

Xper.Xr
Selected Press

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Portrait of XPER.XR. Photo by Peter Chung for *ArtAsiaPacific*.



XPER.XR, *Untitled*, 1991/2021, acrylic, plaster, pigments, and Chinese ink on canvas, 90 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

Maximum RPM XPER.XR

BY HG MASTERS

There was a sleeping tabby cat at the entrance of Xper.Xr's exhibition at Empty Gallery. Ignoring visitors, it purred away in blissful repose despite the bass guitar riffs and wild screaming echoing from the next room. All seemed well in the cat's world; not so much in ours.

Anyway the cat was not real, and its battery eventually died. Xper.Xr is not the artist's real name either, so I just call him Chris. Empty Gallery is real, even though it feels surreal to emerge from an elevator into near total darkness on the 19th floor of an industrial building in Hong Kong. The metal security barriers that were piled up in a corner of the exhibition are real, though not originals—they are a re-creation of Xper.Xr's 1994 installation *Fracas*, inspired by the showdowns between English football hooligans and riot police, and complete with tangled, "Police Line Do Not Cross" tape. The dozens of human teeth embedded around the border of an impastoed black canvas are thankfully not real, though horrifyingly realistic; it too is a re-creation of an untitled work, from 1991.

The retrospective—named "Tailwhip," for the BMX trick that Chris says he landed only twice in his life—spanned Xper.Xr's experimental forays into industrial-noise music, action painting, zine publishing, performance art, novel writing, touring car racing, and sonic healing. Though the show featured an abundance of archival materials—cases of magazine clippings, album covers, old correspondence, articles and zines that Chris published, musical scores, and various noise-making props including a megaphone and angle grinder—it can still be difficult to comprehend that Xper.Xr's multipronged creative life really happened, and with such intensity. Yet "Tailwhip" gave glimpses of the real moments, including Xper.Xr's sensationally abrasive entrance into the music and art scenes of Hong Kong. Footage from a 1991 event at Quart Society in Pok Fu Lam shows Xper.Xr and the Orphic Orchestra scraping violins and clanging pieces of metal together before Chris takes an angle grinder to his guitar. At an iconic 1993 performance at the Ko Shan Theatre in Kowloon, the group jumped on stage like a classic rock ensemble before the lanky, longhaired Chris began wailing and grinding, while other members launched into varieties of noise-making. A hammer head—now rusty and framed—swung around by a bandmate

flew off its handle, hitting their friend in the forehead and leading to the concert's abrupt termination.

"Tailwhip" also explored when and how Xper.Xr came into being as a persona. Did he emerge out of a delinquent childhood of urban-industrial, late-colonial ennui, as is suggested in a photo of him soaring through the air on a BMX in a counter tabletop pose circa 1982 in an undeveloped area of Kowloon Tong? Is what marks his creative emergence the 1989 cassette tape *Murmur*, which tortured the eardrums of Hong Kong's tiny alternative music scene? Or did he come into his own in a blaze of postmodernism with his first CD, *Voluptuous Musick* (1992), which deconstructed and satirized Cantopop hits, sparking fears of lawsuits and the artist's relocation to London?

And why did Xper.Xr emerge? In the 1980s, as the British empire was hastening its retreat from Hong Kong, Chris recalls that the city had no independent music scene and its commercial culture was stale. But this gave him and others room to experiment. "We did everything we could to counter the mainstream—that was our main drive," he recollected. But the still unanswerable question is where this desire to crash past the limits, wreck havoc, and make crude and rude music and art comes from. Was it an idealist's pursuit of raw emotion, of pure expression—anti-melodic and anti-commercial? Or a brazen middle finger to the prevailing social orders of the world?

"Tailwhip" suggested it was a heady mix of both. One mythical episode of mischief alluded to with a single invitation card was Xper.Xr's graduation project at Goldsmiths. He imagined driving his beloved BMW into an exhibition gallery. Though his professors were discouraging, he asked two prominent London gallerists for their thoughts. The East End gallery space Curtain Road faxed him words of encouragement; the West End gallerist, Stephen Friedman, told him it was such a cynical idea there was no place for him in the art world. He displayed the two faxes along with the car in *The Ultimate Art Machine* (1995). One of his professors, Xper.Xr claims, snuck into the gallery and stole the dismissive message from Friedman.

