

AiRCAST #6

YUEN CHEE WAI

NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE



Yuen Chee Wai and Anna Lovecchio recording AiRCAST, 31 March 2022. Courtesy 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 lush 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 am Anna Lovecchio. I am a curator and Assistant Director for Programmes at NTU CCA and I am your host for today.

I am with Artist-in-Residence Yuen Chee Wai, a musician and multifaceted artist deeply invested in experimental music and free improv, collaborative networks and multimedia crossovers. Working with an eclectic toolbox that comprises noise, electronics, and field recordings as well as multiple layers of relational engagements, his creative practice is a vortex of acts of resistance, melancholic drifts, and world-making gestures that reverberate critical perspectives through the status quo. In this conversation we will find out how his interest in underground music ended up shaping a lifetime journey. And we will hear how the unprecedented challenges of these unfamiliar times triggered an outburst of creative energy and pushed him even further into the exploration of new alliances and new ways of expression.

[Audio excerpt from installation recordings of *REFUSE*. Courtesy The Observatory.]

Anna Lovecchio: Hi, Chee Wai. It's the last day of your residency, the very last day. How are you?

Yuen Chee Wai: Yeah, very sad.

Anna Lovecchio: Me too... For this conversation, I'm faced with an unusual challenge. The challenge comes from the fact that you are part of a sprawling expanse of collective undertakings, been involved in a myriad of networks, collaborative platforms, and creative relations. On one hand, I don't want to put you in the position of unwitting spokesperson speaking on behalf of others who are not here now—a position I think you are also not so comfortable with. On the other hand, these projects are part and parcel of your practice and it's almost impossible to talk about your practice without touching upon them. So I'm setting myself up to the uneasy task to extricate your artistic sensibility from within the

polyphonic and multimedia composition that is your practice, and try to tell the story of becoming who you are. Let's see how that goes...

Today, your name is associated mostly with the experimental music scene. Since 2014, you are a member of the long-lived avant-rock band, The Observatory, but you also work closely in collaboration with other musicians not from Singapore. Let's rewind a bit and retrace your early steps in the music scene as someone who never went through formal training in music. Where do you come from? How did the journey start?

Yuen Chee Wai: I think I started during university. But when I was young, I was already fascinated with music, being put through piano lessons even if I didn't really like playing the piano. I dropped out when I was, I think, 7 or 8 years old. And then eventually, later on in my life, I would pick up the piano and play it by myself. But it was in university when I started to play guitar in a local music band, and I was already at that time starting to play around [with] the feedback of guitars and looking at noise, and the articulation of noise with the guitar in the band. So, in a way, I don't have much of a formal music training. From there on, I thought I wanted to explore this further. I wanted to be able to perform by myself, without the presence of a band, to kind of like being liberated from the very band structure and set a structure where I could start to perform with other people, or have agency for myself, to make music for myself. I started on my own journey. It was also during that time, I think it was in the late 1990s or early 2000s, that the laptop came about and it was easier to make music with laptops. Yeah, so from there, I began this whole journey into the experimental music scene.

Anna Lovecchio: And how was, or when was your first encounter with noise, with the noise scene? How did that filter down to you?

Yuen Chee Wai: I didn't have very much formal introduction to noise. In the late 1990s, I started buying a lot of CDs and the friends around me in university also started to pass music around. I think that vocabulary grew from this network of friends educating me while they discover new things. One of the most defining moments was [when] Otomo Yoshihide came to Singapore under invitation of TheatreWorks for the *Flying Circus Project*. Before that, I had, of course, already known of Otomo's work. I think that was the first time I experienced this barrage of noise, when he was doing this turntablism act for the closing of the *Flying*

Circus Project at the Zouk disco. That kind of blew me away, and it also freed up a lot of inhibitive modes of expressions from the past, and emboldened me to do a lot more things. Ironically, about seven years after that, I ended up being in a quartet with Otomo.

