

[00:00.25] **JUNNI CHEN**

Artist Song-Ming Ang makes art, focusing on how we relate to music individually and as a society. Singapore born, and Berlin based, Ang draws from the everyday and popular culture to create objects and encounters in various formats. He holds an M.A. In Oral and Visual Cultures from Goldsmith's University of London. Ang's projects have been presented in numerous international venues, including the Singapore Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennial, the High Line, New York, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, and the Kunstinstituut Melly. In his work, music often serves as an entry point into other areas, such as the ways in which fans and amateurs generate alternative forms of knowledge, and how structures and processes in experimental music may inform self-organization and democracy. In these ways, Ang's practice straddles several meanings of the word "interdisciplinary," and displays a sensitivity to the fact that the interstices between different modalities create new understandings of art and culture. I remember that we had a reading in one of our first classes, on our second year thesis projects, and one of the readings actually raised up social historian Joe Moran's notion of "interdisciplinarity," which he mentioned might refer to forging connections across the different disciplines, but also establishes a kind of undisciplined space in the interstices between disciplines. And he writes, "or even attempting to transcend disciplinary boundaries altogether."

[01:44.87]

One of the questions that we're trying to answer in this speaker series, or even just to consider is this thought: what does this look like in artistic practice, particularly for the visual arts? In many ways, even the mere term itself, the visual arts, delineates boundaries. Visuality is privileged, and what constitutes art is often presented within the context of spaces that prescribe strict behaviors, and ways of looking. In thinking about Ang's work, we note that his works are often interdisciplinary in multiple ways. Through how his works operate, moving between visual and sonic mediums, through how they are created, in work versus play, and the various audiences that they engage—the art world versus the quote unquote "public." Thus, Ang's practice uses music to expand our understanding of what art can be. And for that reason, we are honored to have him here today as our guest. In the Speaker Series, Ang will present his art practice and its

underlying concerns. We will then open up the floor to a short question and answer session which will be moderated by Guy. We invite you to write your questions in the chat or use the raise hand function in the menu bar of your Zoom interface.

[03:02.69]

And now I will turn over the floor to Song-Ming, who will lead us through a short presentation of his works.

[03:11.45] **SONG-MING ANG**

Thank you very much, Junni, for the introduction. Good afternoon, good day. good evening, everyone. Whoever is joining us. Thank you very much for the invitation. I'm just going to start off by going through several points that I was thinking about with regards to my work when I was invited to do this talk before going into a selection of works. Twelve of them in all. That covers sort of like three mini-periods of my artistic practice over the last 10 or 15 years. When I received this invitation, I thought it would be really interesting to talk a little bit about the connection between art and politics. Different kinds of binary started appearing in my head, such as everything and nothing, work and non-work, amateurism, professionalism and all these things that were swimming around my head. I guess consciously or subconsciously due to the pandemic and essentially the state of the world over the last two years especially. And I think as an artist I've also always been quite— what's the right word for this? Quite sensitive, or quite cognizant about the value of art, which is obviously related to why artists make things in the first place.

[05:02.97]

I guess one of the things that you might notice about my art practice, is despite the fact that it sort of traverses different kinds of terrains and also different kinds of media, I think maybe at its heart, there's a certain kind of ethics, or certain principles, that are fundamental to how I make things. Amongst which simplicity, or efficiency are also concerns. One of the other things that I started thinking about as well, was the idea of transformation or transmutation because in my work there's quite a lot that transpires.

Apart from making objects— two dimensional things, three dimensional things. My work also quite often goes into the performative, or it exists as live events. Some of them can be quite hard to document, they are ephemeral. All right, I'm kind of losing myself, I think. I'm just going to go into the works. I take everyone through them and at the end of the introduction, it's going to be about twelve works. Junni and Guy are going to come in, maybe ask some questions and then everybody can join in afterwards.

[07:03.93]

The first work that I'm going to talk about is actually this one, called "Piece for 350 Onomatopoeic Molecules." It has a pretty pretentious title. As you can see here, it's an interactive installation that's set up, and I'm just inviting the audience to participate by throwing these plastic color balls at guitars, they are sort of tuned to open chords, and put through effects pedals as well as drum sets.

