

AiRCAST #3

YEO SIEW HUA

NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE



Kent Chan and Yeo Siew Hua, in conversation. Courtesy of NTU CCA Singapore.

Anna Lovecchio: Welcome to AiRCAST. AiRCAST takes us inside the Residencies Studios of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, located right at the edge of a thick tropical forest in Gillman Barracks. On this podcast, we broadcast the inner lives of our Artists-in-Residence entering their studios during their residency and inviting them to share about ideas, materials, processes, influences and research methodologies behind their practice. I'm Anna Lovecchio. I'm a curator and Assistant Director for programmes at NTU CCA Singapore and I am your host for today.

In this episode we open up the platform to a guest-host for the first time. We invited artist and filmmaker Kent Chan to pick the brain of our Artist-in-Residence

Yeo Siew Hua. Beyond being both filmmakers and artists, Siew Hua and Kent have been occasional collaborators in the past and they are also long-time friends, as you are about to hear.

Yeo Siew Hua is a Singaporean director and screenwriter. His films probe the darkest side of contemporary society through narratives layered with mysterious atmospheres, inscrutable characters, and mythological references, all steeped in arresting visuals and sounds. His last feature film *A Land Imagined* (2018) garnered recognition around the world receiving the Golden Leopard at the 71st Locarno Film Festival and the Best Original Screenplay and Best Original Music Score Awards at the 56th Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival.

After *A Land Imagined*, Siew Hua has created a number of short films, one of which, *An Invocation to the Earth* (2020), commissioned by the Singapore International Film Festival and TBA21, was co-produced with NTU CCA Singapore. *An Invocation to the Earth* is available online on the website www.stage.tba21.org. During the residency, Siew Hua has been completing his next major production titled *The Once and Future*, an expanded cinema project which will premiere at the Singapore International Festival of Arts 2022 this upcoming June.

Kent Chan is himself an alumnus of our Residencies Programme. He is an artist, curator, and filmmaker based in Amsterdam who happens to be temporarily back in Singapore, for the first time in two years, to produce a new film. And we have been lucky to catch him for this interview. His practice weaves encounters between art, fiction, and cinema with a particular interest in the tropical imagination, colonialism, and the relation between heat and art.

I hope you enjoy this candid, open, at times belligerent exchange between friends

and peers as they talk about the trajectory of Yeo Siew Hua through philosophy, filmmaking, visual arts, Singapore, and Argentina.

Kent Chan: Hi everyone, I'm Kent, a good friend of our focus of today: Yeo Siew Hua. I am going to refer to him as Chris because that is the name I have known him by. Today I am going to speak to him a little bit about his practice, his residency at NTU CCA Singapore, and about his latest work. So here it goes. Let's go back to how we got to know each other. I first got to know you through your graduation films from Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

Yeo Siew Hua: Going back so much!

Kent Chan: Yeah, just for context. We ain't young, so it's fine. We can talk about how long ago that was... Your film was popping up in the short film circuits in Singapore around 2006, so I think I was seeing your films quite a bit. You were also at the screenings a fair bit and we got to know each other in person through mutual friends. And then..

Yeo Siew Hua: I asked if you wanted to edit my film, right?

Kent Chan: Yeah, pretty much. And for some foolhardy reason I said yes. And then...



Yeo Siew Hua, *The Obs: A Singapore Story*, film still, 2014. Courtesy the artist.

Yeo Siew Hua: I remember you told me it was because I was saying this is the last film I was going to make. I gave you this selling point. To give a bit of context, that film was titled *In the House of Straw* [2009]. It was my first feature-length film. It was about 120 minutes by the time we got through it. At that point I was thinking, okay, it's too difficult to make films, I'm done. I studied film, I am going to make this one film and then, maybe, that's it. I have done my due diligence. So I told you: "hey, this is probably going to be our last film. You want to edit this film?" And you said: "Okay, why not?"

Kent Chan: Clearly neither of us have 'wisened' up since then.

Yeo Siew Hua: No, no, we are still doing this!