Anna Lovecchio: One of the things that I hear more often from artists from your generation is that in the 1990s there was a lack of access in Singapore to some developments that were happening elsewhere in the world, either in the West, but also in the East, because [the] Internet was still in its very early stages and there were not so many bookstores, music stores, or magazines... There was this capsule here where everything was quite filtered. I mean, the radio, as you have mentioned many times in your projects, was not [free] enough to feed the imagination of local artists. Was it your community of friends that was feeding you mostly? Or were you traveling? How did you carve your way to discover music from elsewhere?

Yuen Chee Wai: I think friends played a large part when the whole mail order culture started. This was probably in the early 1990s, when we were ordering stuff from these two record shops in Singapore, Da Da and Roxy. These are institutions by their own right. Roxy still exists today. So we'll go through catalogues of really small font of what was available and literally just mail order from them. That grew into something else when HMV, Tower Records, and Borders came about. We saw ourselves buying a lot more, and consuming a lot more, because some of the stuff that we were interested in was available in these places, especially Borders. Borders also opened up this portal for us because they were bringing in books, even on experimental music and avant-garde music composers. But, of course, spending power was pretty much limited back then. The information was tied to the ability to acquire. At some point university libraries also played a significant role because they did stock some of these books as well. But in the late 1990s–early 2000s, or actually in the whole first 10 years of the 2000s, a lot of people were informed by a music magazine called *The Wire*, which eventually fed an entire scene of musicians with information on the European music scene, or the Japanese music scene... In Southeast Asia, we are a little bit far-off from that region. Even though we are presenting our own music, putting up our own gigs, we were never featured in *The Wire* magazine, nor we were able to plug ourselves into that arena. Actually, even now, I feel it's still the same with *The Wire* magazine, hence I don't really read it anymore. So a lot of what we learned at that

time was through these kinds of very casual circulations. The Internet didn't really inform us much. It was just basically from reading, from exchanging ideas from books with friends.

Anna Lovecchio: And let me dig a bit deeper into your memory since I have this amazing archive now at my disposal. It was about 20 years ago. There was a set at The Substation called *Sound Art. Strategies v.01* which featured yourself together with two other musicians, George Chua and Evan Tan. The three of you performed individual improv sets, with electronic/computer-generated music, and then you jammed together. I mention this event because it marked a turning point in your development and yet, it's almost completely undocumented. There is very little information about it online and the reported audience who showed up at the gig was less than 10 people. I would like to prompt you to reminisce about it.

Yuen Chee Wai: *Strategies* was a series that was organized by George. At that time, he was having a residency, an artist-in-residence programme, at The Substation, if I'm not wrong. Hence he had access to venue hire or, actually, free space in The Substation to do this. And at that time, the one that you're describing would be the first, the very first one [event] in that very small room, to the left of the staircase going up into The Substation's Guinness Theatre. It was the random room. It was really small, like, five to seven people, sold out. Maximum capacity. Yeah, so it was the first time we launched into something like this. Even before that, I'm pretty sure there were some experimental acts presented at The Substation's Garden. But I think that was the first time three of us, with three laptops, started to perform strange sounds and samples from all over.

[Audio excerpt of George Chua and Yuen Chee Wai live at *Strategies v.02* at The Substation, 2003. Courtesy the artist.]

Anna Lovecchio: For someone like me, who belongs to the visual arts context, what strikes me about this event is the choice of words for the title. It's called "Sound Art". I found one review of this event online, on the BigO website, where there is a very long description of what happened, [with] a lot of perplexities from the side of the reviewer about what was going on. Then I started to think, or wonder: is this why they use the word 'sound art'? Because sound art for somebody who works in the arts, has a very specific genealogy and connotation.

And for a music event of that kind, I felt [the title revealed] a need to gain legitimacy, to mobilise 'art' because, maybe, the music scene was not inclusive enough, or elastic enough, to encompass what you were doing. What was the music scene back then?