#### **(VIDEO PLAYS)**

[07:49.49]

So it looks quite chaotic, quite hazardous. But I would say that it really draws from two different strengths, I think, of music. One obviously being rock music, and that's where the instrumentation comes from, as well as avant garde music. Quite a lot of John Cage in this indeterminacy, if you ask me. And that's really one of the first works that I made. And I think in the beginning of my art practice I was always making things in a very blunt way, and I guess to some extent I am still very blunt in terms of how I make things. And this one is just based on the process and it's really about delineating a certain sort of sphere, or creating conditions for something to happen. And what we have here is maybe some kind of collaboration between me as an artist, and the visitors as a performer.

[09:10.81]

And the next work that I'm going to talk about is "Guilty Pleasures," another kind of interactive work. These photos are taken from the Museum of Contemporary Art in

Sydney. And this is the work that I've presented a few times in different cities around the world. And the premise of this work, as the title suggests, is it's actually a listening party. And I function as a host, usually some kind of evening event in some part of a museum or gallery, and serve a little bit of wine. It's kind of like an Alcoholics Anonymous for music fans. I think when I first made this work, it was sometime around 2006, if I'm not wrong. And at that time I would ask people to bring CDs, vinyls, iPods to come in, and then we have equipment to play all these things. And then as the work kind of got older and in its older iterations, we started using Spotify and YouTube, so people didn't have to bring in their own music anymore. It became an event that influenced and connected a lot to what we can find online. But I think what I really enjoy about the work is that you really have this space, this couple of hours where people are just coming to talk about all the music that they love listening to, but they feel so guilty about confessing to liking. So, a lot of boy bands, a lot of cheesy music, 80s Pop, gangster rap, things that are not necessarily of good taste, let's put it that way.

[11:37.44]

In a sense, also, I think there's a lot of my work that's also about the context in which music is produced and disseminated and consumed. Almost a metacriticism of music. But I would really say that the motivation comes from me as a fan, just as somebody who likes to talk to people about music. And this just happens to be an occasion where people can really come and enjoy so-called bad music for a couple of hours, and talk about it. So everyone's just coming next to me, sitting down and making their compassions before we share the song for everyone to listen to. Again, another work that's not very technical.

[12:31.41]

I'm going to move on to "You and I." I started this project maybe sometime around 2008, I think—it took a few years. I also worked with different institutions, depending on whom I was working with at the time, who wanted to show that work. So, "You and I" is a project where I invited people to write me physical letters. So, whenever I got these letters, I would create a response in the form of a mix CD, actually, for the people who

wrote to me, so that there's this exchange between an audience member, or member of the public, and myself, as well as an exchange in format.

[13:24.47]

So what they communicate to me in words, I'm replying, actually, with music. I was just using music from my MP3 library, from iTunes, which is about, I don't know, 50GB or something. That's a lot of MP3s, but we've got Spotify and YouTube now, so that's quite obsolete. Some of them really took a lot of effort. You can see this origami rhinoceros that was included in the letter. And it's just really amazing how much effort people put into the letters and just being able to appreciate handwriting. Color envelopes, nice paper everyone's using. I'm quite happy to say that I've gotten really nice responses from the public about this work. A woman told me, she wrote me an email saying, "I came across your work, 'You, and I,' showing in Singapore. And then I spent 45 minutes in the room crying, reading all the letters." So, yeah, a lot of responsibility for me.

[14:51.93] - Song-Ming Ang

I'm going to move on to another work, sort of quite early, 10 - 12 years ago. This one is called "Silent Walk." Again, another work that's quite open, really, about delineating a certain sort of conditions for something to happen, process-based, and again, quite ephemeral, absolutely un-virtuosic.

