

Bettina Fung interviews Suki Chan

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Suki: I've been looking forward to this conversation. Aspex is very much part of my development journey. To go back in time, so to speak, and think about a work that I made ten years ago and how that has influenced the current work that I'm doing is really fascinating. Making *A Hundred Seas Rising* has had a big influence on my practice and I hadn't realised that until now. So thank you for this opportunity to reflect on my life in the last 10 years and what I have been doing, it's somehow very meaningful.

Bettina: I'm glad to hear it! I've been listening to lots of podcasts of interviews, so I'm going to pretend this is a podcast that I'm doing, I'm the interviewer - let's begin! The first time I encountered your work Suki, I saw you on the show called 'School of Saatchi'. I think it was back in 2009 and it was a competition where the winner gets to show in a world renowned gallery. How was the experience for you of being on that show?

Suki: It was a real eye-opener. I'm someone who doesn't watch TV. I've not watched TV for the past 20 years. I suppose the whole process as it unfolded was unnerving because I hadn't fully appreciated the format in which the TV programme would develop and present itself. Now, 12 years later we're very familiar with this format of reality TV and we all understand the structure of it and how certain things are heightened to provoke drama. I think what I *thought* I was entering into and what I entered into were two different things. It wasn't meant to be a fly on the wall documentary where they followed six artists for a year to see what that creative process is when they're making an artwork. It needed to generate drama, a narrative arc and a story, so it was very produced and to some extent quite artificial.

Bettina: Mhm. To be able to produce something in ten days with a budget of £300 and have the camera crew around you and that pressure. Has that experience helped you in any way?

Suki: Actually, I think it probably has influenced me because I'm very aware of the kinds of questions that I ask my interviewees. I'm very aware not to ask them leading questions. I'm aware of my perspective and I try my very best when I enter into a situation, to really listen and not impose my own expectations onto the interviewee. I think we can do that through

spoken language; we can do it through body language; we can do it in so many different ways. I'm very aware of the influence that I have on how something turns out and really to truly be open to whatever it is that I am enquiring. I want to make sure that I'm doing it with honesty and curiosity; to really listen to what people have to say, rather than trying to get them to say what I want them to say.

Even if you were making a documentary, let's be honest now, they're not completely neutral. You have the influence of the director, of the producers, of the person who has written the script (if it is a scripted piece). Let's be honest about that process and try and deconstruct it so that we don't come into documentaries thinking that it is the truth.

Bettina: Yeah I agree! Before I started my art practice I worked as a video editor. Even though things are presented like it's a fly on the wall there's hidden narrative.

So, I've been invited to make this commission. I wasn't able to access the archive myself and I mentioned to Vickie and Lara [Aspex Curator & Assistant Curator] that I'm interested in this idea of gathering, especially because over the year of the pandemic, we've just been gathering virtually. I was really happy that Lara found your work, 'A Hundred Seas Rising' and sent me the link to the video and the Soundcloud [audio file] and Vickie sent me the book, which I have here! I thought before we start talking about the work, could you recall what the experience was like in the space?

Suki: Yeah, the sound was such an integral element. It was one of the conversations I had with my Sound Designer, Dominik Scherrer from the early stages. I was talking to him about how we might create this cacophony of voices that rises in volume like waves. Experiences like when you're by the seaside and you're just stepping on the edge and you've got the waves coming in, lapping your feet, or coming up to your waist. It brings back those memories of being a child, being on the beach and experiencing this force of the waves coming at you. Sometimes you think it's going to be a little wave and suddenly it was actually a big wave, it was a little bit more uncomfortable than expected, you're moved by it, you feel this physical force.

That really connected with the illustration of 'The Sea Rises' in Dickens' book where it's depicting the rise of the revolutionary mob. I was thinking it would be great to immerse the viewer in this sea of voices, and for them to not only hear voices but actually feel it as the sound comes past you. It's a bit like a Mexican wave in a stadium, you know how people raise their hands up and then the next person raises their hands up but because there's a delay you see this wave go around the stadium. We're raising the voices and then we separate out the voices across the space.

In Aspex, due to the shape of the gallery we had this unique opportunity to make an artwork that is very long, so we had five rows of twenty desks and we made sound travel from one end of the gallery space to the other. When we tested it in my studio which was quite a small space you could already feel that movement so I was very excited to assemble the artwork in Aspex and feel those little waves.