Yuen Chee Wai: I think that review sets the tone for what the music scene at that time was like. Ivan Thomasz [the author of the review] was from that generation of the local music scene. He would attend gigs at The Substation's Garden and follow the trajectory of local bands. So, for him, to watch three people from that particular scene—myself being in a local indie band, George whom was already known in the circles of the local music scene, and Evan who was from Opposition Party—do something as lowercase, or as microsound, or as unfathomable in that random room with sounds like these, it probably took him by surprise. Maybe he went in with very fresh ears. The whole sound art thing [the event] was labelled under... you are right, in some ways, to say that maybe we had to call it this way because, generally, people in the music scene at the time were still not too familiar with what we were trying to do. It wasn't exactly, you know, three chords and a 4/4 beat going. And you generally need to label things, right? Hence, this came about. Not out of intention, but I think just out of unanimous labelling. In some ways, it's controversial, to some extent. Different places in Asia or Southeast Asia, still have different takes on the term 'sound art'. Some countries regard what we do, or this kind of music, as sound art still today. And some might have already moved on to label this as a genre of music.

Anna Lovecchio: Right, and maybe labels don't really matter that much in the end.

Yuen Chee Wai: Yeah.

Anna Lovecchio: But I think they do speak of some kind of circumstances in which works are generated and that's to asked you [about it]. Well, you seem to remember that review quite well! It was funny to read it because at some point, the journalist asks: "Can we take these performers seriously?" With a big question mark. Yes, that was 2003 and I think now we have the answer!

Yuen Chee Wai: Wow, 19 years.

Anna Lovecchio: Yes, 19 years! But let's get to your involvement in collaborative projects. Can you share about the concepts and circumstances behind Asian Meeting Festival and Playfreely, two aggregating platforms you are very entangled with that are redrawing the boundaries of the music scene in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Yuen Chee Wai: I think Asian Meeting Festival was something that was born out of a particular vision back in 2005, 2006. Just now I was talking about the accessibility of information and that this part of the region was never entirely in the radar of Western music publications, or labels, or whatever. At the time, I was also wondering: how can we have an active scene in Southeast Asia to actually get this going? I was organising a lot of gigs and events of experimental music nature in Singapore. I had this series called Hadaka and eventually, [Neo] Kim Seng, who was a music fan and a programmer at Esplanade, saw the promise of this series and invited me to put up a Hadaka show at Esplanade. He gave generous support. That was the first idea that came to fruition, of being able to effectively make this Southeast Asian scene a little bit more connected.



Hadaka: K, live performance, 12-14 September 2007, Esplanade Theatre Studio, Singapore. Courtesy Law Kian Yan.

It was also an opportunity for me to reach out to performers, collaborators, or people from the East Asian scene to have some kind of dialogue. Otomo, whom I spoke of earlier, had [held] one Asian Meeting [Festival] one or two years before what I did for the Hadaka at Esplanade, and he focused on East Asia. I think he had one or two participants from South Korea, Hong Kong, and China, if I'm not wrong, with Japanese musicians. So for that specific Hadaka, I thought that maybe we could get Otomo and a few people who ran events in their own countries to come as well. And most of the time, these people are also performers. Then, I selected a few from Southeast Asia and we had about 10 musicians do open workshops and perform, pretty much in a free improv setting. I think that was the first time that an initiative like this happened. And then Otomo thought that we should continue and, eventually, he set up two things: he started FEN (Far East Network) with Yan Jun from Beijing, [Ryu] Hankil from Seoul, himself from Tokyo and me, in a hope that the four of us would continue [to expand] these networks by their own volition. It [FEN] also became a improv music quartet that would perform in different situations. The second thing he continued on was the Asian Meeting Festival, and he made it bigger! He used his own money. He put in a lot of money and he did Asian Meeting Festival, I think, in 2008, or 2009. He involved me, Hankil, FEN, together with a few other musicians from here. I think Vivian [Wang] and Leslie [Low] from The Observatory, and Zai Kuning as well. We all went. It was during that time that AMF (Asian Meeting Festival) grew bigger. Then, in 2013 or 2014, The Japan Foundation came into the picture and wanted to help... because, at that time, East Asia had this funding process where they'd give money for projects with Southeast Asian partners. I think South Korea had that as well. Taiwan also had that. But I think Japan was the first to jump into it. They provided funding and we did Asian Meeting Festival for a good five years in Japan...

Anna Lovecchio: Annually?

