Skyping with Coffee and Cats: interview with Wendy and Amy Yao

Sisters Wendy and Amy Yao are both very active in a multidisciplinary way: Wendy runs Ooga Booga, an art/bookshop in the Chinatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, and Amy shows her artwork internationally. In the early mid-1990s, when the Yao sisters were teenagers, they formed a short-lived, all Asian, all teen-girl band called Emily's Sassy Lime with friend Emily Ryan. They frequently collaborate with friends on projects. Wendy most recently was invited to curate the *Excursus* platform at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) Philadelphia for two months in winter 2012, and Amy recently designed a clothing line for New York label JF & SON. Together, in 2004, they founded the Art Swapmeet at the High Desert Test Sites in Joshua Tree, CA.

I've wanted to do a joint interview with the Yao sisters since 2009, when I first met Amy and heard some of her story. Four years later, I was serendipitously able to catch them for an early-morning Skype session while they were both in LA (though at separate locations). Skype was a perfect format for our chat. Over coffee (and cats), we discussed how the Internet is changing artistic voice and communication and where each of their practices and projects finds them now.

Rachel Reese: *I started thinking how layering and collaboration have always been crucial aspects to both of your practices or your programs. What does collaboration mean to each of you, and are you creating some sort of map or web that connects people, ideas, and interests to each other?*
Wendy Yao: I think collaboration is just something that comes naturally [to us], because we started out being musicians so early, and that's something that often includes collaboration. When we were doing music, it was a lot about friendship and having fun as the main focus, rather than really focusing on having a "good" band.

RR: *So it wasn't so steeped in some end result. ... It was just in-the-moment "we're having fun, and we're friends ...."*
WY: Yeah, I think like that. And being around and working with people, that just comes naturally.
Amy Yao: I agree with Wendy. It was always really casual. We would always just hang out, and then somehow end up playing music with other people. Personally, I have found that collaborating is a really good way to get rid of your ego. The work that comes out of collaboration tends to always be more loose. Which is really great because sometimes when you're working as an artist you get too tight in the way that you're thinking about ideas. And when you work with others, or even have conversations with others, a lot of times casual themes will start coming into the mix. For instance, with our band Shady Ladies, half of our ideas for songs came from jokes or observations while [we were] walking down the street.
WY: Yeah, or waiting for our flight at the airport for too long. [laughs]

RR: *So this idea of losing control feels important. I want to back up and look at the Yao sisters as teenagers in the early 90s—living in Southern California and sneaking out, writing songs over the phone and answering machines. Can you quickly talk about Emily's Sassy Lime?*

What did social media look like to you guys in the pre-Internet era? You were probably in prime teenage years during that time, using what we would consider very analog forms of communication now.

AY: It was very different back then. Even though Internet existed earlier, few people had Internet. Only during my senior year of high school, I remember some kids having AOL ... using chat rooms and that kind of thing. But the idea of the Internet was still very foreign back then. It was a lot harder to gather information; you really had to seek it out. You might randomly hear about a band, write to their record label, mail order something. After receiving the record label's catalog, you [would] have to figure out which bands you liked based on whether you had seen them live, liked the name of the band, read about them, heard them on a compilation, etc. Communication happened through fanzines or mail order. Everything was at a much slower pace.

Our band [Emily's Sassy Lime] only lived in the same town for a brief period of time, and during that time we weren't really a band yet. Most of the time when we were in a band, we were a long-distance band. For a year we didn't have cars and would have to get rides from other people.

RR: *Do you think that was an important part of what the band was about? Working at and figuring it out together?*
WY: It was a challenge. It was all kind of an excuse to hang out with each other.
AY: At first we didn't even *really* have a band—we didn't have songs, instruments—but we would tell people that we had a band because

being in a band meant something different to us. We saw Bikini Kill and somehow—I don't know how, we had this idea to tell them that we were in a band, perhaps because it felt like we were already doing it and we were inspired by what they were doing—and they were like, "Oh well, The Frumpies are playing in LA soon and you guys should play with them!"

RR: *And so you played?*
AY: No, we didn't end up playing. We did play with Bikini Kill later on. We never played with The Frumpies. At the time, it just seemed that people were starting bands all the time. There was a spirit that anybody [could] do it—and you didn't have to be a professional, or even have a good voice. I remember No Doubt getting big at that time, and everyone in high school kept saying, "She has such a good voice, Gwen Stefani's voice." And I remember thinking, that's totally lame.

It's not about having a good voice. It's not about being the best at guitar, playing the best drum fill. We just told people we had a band even though we didn't, and that forced situations upon us. When we really did start a band, we couldn't write the songs in a "jam session," [so] instead we made songs individually. And then we would call each other on the phone, and one person would record it like you're recording this interview right now. And then add a part on to it.