Contentious moments form an important part of the Xper.Xr archive, illustrating his uncompromising ways. A fax exchange, for instance, between Xper.Xr and Juntaro Yamanouchi, of the Japanese harsh noise group Gerogerigegege, is a terse negotiation over sharing the costs of a record that ultimately never came into existence.

A whole binder of letters in "Tailwhip" documents the saga of Chris's firing from a *Comme des Garçon* store in London—primarily for three counts of lateness and one unexplained absence—and his successful pursuit of a wrongful termination case. (He did admit that he was never called out for acts of retail sabotage like saturating the store with entire bottles of perfume.)

These fraught interactions are the flip side of Xper.Xr's desire for collaboration. A documentary of his project *70mph* (2006) shows him and his collaborators in London deconstructing a motorbike engine, attaching it to a computer, and recording its tones as its cylinders fire away. Originally, they wanted to use eight Formula 1 engines and have them blaring on stage with a chorus of six guitars and 12 live drummers in a symphony of speed and sound, machine and men. He still claims hellfire from the exhaust system nearly burned him alive and that his collaborators were at each other's necks, like any real band.

A few years later, when he moved back to Hong Kong in 2012, he launched a space for alternative music called the CIA (officially the "Cultural Industries Association") in the Kwai Hing industrial area. CIA spotlighted radical performers like Vagina Dentata Organ and New Noveta in July 2013, and the Slovenian industrialist noise ensemble Laibach, billed as the "most dangerous group in the world," at a 2014 concert called "The New Cultural Revolution." Despite all the hyperbole, Xper.Xr insists that he is not avant-garde or political as these too are tired formulas for art and music. He admits there's a risk in doing any exhibition, especially like "Tailwhip," of being boxed-in and labeled, and that is exactly the kind of cultural stagnancy he tries to move beyond.

These days Chris says he's primarily working as a "quack," providing healing with Rife Plasma tubes that transmit sound and light at frequencies that realign cells and can cure diseases and cancers. He's pushing the limits of conventional understanding, and not for the first time. For Xper.Xr, "the history of the world is on repeat," and though things might seem dire again now, "there will be a reawakening." Maybe it takes getting hit by the bicycle that you're trying to spin around midair to see agency, action, and risk in a different configuration. Maybe subjecting your body to pure noise and light at just the right frequency can get us collectively vibrating again. Maybe someone will put a new battery in the cat and it will come purring back to life.

SPIKE ART MAGAZINE

On the occasion of Xper.Xr's exhibition "Tailwhip" at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery, Jaime Chu, phoning in on a video call, joined curator and researcher Michelle Wong on a walkthrough. The show, which collects documentation, artefacts, and ephemera from throughout Xper.Xr's nearly thirty years of activity in the industrial noise music and anti-art realms, is a rare window into Hong Kong's poorly-documented underground scene - colourful and full of petty spats that reflect the unruly energy of Xper.Xr's multifaceted practice.

Jaime Chu: In "Tailwhip", anti-white-cube Empty Gallery's recent archival exhibition Xper.Xr's output from the past three decades, the artist dedicates a 2021 reproduction of a mixed media painting - made from acrylic, Chinese ink, cement, mortar, and fake teeth; originally exhibited during a noise show at the now-defunct Quart Society, one of the first artist-run independent spaces in Hong Kong, which opened in 1990 - to the soon-opening M+ Museum. The tragically allegorical presence of the ever-looming, ever-completing, and ever-becoming M+ has only intensified since in the National Security Law came into effect in Hong Kong last July, as practitioners have been departing or resigning from positions of power, projects are getting defunded, and having a point of view feels increasingly pre-emptively guilty. Under these circumstances, "Tailwhip" seems to be a rare, disappearing opportunity to consider the archives of someone whose career - and now retrospective - connects these different spaces on a single timeline.

The shadowy and provocative Xper.Xr has been all over the place since he became active in the 1980s, starting out in Hong Kong and spending years studying and making art in London and Paris. He has, with the conviction of introducing alternative aesthetics to mainstream pop culture institutions, performed in Hong Kong's first industrial noise shows, hosted extremely small-scale experimental cinema screening series ("I don't believe we can't even find a dozen people in this city with an open mind", he once wagered), made fanzines for experimental music, brought avant-garde European artists like Hermann Nitsch (notable for his musical compositions, performances and association with the Viennese Actionists) and Laibach to Hong Kong, started an underground venue called CIA, co-founded labels, and got into drag racing.



