

Conversation with  
MICHELLE WUN TING  
WONG, Yokohama  
Triennale

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I is for

Institute

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What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,  
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber  
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute  
of Contemporary Art,  
University of Pennsylvania

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MICHELLE WUN TING WONG,  
Yokohama Triennale

Michelle Wun Ting Wong is a Researcher at Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong from 2012–2020. Along with Lantian Xie and Kabelo Malatsie, she has been invited by Raqs Media Collective, Artistic Directors of the 2020 Yokohama Triennale, to develop a series of *Episōdos* titled “Deliberations on Discursive Justice” as part of the Triennale

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor.

MICHELLE WUN TING WONG:

We laugh and say that the Yokohama Triennale is an arranged marriage of this ensemble because we’ve never worked together, but it works. Kabelo, Lantian and I are very different, but we work well together. Lantian and I have known each other for many years and are kind of like siblings who banter and fight, Lantian and Kabelo have both been in projects together before, but Kabelo and I had never met in person until December 2019. Within the context of the Triennale, Raqs Media Collective invited the three of us over a year ago to create a forum to deliberate on discursive justice, to ask: “What does it mean to be together? What are the claims *to*, *for*, and *of* justice?”

The world is convulsing, and everyone’s world has turned head over heels. We ended up talking a lot about Hong Kong. I grew up here, and I was twenty-something when the Umbrella Movement started in 2014. With the earlier protests that happened in the 2000s, it became clear that a lot was going to happen. Since the protests sprang up again last year there have been days where you’ll have a million people in the streets—they are like a body of water. I was talking to a former professor of mine about this, and it struck me that when you refer to yourself as a liquid body you can’t just pick up a gun and decide to shoot someone; there’s nothing to shoot at. When you turn yourself into a liquid body then you can soak through the infrastructure.

When the 2019 protests first started and I was still working at an institution, I realized that there were structural and systemic insufficiencies. The *Episōdos*, for which our deliberations on discursive justice are a part of

the Triennale, have helped me to step aside of the institutional framework to consider and attend to different things that are already happening around us. These events around us show us how to make this forum of deliberation wider and more expansive and matter to us in a closer way. It's the way that we behave with one another, the way that we claim public and personal space. When we work on discursive justice through the Episōdos, we speak a lot in stories. Some of them are Kabelo's stories about elephants, ancient stories about elephants that started swimming out from an island and swam out so far that they forgot the shape of their origins. This is something we hold close as we deliberate forums of justice. Sometimes our curatorial and creative tendencies impose linearity on ourselves. Things come together, but they also disperse.

#### ALEX KLEIN:

Let's take a step back and talk about the context that you're working within and the mission of the Yokohama Triennale. How did you enter into this team?

#### MW:

Raqs Media Collective, which consists of Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebeesh Bagchi, and Monica Narula, are the Artistic Directors of this edition of the Yokohama Triennale. There are many different folds to their curatorial work, and we are one of the folds. There are a series of Episōdos, or episodes, which Raqs describes as instances of 'in-between-time' and 'extra-time' in the Triennale. They are temporal and discursive forums that come together in the 1,000 days leading up to the Triennale and during the Triennale itself. Creative and deliberative work doesn't just happen in the three months of the Triennale, so Raqs's idea to create these Episōdos is to also make us pay attention to the time between the Triennales. For the ensemble of Kabelo, Lee, and myself, we have used this time to think about questions such as these: What are the moments where justice is discursive? Then, the relationship between perpetrator is suspended, so what does that mean and what does that do to the way we inhabit the world?

#### TAUSIF NOOR:

You mentioned that one of your guiding questions is to think about what it means to be together, which calls to mind Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's statement

in *The Undercommons* that “being together precedes being.” That notion of coming together anticipating particular forms is interesting to me within the context of large-scale international biennials and triennials because in these cases, the exhibition may be auxiliary to all of the thinking that it occasions, those discursive moments that come before the actual display. If discourse is productive, then the exhibition is just one of many products. In these days leading up to the triennial, how did you approach the three geographical nodes of Hong Kong, Johannesburg, and Dubai—did the decision come before the pandemic?