RR: *Do you feel like something is lost now in the way we communicate with each other? Or do you feel like it's easier, and we've progressed?*
WY: I think both are cool. It's just a lot more speed now, basically because back then there was a lot of "social networking," so to speak, in that there were people running distribution companies, whether for music or zines; there were catalogs you could get that listed zines you were interested in. People were finding out through zines, or record stores, or record label catalog mailers [how] to spread information. But I guess the pace of it was relatively slow. I think you had to be a lot more obsessed back in that era to find out a lot. Whereas now you can find out a lot without even caring at all.

AY: I would say that people these days are much smarter in that sense than people back then, because now you can just become an expert in something. It's really much easier. I remember in '97 [was] when a lot of records got reissued. That was a big change for a lot of people because, before that, the whole process involved both a lot of work and blind chance discovery. Total randomness or an educated guess based off aesthetics. In '97 many bands started adopting a retro style, playing psychedelic music and dressing like they were in the 60s; at the same time there were all these reissue records of that kind of music. It became a vicious cycle, where there was more information and access and that would seemingly result in more aping and emulation. Some of the bands were great, but the thrill of randomness was lost.

It's interesting because I have a lot of friends that are way younger than me, maybe in their early 20s. They've expressed to me that they feel sad they missed out on pre-Internet times, like they missed out on this other mode of communication. And then also, back when we were kids, the idea of "networking" was kind of a dirty word. And I think that now it's really different. And the idea of copying is not seen as so sinful.

RR: *I keep thinking about all this free and open-source information and how everybody has to hyperlink to everything. Do you think we've lost authorship in an Internet age?*

When I look at your website, Amy, there are a few specific pages where we're unaware of any authorship other than on the ones that explicitly contain your artwork. For instance, the page titled "Free Metallic Clutch—it's full of samples!" takes you on a click-your-own web adventure filled with pages of outdated clip art and collaged imagery, starting with "banana cat" and ending on some Gizmodo story of Chick-fil-A pretending to be a teenage girl on Facebook. I wanted to know if this is a very conscious ambiguity that you're working with in your practice. And there are other uses of advertising or pop culture, kind of your own free sourcing. In a way, it feels like you're using the Internet to create analog advertising.
AY: I will say that with the website specifically, I wanted it to be sort of confusing. I didn't want it to be so quick to get to the artwork. In fact, there was a point where I thought, "I'm not even going to have the artwork up at all.

OPPOSITE: (left to right) Emily Ryan (guitar), Wendy Yao (drums), Amy Yao (guitar), Emily's Sassy Lime performs at Jabberjaw! (photo: David Donahue); Audience at Emily's Sassy Lime's first show at Tita's basement in Trabuco Canyon, CA / ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Wendy Yao, performing in Emily's Sassy Lime (photo: Allison Wolfe); Emily's Sassy Lime performing at Beyond Baroque, Venice, CA. Show organized for *Giant Robot* with Kicking Giant; Amy Yao, performing in Emily's Sassy Lime (photo: Allison Wolfe)

I'll just have a secret site for the artwork." With regards to authorship and copyright, it is something that's been in the undoing for a long time.
WY: Well, let's think about medieval art. They weren't credited!
RR: *And the Internet has really accelerated it.*
AY: I think the Internet has made it less of a controversial issue in some ways. Now, it's almost a non-issue or more complicated, there's a whole profession behind these issues—you have intellectual property lawyers. Napster was controversial, but then that was so long ago. And now, it's just like people are taking things all the time, borrowing. And so there's a different form of commerce attached to it. People still want to make money off of what they "created" and have to find new ways to do that. With art, artists are using other people's artwork in their own artwork. It's just another strategy, option, or way of working, with its own meaning attached to it. And it's not really seen as something shocking.
WY: It's almost a form of collaboration. In some ways, it feels like that to me.

It seems like with the increased speed of everything, the speed of exchange, the speed of ideas and everything with [the] Internet era, it's hard to think that you could constantly put your mark on something and lay a claim to it all the time. But now is also a period [in which] artists like Elaine Sturtevant are bigger than ever or more accepted. Whereas when she was ... starting out, a lot of people thought that was completely crazy.

RR: *I wanted to ask Amy about the origin of the curlicue in your paintings. You've said that your work "disturbs common sense," which I think is a really nice analogy to make with regard to that symbol.*
AY: Well, it's a maddening symbol, I'd say. I started using the curlicue because I thought it was a funny shape. I don't know if you remember the Menendez brothers, from the 90s. They were these wealthy twin brothers [who] lived kind of close to where we grew up, and they killed their parents to get all the money. One of them went to our high school. And somebody got his math book. One of the Menendez brothers signed his name in [it in] cursive, with the *z* curled endlessly. For some reason, that always made an impression on me. It felt like madness—something simple and crazy like the endless curlicue. And it also suggests animation ... like a spring.