[15:22.39] - Song-Ming Ang

Also, again, I would say influenced by avant garde music, by sonic practices, by people like [inaudible 00:15:32], of course, different kinds of walks. In our world, there's actually quite a lot of walks, right? But anyway, this one, "Silent Walk," it's actually based on that set of instructions that I've written. And it's really simple, it's just based around everyone in the group taking turns to be the leader of this walk. So, for example, if you got eight people, we would start off from the location, which is usually a museum or a gallery. And everybody takes five minutes to be the leader of this walk. And then after five minutes, you tap somebody else on the shoulder, and this person becomes the leader of the walk. Everybody turns off their mobile devices so we don't get interrupted

and we don't get disturbed. And, in this way, following the leader as the leadership gets passed on, this group exists as a self organized entity wandering through a particular space for something like, let's say, 40 minutes, right? Because five times eight is 40. And then after the walk, everybody goes back to the gathering point where they started, and then they exchange some words about what they heard. And it's quite amazing because almost everybody hears different things. It's one of the works that people are initially apprehensive about. Because on the surface, really, on paper, it's a very simple work. But again, participants have also given me quite good feedback. As in, the experience is really quite rare because it's just really not something we would do, which is just to go out, to listen to sounds for like 40 minutes, without interruption.

[17:35.87]

So these are the kinds of work that I made, I would say, in the beginning part of my practice. And when I moved to Berlin in 2011, that was for my residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien. And, I started making works which were more introverted in some ways, but also focused a lot more on labor. I was interested as somebody who was influenced, I think, by experimental music, by conceptual art, and also as an untrained artist. I have an M.A. From Goldsmiths, and that's in Oral and Visual Cultures. But, essentially, that's a theoretical degree. So I never studied fine art properly. And as a musician I'm also just generally self taught. A couple of years of private lessons when I was a child, as per every child growing up in a developed country.

[18:56.47]

So when I moved to Berlin, the work started evolving a little bit. One of the first things I did was to look for a piano workshop where I could become an apprentice, which was a very funny process, because I approached several piano workshops and then they obviously didn't take me quite seriously. I said, "Would it be possible for you to teach me how to refurbish a piano?" And, essentially that's what this work is about— "Parts and Labour." So over a period of four months, I rented a small space in the piano workshop. And because they refurbished pianos, they buy old ones and refurbish them, and then sell them. I took an old, very basic East German piano from the seller, bought it from

them for 250 Euros and I asked the Klaviermeister to teach me how to do it. And I documented the entire process. Several times a week I went in, and sometimes I just set up the camera myself to shoot it. Sometimes I had some other artist friends helping me with the camera work. And it documents the entire process of me just taking apart the piano, changing all the strings, making physical improvements to the keys, things like that, and then tuning it back, and then basically making it playable. Salvaging an instrument. Really quite the opposite of a lot of artworks. Many artists have made artworks that involves destroying instruments. It's always very painful for me to watch, so I just decided to do something that was totally opposite. It's quite rehabilitative instead.

**(VIDEO PLAYS)**

[21:08.81]

And in the video you can really hear the sounds that emerge quite organically, or spontaneously, between the interaction of me as a person, and also between the tools, and then of course, the piano, the instrument itself. So again, using that as a kind of a framework to make a video essay. There's all these amazing sounds from the piano that emerge almost naturally, and then sometimes another person is tuning another piano in the other room, and then it steals over to the video, and it's all these moments that I'm interested in that kind of make things beautiful for me.

**(VIDEO PLAYS)**

[22:49.65] - Song-Ming Ang

There's no postproduction on this, pretty much nothing. It's just the sound of me hammering that pin in.

[22:58.83]

And then "Backwards Bach." This one looks very genuine. This one, again, as the title suggests, it's me learning how to play a Bach piece backwards. The C-major prelude from "The Well Tempered Clavier," Book One, which you all know because it's one of the



most famous pieces that probably gets used in films quite a bit. And it's probably also something that many children would have to learn how to play when they take piano or keyboard lessons. So this one, I filmed in a German mansion that was built around the Baroque period, I think, although they later refurbished it and changed the interior a little bit. And what I wanted to do, really, was essentially invert a piece of music. And I started looking at different prospective pieces of music that I could invert or reverse, pretty much play from the last note to the first, or from the last part to the first. And Bach became almost like the natural choice because there's so much symmetry in his music. Counterpoint, everything is really structured. And I think in some Bach pieces you can really just sort of play backwards, and it still sounds like Bach. So this is kind of what it sounds like.