MW:

For us, being located in Hong Kong, Dubai and Johannesburg doesn't mean they are separate nodes of an arc of thinking; we just happen to be in different places. Often within the biennale-triennale context one thinks first of the exhibition, the collateral programs, the symposium, and then the catalogue, but the way that Raqs has worked on the Yokohama Triennale (and previously for the 11th Shanghai Biennial in 2016 and Manifesta 7 in 2015) removes hierarchies and structured relationships like these. I'll give you an example: We don't actually call it “the exhibition,” we call it the “exhibitionary.” Site becomes less representational, and it becomes a container, a space that you fill where you set the stage for certain experiences to happen and certain works to do things and to unfold. It's a slow ironing to undo those creases of what we know as the structure of these mega-events, and the event becomes so much more expansive. In some ways, the institution is an encounter such that the site and people are there, but everyone brings in a certain energy that has specific effects. I like to think that even as you are virtually conversing, you are committed to a deliberation and are investing a certain amount of time and energy. That contact point then melts something, and that's where possibilities emerge.

AK:

You mentioned that all of these meetings in the days leading up to the Triennale happened virtually, and now you're installing, correct?

MW:

Yes, we are now installing a sound work of radio overlaps by Merv Espina which is part of the third episode of our deliberation in the Yokohama Museum of Art, so I'm basically stuck to my screen!

AK:

Right! I have two basic logistical questions that I think point to larger issues. How do you embark on this big project without actually physically being there? And, how does the meaning of "being together" shift when that physicality is removed?

MW:

We're all trying to figure it out. Raqs is helming the main install, and nobody is in Yokohama. We get videos from Yokohama showing bits of the install—a piece going up here or there, and the DJ ensemble have several components of the exhibitionary in Yokohama. But apart from that, we're also in the midst of install for the Epis do *A Scenography of Suspended Time* in Johannesburg where Kabelo is located, so we are also in touch with each other on that as well. Of course, we really wish we were in Yokohama, but this remote process is not entirely unfamiliar to us because our different locations require us to work like that to begin with. It requires you to trust certain people with decision-making, but I think it's also coming to terms with the fact that this is just how things are going to unfold.

AK:

It's interesting to think that you're organizing an event that you might not be able to see in person. The conversations Tausif and I have been having are equally concerned with rethinking organizational models through an

examination of them, i.e. looking at the ways that we all have proceeded in the past, as creating an archive of this moment. It really feels like a turning point. Even the logistical aspects of having this gathering in which you can't physically congregate is fascinating because we don't know what kind of world we'll be in after this moment of COVID-19—this might become the new normal.

MW:

We are going to miss the episode in Johannesburg, but the exhibitionary in Yokohama runs until October, so hopefully I will get to see it.

AK:

The exhibition was delayed though, correct?

MW:

Yes, it was originally supposed to open on July 3rd and now it's opening on the 17th of July, so it's not postponed that far. It's a fascinating move because visitors will now primarily be a Japanese audience. There's an interesting connection to the post-Fukushima moment in Japan in 2011 because after Fukushima, people did show up for art. This is the operative logic, and I'm in it, so I'm going with it.

AK:

Mega art world events like biennials are also places of international gathering. We've all had these experiences of traveling for these kinds of things (biennials, symposia, etc.). These experiences can be really generative, and the exhibition is often only just one aspect. The discourse, the meetings, the dinners, the physical presence of people being together are

all crucial aspects of our field. And here you have an instance where you'll have a mostly local audience where the curatorial team and the broader art world audience cannot attend. I'm wondering if you think that impacts the Triennale in any significant way?

MW:

It's unfolding in front of our eyes, so we'll see how it works. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Monica Narula did say that it might just work, and it might not be a bad thing.

AK:

Definitely—it's just interesting to think of the implications of reinserting and insisting on the local population in the context of what is normally understood as an event that centers a global art audience.