Yuen Chee Wai: Yeah, that was annually. I also tried to bring it to Singapore because I thought that festivals like these can't just happen in Japan. It needs to be in Southeast Asia [as well]. So I pushed pretty hard for it to come to Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur. By that time I was already in [The] Observatory and we have this program called Playfreely that facilitated a lot of crosspollination and could be the local partner for Asian Meeting Festival to come to Singapore. Then, also, to join up with KLEX, from KL, to present part of Asian Meeting Festival in Kuala



Iman Jimbot, Ishikawa Ko, and Yuen Chee Wai, recording session of Asian Meeting Festival, 2017, GOK Sound, Tokyo, Japan. Courtesy Asian Meeting Festival.

Lumpur. Basically, it's just to connect people to the larger idea, the larger vision. If you draw back to the 2005 or 2006 period, it was basically just to continue connecting people and these networks, because each network will have their own sub-networks and sub-categories as well. So I think it was making it stronger.

[Audio excerpt from unreleased studio recordings of Ishikawa Ko, Iman Jimbot, and Yuen Chee Wai, for Asian Meeting Festival. Courtesy the artist.]

Anna Lovecchio: What about Playfreely?

Yuen Chee Wai: Playfreely is a programme of The Observatory. The first one, I can't remember when it was, even though we just did the exhibition at SAM [Singapore Art Museum] where we charted everything! It might have been in 2011 or so... I think it started out as a very small idea. At that time, I had not joined The Observatory yet, but basically it [the idea] was to pair musicians of different disciplines together to see what happens in a free improv setting. There will be successful experiments, there will also be not too successful experiments, but the

idea is to not be afraid to fail.

At the time, I think, the idea to look at musicians from our backyard, from our region, was already quite prevalent. There were musicians from Indonesia and Malaysia coming to join these sessions. After that, I think it was when I joined The Observatory, it expanded a little bit and became more like a bigger-form festival. The biggest one was at The Projector where we performed on The Projector's stage. And that was the first concert in The Projector as well. That threw Playfreely in a completely different direction. It slowly became more a free improv music festival, except that it's a lot more curated. We'd select musicians from here, from the region, and also from further away, to come and play together.

[Audio excerpt of The Observatory and Haino Keiji in *Authority is Alive*, Playfreely, 2019. Courtesy the artist.]

Anna Lovecchio: We missed it in the last few years of the pandemic.

Yuen Chee Wai: Oh, but then we did the installation version!

Anna Lovecchio: That's true. I think there is this very strong relational and 'creational' component at play in these networking platforms for encounters and exchange, like the Asian Meeting Festival or Playfreely where, through improvisation, you bring together musicians who very often are not familiar with each other. I think it is quite important and should not be underestimated: the fact that this is the first time when people often get to know each other. For me, the magic of these encounters is that you veer artists away from their comfort zone. You plunge musicians into a space of intimacy with the unknown where everything can happen, new situations are triggered, new relations unfold, and failures are possible and welcomed, to some extent. For me, it is stunning to remark that, beyond practicing experimental music yourself, you also put all this time, effort, and work in creating these alternative assemblies – is that a form of resistance to the power structures of mainstream culture? Or is it more of an effort to build communities as a strategy to overcome that very special kind of loneliness that sometimes befalls upon people who work in the niche?

Yuen Chee Wai: I think it is a confluence of various things I've experienced along the years of playing in festivals overseas. You go there, you play in a festival, you meet certain people, and then you leave not having [made] enough connections

with the space or with the people. It becomes very one-way, you'll just bring something and then you leave. It does not feel very connected, in some ways, for me. Almost cold. You don't engage enough. So [I'm] always thinking how, then, to break the ice and have interesting collaborations come out from a festival, an event, a conversation, or even from a meal. I think the meal, or the time that you spend together, makes more sense, sometimes, than the performance itself. There are these things that I see and observe, and I value and sometimes it's not just about us. It's about that exchange and the kind of chemistry that you have with people. Even if you dislike the person, [when] we play, something good comes out of it. There's some sense of value in what's being presented. So when we do Playfreely and Asian Meeting Festival, a lot of emphasis is placed on the meals and the time spent outside of preparing for the concert, for the people to be comfortable amongst themselves. Once that is solved, whatever comes out from the experiment, or whatever comes up from the performance, would be the result of all this. That preparation builds up to something else, and it's something that I find very precious. This is also something I learnt from Otomo. Otomo would always be most excited, and he will always be looking forward to the after-show party. That's the only thing he lives for.