Kent Chan: Yes. Back in the day we were camping at your place, working on your film, it was what? 2009? And your film was touring. Then you went to the National University of Singapore and studied philosophy. The next thing I remember, you were working on the documentary on The Observatory. I guess the major thing since then was your film *A Land Imagined*.

[Audio excerpt from Yeo Siew Hua, *A Land Imagined*, 2018. Courtesy the artist.]

Kent Chan: And when was The Observatory documentary?

Yeo Siew Hua: That was 2014. After my film school, I went to do philosophy at the National University of Singapore. After that, I was done with school. I was thinking, I'm not going to become a philosopher but where I can still put some critical thinking into action would be, maybe, going back to my practice as a filmmaker. I decided, okay, I'm not going to make a film yet, I'm going to try to think through a cinematic visual language through documentary form. So I embarked on this feature-length documentary to document the oldest surviving Singaporean band, The Observatory. One of its members, [Yuen] Chee Wai is also one of the Artists-in-Residence at NTU CCA Singapore right now. I documented the band for almost two years.

Yeo Siew Hua: After that, I comfortably went back into making films and visual artworks. I guess it started again from there, after my detour in school.

Kent Chan: It seems you like to work in four-year cycles.

Yeo Siew Hua: Well, you also need to understand that it's really all about funding. Of course, the practice is one thing but 80% of it is about how to get money. Actually, how to get big projects started has always been my long-lasting angst. Every four to five years, I make something. I always feel I am extremely unproductive. And throughout these four, five years, my mom will ask me: "what's up?" So after *A Land Imagined*, I started to do smaller, shorter works, either conceptual or visual works. If it is going to take four to five years to make one long film, and so much money to do it, meanwhile I really want to experiment and I want to...

Kent Chan: ...indulge in promiscuity.

Yeo Siew Hua: Wow, if you want to put it that way.

Kent Chan: I always put it that way.

Yeo Siew Hua: It's just to dabble in something different, and experiment to see what comes out of it. If that is what you want to call promiscuity?

Kent Chan: If that is the definition of promiscuity that you want to give... It is interesting to talk about this whole cycle of fundraising, maybe we can touch on it again a bit later. The Observatory documentary was actually crowdfunded, right?

Yeo Siew Hua: Yes. At that point of time, it was quite a thing. People were able to raise enough funds through crowdfunding. For me, it was a model of how to tap into people who want to support things instead of going through a top-down grant process. How to take a ground-up approach to get money, to rethink the model of the process. And it worked. Especially because it's a band and they have a following. People wanted to see something put together on this long-running and important band in the history of Singaporean music. Thankfully, we managed to raise a good amount of funding.

[Audio excerpt from Yeo Siew Hua, *The Obs: A Singapore Story*, 2014. Courtesy the artist.]

Kent Chan: Speaking of these four year cycles, what do you do in between? Let's talk a little about the residency you're in which is, in many ways, of a visual arts nature. Let's talk about your introduction to visual arts. How did that come about?

Yeo Siew Hua: It is very convenient and easy to think about visual arts as a category where I speak on how I got introduced into it. But at the same time, for me, it's more complex and not so clean-cut because my training was previously in making films, which is about image-making, and with a heavy component of storytelling and narrativity in documentaries, as I mentioned. My other training was in philosophy, right? So it's sort of putting these two together. I was trying to expand to smaller scale projects instead of these two-hour films, to really experiment with the medium of the image and how that translates into concepts. That's my way of approaching it. If you want an introduction, it was through the people I knew because I wasn't in the art scene yet. I could mention a few but I have a lot of friends... Maybe this is the case for Singapore, the film scene and the art scene are quite promiscuous. We are in it together. As a filmmaker, I probably have more artist friends than filmmaker friends, if you want to put them in these categories. Someone who I was closely working with and who was very steeped in the art scene is Ho Tzu Nyen. Because of my training as a cinematographer, I was actually shooting for a lot of his earlier works like *The Bohemian Rhapsody Project* [2006], and *Lucky7* [2008]. And there were other things I was helping him with, like editing *[The] Cloud for Unknowing*. Talking about *The Cloud of Unknowing*, actually, I was also.. what's the term now?