#### **(VIDEO PLAYS)**

[25:41.63] - Song-Ming Ang

Just to explain a little bit about what was going on just now, because it's a two channel installation, and as you can see, the camera is actually moving in opposite directions in a semicircle. So any one time there's only either the forward or the backwards version that's playing. But, we're seeing actually both the forwards and backwards take at the same time, which is also interesting because you can play with it in terms of how it's installed.

[26:15.17] - Song-Ming Ang

So, I think this work relates obviously a lot to "Parts and Labour." It's about an instrument, it's about a particular kind of process. It's really about going from point A to point B and then going from point B back to point A. Few days ago, I actually just went to see a concert and they were playing Alvin Lucier's "I Am Sitting In A Room," which is a really great composition. We could talk about that a little bit later. But it just really reminded me that I think a big part of what I do is actually quite influenced by people like Alvin Lucier, even though it doesn't quite make sense because I'm just not trained as a composer. But artists and composers who tend to be able to whittle down an idea and



really find the right way to communicate a particular idea. They're really interesting for me.

[27:30.87]

To move on to talk about this one, which is a slightly simpler work, again, as a Singaporean, actually. I know this probably sounds really funny, but I grew up in Singapore, and it's just one degree north of the equator, so we don't get seasons. It's always summer. And when I had opportunities to do residences, the earliest ones that I did was one in Japan, which was great. And I went there in Fall. For my open studio. I just decided to get a lot of these ginkgo leaves which were all falling over a couple of weeks and brought them back to the studio corridor. So when there was the open studio, everybody had to walk through the corridor to get to my studio. And then of course, in the process you're just making all these rustling sounds. So I just repeated that, for my open studio at Künstlerhaus Bethanien and it was really good fun. Apart from the sounds that you hear from walking through the leaves, you actually really smell them. That's quite fun too.

[29:08.25] - Song-Ming Ang

In case you're wondering— basically the way that I make "Transposition," is just go somewhere to collect with some friends, just call them up. That time I went actually with my now wife and another friend and just brought along a lot of trash bags. Brought it back to the studio.

[29:40.01]

The next one is a slightly fun one. Also, again, about labor in a way. This one's called "Justin." And over a period of about three months I learned how to reproduce Justin Bieber's autograph. It's not really important, I think, whether I'm a Belieber, whether I'm a Bieber fan. I don't think that's important. But we can go there, we can go into that later. But anyway, I think for about 15-20 minutes every day I would just practice. The image that you see here on the left, this is apparently Justin Bieber's original autograph, which I found on the Internet. I just printed it out and used it as my example. And then these

three that you see here, right on top, it's me without any training, just trying to do it just to see how bad it is and how different it is and then you can see— just being completely methodical about it, I think the J and then the J U, these are just samples. I've got a whole stack of sheets of A4 paper and then going on to the J-U-S- T- I- N - B- I- E- B- E- R — when you've done it about 1000 times. Yeah. When I felt confident enough, I bought a few of these posters and I signed on it and I framed it and next to it I had a 35 millimeter slideshow which was a sample of all the practice sheets that I accumulated. So in that sense, it was also quite nice for a viewer to be able to see other experience time passing, as the carousel for the slight projector goes around right once every 2 seconds, you really kind of feel it. During this period, I was making work that I guess, in some ways were more introverted, but also, like I said, very based on labor and logic. And that was one of the things that I was very interested in, how to use my hands, how to make manual things as somebody whose work is, I guess, more on the conceptual side.

[32:42.37]

And the last part, the last few words that I'm going to talk about are the more recent ones, most of which I showed in Venice a couple of years ago at the Biennale, in the Singapore Pavilion. We'll start with "Recorder Rewrite." This is sort of like the main work that anchors the entire Pavilion. It's a three channel video installation where I ran a workshop. First of all, it's a really huge undertaking, working with 20 children as the performers, working with them to create a four part symphony. And really, this wasn't me trying to be Beethoven, if anything, probably me wanting to be like the Beach Boys, making, like, "Smile" or something. Anyway, so working with children to make a recorder symphony in four parts, and running workshops. We had a three day workshop. On the first day, we taught them techniques for playing the recorder in an experimental way. So, essentially what you would call extended techniques. And then the next day, we went through improvisation exercises, games, exercises with them and asked them to just sort of like, make sounds through games, call and response, different kinds of things. And then we sort of, like, tried to put it together at the Singapore Conference Hall, which is where we shot the video. And there's some historical reason for this, if I wanted

to do this, but maybe we can get into that later again.