Playfreely: No Man's Land, live performance, 13-14 December 2017, The Projector, Singapore. Courtesy The Idealiste.

Anna Lovecchio: And drinks!

Yuen Chee Wai: He doesn't drink! But he likes being amongst people talking, and eating good food, and sharing. From there, I started to learn a lot more about the process behind this kind of work. And I always credit Otomo as my teacher. I always learn and look up to him in this way. These are things that I've realised and observed for myself. I've come to know how important it is because these afterparties will then forge eventual collaborations. When people start to really lose their inhibitions, they'll be more candid and they'll talk more openly about things.

Anna Lovecchio: That special chemistry of conviviality, of feeding creativity... It's sometimes underestimated how important it is to create an environment where people can actually let go. Where they're not only engaging on a professional level, but on a deeper level. It's good to learn that Otomo is your master of conviviality from the Far East!

Yuen Chee Wai: Yeah, with FEN, we had never spoken about music before. From the day we met each other as a quartet until today, every time we meet, we never speak about music. We're always talking about food. We're always talking about how stupid the politics of our countries are. It's basically that, most of the time.

Anna Lovecchio: Let's go back to closer times. You've just spent six months in residence with us at NTU CCA Singapore. During the residency, one of the things that I came to appreciate the most is the DIY aspect of your practice. I saw your studio become an unclassifiable workshop with your desks bulging under the weight of synthesisers and sonic gear, but also many tools and gizmos that you use to do and undo, to put together and pull apart, to wire and re-wire whatever unsuspecting objects around you, sometimes even organic entities. For me, there is an ethos of resourceful independence in this DIY attitude, an impetus of self-determination, a readiness to stray away from the fabricated, and what is already there, to make things your way. Because, maybe, the world is not always the most hospitable place for new ideas or forms or sounds... I'd like to ask if you can unpack some levels of significance of this endless doing things your way.

Yuen Chee Wai: First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge, credit, and thank NTU CCA Singapore for that six months. It's been very precious. The environment and the space have been very generous towards me. The solitude of

inhabiting this space has pushed me further... because there aren't limits to what I can do in this space. So there was a lot of thinking. Just these hands... looking at what can be done [with them]. The whole DIY thing is something that I had to learn for myself. I have no formal training in a lot of these kinds of stuff. You just have to rely on yourself most of the time to get things done because no one else is going to do it for you. It even dates back to when I was organising shows. I just had to do it myself. I use my own money. Do it yourself. If you lose, you lose. If you gain, or breakeven, that's fine. It's a matter of survival, I think. I'm not sure how to unpack this...

Anna Lovecchio: Is this something that you see yourself keep doing?

Yuen Chee Wai: I think so. I mean, I have thought about it before and I think about it aloud even to Cheryl and Dharma from The Observatory. Are we going to do this until we die? Are we going to do this for the next 10 years, 15 years? What's going to happen? I think the idea of unpacking is also to consider having people take over, eventually. Whoever is interested to be on this path of not having much, of getting your hands dirty. Actually even now, for BlackKaji, the



Yuen Chee Wai, Residencies OPEN, installation view, 22 January 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

series that we do in our studio, we move all the instruments ourselves. We lay the cables ourselves. We do the documentation, the recording, the sound engineering, everything... even down to designing the publicity materials. It is all DIY. The upcoming BlackKaji *REFUSE* is all DIY as well. As much as it looks like it's from SAM [Singapore Art Museum], it's pretty much DIY by us. I'm not sure if there are people who are interested, genuinely interested, in doing stuff like this. I mean, it's a valid question of how long we can do this for... I don't know. I still try to find some kind of creative satisfaction in doing this, to always give myself a challenge and do something different, or to make a difference in the scene and serve the work. Because I've always thought the work be more important than me. Maybe that's where the punishment comes from, to be enslaved to the work.

Anna Lovecchio: That sounds very gloomy. I was hoping you would tell me: DIY is my recipe of freedom. Well, it is not...