TN:

As we think about the term "infrastructure," one of the things that has materially represented itself is that part of the reason why the Yokohama Triennale is opening at all is because there exists an infrastructure in Yokohama for it to open. There exists a social, political, and economic infrastructure such that the Triennale is more or less operating. All of the discursive work then forms an infrastructure that has been built for the Triennale by Raqs. Do you now feel more pressure to make that discursive work "visible" through an online platform? Do you feel

this need to show your work in a way?

MW:

I think there is a pressure or need to do this, and we've gone through many conversations where we thought that not many people would be able to see the show. But I also think the way to flip this is to ask, what transformations does the current condition ask of us? For the world that we are already in, a digital replica of what we planned to do is insufficient. The deliberation is then on, "What does one make and *make of* the situation and to continue to nurture the deliberations? To continue to clamor for the right thing at the right time, which will also change over time.

You mentioned *The Undercommons*, which prompted me to pull out the Sourcebook that Raqs has compiled for this edition of the Yokohama Triennale. There are excerpts from a 1570 folio from Bijapur, an illuminated manuscript that has all of these fantastical prescriptions for nurturing friendship, ways to take care of the people around you. The title for this Triennale is *Afterglow*, alluding to how to take care of oneself in an age of toxicity, and one of the prescriptions is to take care of your friends.

AK:

That's one of the questions that we've been ruminating on as well. I think there's been more conversations within institutions and within the field about health and what forms that takes. We've talked previously in the field about self-care, but this is more of an outward-facing, supportive gesture. How do we take care of each other, and how do we take care of physical and psychic health in a pandemic? What are the things that we give up, and what are the safety nets we produce for other people in terms of economic health? It's interesting that you bring up this medicine for friendship, which I think also points to how these issues are already embedded in the system. It's not as if we

suddenly just woke up in an unjust world; these are things that are infrastructural, and there are moments in history where you can see them very clearly.

TN:

How would we devise a theory of justice that correlates with the specific moment that we're in? Broadly speaking, there have been debates across history on whether there is a universal mode of justice that can be applied, when we know that inequalities are pervasive and a function of many divisive categories. What has struck me in this moment is whether or not there has actually been any leveling of access within the contemporary art context. How much more egalitarian is it to have programming and events on digital platforms?

A theory of justice that is responsive to this pandemic might offer a way to think of future events in the contemporary art sector. What comes next—what is the afterglow of justice? My thinking is that we have to do away with the fetishization of the digital and the notion that the digital is somehow egalitarian. Moreover, because biennials and triennials and all these mega-events are more than the sum of their constituent parts, from discourse to exhibition and so forth, how might we stop and think about the ways of thinking they advance? When Carolyn Christov-

Bakargiev organized the object-oriented ontology documenta in 2012, it wasn't about leveling objects and humans, but thinking about a specific mode of research in the world that had discernable impacts. Whether or not people who visit and write about these biennials go on to apply that research or mode of thinking is questionable, but what's important is that there is a method of thought being advanced, and in your case that is distributive justice. I wonder if we can think about discursive justice outside of in-person modes of organizing.

MW:

For us, to deliberate on discursive justice is very much about thinking what is already outside of in-person modes. The Episōdos are moments of clarity wherein you become more acutely aware of what these modes of operating look and feel like. These things are already happening outside of the art infrastructure. The Episōdos are a fascinating and important contact point because we have this time, space, and resources to think through and act in ways that raise concerns about and questions the ways of working in the art-institutional model. These ways of operating are sometimes ingrained in us and burden us because it is a comfort zone. By attending to how other elements and events outside of the world of art might impact us, we can reimagine and act differently. That's what I mean by stepping aside of the infrastructure. For example, the anti-CAA protests that happened in Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi earlier this year, which were led by women and shifted the understanding of traditional gender roles in some communities in India. There is rethinking in what constitutes differences in religion/faith, who qualifies as a citizen, what nationality is, and who is considered equal. These thoughts and actions have taken a form, and it is maybe not from the forms that we create intentionally.