[34:50.23]

So, yeah, I had to work with a music instructor, a musical director, and a lot of work also went into planning the shots with the cinematographer. But of course, this was going to be extremely difficult because it's not something that you can storyboard. It's really not like a regular kind of film where it's the director, like directing, access. It's a really different experience. So I think even the key personnel, which was for, of course, me directing this, and the cinematographer. And we also had a choreographer and a choreography assistant as well as the musical director. So all four of us, we had to work quite closely. But of course, everything was just changing on the fly. And also, due to how long you can book the place, we had to shoot everything essentially in two days. The kids were so amazing. It was really good at working with them. I'm just going to show you the trailer here.

### **(VIDEO PLAYS)**

[38:02.53]

So after we made "Recorder Rewrite," after we made the video, the children had all these recorders which they were playing, four of each, soprano, alto, tenor, base, five of each, actually. And at some point it just kind of struck me that I need to make a work out of the recorders, because it's so fun. And this is what I did, basically, again, very simple. Dismantling them and then rearranging them, restacking them and trying to create sculptures out of them, trying to find new forms. What you see here, they're just naturally balancing. So it's also about finding this equilibrium, finding this kind of balance, which is quite fragile, and therefore interesting for me. And I think it really is what sculpture is about, working with material, with things that have mass, things that have weight, and finding new forms and respecting gravity. And despite the fact that they look so simple.

[39:32.39]

Here's another set of works that's kind of related to this, would be the "Music Manuscripts," which I've been working on already for some time. The early ones, essentially, I made by superimposing hand drawn lines on top of the musical staves. So this entire series is just about using musical staves and music manuscript paper as a kind of foundation for me to work with, to create new visual compositions, but actually not necessarily visual. I mean, of course, people have asked me, are these playable? And my answer always is yes, if you are game enough. Like any form of visual score, it's really a question of willingness. And then the later ones, I started incorporating techniques like cutting, photocopying, pasting, folding, looking at origami for inspiration. Yeah, and then a lot of them also sort of have an internal logic and sometimes they get made in sets. And then when you look at them being placed together, it makes more sense.

[41:00.81]

And the last work that I'm going to go through very quickly is "Dusk to Dawn Choruses." This is a collaborative project with Julien Grossmann, a French artist, a good friend of mine, who's also really both a musician and artist. And we work with different singers, different groups of people around the world with different institutions. And essentially it's us working with amateur singers to perform pieces that me and Julien have written. And most of the scores that we've written are essentially instructional scores. Julien tends to write sheet music a little bit, so he can kind of go into that direction. But for me, it's just like this text, these instructions. And again, a lot of them are very simple. So, for example, there are pieces that revolve around counting numbers one to ten. There are pieces that revolve around letters, the pieces that revolve around words, just yes or no. And we're using very simple choreography. So, yeah, the performances usually take place in the setting of a kind of a gallery. Just going to run through this very quickly.

### **(VIDEO PLAYS)**

[42:48.93]

I'm going to read out the instructions for this particular piece here. Actually, this one's

called "Dawn Chorus." "Performance imitates a dawn chorus, whistling like birds do at dawn. Performers who cannot whistle may imitate the sounds of it vocally. The performers should think of what a voice in a dawn chorus sounds like and attempt to replicate it as closely as possible. The performance shall not discuss when the piece starts or when the piece ends. They should walk freely around the performing space."

**(VIDEO PLAYS)**

[43:48.97]

So that was the rehearsal, but I'm going to stop here, now, and pass the mic over to back to Junni and Guy for this, so that we can have a discussion. Great.

[44:09.210] **JUNNI CHEN**

Thank you so much, Song-Ming.

[44:13.35]

**Questions and comments not transcribed.**