

[00:00:01.150] - Speaker 1

Hello. Welcome to the first episode of our new podcast series Gaining Ground, hosted by a curator in residence, Annie Jael Kwan. In this first episode, Annie chats with artists Yarli Allison and Boedi Wadjaja, whose work is currently on display at FACT on an exhibition called Future Ages Will Wonder. Both Gaining Ground and Future Ages Will Wonder are supported by art formation. To find out more information about this podcast series, the exhibition, or us, visit our website, FACTo.uk.

[00:00:36.390] - Annie Jael

Welcome to the first of a series of podcasts in association with Future Ages Will Wonder, the group exhibition currently showing at FACT till the 20 February next year. The project explores the advancements of science and technology in relation to our conceptions of ourselves and our histories. My name is Annie Jael Kwan. I'm currently a curator in residence at FACT and also the curator of the project.

[00:01:03.470] - Annie Jael

I'm very pleased today to welcome two of our artists whose projects are displayed as part of the exhibition. We have with us today, Yarli Allison, currently based in London and Boedi Wadjaja in Singapore. Really nice to see you both here today. And I just really want to reiterate again, thank you so much for contributing such rich and creative projects to the exhibition. Perhaps for our listeners who have not yet visited the show, could you please give us a short introduction to the work that you're showing?

[00:01:43.130] - Yarli

I can go first. So I have two sets of work showing at FACTs, and two of them are an investigation of using VR to create lost spaces through memory. And they're both keywords with Gasbora and migrants, with East Asian with queer gases. And the first work is titled In Virtual Return, You Can't De Haunt and in short, let's call it De Haunt. And investigating for Hong Kong queer migrant, both at some point lived in British colonial era at that time in Hong Kong, and then they all moved on to other countries. Using VR as a research process to go back to these lost homes in Hong Kong before they have moved.

[00:02:47.130] - Yarli

And the other works, it's a two channel video also using VR as research of larger scale. This time, instead of home exploring Chinatown, let's call it Chinatown at that time at 1900 and it got bombed in post-war. And this street called Pit Street is the street that I'm focusing on to rebuild and search for the community that is no longer there. And then using VR and 3D modelling graphics that can invite these community descendants go back and then start sharing their stories again and also imagining an alternative future.

[00:03:44.390] - Yarli

And along with this two channel work, I also have some physical work which I could elaborate further more later.

[00:03:53.970] - Annie Jael

Thank you so much, Yarli. You Boedi, could you tell us a bit more about your multiple works in the show?

[00:04:03.930] - Boedi

Thanks, Annie. The work that I'm showing at FACT is a trilogy that looks at the notion of ancestral memory through the language or the genetic language to be specific of the DNA. The title of the trilogy is A Tree Plus, and the title of the three works in the trilogy revolves around this motive of a tree. And that is because this trilogy is really inspired by my experience of reading my paternal grandfather's Journal, a document that he wrote in the last few years of his life when he was living with my family in Indonesia.

[00:04:55.410] - Boedi

My grandfather was named after the Chinese parasol tree or [foreign language 00:05:03] in Chinese.

And it also happened that I am named after a tree as well, the root word of my first name being the body tree. And looking at the parallels of migration between my grandfather and myself, my grandfather migrated as a youth from South China to Indonesia, and I migrated as a child from Indonesia to Singapore.

[00:05:38.850] - Boedi

I couldn't help but wonder if our diasporic and migration stories were somehow also written genetically and biologically, and that thought inspired my exploration into the genetic language of the DNA and how that might be linked with notions of memory, something that is being explored right now in fact, in the field of epigenetics.

[00:06:21.270] - Boedi

The three body of works in the trilogy are expressed across a diverse set of media that range from large flex installation, that visually encodes the titles of the three works in the trilogy. To a soil sample that was taken from a site specific installation in Singapore, with the soil having been marked by a mixture of ink and a hybrid DNA that was synthesised together with the help of geneticists in Singapore. To a video that runs its images and sound using a music score that uses the hybrid DNA.