The piece is forty minutes long and I structured it like a film in a way. At first you have the beginning, the little waves, and then you have this narrative arc where it starts to peak and you have bigger and bigger waves; and then you have this tsunami, that very dramatic moment in the film, that travels from one end of the gallery space to the other and it was really quite a physical force, it was incredible! When you enter into the gallery space you have no idea at which point it is. But you do get this feeling of change, that something is gathering momentum because we're either working towards the tsunami or going towards quieter moments. There is that feeling of something changing and so a lot of people do stay in the gallery space for forty minutes and some people stayed longer than that.

Bettina: So for the solo parts of the audio, were they sort of at random or were they particular lines?

Suki: They were particular lines that I felt really needed our attention.

Bettina: Can I ask what they might have been talking about?

Suki: The need to change and the importance of revolution. For me they were very philosophical, they were from people who I felt had a strong story to tell. They weren't very long, they were almost like soundbites for thirty / forty seconds but the series of solos connected with each other. It was also that connection between these voices and what they were trying to say and the emotion of change. But I think that you got that from the video as well because at the end with the credits you also heard some of those solos.

Bettina: Yes, yes you do!

Suki: There was a lady who talked about her grandmother who emerged from the Holocaust and feeling that the world needed to change.

Bettina: I like hearing you describing it; there's so much physical movement and you can really feel it. I like how immersive it is. It's really nice to hear you talk about it.

Suki: Also, it was played through a hundred speakers so because the speakers are actually placed in a different position in the space, it was incredibly immersive. At what point do you have the opportunity to listen to anything through a hundred speakers! Even if you have surround sound it would be eight, plus a sub.

Bettina: Ha yeah! Speaking to a hundred people about their views on revolutions, whether personal or political; has that helped change your feeling towards revolutions or collective action?

Suki: Yeah, I mean absolutely! The piece was commissioned in the Summer of 2011, I think Jo [Bushnell - Director, Aspex] wrote a tentative email to ask me if I would be interested to respond to Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities' and at the time I didn't know that much about Dickens. I didn't know that he was this great social commentator. It was amazing to understand what he achieved in getting people to understand class divisions, the privileges of the wealthy and the kinds of conditions that people were living in in Victorian England. I think he really helped us to become aware of all these things and indirectly helped to change some of the laws. It was fascinating to learn about Charles Dickens in this way and coupled with listening to a hundred people from all walks of life about what they want to change, was really inspiring. I came into the project with some ideas of what I would like to change but I came out of it with this deeper awareness.

When you speak to a hundred people you get such an insight into society. I spoke to secondary school students from both comprehensive and private schools and that gave me an insight into the role of education and how that determines so much in life. The kinds of inequality that is perpetuated by education. For example, in one private school where I was interviewing the students, the students were already aware of political life and their aspirations were to become the Prime Minister. Going to a comprehensive school in Hampshire, I wasn't even aware of political life when I was in my teens. Imagine that perception of what you are going to be when you're older and to be eleven, twelve, thirteen, to already be aiming for that leadership role of the entire country!

Compared to someone else who might be thinking, "I'll be a cleaner because that's what my mum or my father does." Those differences in aspirations of what can I be when I'm older, or what kind of opportunities will be open to me: it was incredible. This is just through education alone and being around the people that we are around. Is it the kids from the estate or is it a posh part of town where your parents drive you to loads of after school clubs and you can meet all these amazing kinds of people. I hadn't realised the world of education really informs your sense of identity and perceptions, including self-perception.

Bettina: Yeah, because of everyone's environment and what they understand about that structure they live in and what they think is or isn't possible or even what to aim for. I guess, speaking to so many people you would find how they're all living in different worlds in a way.

Suki: We live in different realities and I think that's something that we don't appreciate as much as we should. I think that made me realise that is what I want to do with my art practice - to get other people to understand that perception is so important. And show them that we don't see the world in the same way. You show ten people the same thing and we will each see something different because of our own unique experiences. I think that is something that we don't fully appreciate. We think that vision and perception are the same thing but they're not. It's an active process and it's very much to do with our memories, to do with our lived experiences, to do with our communities - who are our mentors who are our role models? All of that informs the way that we see the world and what we expect in life. Do we expect things to be difficult or do we expect things to be easy? Even that is a very subtle change. Do you approach things as a huge problem that can't be overcome or do you approach it as a challenge? Those things are very subtle but it can completely change you and the course of your life.

Bettina: I agree! I'm really thinking about what you're saying. It's also the belief that you have within, it already determines how you look at things or what you choose to interpret or what you pick up on.