Album cover of Xper.Xr, (2022)



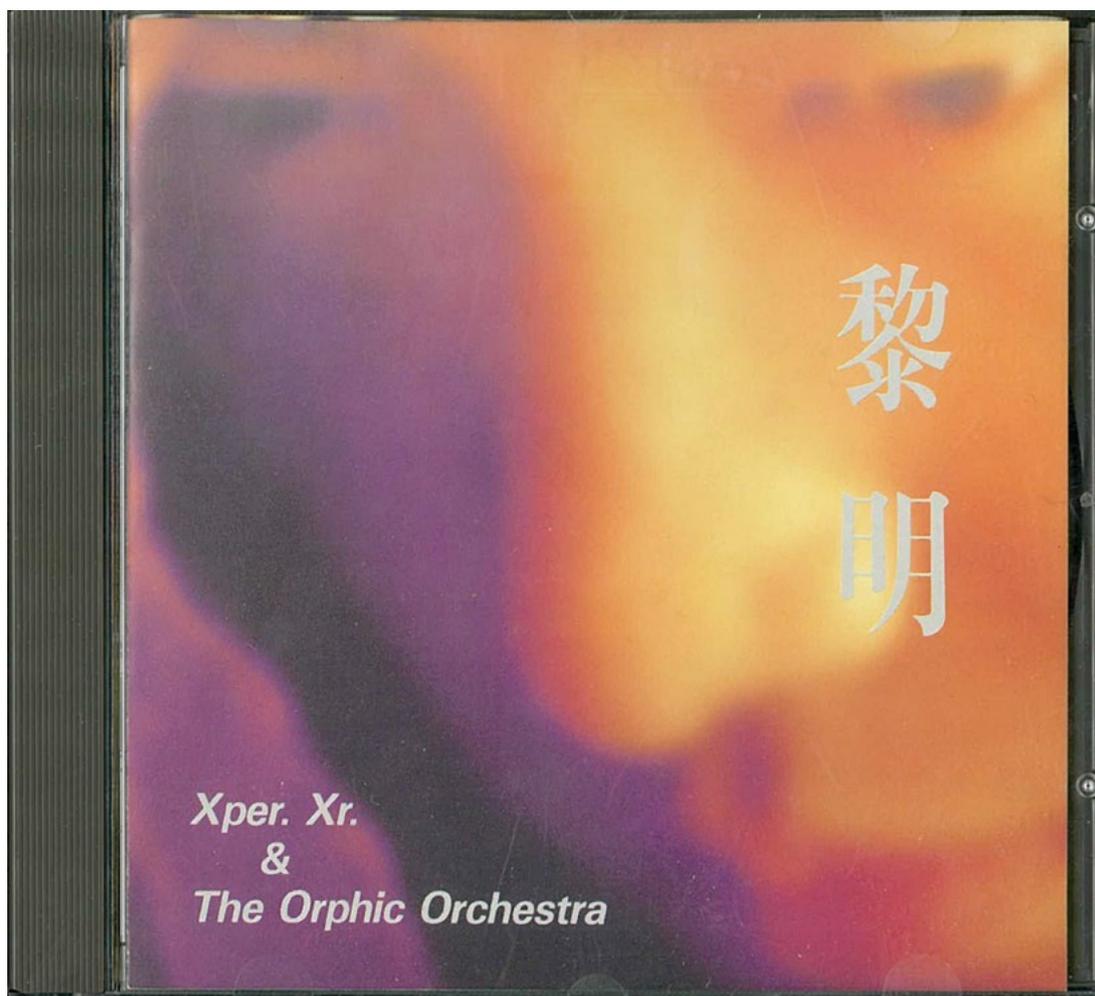
Installation view, "Tailwhip", Empty Gallery, 2021.
Photo: Michael Yu

I was born into the golden era of mainstream Cantopop, one of Xper.Xr's main objects of criticism and parody, and the genre in the 80s and 90s has an outsized iconography that enjoys an afterlife in the global popular imagination pretty much apathetic to present reality, so that in this horse-shoeing moment, there is a simultaneous sense of mourning for the culture from that bygone era and the counter-culture it had inspired. Writing about Hong Kong from afar now, I am, of course, only noticing these reverberations from a distance. What was the show like in person?