RR: *Are you guys still organizing the art swapmeets, and how did those get started?*
WY: We haven't planned the next one yet, but we didn't decide to end it, either. We've done six of them since 2004.
AY: Andrea [Zittel] was my teacher in undergrad. ... She's someone I've kept in touch with always and who's always been very supportive, and I would meet with her occasionally. Originally the idea started with Steve Hanson. Steve and I had [the] idea to take over this space in Chinatown, and just have kind of a permanent swap meet for artists—the idea was just to have artists make work that would cost under $100. To not have everything be so precious. But that didn't work out. The person who owned the space rejected our idea, so we couldn't do it. But I told Andrea about it, and she invited us to do the swap meet at High Desert Test Sites. Wendy and I had always worked together on things, and she was already doing Ooga Booga, so we decided to work together on the swap meet. We had to figure out the format, which changed over the years. I think the last one was the most interesting.
RR: *And they're outdoors, right on the earth?*
WY: The first year we did it literally on the sand, sort of in the desert. We used gym towels as the mats on the ground. And it was really windy sometimes, so the sand blew all over our merchandise and it was kind of crazy. Each swap meet had its own good things. The first ones didn't suck, but we didn't know what we were doing. It was pretty experimental in that sense.
AY: [With] the first one we really didn't know what we were getting into, and everything got wind-blown—sand all over it. And I couldn't attend the second one because I was in grad school, so Wendy did it solo [and] I helped with coordinating things beforehand.
WY: I got sunstroke that time. That was the big snafu the second time. [laughs]
AY: So there's the little things, like dealing with the environment. I think that that experience became part of it.

RR: *Wendy, let me ask you about Ooga Booga. Where did the name come from?*
WY: The name came from these friends of ours; they had started a hard-core band. They had a bunch of potential names on the wall of their studio, and that was one of them. They were going to go with that, and then at the last minute they changed it, so I asked them if I could have the name. I didn't want it to go to waste.

RR: *Do you feel like it embodies some sort of spirit or philosophy?*
WY: Inasmuch as it's sort of a nonsense word. [It's] sort of onomatopoeia, so it's not supposed to mean that much. Maybe [it jokingly refers] to the first words uttered by man, but I figured having a store that had a lot of obscure items, I didn't really want to have a name that was too pretentious. [It] sort of draws people in, and it's very casual and just sort of open, entry-level here. We don't really know what we're doing, so ....

LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Tobias Madison, Rebecca Senn, and Lisa Jo parading Madison's dragon sculpture at Art Swapmeet; Lucky Dragons and Rob Halverson; Booth by David Benjamin Sherry (all images: Art Swapmeet, High Desert Test Sites, Joshua Tree, CA)

RR: *And I'm interested in this duality between using the Internet to shop online and all that, and these physical fine art books and objects. So, do they work together in your case or do we have to accept one to promote the other? Do you have more foot traffic or do you have more online traffic? How do they work together for you?*
WY: I think the Internet really helps because it really helped me start a business with very little capital. I've been around for almost nine years, and we've never paid for an advertisement, ever .... I think if it was pre-Internet, you probably would have had to do that. In the Internet era, the word of mouth spreads pretty quickly or pretty easily. It flows. That really helped me get the word out because my store location is very hidden. It's really hard to find, you're not going to stumble across it. It's not a standard storefront. The other thing is that it's a different experience; I guess people can stumble across it. My original store space was really, really small. Some people like that experience, and some people probably want a more relaxed experience. There are definitely people, local, five minutes away, [who] browse the store online and then come in and say, I saw this thing on the website, and I want that.

RR: *They want to come for a very focused experience.*
WY: I think it's because my store is really small, and stuff is really crammed in. To someone who likes digging through a garage sale or digging in crates, she wouldn't mind it at all. But other people can look online.

RR: *Ooga Booga entered the institutional realm last year for the* Excursus *platform at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. What does this mean for future programming?*
WY: The project at the ICA Philadelphia was a lot of fun, and [I'm] grateful to Alex Klein for giving me the opportunity and support to do the installation and programming series there. The programming was a natural extension of what [we've] always been doing in LA, but it was great to assemble all the books and ICA archival materials in one place and try something different along those lines. I think my new location at Mission Road is a good chance to continue some of that work in a larger space than we previously had access to, and Laura Owens and Gavin Brown have been extremely supportive to that end. They are great hosts and collaborators. We've been doing a lot of events there, such as talks, performances, film screenings, parties, workshops, meals, radio broadcasts, etc., and I'm interested in expanding that further once I recover a little, energy-wise, from everything that's been going on.