Suki: Definitely. And also how you speak, how others perceive you because of the way you speak. I was very aware of how certain people were educated to become articulate, and we tend to think that people who are articulate have something important to say and I don't necessarily believe that.

When I interview people, I always put them at ease and I say to them, if you get it wrong don't worry, take a deep breath and just repeat that last sentence because I will edit out that little stutter or whatever it is. I'm not putting you under any kind of pressure. I'm totally on your side. I try and make the most out of every interview. I've done it where I interview people and I've already heard them on podcasts; I've heard them on different programmes. I realise the way that I interview people is very different. They sound different. I give them time.

When I interview people I give them long gaps. When we speak we take an in-breath and often in that little gap they suddenly think of something that they want to say that they wouldn't have said if I had jumped in with the next question. So actually giving people the time is so important, really letting them speak.

Bettina: I guess the truth of who they are, what they really think about really comes out?

Suki: Yeah. I thought that I would interview people for like half an hour for 'A Hundred Seas Rising' and in the end for some people, it went on for over an hour. It was a bit of an editorial nightmare I suppose because when I went back to the edit suite, I had a phenomenal amount of audio recordings to sift through. It wasn't that I only listened to them once, I'd have to listen to them five, six, seven times. That's almost a day to do one person.

I don't make my job easy but I think sometimes that is what's necessary to really understand what people are feeling. If someone hasn't had the opportunity to speak, or hasn't been given that time to really think about how they feel about something, then they're going to need a bit more time and they're going to need a bit more coaxing to reflect on the condition of their lives, or to reflect on different aspects that they may not have been thinking about before.

Bettina: Like you say, it's really creating that condition for them to be at ease and be able to think about what they need to think about in order to share how they feel about certain things.

Suki: Yeah, I think it's understandable that we all operate differently. Understanding that our brains are different, so some people are going to be more nervous than others. I try and create as level a playing field as I can, so that I'm already not rushing them and getting them more nervous so that they don't speak.

Bettina: Certain ways make us perform or act in ways that are quite mechanical. It makes me think about certain structures we operate in which tend to not allow these conditions. For example, a job interview, that sort of pressurised condition that we are unable to show ourselves in the most natural way or be able to articulate.

Suki: Yeah, definitely. I mean this is a little bit of a tangent but I've been thinking about speed - speed at which we operate, and how different brains operate at different speeds. Generally we rush people, we think one size fits all, it's got to be quick, hurry hurry hurry! But in that structure of society we've become quite exclusive, we exclude elderly people or people who might have different neurological conditions that means they just need a bit more time!

I'm very aware of these subtle structures that exclude people and say, you're the abnormal one because you need longer to cross the road, whereas 'normal' people will cross the road in the time that we've allowed you. We don't all operate at the same speeds, we have to

have this understanding that other people operate at other speeds and actually, how can we accommodate the lived experiences of other people so that we don't create this society that is very exclusive.

This is just on a very basic level of getting people out of the house and into the community and able to participate in community life. Being able to cross the road is pretty integral to all of that. But I think we tend to forget about these things and I feel quite passionately about it because this is so key for someone living with dementia for instance, to feel that they can go and cross the road safely without being fearful of being run over. At some point one in three of us will have dementia, so actually creating dementia friendly environments and accommodating neuro-diversity is so important to us functioning as a successful community, as a society.

Bettina: Yeah, it's developing that patience and also that compassion in us to just be aware of that, which goes back to what you were saying; we all live in our own different worlds, unaware that everyone has their own perceptions and different realities. It is having that patience and allowing slowness, or your version of slowness because it might not be slow for someone else. But I feel like with all the technology, we've developed this expectation of getting things immediately. And I think that goes against cultivating this ability to allow time. The general work culture, it seems very fast-paced and immediate, there's no waiting involved, we want to eliminate waiting but it's actually in waiting we can allow that patience.

Suki: Having made and still making immersive installations, that need to inhabit spaces and that need to dwell, whether in a physical space or in a concept, are really important things. The films that I make now are paced with that in mind because I want to create that space where people can contemplate. So much of what I see is totally the opposite of that, the cuts are very fast.

Edits are getting shorter and shorter because we've got to hold the viewer's attention; they're going to get bored if we don't have fast edits. I think that's not conducive to us being patient and really listening to what's going on. It becomes more of a distraction that you move so quickly from one thing to another that you're not really thinking. I go against that grain. Whether it's about perception, changing perceptions, or about ageing, or our use of technology, all these aspects are so important to life and we never give the time of day to really think about them. I think that it's really good to have those moments where you pause and think: how did I get here, where do I want to go next?