Kent Chan: Part of the Singapore Pavilion contingent for the Venice Biennale in 2011.

Yeo Siew Hua: There you go. I was involved in that way. I guess this was a step for me in understanding how the art scene works. Who is involved and, importantly, going back to funding, how things are made and distributed, and how to understand this whole scene. So that would be where I got introduced. In terms of what I actually do with it, it's still pretty much me trying to translate certain critical concepts that have been bugging me. Not just critical concepts, spiritual concepts too. I think a lot of things connect in esoteric ways. How to translate these into a visual form? After all this time, I realise that I go back a lot to a certain kind of storytelling, a narrativity which is very heavy in my works, even when they are very abstract or [fall] under visual arts.



Residencies OPEN, documentation view, 22 January 2022, NTU CCA Singapore. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Kent Chan: Let's talk about the way you work then. We already touched on it a little. In many ways, it's very much rooted within a certain scene, particularly the Singaporean scene, or the people around you. Often when we start out, we all help each other. That extends to a certain amount of years and, to certain extents, and I think particularly with you, it retains a certain kind of heavily collaborative approach in terms of the way you work and also how your projects are conceived. Why don't you talk a little bit about that?

Yeo Siew Hua: Sure. This is definitely something important for me to address. In the first place, unlike maybe a painter or sculptor, the medium I work in is something that is deeply collaborative and requires a lot of people. There is no way for me to make the things that I do alone. As a filmmaker, sometimes I am working with a crew of 20 to 50 people. For example, that was happening in *A Land Imagined*. There are ways to scale it up and down but, ultimately, it is a very big number. [Filmmaking] just requires different people coming together. What I can do is not what the editor can do. And what the cinematographer can do is also not what the art director can do. To create something, there needs

to be a very deep collaboration between us. As the director, or as the artist, of the work, I give the direction. But, to look at it in another way, if I don't have the options I cannot choose. I want to make sure that a lot of credit is given to the collaborators I work with. I try to break out of the conventional film hierarchy, where the director calls the shots. For me, if I can scale down these big film-like structures, then I can even out the power dynamic so that there can be a real collaboration between me, my cinematographer, my editors, the concept people, and free reign is given to the creative process. I particularly pick people who are artists in spirit, visual artists themselves, because they bring something that is not in this conventional film form. They bring challenges. They bring their own practice, process, and ethics into the project. Someone I worked with very closely is Daniel Hui, the editor for many of my projects, who was also Artist-in-Residence at NTU CCA Singapore about two years ago. And he's a filmmaker himself. Of course, we talked about Ho Tzu Nyen, also an Artist-in-Residence alumnus. Recently, I also worked with [Yuen] Chee Wai, my fellow current Artist-in-Residence at NTU CCA Singapore. We can talk specifically about collaborations, if you want. I sometimes see myself not as a curator, but as a facilitator who brings together different artists to work together on a project. Maybe I lead the project in the sense that I have scripted it, but the rest of it is creating collaborative magic. That is the most exciting. That my vision gets materialized, that itself is not so exciting for me. Yeah.

Kent Chan: I am going to throw out a slightly controversial question. The film scene is an industry. Within this industry, you have different departments. I want you to comment on the difference between working with an art director and a wardrobe person, as compared to other projects where you work with artists, like designer Dinu [Bodiciu], who have their own practice. Maybe just comment on the difference between working with somebody that is part of a certain kind of production process as compared to somebody who is...

Yeo Siew Hua: Yeah, I get it. As a filmmaker, I'm more used to saying, for example: this character is like this, the story is like this, the person needs to dress like this. But working with people who are bringing their own practice, thinking, ideology, ethics into the project as artists themselves... how to represent their work in the piece [means that] I might have to rewrite it. I am currently working on a film, an expanded cinema work titled *The Once and Future*. We will be releasing it in June at the Singapore International Festival of Arts. We have the

Berlin Philharmonic coming down to live score and perform accompanying music throughout the work.

[Audio excerpt from Yeo Siew Hua, *The Once and Future*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.]