TN:

In that sense, it sounds like you're sort of approaching a prefigurative notion of politics.

MW:

It's a mode of attention—a condition of how we attend to the world that we are in.

AK:

It raises the question of what art can do or what we expect art to do within these parameters. Increasingly it feels like there's a lot of questioning of these infrastructures and institutions and how we've expected the art world to function. I'm curious about this recent move to privilege the discursive over the auratic space of the object. Even as documenta 13 created an alternative organizational logic, as mentioned earlier, it was also totally dependent on blue-chip galleries, which was evident in many of the larger artist-projects. I just wonder if we are also going to want something else? As capital breaks down, is the way that we've constructed our relationship to art also going to necessarily shift?

MW:

Absolutely. And I think the way that we've worked in these Episōdos has blurred the boundaries between the curatorial and the artistic. Because we have an artist, Lantian, in our midst, it helps us to do that freely. For Lantian, having curators or people who are more art historically inclined also allows for a different way of working. I think it becomes easier for all of us because we have each other. You don't think so much about the product. The breaking down of capital and the production process means more space for deliberation.

AK:

There's also increasingly a breakdown of the model of singular authorship; we're looking

more toward collective models and voices, in such a way that there really is the potential for us to become fluid like a river as you said. The art world is so focused on the singular name and authentic product, but increasingly it feels like the expectations of the publics and communities of institutions are moving away from this, which is why so many institutions have fallen short. They are structured around a capitalistic approach to authorship and objecthood, but people want something else right now. No matter how much certain things within an institution change—who and what is being collected and shown, for instance—you're not going to change that infrastructure. That schism between the symbolic space of art and the actual space of art is something I've been thinking a lot about.

MW:

One of the things we have also been working on is somewhat of a soundtrack to the discursive justice *Episōdos* that enters into the exhibitionary, these radio transmission overlaps. It's not something that you tune in and hear, but we'll have docents wearing these radio transmission receivers and we'll have transmitters elsewhere, so we'll be testing these overlaps. These radio overlaps can be seen as a metaphor—when things *do* happen, one has to pay attention. The body then also becomes a sonic body that stirs the infrastructure, and there is a liquidity in this that is propositional. It's perhaps not so much about taking the infrastructure apart, because institutions are so often built from this position of singularity or the potential, but not actuality, of collectivity. The default position of singularity is where capital multiplies and establishes itself. When sonic bodies and liquid bodies operate, what we do is to quietly mess with the density and contact points of these infrastructures, which I believe is a possible way to shift things. Infrastructures are also sponges and when they

are soaked through, they stop being different in density from that which was formerly outside of them.

TN:

I've been following Raqs's work for a long time, and it seems that if their work privileges the process over the end product, then it also similarly privileges these very aftereffects. It seems that they often revisit their past work and revise or rethink concepts and forms to ask, "What are the effects we didn't anticipate or couldn't have predicted?" In this pandemic so much emphasis is on quantitative prediction, and in the cultural sphere these metrics often just fall apart. You might be able to say that a museum might lose a certain number of visitors and a certain percentage of ticket revenue, et cetera, but we don't really know how we'll fare with regard to creative output.

I've been thinking about this question after attending the Dhaka Art Summit this past February, where there was a lot of emphasis on collectivities and the theme was "Seismic Shifts." Marie Hélène Pereira, the Director of Programs at RAW, who is one of our *I is for Institute* thinking partners, posed a question that I found really productive: "What comes *after* seismic shocks?" So, I wonder if in your research and discussions you've thought about what you can't anticipate? What comes after the having-been together?

MW:

I was going back to this page in the *Sourcebook* on “Luminous Care,” which reads: “Life, the universe, the world, and the time of each day disintegrate and get re-constituted through innumerable acts, incrementally re-building through luminous care. Broken minutes are mended in the afterglow of time’s toxic debris. Life is a luminous autodidact.” I think one has to have faith that life will learn how to mend itself and be together after the Triennale, after the Summit, etc.