The Observatory, *REFUSE* (2022), installation view, Singapore Art Museum. Courtesy the artist.

Yuen Chee Wai: To be self-sustaining... I mean, I was just reading in this Mycotopia book [*In Search of Mycotopia: Citizen Science, Fungi Fanatics, and the Untapped Potential of Mushrooms* by Doug Bierend] that I have been reading for the past few weeks, that self-sustenance is not possible without community. So I think that kind of put things into perspective for me. You know, this talk about being self-sustaining... Sometimes this whole national narrative, for example, from the Council [National Arts Council], from the top down, that you have to be self-sustaining, and all that stuff... It is not possible without community. And hence, without being cognizant of this idea, you just want to continue serving something or making something happen, eventually. It's not self-aggrandising. But, you know, if the scene takes off, and if the scene is vibrant, things will happen, eventually. Maybe that's the general idea behind the whole DIY mentality.

Anna Lovecchio: John Cage once said: "I'm trying to be unfamiliar with what I'm doing". I think this resonates a lot with what you do. It's becoming increasingly apparent in the work of The Observatory which, as you mentioned before, features in its current formation yourself, Cheryl Ong and Dharma Shan. One must acknowledge that The Observatory has a long tradition of creative restlessness. The band has always been surprising its followers. However, in the last couple of years, at least from my point of view, the sheer variety of outputs from the band has reached an unprecedented level. You're increasingly venturing into a space that is beyond any conventional music-making format, or strategy. Just to mention a few: you experimented with clay and with the sonification of ceramics; you released some materials from your forthcoming album through a mixed-reality experience which was a mixture of installation and virtual reality; you launched BlackKaji radio, an online broadcast; you radically transformed Playfreely, as you mentioned before, and turned it into a sound exhibition. And, of course, there is *REFUSE*, your last massive project which also came in the guise of an exhibition, currently on view at the Singapore Art Museum in their new space at Tanjong [Pagar] Distripark. That all these projects are so different from each other and happened in just a couple of years is mind-blowing. What is your relation with the unfamiliar? What is it that keeps pushing you into uncharted waters?

Yuen Chee Wai: Actually, just listening to you go through this list has kind of alarmed me. All this happened in the past two years, and in unfamiliar times as well. This unfamiliarity really pushed and challenged us a lot more. I'm not sure whether it is a cliché to talk about the new normal and the whole pandemic

situation, but at least for myself, it has taught me to think differently and recalibrate ways of expression on many different levels. For example, Playfreely as an exhibition format was also personal as well, [it was about] reacquainting the individual to space, reconnecting with greenery and with being outside. With the mixed-reality project made of VR, installation, and physical space, it was again to acquaint the person, the individual, back into some kind of cognitive dissonance.

[Audio excerpt of *Imprisoned Mind* from upcoming album *Demon State* by The Observatory and Koichi Shimizu, 2022. Courtesy the artist.]

Yuen Chee Wai: Especially with the VR, I was already thinking how—with the saturation of the music industry, the whole piracy thing, and also all the streaming platforms—we can take agency as musicians and creatives to offer a different way of consuming music. To put the listener within or in the sound of the music, in the space of the music. It becomes more visceral, and it becomes an experience not to be replicated in, let's say, a room with a good Hi-Fi system [because] you need to be in that moment... I was trying to think about that moment, and what it takes for the person to be music. Without the person, the music doesn't exist. These ideas challenge me all the time to rethink our practice as musicians, as artists, as creatives, to push the boundaries of what this expression can offer. I mean, in the long tradition of music, what else can be done? What you can explore with? I think that challenge really drives me, or at least, me with The Observatory. To find new ways of expressing what is already available, and pushing it even further. I think that is the excitement. That is what we want to do. Even for *REFUSE*, we don't compose. We relinquish our agency as musicians and as composers to something else, to compose through decomposition, questioning certain rubrics and logics, and pushing and pushing and pushing. That is what drives us... that unfamiliarity. And to be actually thrown into that unfamiliarity is exciting.