[00:07:24.550] - Boedi

And also a newly commissioned work that takes the form of a screen featuring images that I took when I visited my grandfather's birthplace in China. And these images having been rephotographed using an inverted lens. And also the screen also holds a piece of encoded text, something that I took from a traditional book of genealogy that I received from my distant relatives whom I met for the first time in that trip to China.

[00:08:07.570] - Annie Jael

So in utilising memory, it would seem as if memory forms a material in your work, or almost a media in your work but in very different ways. For you, Boedi, it seems to be rooted in questions of self and identity and family, whereas for you, Yarli, it seems to be about a concern for this particular community in Liverpool that was erased after the war. So can you speak a little bit more about that? Like how does memory, the concept of memory, what does that mean to you in terms of making this work? And also how does working with memory unfold in a way, because to some degree our memories are not always reliable. So it's based on a collection or histories to some degree, also maybe some fantasy as well.

[00:09:07.750] - Yarli

Yeah, Annie. There were two works in Liverpool. And the first work of De Hans, I think highly relate to bodies. A working process for De Hans, which is the start of everything. It was me taking this photograph of a Canadian home that I left forcefully when I was a child. And then at the back of this photo, I have the address. And then on my 20th birthday, I returned to this home that belongs to someone else right now.

[00:09:53.630] - Yarli

And I was standing in front of it and then realising this space was once in my memory that forms my identity. Essentially, I thought that was my identity as the Canadian before I moved to Hong Kong. And once I realised that space is not my space anymore, the space has moved on but I haven't. That subjective memory becomes, I don't know, it's almost like a lightning shock for me to realise that how could a space hold that much power to someone's formation? And then once realising that loss is there, and then I start grieving about that space of memory, then I start working in virtual reality and obsessively draw the space that I still remember. And probably very wrong, I wrongly remembered.

[00:11:12.210] - Yarli

But I had a sense of comfort when I could finally return to this space and have this bodily memory. Let's say I'm sitting on that virtual bed and the ratio of that bed, it's relatable to my size as a child. And then as a child, I can relate to sofa that's super huge. And the fridge as well is much taller than me as an adult now. And then all these sensory memory also came back and emotional memory as well. And I thought, okay, maybe I can extend this to a wider context. What if I draw someone's home and

they wanted to return to that home as well?

[00:12:07.060] - Yarli

And turns out I'm not alone. This is quite subjective thing but then when it becomes with multiple subjective voices, then it could become a larger collective oral history. When I started to collect all these subjective voices, it became quite a way to find alternative truth, I guess. When multiple voices groups together can enlarge even to a street that is lost. And using this virtual return method, I can finally see if these truths are valid, these are all history that is not documented on textbook or even on data. Let's say British census data could be invalid as well when you know there were much more people than recorded.

[00:13:20.450] - Yarli

And then you started thinking, why is the reason? Is it because they're migrant working in the dark and underground? Or is it because they just probably don't understand how Chinese surname works and stuff? And then I'll give the last example.

[00:13:39.880] - Yarli

There's this physical work, a handwritten letter from the father to his child. The semen father got repatriated, let's say, in 1947. And then there is a letter that never could send out to their child that I imagine there are a lot of letters that is lost after the reputation. And then I think about what if this father is creating a toy for his child about a community shop that they grew up in and that shop holds the memory of the community and that's no longer there?

[00:14:30.640] - Yarli

And then how do I make this trauma less sad? And I'm just thinking if there's a way to rebuild this lost narrative or memory that has never arrived? And it could uplift the mood of lost grief or something, but instead using reassurance to revisit or create closure to these trauma. I guess, like working memories a lot of different ways.

[00:15:27.450] - Boedi

I think for me, memory is both a starting point and also an invisible structure from which I built my artworks. And I'll explain a little bit more about what I mean. I think due to the circumstances of my childhood migration to Singapore, I have always felt the presence of something that I would describe as a void. I think it is not too dissimilar from what Yarli had described, that feeling of an absence. And it is a very tangible sensation, at least for me. It's something that I kind of embodied.