Michelle Wong: It was dark (like Empty always is), but the gallery brightens up ever-so-slightly as you move inside and your eyes slowly adjust to the light. The vitrines are in the centre of the space, but you can also walk through and around them to wander and look for connections. There is a big projection screen on one side of the space that plays Xper.Xr's performances, emitting an ambient flicker and sound. In other parts of the space, Xper.Xr's works played on box TVs, another time stamp of the 90s.

What struck me was the connected creative milieu of that era - between the visual arts and noise scene; with the artist cooperative Quart Society being at the centre of "Tailwhip", there seems to be that connection. Between the reproduction of Xper.Xr's earlier works, the life-size pixelated printout figure of himself, and the listening lounge at the gallery - I think there's some good momentum we can harness from a recent conversation between the artists Anthony Leung Po Shan, Lantian Xie, and Jane Cheung about metabolising the archive, pushing against the production of loss and scarcity and the romanticisation of disappearance. (For me, the larger question eventually is, what is or will be of cultural value in this place?)

Now that I've typed enough ... what impressions did you leave the walkthrough with?



Album cover of Xper.Xr & The Orphic Orchestra, *Voluptuous Musick* (1992) featuring photo of Cantopop singer Leon Lai

JC: Who is Xper.Xr? There is always the fear that hoarders and lazy curators produce archival shows. (Maybe I am just cynical of a certain breed of retrospective exhibition that dumps a bunch of archival items in a vitrine and calls it a day.) There didn't seem to be a language for reviewers and music journalists to talk about his work when he first started performing and releasing tapes and albums in the late 80s and early 90s. In turn, the writing either flounders in trite publicity-speak or the writers have to get creative themselves.

There is a report in an August 1990 issue of Youth Weekly about Xper.Xr's rooftop show in January of that year, which was credited as the first noise show in Hong Kong, and it's just a long list of free-associative phrases: "My impression of the Fringe Club show: space, performance, rocks, sand and mud, rope...fire, metal rod, electric drill...resistance...breathing without air, improv, religion, numb, hell, sexual feelings, sensual seeings, fuck your mom...pain... I can only lean on these fragmentary phases and the suggestive power of imagination to accurately represent who he is." Maybe from the beginning, Xper.Xr's disembodied presence has led his work to be more about the materiality than anything else.

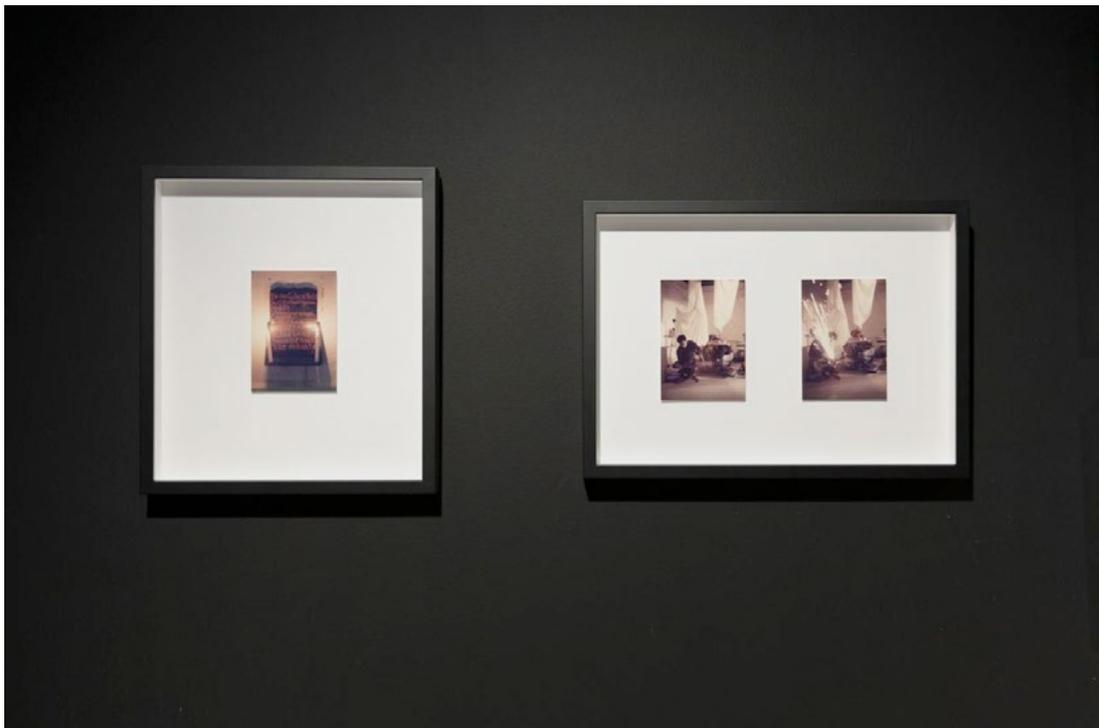
For me, the most visible and loaded work (from what I could tell through the mediation of a video chat window) was the life-size reproduction of a pile of metal barriers from a photo of the spectacle of soccer fans rioting in London in 1994. Kaitlin at Empty Gallery, where "Tailwhip" was on view until 24 July, mentioned how Xper.Xr initially couldn't get the barriers to pile up in a way that seemed organic, as they would've in a protest or in real use. The imagery is almost too overt in 2021, knowing what went down in Hong Kong in the past two years, but at the same time, you still can't ignore the visceral pain by association. Two years ago, when the anti-extradition bill protests first began, the "Café do Brasil" show at Para Site, curated by Qu Chang, made timely connections to intellectual culture in the public sphere in the 70s, and I remember that a lot of discussions with friends about the show circled around the misalignment between what's inside the galleries and what's happening outside on the streets. Namely, one of the questions that kept coming up was, "what can do we do inside that we can't do outside?"