Anna Lovechio: And it's a free choice, which I think is remarkable. For those who might not be aware of *REFUSE*, *REFUSE* is The Observatory's exhibition that is [currently] on view at the Singapore Art Museum [14 January – 17 April 2022]. It's a huge collaborative project that involves a multiplicity of agencies: human and, most importantly, non-human. This is the first project that you do in collaboration with non-human entities by lending sonic presence to the secretive,

and normally silent, underground world of fungi and mushrooms. We're not going to get into this big project because we agree that Dharma and Cheryl would have to be here to talk about it. But what I want to ask you, because this is also a project that occupied a lot of your energies during the residency, is: now that the project is almost over, what is your takeaway from this experience of working with non-humans? What's going stay with you?

Yuen Chee Wai: One of the main things I learnt is to be sensitive to non-human collaborations, the ethics of working with non-humans. The kind of caution to accord to something like this. I think we need to be a bit more delicate and respectful in certain ways. All through my musical journey I've been predominantly collaborating with humans. So this is the first official, non-human collaboration project. What I learned out of it is that I need to be more respectful. I've learned and I'm still learning, of course, to be more respectful to non-human collaborators. Of course, there's the question of rights, the question of ethical agencies... They [the fungi] didn't choose to be there. We made that choice for them to be there. There's also, you know, that whole dilemma of labour and



Yuen Chee Wai, Residencies OPEN, installation view, 22 January 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

ownership. Things like these question me all the time. I have been dealing with these questions every time I go to the museum, to *REFUSE*. And every time I lead tours, I'll be explaining to people certain things about the behaviours of certain fungi. But I have not been entertained with the question of ethics yet. I wish, sometimes, that things like these would be talked about because other people's perceptions inform me further. Yeah, so this whole thing about ethics... I'm also now starting to look into bio-art as well, and the ethics behind that. To a certain extent, if I were to be asked about the whole collaboration with fungi in the exhibition, I will also say that we all collaborate with fungi on, not even a daily basis, but I think on the hourly basis. The food we eat, the beer we drink, so many things like the medicines that we take are all results of collaborations with fungi, which people do not really take notice of, or they take it for granted. 80% of antibiotics come from fungi! So I could also say that in some ways, collaborating with fungi in a symbiotic relationship, or in an exhibition, also articulates it in a different way. Maybe they [the fungi] have been wanting to make music all this while. There's a lot of space for speculation, and that makes it interesting to collaborate. In some sense, I could be the substrate for the fungi in this collaboration process. Yeah, I really think it's about metabolism. I am being metabolised, they are metabolising...

[Audio excerpt from installation recordings of *REFUSE*. Courtesy The Observatory.]

Anna Lovecchio: This project brings a lot of question to the fore. It's insightful to also hear your perplexities about what it really entails to create a collaboration with entities that might have a different agency from humans. I think this is a longer metabolic process that as a society, as a civilisation, we need to go through.

Yuen Chee Wai: Just as an example... some of the mushrooms in the jars, in the exhibition, they are trying to break out of the jars. So they are expressing in a very obvious way "this is not what I am supposed to be and I want to come out. This is how I express myself." But then, of course, the institution would want us to put it back in or to do maintenance on the jars and neaten things... Is there a need to? Why should we stop their agency to express what they are meant to be?

Anna Lovecchio: Yeah, I think we'll keep negotiating these boundaries for a long

time, until we truly learn how to coexist with each other and maybe we take 'labour' out of 'collaboration' and go back to a different kind of being together where there's no labour involved...

I think we have come to a close. Thank you so much Chee Wai for sharing your thoughts. I look forward to seeing what you are going to metabolise next.

Yuen Chee Wai: Thank you...

[Audio excerpt from Yuen Chee Wai's recording of himself packing up the studio in the last hours of his residency at NTU CCA Singapore, 30 March 2022. Courtesy the artist.]

Anna Lovecchio: You listened to AiRCAST, a podcast of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national 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 musician and artist Yuen Chee Wai in conversation with myself. I am Anna Lovecchio, the editor of this podcast series. The Programme Manager is Nadia Amalina. The Audio Engineer, Ashwin Menon from The Music Parlour.

The intro and the outro were composed by Tini Aliman with field recordings taken at different times of the day in the beautiful forest around us.

This episode was recorded on the 31st of March 2022.

Thank you for listening.