[00:16:32.530] - Boedi

And I think the objective for me when I work with my familiar memories, it's never really to uncover the truth or to build an accurate account of the past. But I think first and foremost, is it a way to address something that is missing, a truncated feeling of how I relate to my past. Each of the artworks that I make, I tend to make use of that sense of absence and to imagine the artistic gestures that can use to both acknowledge and also take advantage almost of the absence.

[00:18:02.950] - Boedi

I think, for example, the impulse to want to connect into my paternal grandfather's memory and also the ancestral memories through the book of genealogy. This gesture of trying to connect with the past is, I think, something related with my desire for rootedness. And it is a rootedness that is not so much anchored in facts, but one that I tried to articulate through the poetics found in the artistic gestures.

[00:19:02.210] - Boedi

Even at instances where I deal with collective histories or even broader stories such as mythologies, this frame or the structure of the absent familial, memories will always be there to guide how the ideas and references would be connected. I hope that wasn't too abstract.

[00:19:43.750] - Annie Jael

Thank you. It's really interesting hearing both if you speak. Because the way you speak about memory,

whether it's personal, familial, or in relation to a community, you almost depict it for me as a memory, as a space. And it's a space within oneself almost, whether it's in the psychosocial realm in terms of our subconscious or the way we structure our thoughts. But also in the way you describe it Boedi, that it actually becomes embodied as a physiological response to that condition. We also carry that with us.

[00:20:27.980] - Annie Jael

So I find this description really poignant but also very productive in terms of how I can think about your work, because certainly the idea of space comes through the way you have created your work. I mean, Boedi, your beautiful flag installation with its Cardinal points beneath. Is in fact, making us so aware of where we are at that moment when we encounter it because we are always trying to navigate wherever we are.

[00:21:02.230] - Annie Jael

And I love how by placing that in the atrium of the FACT lobby when we come in, the very first moment is we are asking ourselves, how do we get here? Where did we intend to go when we get here? And I do really like that you sent over for us as well, this bit of earth that's actually from Singapore, where you embedded your DNA that was synthesised. And you bring with that this hope of implanting a story or narrative for our audiences in Liverpool.

[00:21:40.630] - Annie Jael

And similarly, I think Yarli, the way you speak about space really does make me think of the joy and tenderness and the way you created spaces in your VR work. Because sometimes we think of VR as being in terms of technology, it's so high tech. But the way you've used the technology is to create these really intimate spaces where we can feel whether it's in the Hunt, where we are travelling through someone's fumbling into the spaces that they could remember. Or the little diorama that you described earlier, which is very adorable to be honest.

[00:22:21.190] - Annie Jael

And you brought back that joy in what could have been, I suppose, a topic that's quite traumatic in a way. So I guess from detailing how you're speaking about memory, I wonder if you could share for your listeners, why is it important to you to reconstruct a sense of history or why is history important if it is?

[00:22:50.930] - Boedi

I tend to think about place imaginaries a lot in my practise. I sometimes would conceptualise what I do based on the tension between two things, one which is identity and the other being belonging. And identity for me, is almost always about stories. The narratives that I construct around my sense of being and belonging is usually very place based.

[00:23:36.510] - Boedi

And I tend to explore stories at different scales, from the scale of a personal memory, a familial memory to one that is broader, like a history, collective history or national history, regional history. To even bigger, such as mythologies stories that cover the span of entire civilizations. And I think, on the other hand, with places, I tend to also apply the same logic of looking at the immediate site where my body is located. And then to try to expand it towards the geographical borders and finally into almost cosmological dimension.

[00:24:50.350] - Boedi

And I can't really explain very well the reason for doing this. But what I desire is simply to have a sense of these elements somehow being integrated. And I think that might be kind of response to that disconnection between belonging and identity that I have experienced due to my child migration. But I think at the same time I do find it to be a very productive tension in my art practise.