Xper.Xr's barricade now also brings to mind Kwan Sheung Chi's *Iron Horse - After Antonio Mak* (2008/2020) in the recent exhibition of Ha Bik Chuen's personal archive, which you curated. What connections do you see between the two?

AS I NEGOTIATE THE GLARE OF SPOTLIGHTS WHILE PEERING AT DOCUMENTS UNDER REFLECTIVE SURFACES ... WHAT KIND OF WORLDS DO PRACTICES AND EXHIBITIONS THAT LEAN INTO THE DISPLAY OF ARCHIVES AND DOCUMENTS OPEN UP?

MW: It was slightly uncanny see to how Xper.Xr's barricade and Kwan Sheung Chi's *Iron Horse* speak to each other from two different exhibitions in Hong Kong at the same time. And of course Kwan Sheung Chi's 2008 rendition of the work included an attempt to collect all of Hong Kong's "iron horses" at the museum, that always brings a smirk to my face. What seems to have emerged from these past few exhibition seasons in Hong Kong is a constellation of shows that put art objects, artist interventions, and archival documents together, with curatorial gestures that blur the boundaries between the three. "Café do Brasil" (Para Site, 2019), "Non-history: Archive as detour" (Fringe Club, 2020, curated by Vennes Cheng), "New Horizons: Ways of Seeing Hong Kong Art in the 80s and 90s" (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2021), and "Portals, Stories, and Other Journeys" (Asia Art Archive at Tai Kwun Contemporary, 2021), to name a few. At the artist cooperative Quart Society, active from 1990-91, Xper.Xr made sparks fly between his angle grinder, hanging white cloth, his gory painting with teeth donning its frame, and a half-dead chicken. Now, a USB stick contains the entire Quart Society "archive".

I think what's remarkable about encountering the life and artefacts of someone with as much zeal as Xper.Xr is the combination of violence and humour in his approach to noise (and its experimental fringes), which shows how protest, as a form, is the antidote to consumption. Hong Kong is basically the banner child of "the art of protest" these days, but we know that protest is so much messier than that. There is blood on the infamous hammer that flew off its handle and hit the artist's childhood friend, who was standing in the audience at his noise show in 1993. When "Voluptuous Musick", his first full-length album that parodies mainstream Cantopop and Western hits first came out, it was completely bizarre - the cover rips off the name and likeness of Cantopop superstar Leon Lai, and there are only ten tracks when he advertised fifteen, not to mention that the "songs" were nothing like what their titles, stolen from 80s Billboard hits, suggested. But he never explained. That's another important distinction between an essentialising curatorial statement and a compelling archive: the refusal to resolve confusion and contradictions. It encourages reading for context, which is necessarily expansive, rather than for meaning.