I think the metaphor of the river is applicable, so *how* do we make ourselves into a flow like a river? Rivers forget where they come from and the shape of their origins. I think there’s a possibility of joy after this, and I believe there’s some potential for luminosity. There will be ways of being together that will exist. Things have changed and will change, but they also won’t change too much—we’ll learn from this. With art, I think it’ll be less about what the art object is. I think it has stopped being about this for a long time, but I think we’re still a little hungover because we are people within these institutional structures. But what we have to do is to become runaways and thieves. We have to steal time away from these structures because it is possible.

AK:

So much of what we’re seeing in the cultural sphere right now is a crisis of production. Currently, in the midst of a pandemic, we’re given a context where theoretically we shouldn’t have to proceed with business as usual. However, institutions are so intent on demonstrating their value and demonstrating that they still function and are stable, so they insist on a way of proceeding that mimics the way things were before. There’s no reason that it has to be that way. You’re seeing museums across the board in the US getting rid of hundreds of staff members, often the public-facing staff who are BIPOC. Instead of reconceptualizing what the relationship to the public could

look like, or how education could take place, or what the function of the institution could be, they're just digging deeper into the older model and anticipating their re-opening, as if it's all going to be the same. The way that we understand value in the institution is coming under real pressure.

MW:

For you in the US, maybe it would be interesting to think about the moments that you can render your justice in that particular context and discourse? Of course, certain things have to change, and this process of change is also something to revel in, even though it is painful and violent. You are then making a forum for what your claim of justice is, and it is a shared process. It's arguing for a different kind of proceeding and a different way of qualifying value, and how people have to be heard. I think you are in your forum and you're making yours.

AK:

I'd love to hear about what has surprised you in this way of working. You couldn't have anticipated that you wouldn't be able to be together in person, but it does sound like it's been incredibly energizing. Have there been any other unexpected things that have shifted the nature of the project?

MW:

Every step is a surprise, including how we've fallen back to our own tendencies. We talk a lot—I think one of our longest Skype calls lasted for four hours—so there are a lot of details that we've gone over, but there won't be many big shifts to the scenography and moves we develop per se. What these conversations do is they deepen our shared ideas and they shapeshift through the three of us.

AK:

Has it changed the nature of what someone will experience

on the ground in Yokohama? Is the inflection of the gathering different now? Japan is still in the midst of the pandemic as well.

MW:

The scenography for our Epis do 02, as well as the Yokohama exhibitionary will have fewer bodies, and I think some of the works will be quite different. Most institutions are now thinking about details like headphones, and cleaning and disinfection procedures. We've yet to have our first Epis do, which is an afterparty in Hong Kong. This was actually supposed to happen before the Triennale opened, and I think that is up in the air.

AK:

Even those logistical details, like not having headphones, are things that we're questioning as well because in addition to concerns for COVID-19 it impacts our investment in accessibility. There are so many ways that exhibitions are experienced now, so even things like having an iPad available as a text reader is something we need to really reconsider.

MW:

It changes the work. Epis do 02 in Johannesburg, for instance, is titled *A Scenography of Suspended Time*. It refers to how a heron spreads its wings over water, creating a shadow on the surface so that the heron can see the fish below. There's this moment of waiting before the perpetrator-victim relationship is defined, and that for us is a moment where justice becomes discursive: You don't know yet what will happen, who is right or wrong, who will cause the suffering of whom. Our scenography is in some ways a staging of that anticipation, a staging for a thief to come. We've found ourselves talking a lot about security in this context, which is also when the limits of the exhibitionary infrastructure comes through. There are some things that are actually *not* supposed to happen, and they become very pronounced.

AK:

I often wonder how much of these discursive aspects are

evident to an average viewer or how they might inform their experience of an exhibition? How much of this actually just stays within the field? Do you think that visitors to the Triennale will have a slightly different experience because of the discursive phase that preceded the actual show, and do you think that the goalposts shift because of that process?