It is really interesting because, here, I have people with their own voice and ideas like the composer Eugene Birman who wants to bring something to the table, instead of just bringing my vision into the work. In that case, I am going to write a film with minimal to no dialogue. You've seen the work, there's no dialogue just so that Eugene can bring his composition, played by the Berlin Philharmonic, to become the voice of this film, or expanded cinema work. This, for me, is very exciting. Of course, we discussed what we want to express, but I don't get to decide on how he's going to bring out certain ideas. I can tweak it a little bit but, ultimately, I want that kind of collaboration to happen. If it doesn't transform my process, then the collaboration is fake. In a way, I have to hurt a little bit. It



Yeo Siew Hua, *The Once and Future*, film still, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

has to challenge the way I have been doing something and my practice has to transform, for a collaboration to be fulfilling.

Kent Chan: Touching on the new work, I think that, more than anything else, philosophy is always a cornerstone, or the anchor, for most of your work. I feel that the storytelling, or the narrative, is very often a necessary evil. To some extent, I do feel that is the case sometimes. But I do have to say that *The Once and Future* is probably also your most personal work amongst all the works I have seen. I know *In The House of Straw* is very personal in some ways...

Yeo Siew Hua: They are all personal, but at different stages of my life.

Kent Chan: I mean, all works are personal in that you put in effort and they are testament of the time that you had to go through, but there are some works that are more personal. There are certain works that are personal in the sense that they do draw from your own life, and this work in particular, I think it definitely shows that.

Yeo Siew Hua: You've known me for a long time, so I will take it at that. Yeah.

Kent Chan: Certain parts of *A Land Imagined* were shot in Malaysia, but this is probably your first proper production overseas?

Yeo Siew Hua: Yeah, the film is 100% not shot in Singapore.

Kent Chan: A compliment to the work is that it is both your film and, in a sense, it is also not. It is your work in the sense that we can see it comes from you, but it is also a work that you made because of another place where you were physically, and also personally. There are scenes of a wedding which I know mirrors your own and you find footage of your own wedding in there too. I'm not sure how much of a spoiler that is...

Yeo Siew Hua: To give a bit of context to this work which most people haven't seen, *The Once and Future* is a film that was shot during COVID. If everyone has their COVID film, this is mine. I was stuck in Argentina...

Kent Chan: 'Stuck' makes it sound like it was a bad thing. You were blissfully stuck.

Yeo Siew Hua: I was blissfully stuck. Argentina is a very nice country to get stuck in. It's a big country, and I think that the vastness of it is also what I was encountering, coming from Singapore. I was there to meet up with my partner. Airplanes were no longer flying so I was there for an extended period of time – for a year. I convinced my producer to let me make the entire work in Argentina. That's why the whole film is shot in Argentina, with small moments in Hong Kong, but 95% of this film is made in Argentina. And so, here's the collaboration, in the sense that I am an outsider to the space. There, I was not working with anyone I had worked with before, and even the working styles were not the same. For example, they have proper unionised syndicates, which I was unfamiliar with. There were a lot of processes that were new to me but at the same time [the work] is about my encounter with the land, the people, the bodies, and the meat. That is very much what the film is about. Ultimately, as you put it, I was in a romantic space because of what was going on between me and my partner. All of that came together, in a very uncanny way. Strange Singaporean in Argentina. A lot of people who have watched this film [think], like you put it, that it is very 'me'. They see the most of myself in a film that was not made here. That is truly very strange.

Kent Chan: I'm going to throw another kind of controversial question again.

Yeo Siew Hua: Sure.

Kent Chan: Alright. Do you find that Singapore limits you?

Yeo Siew Hua: For sure. But if you grow up in a place that limits you from day one, the limitation is you, no? That limitation is very much part of you. In fact, the removal of that limitation is your response to it. It is still very much part of you reacting to the removal of it. So I don't see it as being 'more free to be me'. It is about navigating 'me' but in a highly uncomfortable way. Actually, I was very uncomfortable working without restrictions. Argentina is very free, very big. I don't want to say this too loudly, but it was definitely cheaper.