Photographs of performance: Xper.Xr & The Orphic Orchestra, *Temporal Death*, at Quart Society (1991)

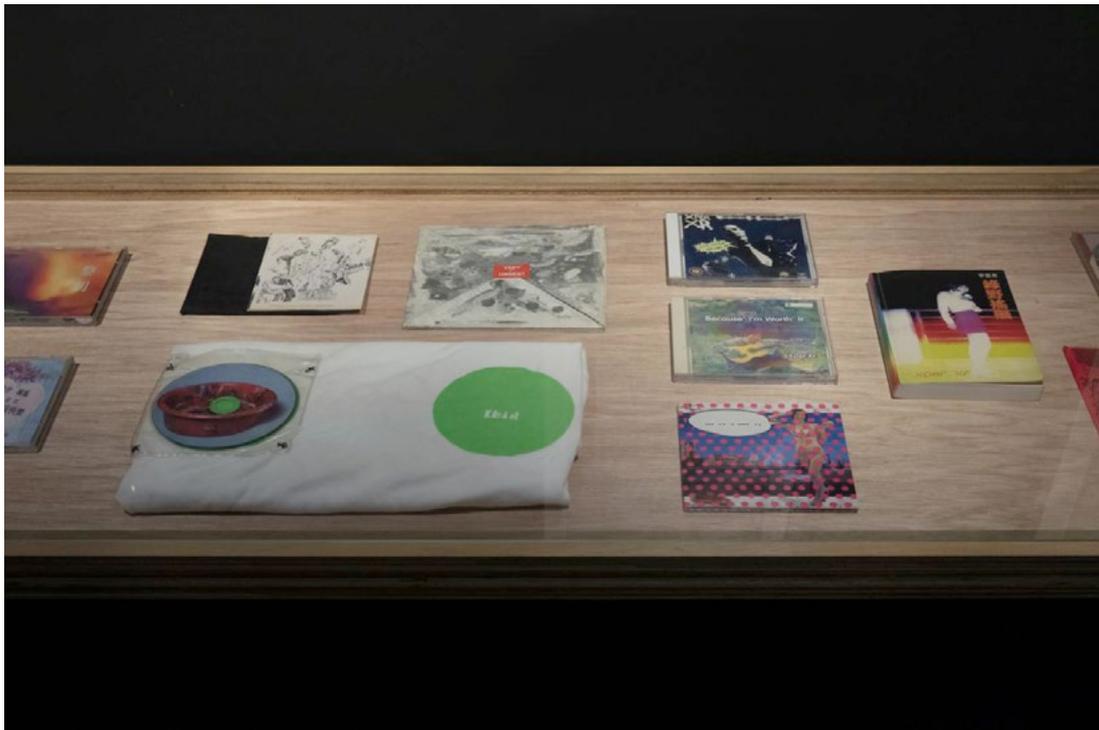
MW: I understand the ideas of "postmodernism" and "post-colonialism" within the rubric of academia, and as concepts that get deployed in curatorial manoeuvres. But when it comes to everyday life and the avalanche of information and news that circulate around us, I struggle to comprehend them. Modernity does not seem to end, and imperialism certainly has not. Protests, too, are often consumed more than we would like.

With our shared vision and experience of the past few years, it is impossible not to see the objects Xper.Xr and Empty Gallery put on display in "Tailwhip" as objects of protest and demonstration. But this very display also calls to me, poetically, that these objects have lived a life other than being objects of protest and demonstration. And it is this matching and mismatched existence that I find to be a move of possible strength and resilience.

The making of worlds, for me, emerges most energetically from practices (some call them art, but more often they exceed this category and its surrounding discourse) that knowingly or unknowingly flip a finger to existing paradigms of morality, judgement, and the delineation of disciplinary boundaries, but are themselves also embodiments of paradoxes. Maybe that's why these practices create confusion and refuse explanation, but they become legible if we stay with

them for a little longer. Much like how one sees Xper's disregard for existing protocols through his performances, which were intended to shock audiences, in contrast to his desire for risk, shiny trophies, and luxury goods - he once worked at a Comme des Garçons store, got fired, took them to court, won the case, and now gets an annual subsidy to buy CDG. Practices like these demand a different vocabulary, a different lexicon for acting in the world.

I like how you say that we need to hold the stories we are told accountable. And for me, this means going back to historical research; to attend to the noise in archives and the stuff that has yet to become archives - to narratives that are fragmented, refracted, hidden. In some ways, I feel we need to have faith in the past - not to treat it as the only truth and reality per se, but as events that have left traces that we can pick up and make sense of. I like to think, in some ways, this attitude and commitment to making sense of the past will help us inhabit our present - and thus shape our futures - more deeply.



Installation view, "Tailwhip", Empty Gallery, 2021. Photo: Michael Yu