RR: *Amy, can you talk about being first-generation Asian Americans in the US? Where do you find that tension between history (or maybe a lack thereof) and reconciling some cultural identity? Obviously, thinking about your recent show at AVA [Audio Visual Arts], you mentioned absurd expectations—*
AY: Actually, that's a very complicated question to answer. Growing up in America as a first-generation Chinese or Asian American, you end up really bonding in terms of thinking about identity and cultural themes with other Asians—people who are not necessarily specifically Chinese American, which [wouldn't] really happen if you were in, say, China. Nowadays, it must be very different, I imagine. There are many more Asian Americans who are visible in popular culture. But when I was growing up, very few Asian Americans were even represented or participating in popular culture. And if they were, they were almost like clowns.

When we were young, that's part of the reason why we were drawn to punk, and indie music. Here was this situation ... you could participate in,

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Making Books with Trinie Dalton and Jen Bervin, from *Excursus III: Ooga Booga*, ICA Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2012; Ooga Booga #2 at 365 Mission, Los Angeles; interior view of Ooga Booga store, Chinatown, Los Angeles

where the rules weren't already written. Like a school outside of school where you could fuck the rules. In LA, what's interesting is that you go to punk shows and have a real variety in who [is] there. There were Asian Americans. There was a magazine called *Giant Robot* that was just talking about Asian American experience. Underground culture things, like Asian skateboarders or film stars and [that] kind of thing.

RR: *So the boundaries either weren't there or they were just blurred so that it didn't matter—*

AY: It was more like a new creative space because everything was being created just then. With this kind of music—although punk rock existed before—things were open because there was no idea that you were creating something that was going to last forever. It was punk in the sense of the spirit of punk; the music and dress didn't have to be "punk." So you were just really in the moment.

I feel like it was a really important thing to get out of suburban California, away from situations where hierarchies were really visible. To be in this new space, things don't work in the same way it would when you were in high school. You don't have a yearbook where someone gets voted class clown or best-looking eyes. It was more free and more open.

RR: *Where do you place value on hierarchy? Thinking about what both of you do, because it is so multifaceted, it feels like there are these collaborative approaches, trades, and projects. But then each of you has your own independent or proprietary practices. So Amy, your work, for example, is nuanced and intimate. Is this a search for your own personal space or reaction against social dynamics that are so central to your other projects?*

AY: I would definitely say that with my work, there is putting ... my personal space into the work. That kind of ties into identity politics in some ways, although [in] a much more nuanced way because I'm not so interested in thinking [about] identity politics in [a] way that is so crystal clear. I appreciate and respect what other artists have done in the past in terms of identity-based political artwork. I totally understand and appreciate it. And I think that they have made it so that a person like me can work with that idea in a more nuanced way. Meaning that, maybe I'm not putting forth statements, but that my work does relate to my identity. Any identity can be political. Any subject can also be political. I guess [I think] of my work being political in that way.

RR: *DIY can be a political statement?*

AY: I don't know if DIY can always be a political statement, but I support DIY practices for the most part. Maybe in the past I would have said DIY is a political thing, but these days everything is DIY. Like, Tumblr is DIY, and I don't know what I think about that. I don't know if it is so political. It seems more about curating or something. Pointing at things that are beautiful or something and showing the world you have "good taste."

I feel like there's a situation of flooding and saturation. That's sort of the attitude of the 2000s at least. I think the 90s started it, people started thinking that way, and it just carried on. I don't know if everyone should be creating and making things.

RR: *Sometimes people should not be doing it themselves. [laughs]*

AY: I think the spirit is important in the sense that there's no one telling you no. If you have something important to say, I think it's good that it's said. I guess sometimes I think that not everyone needs to make something.

Rachel Reese is an independent curator and arts writer. She produces Possible Press, a curated newsprint publication of artists' writings, as well as Possible Projects, a curatorial program with her husband, Trevor. Most recently Reese was assistant director of Fleisher/Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia, 2010–2012, and the financial director of Deitch Projects in New York during its final years, 2009–2011. Now living in Atlanta, Reese is the editor of BURNAWAY magazine, an online destination for contemporary arts criticism and dialogue.

ABOVE: **Amy Yao,** installation view of *Mistress, oooof! Les Bourses...*, 2011, The Green Gallery, Milwaukee, WI; RIGHT: **Amy Yao,** *Huntington Library Chinese Gardens Fan No. 01*, 2013, fan, glitter, distorted photograph, 9.5 x 14.5 inches (courtesy of the artist and Audio Visual Arts (AVA), NY)