Kent Chan: How is that even a controversial point?

Yeo Siew Hua: Okay, but I come back to talking about funding and processes. It's still very much part of what I do, take these elements and put them together. This freedom was also very painful, working without the kind of limitations I am



Residencies OPEN, installation view of *The Once and Future*, 22 January 2022, NTU CCA Singapore. Courtesy of NTU CCA Singapore.

used to. We all know that Singapore is the starting point. Maybe starting points are limitations.

Kent Chan: In many ways, when there is a lack of limitations, you own your own failures.

Yeo Siew Hua: Yeah, you own your own failures. Hopefully, you don't need to deny them too much. Maybe you're working on some transcendental mode of existence, but if you're making works about your context, that is something you need to address. You need to address it not just in the content but you need to address it structurally. You need to be part of that process whether you get co-opted into it, or whether you subvert it, or whether you work around it.

Kent Chan: Heads up! I'm probably going to end this whole thing with a question about another limitation, but I'll get to that point in a bit. If I'm not wrong, there's quite a stark contrast between the works you do within cinema and works that fall out of cinema. Have you ever noticed that your works that are not for cinema actually don't have dialogue? Almost in their entirety. None of them have dialogue.

Yeo Siew Hua: Okay.

Kent Chan: Am I right? Is that even an accurate observation?

Yeo Siew Hua: To put in another way, I treat dialogue as not just dialogue. This is true of all my films. It is just that in the conventional cinematic form dialogue is treated in a certain way. Whether you use that, or you subvert it, that's a choice. For me, I treat dialogue as a separate element, like I treat props, or performance, or music, or cinematography. Dialogue itself, you could use it as texture. As you know, I love to play with the idea of a disembodied voice. Oftentimes as voiceover, oftentimes coming in as conversations from nowhere. [I treat] dialogue as a character in itself, I guess.

Kent Chan: Yeah, but that doesn't quite... it sounds like you are sidestepping the question.

Yeo Siew Hua: Please tell me the question. Or, do you want to address the issue of language as a limitation?



Yeo Siew Hua, *An Invocation to The Earth*, film still, 2020. Courtesy the artist.

Kent Chan: No. Most of your work, it is very much rooted in language. That's without a doubt. But I feel like, let's say, the newest work... what is it called? Invocation..?

Yeo Siew Hua: *An Invocation to The Earth?*

Kent Chan: Yes. It's weird. I find that there is a very stark contrast between cinema and non-cinema works. For example, the lack of conversations, maybe not just dialogue, but the lack of people having conversations. Even when people appear, there is a certain 'mutedness' that occurs in the non-cinema works.

Yeo Siew Hua: Since you are probing, the way I think about this kind of visual storytelling, or let's call it image-making, or a translation of the idea through the image, that is actually what this question is about. In a more conventional, scripted work, the leeway for me to really experiment to convey certain ideas without relying on dialogue in the conventional cinema narrative setting is a lot more difficult.

Kent Chan: Sorry, say that again.

Yeo Siew Hua: In a normal cinematic narrative setting, it is more difficult to convey certain ideas. And as you know, my works are all concept-driven. They always start from a concept and from certain ideas, more than from psychological characters. For me, the translation of these ideas in my visual arts projects... because of their length, their scale, and the resources that I need, I have a lot more room to play, to experiment on how to not directly use conversational dialogue to bring out certain topics. Of course, text is always the most direct way of addressing these concepts and I have to use it when I do my narrative films sometimes. But when I really push myself to understand the visual art that I want to do, it is really to see how to translate that into another language. It is still a language, right? It is just no longer 'dialogue'.

Kent Chan: So, the follow up question is: between your cinematic works and the works that don't fall within a cinema setting with this lack of dialogue, do you ever think that there is a certain kind of limitation that is put upon you because of the traditions, the conventions of cinema and the expectations of the audience?

Yeo Siew Hua: Yes and no. No would be a total lie. Yes would be a total lie. I think

about tapping into that poetry. When we talk about language and text, for me, it's the poetry in the language. Which language am I using, and how the poetry of that language can shape the work... Ultimately, it is a limitation, but at the same time, it is the poetry.