[00:26:01.930] - Yarli

Yeah, I think Boedi put it really well. It reminded me that as a kid I always failed history exams. I didn't know why is it relevant to me? Why is Napoleon relevant to me as a child? And I noticed that the way

that my teachers at least how they teach history is to memorise all the facts. And these facts doesn't even connect to emotions or stories. It's just I realised I cannot access these history without knowing emotion.

[00:26:54.560] - Yarli

And for me it's a really important part in my work is to find the personal viewpoints of these specific moments. Why is it documented? Why is it important in our humanity growth? And what is history telling us that is reduced now into just objective facts? And I'm interested in kind of play with that. Imagine the gap that is unspoken using VR to explore the sense of belonging, sense of a driftiness that land is lost.

[00:27:48.410] - Yarli

And what about the people who lost their land? Their thoughts are not documented like it's usually just okay 1875 this place is lost to blah blah. And I'm really interested to imagine what would they have felt relating to these griefs or trauma that is not on the textbook. And so it could become highly relatable to anyone who has similar experience. Let's say Pit Street was bombed and community are forced to move.

[00:28:27.870] - Yarli

The feeling of it, not the fact of it, but the feeling of it probably is not so different from gentrification that people are forced to move by company giants or investors. You have no choice but you are oppressed in being sucked out from this area. And then you have no idea how to connect with your friends anymore. I'm finding a way to not to reduce it but to multiply and make it more complex into a human level, I think. And what makes it human is essentially we have emotions. And yeah, that ties back to the question I guess.

[00:29:22.950] - Annie Jael

I suppose in a way I think what you're both pointing out is that there's one way that we're taught that history is a form of knowledge that we encounter or we should encounter objectively. But actually sometimes now that looking back at the way history is told, I actually wonder how objective facts are on their own. Because you can manipulate facts the way you want to narrate a story. And I find it really interesting, I suppose how a story is told from which protagonist point of view.

[00:30:01.470] - Annie Jael

I'm currently working on a project that relates, I guess, World War II. And so it really makes it really interesting because there are a lot of films and TV shows that portray that era and the conflict from, say, the British perspective. I remember watching this TV show that humanised the entire Squadron and told all their individual back stories and then showed their struggle I think, the Nazi soldiers. And you really felt like, wow, this is told in such a way where the British soldiers were heroic and therefore Nazis and whether in terms of Germany or also Japan, those were definitely the evil access of power.

[00:30:52.470] - Annie Jael

But then this recalls to me this beautiful novel I once read by Ruth and Zaki, where there's time travel in the novel. But you realise that one of the characters in the novel is actually a young Japanese soldier that got conscripted into the army and then became a kamikaze pilot. And actually he was absolutely terrified by the whole prospect of having to fly the plane to his death.

[00:31:21.910] - Annie Jael

And actually it was a very moving story because he's writing these letters and then his voice becomes essential part of the story. But how these stories that are narrated say a lot about how we understand that historical moment. And so I think both of you, the point that you're making about how our emotions and the way we experience these stories really come into understanding them.

[00:31:50.550] - Annie Jael

And I wonder whether you can also talk about how in a way that you explored that or explore the challenge of that in your work? Because the way I suppose your artistic processes unfolded are quite different. Boedi, you have a lot of systems in your project, whether it's coding systems or language

systems and algorithms. In some way, how do you thread that through? Because you speak in such a way that's so personal with this work but yet at the same time, there is such a very rich use of language and stories and linguistic systems encoding in your practise.

[00:32:33.000] - Annie Jael

How do you marry the two together? And for you, Yarli also, I think it's the same question in a way but refrain it as because your work is quite labour intensive in terms of the post production and VR and animation. How does that impact the part of it where it is extremely personal?

[00:32:59.050] - Yarli

Every time I use technology, there's always something, some errors that comes up. Where is the goddamn button? And then you can never find that button. And then after 30 minutes of researching on YouTube, you realise, oh my God, I'm not actually creating, I'm actually solving problems of the technology.

[00:33:19.330] - Yarli

And then again, reminds me of the kid when growing up in the 90s. I realised the technology, it's really fun. Like we have an open source platform for everybody and people are writing their own HTML and I was making, I don't know, some interactive games for websites and stuff.