Bettina: When would be a good moment to, or where would be a good place to do that do you think?

Suki: I think art should be a place where you can do that. Art should be a place where we should be able to reflect on life. A lot of what I'm doing now, is about showing people there's another way. It also came out of *A Hundred Seas Rising*; people were talking about other ways, even GDP. When it was developed GDP was measuring the wealth of countries as we came out of the Great Depression. Obviously now that's not relevant, so we don't need to stick with GDP, we could actually look at other methods to measure. Instead of wealth, let's measure welfare, let's measure people's happiness, let's measure the length of the lives that people might lead, and healthcare or the environment.

Artists are very good at imagining other scenarios, we can help others to imagine that there is another way to life, just because this is the way that we've been brought up, it doesn't mean that we're static, we can change and we can make things better. I think art should be about that as well.

Bettina: Going back to A Hundred Seas Rising, I noticed photos of people interacting with the work and just taking that moment to really listen to the desk. It made me think of having that space and time to carefully listen to individual views. I was wondering, did you have an expectation of how you wanted the audience to interact with your work?

Suki: Yeah, so it's arranged as a classroom. I think education plays a big role in the progression of revolutions and it is about re-educating people to listen to other people, not necessarily listening to the experts or listening to the voice of authority but actually listening to each other.

I find it fascinating to listen to other people who don't like to speak, people who don't have a voice, or don't have a platform to speak, or who aren't confident to speak. That's also why I wanted to take away the image of the person so everyone is equal. Each voice is the same as everyone else's voice so whether you're listening to someone from a primary school or you're listening to the voice of a politician, a famous writer or an artist, everyone is levelled out. There are no names on the table, there's no image to show you who it is. That means we approach each one with the same level of respect and openness.

Bettina: How did you find the one hundred people?

Suki: Aspex put a call out and we worked with the University of Portsmouth who also put a call out to their students and staff. At the time when it was happening it also coincided with

the Arab Spring and then the Occupy movement. I would also just sit and listen to the crowds at St Paul's, one of the places where the movement was based. I would listen to people and then approach a few individuals and ask if they would participate in an interview. We also put a call out through my gallery Tintype and my husband is a teacher in a comprehensive school so through him I was able to interview students. I also targeted a few individuals, some politicians and some bankers because I really wanted to get their point of view across, and I was in touch with Westminster Kingsway School, so I interviewed some Chinese people who were learning English at the College.

Bettina: The hundredth voice in the book is speaking in Cantonese, which is the first language I spoke. I'm intrigued to know why that was the only voice in another language. Also, in the book it was written in traditional Chinese so there's no translation.

Suki: Yeah, I wanted more Chinese people to participate. I think sometimes the Chinese community is very quiet and likes to integrate but not really be seen. They're not always a very vocal community group so it was incredibly hard to get anyone to participate in the interviews. I would meet people on the course and they would be happy to talk to me but as soon as I asked them if we could do the interview with a microphone, they would say 'oh no, I can't do that!' We had one because there was only one that would participate.

That was twelve years ago and the community was very quiet. I would say that Chinese people in general like to be invisible; they get their heads down, they work very hard but they don't really like to be heard as individuals. I think there were a few people that were worried about speaking about revolution because of the political repercussions. Even the lady that participated decided to be anonymous in the end.

I think revolution for some Chinese people is a bit fearful because of what happened with the cultural revolution. Professionals like teachers, doctors, thinkers and writers were put into re-education camps. There is that history that people are wary of. I think that has probably changed now because of what we've been seeing with the protests in Hong Kong. If I was to interview people today they would probably be a lot more willing to participate, and voice what they are feeling is unfair with society and what needs to change.

Bettina: I was wondering if it was a deliberate action not to translate what this person said, in the book, or just to keep it in the language because even if it was translated not everyone would understand what they were saying.

Suki: I think the reason we didn't translate it was that she wasn't totally comfortable about being heard. Even when she spoke she was holding back. It felt right to leave it as it was so

we wouldn't be treating it differently, because everyone has one section. Because it's the hundredth one it's perhaps the one that people are curious about, who is it, what's the last revolution?

I didn't feel like it would be fair on the others but it was also a practical reason that we couldn't really afford more space.

Bettina: Do you speak Cantonese?