MW:

I think in this case the goalposts won't shift so much because the way that we've made use of this forum holds a certain disregard for that question. Of course, it'd be great if people are there, but I think that the relationship between the discursive and the exhibitionary in this case is not actually so causal but are entangled. I'm telling you about the heron now, but it'd be more or less the same if you went to see it and you heard about the heron later. This is a feedback loop, and we're continually imagining and sometimes seeing becomes thicker and our world becomes richer.

TN:

As we talk to our colleagues, I've been curious about the changes that we think need to be applied to the cultural sphere and how we work within it that have perhaps come into relief in the past few months. In your case, what is one particular form of injustice that you perhaps see more clearly?

MW:

I'd say it's how the institution makes us feel paralyzed. But look—we're all at home. We don't have to be *at* work. I wouldn't call that an injustice, but I think what the past few months have really shown is that maybe we are the people that limit ourselves. For the US context it may be different from where I am, but I'm speaking at a conceptual level. I think people are in some ways limited by themselves. In the past few months, I've recognized that even when we position ourselves as cultural workers within institutions, it is still

possible to be a fugitive. It doesn't make you a traitor, and sometimes these are necessary steps so that we can move toward a way of working and being and creating a forum that we actually want. Why be half-dead and half-alive? It's very important for all of us to remind each other that we are part of a forum in the making. The structures of authority will try to tell you otherwise because that is the only thing they know how to do. We have each other, is what I'm trying to say.

AK:

As you've suggested, we've let ourselves become one with the institution and we have to unlearn our own thinking and habits.

I am interested in hearing your reflections on the current situation in Hong Kong. You said earlier that you came of age during the Umbrella Movement and that some of your work going forward will look toward these infrastructures. In the US we've been caught up in the protests against racial injustice and inequalities that have manifested themselves quite visibly in the acts of police violence that connect directly to the legacies of slavery in the US—all of which have been compounded in the Trump era and COVID-19. We've been watching the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong from afar and it's been really inspiring for organizers here as people increasingly take to the streets.

MW:

When the protests in Hong Kong first started last year, Kabelo and Lantian and I were talking on a weekly basis. Every week was difficult, and I don't really remember what it was like before news started streaming in live feeds. Before

the pandemic, every weekend was different depending where you were—you were either in it, or you were watching nine screens each showing different angles of live events. I don't remember a time when things weren't mediated in that way.

Racism is also an issue here, and I often wonder how we deal with hatred—whether its hatred for the police, or for people who are from places that you don't call home. I think it's going to take decades to eradicate this, and when you're facing an authoritarian regime, there's a lot at stake and I think the cultural sphere recognizes that.

Naïveté can become very dangerous very quickly, and things become very real in a short amount of time, if they haven't already. For me, it means that things have to be thought of in a longer *durée*. It means that history is very important and how history is constructed even more so. It's a slightly counterintuitive answer to go back and study history more and think about how our voices have been heard and how we are listening.

TN:

It goes back to the notion of justice. Even when it's thought of in abstractions, it often is envisioned—perhaps in a liberalist mode of thought—as something that comes to you, something that's delivered from a top-down, maybe institutional in a way. But as these protests have demonstrated, justice actually comes from the demos and has to be claimed.

AK:

And that's also how history gets redelivered as well. In the US, we're seeing this in the call for reparations and basic civil rights, stories that have been whitewashed in our education system. It's interesting that you bring up the question of going back to history because we're seeing that in real time. Things that have been erased are coming back up to the surface,

and this is a direct result of the actions on the streets.

TN:

Monuments certainly don't take themselves down. Michelle, you mentioned that you see this as a moment of hope, so to conclude, I'd like to know what you are particularly hopeful for within institutional infrastructures.

MW:

When both of you were talking about how people are reexamining how things are taught, I made a mental note that this is a moment of changing how our minds work, and I think that is more exciting for me than any institutional change because in the end, institutions are made of people. When people's minds change and when we recognize how knowledge, narratives and power are put together, we'll have the tools to make a lot more changes and infrastructure will be ours—it won't be something that controls us. That's what I'm most hopeful for.

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