[00:33:45.400] - Yarli

And it was labour intensive, but then it was really pure and it was just very direct. It was just finding the possibilities of what can these open source platform could do. And then now, of course after many years, I realised the notion of how we use the tool has changed and the analogical instruments are basically just like any other policy instruments. Whoever that holds the technology, holds the instrument of power.

[00:34:28.100] - Yarli

And so in the Liverpool Pit Street work, I was thinking, okay, who holds these power and who are the people? Like, through my research, I'm just looking at the stories, heavily falls onto one side. Which is the British census and the British side of the story privilege people, the policymakers. And why did they have to have to invent this alien exclusion act at that time? And are they privileged elite people?

[00:35:07.580] - Yarli

And then tying back to now, are the people higher up using technology to create AI algorithms or feeding data in the machine learning? What are these people and how are the data gathered, filtered, selected and then as a result, are they biased and how are we aware of that? I guess looking back to these history is not really different from where we are right now. And for me, I spend 30 minutes to solve a problem of finding a button but then for them they can press one button and probably erase our whole being in the society system.

[00:36:11.910] - Yarli

I'm thinking of tech education, if we can provide more education helping people and then shape their own histories with technology and then we can determine the best outcomes for their society in the human centric design. Let's say language for human instead of language of the machine, then probably we can think about the open source platform once again and decentralise them again.

[00:36:43.930] - Yarli

And yeah, just thinking about relationship with network technology, particularly how the machine thinks, actually how the human thinks. And it's all about human narrative. And I always remember in my work to remind myself of a sticky note, always have human touch in your work, even though there's... Yeah, even it's heavily working with technology. So I thought that would be my approach.

[00:37:24.510] - Boedi

I think the way I think about process is very influenced by my education in architecture. And I don't see any necessarily contradiction between method and an outcome that possess that human quality that Yarli just talked about. In fact, I think the process that I tend to use is one where I try to bring in

some order into an extremely chaotic situation. And with the hope that some of these chaos survive this artistic process and still be able to be experienced or sensed in the final artwork.

[00:38:45.630] - Boedi

My practise in drawing also contribute quite a fair bit into the way I think about methods. Because when you draw or rather when you draw with the purpose of describing a building, every line is there for a purpose. It's not there as a means of decoration, although there's nothing wrong with doing that. But there is a systematic notion of having each line describe a situation and a step in the overall process.

[00:39:41.210] - Boedi

Technology for me is something that is very human in nature from the beginning of language itself or even from prehistory. In the drawings found in the caves of Lescoe, for example. You already have this sense of our relationship with technique or technology. It's more of an evolution of our relationship with technology ad the kind of capabilities and augmentations that our modern digital technology offers us and what it enables us to do.

[00:40:42.290] - Boedi

I think there's always a desire for me to expose this process or this method that I use in my art. I always tend to think that there's quite a fair bit of the art in that process. For example, in one of the pieces that I'm showing, in fact, I had used the syntax of the genetic language of the DNA to bridge the hexagrams found in the eating with the Japanese ancient language called the Hanataraka.

[00:41:31.190] - Boedi

And that to me is one way that I can think about a method that may seem to be very technical at first instance. But one that serves a purpose to address a very real and a very deep emotion in the project.

[00:42:06.250] - Annie Jael

Thank you so much. I think you both made such an important point that in a way we shouldn't necessarily be led by technology. But technology has always been a tool that's been with us through the ages. Whether it was from the first wheel or Arrowhead to the sophisticated machines that we have now, is how do we deploy these technologies?

[00:42:30.410] - Annie Jael

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts so generously today. Listeners, if you've not been up to Liverpool, please do come visit our show at fFACT. It's called Future Ages Will Wonder. And it will be until the 20 February so there's still plenty of time. And do also catch the next podcast. We'll also be spending some time with Brick Water who are Yung Sukchoi [inaudible 00:42:52]. As well as Larry [inaudible 00:42:55] and David Blandy. Thank you very much.