Suki: My mother tongue is Cantonese. My father is a Hakka so I can also speak a bit of Hakka. My mum would say she's a 本地人 (bun2 dei6 jan4) which means 'native person.' I was mainly educated in the UK so I'm much more comfortable with the English language but I'm fascinated with the Chinese language. When you sit in between two cultures, you can see the differences and that affords you a perspective that is unique. For instance I love the way the Chinese language is very pictorial so the word for mountain actually looks like a mountain, the word for water looks like waves. It is so descriptive and representative of the real thing whereas if you look at the English word for an ant, it doesn't look like a real ant, there isn't that correlation.

Some of my early works were inspired by thinking about the Chinese language. One early project was called *The Story of Rice* because I was very interested in why it is that when we greet people in Chinese we say 食咗飯未呀 (sik6 zo2 faan6 mei6 aa3) which means 'have you eaten rice yet?' Why do we not say 'have you eaten a potato yet?' Why is it to do with rice? Obviously it's rice because in China that's the staple, we don't eat potatoes and the way that language evolved is expressive of the environment in which the need to communicate arose. I love the Chinese language for those kinds of idiosyncrasies. It happens in English as well, we have lots of idioms and proverbs that are expressive of the values and beliefs of that particular society.

Bettina: Just going back to rice, it's like bon appetit in Cantonese: 食飯 (sik6 faan6) 'Eat rice!' Even if I have dinner with my family and we're eating pasta we'll say 'Eat rice' even though we're not eating it!

Suki: Yeah, I think quite often what happens with immigrants is that when they move away, that connection with homeland becomes even stronger. You yearn for that sense of belonging. Immigrants will uphold these traditions whereas often the people who are living in that country, they've changed, they're doing something totally different. It's really fascinating that when I meet Chinese communities in England, some of them really do hold on to certain traditions as if it's sacred. We always say 食飯 (sik6 faan6), we also say buon

appetito as well but that's because I have a very good friend who's Italian, so it's to do with our influences and also our communities.

Bettina: Yeah! Just looking at the time, do we have time for one more?

Suki: Sure.

Bettina: This is something you might have touched on already but the work I'm currently making for Aspex emphasises the importance of imagination as a way to guide or shape the future and it proposes to collectively imagine worlds by writing them together into existence. I've been asking people the following question, so I thought maybe I can finish by asking you the question. If you could rewrite the world, what would this new world be like?

Suki: I think it would be for us to be more open to other people's subjective experience and other people's realities. So that we are more inclusive and don't have biases towards certain groups and actively include everybody. It would be great if we can come to an understanding that we have very different brains and operate best in different conditions, rather than trying to get everybody to operate in the same way.

This thinking came about through a dialogue I've been having with a lady who lives with dementia. Her name is Wendy Mitchell and she has inspired a series of works exploring what consciousness means and how we relate to one another. She would love to participate in a choir but the rules of this choir are that you're not allowed to sing from the song sheets and because of that stipulation she's not able to join. She was saying, how can we make it more inclusive and take down these barriers, because all it needed was for the organiser to say, "well you have dementia, you don't have working memory like the rest of us, you can have the song sheet to sing from." This would mean that she can participate but they're not amenable to those changes so she can't be part of it. The solution just seems so simple but their reluctance to change is so sad.

We would never do that now with someone who is disabled for example because you wouldn't say you can't enter this building because you're in a wheelchair, we would actually have a ramp now because that is a disability we can see. We've also made a lot of progress as a society to really try and include people who have access requirements but we need to be more open to other people's disabilities and not all disabilities are physical, some are invisible. If someone living with dementia asks you, can I bring in a song sheet, we really should actively be saying, "well of course, why not!"

For me it's a society that embraces all these differences rather than casting certain differences as abnormal or inconvenient. It's not that difficult to adapt to other people's needs, it's really important that we do because we may become that person. It's understanding that these people are not second class citizens, they are like us. We better set up those mechanisms in society because we might need that support ourselves one day. I think it's just having that compassion to sort it out!

The trajectory of my work right now is to use filmmaking as a tool to create immersive experiences so that we can see that. We can see through the eyes of someone who is living with dementia or someone who is blind. How they operate in this world that is very much biased towards the visual. It's really just trying to get people to understand other people's needs and how we can embrace those differences and accommodate them.

Bettina: Yeah, be more caring or just be open and able to adapt! That's great.

Suki: Thank you, they were very good questions.

Bettina: It's really nice talking to you.

Bettina Fung interviewed Suki Chan on Zoom, as part of her residency and digital commission for *Aspex (life begins) at 40*. Fung's artwork, *The Sea Changes Into Words* launched on Aspex's website on Thursday 20 May 2021.