Kent Chan: I feel that in your cinematic works there is the burden of characters. The problem is never with narrative. The problem is never with storytelling. The problem has always been with characters, in the sense that with characters you can't necessarily go straight into talking about the ideas that you have in your head.

Yeo Siew Hua: Yeah. But framing it as a burden, for me, is bad faith.

Kent Chan: Of course. That's the whole controversial question.

Yeo Siew Hua: But if you ask me, the ideas I have are not free-floating ideas. They are not disembodied ideas. The whole idea of me not continuing to do philosophy in academia, there's a reason. It's to practice critical thinking in a much more embodied form. That is why I came back to my first love, which is film or the arts. It is the most embodied form that we can bring our ideas into... a breathing, failing, contradictory, and at times lying, moment. When I say moment, it is because I want to put in the idea of time... When the characters mention the ideas, it is more about the characters than the ideas. It says a lot more about the characters than the ideas they put out.

Kent Chan: I am going to throw in one question to wrap it up.

Yeo Siew Hua: Sure

Kent Chan: I am going to throw in a frivolous question. Where do you see your practice going?

Yeo Siew Hua: Very frivolous, Kent! Can you not be so frivolous!? In fifty-year time? in two-year time? Five-month time and fifty-year time is very different!

Kent Chan: I shall not give you limitations to answer this.

Yeo Siew Hua: Maybe I'll talk about the time and context that we are in, because

it is what I'm thinking a lot about these days. The way that we have been talking about films, visual arts, and the practice of drawing these boxes itself, is already, I don't want to say irrelevant, because they are still relevant to some people in the way they have to talk about things. They have to talk about art, or even draw out policies... but as a filmmaker, I have to call myself a filmmaker. What would you call me: a content creator? someone who is making things? I'm thinking about the way I make my works and so, yes, I will say that I am going to make films. But with this Argentinian work, is that an expanded cinema work? Where can we expand it to the point where it is no longer cinema? Where can we expand it to the point where it is maybe no longer even art without trying to do it in a way that is deliberately just trying to break all walls? I don't think that it is the point. It is really about an organic process that is changing according to this very technological time we live in. Without taking this very technological moment that we live in out of the account... How not to become a stuffy professor. How not to stop experimenting. There you go, that's my future horizon for you.

Kent Chan: Which should probably be the title of your next work.

Yeo Siew Hua: Okay... which you are going to edit?

Kent Chan: I bought into the con once, I shall not...

Yeo Siew Hua: Right.

Kent Chan: So that is it for me. Thanks NTU CCA Singapore for giving us a chance to have this conversation. It was long overdue.

Yeo Siew Hua: Yes, funny. I'm not really sure if it is funny for the audience, but interestingly funny to talk to Kent in this way. Thank you, Kent.

Kent Chan: Thanks a lot.

[Audio excerpt from *Yeo Siew Hua, The Lover, The Excess, The Ascetic and the Fool*, 2021. Courtesy the artist.]

Anna Lovecchio: You listened to AiRCAST, a podcast of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national research centre for contemporary art of Nanyang Technological University. To find out more about our programmes, visit

our website at www.ntu.ccasingapore.org, sign up to our newsletter, or follow us on your favourite social media platforms. And of course, if you'd like to hear the voices and thoughts of our other Artists-in-Residence, do subscribe to this podcast.

AiRCAST is produced by NTU CCA Singapore with the support of National Arts Council Singapore. This episode featured artist Yeo Siew Hua in conversation with Kent Chan. I am Anna Lovecchio, the editor of this podcast series. The Programme Manager is Kristine Tan, the Audio Engineer, Ashwin Menon from The Music Parlour. The intro and the outro were composed by our previous Artist-in-Residence Tini Aliman with field recordings taken at different times of the day in the beautiful forest around us.

This episode was recorded on the 22nd of February 2022.
Thank you for listening.



Kent Chan and Yeo Siew Hua recording AiRCAST, 22 February 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.