

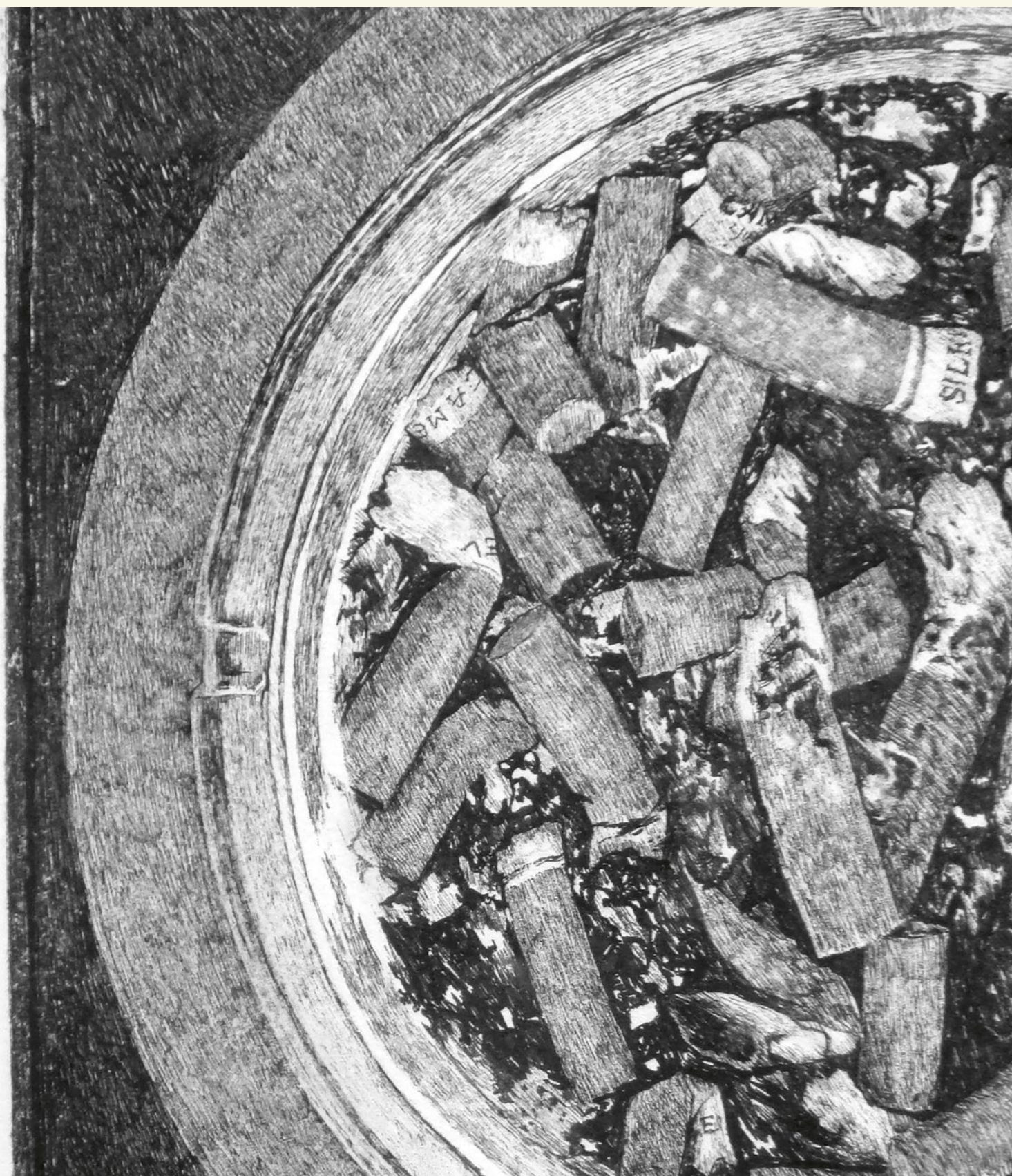


INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

KONG CHUN HEI

Thinking Through Space

BY HARRY C.H. CHOI



"A lot of people thought this cavernous doorway was my work," remarked Kong Chun Hei while reflecting on *Stairs* (2023), an installation presented in his solo show at Hong Kong's Para Site that same year. Titled "PS," the exhibition featured a series of architectural interventions to the newly renovated kunsthalle on the 10th floor of the storied Wing Wah Industrial Building. To develop these works, Kong closely followed the transformation of the space from a nondescript industrial shell into two snug, neatly finished galleries. Interconnecting the newly configured rooms was a dividing wall with two gaping, coarse-edged entryways, which evoked an abrupt, primordial collision.

Contrary to what many spectators assumed, Kong's work was not the dramatic carve-out of a drywall—a gesture that would have recalled Gordon Matta-Clark's unforgettable building cuts from the 1970s. Instead, staying true to its matter-of-fact title, his contribution was an unassuming, two-step block made from fragments of the broken wall, which were visibly suspended in a concrete mixture to produce a terrazzo-like pattern. The piece, bridging the two galleries, was meant to be stepped on by visitors—an almost unnoticeable, if not negligible structure that completely blended into its surroundings rather than asserting its objecthood. Yet without it, one would not have been able to move quite so seamlessly between the two galleries, and the vestiges of the demolished wall—which had facilitated the spatial division—would have been disposed of at a scrapyard before being pestled into a heap of concrete powder. Unremarkable as it may have first appeared, Kong's modest staircase held many scintillating revelations.

Like *Stairs*, Kong's practice is in no way "loud"—a feat that is not so small in the world of contemporary art that incessantly looks out for the bigger, the flashier, and the stronger. But his reticent works—which comprise drawings, sculptures, and installations—never cease to surprise as they activate and re-orient our senses in the most intimate fashion, pushing us to look and feel as intently as possible. During my conversation with the artist, we delved into a wide range of subjects; while discussing everything from his fascination with television to Milan Kundera, Kong divulged what goes on behind the process of his thinking and making that has given shape to one of the most singular emerging voices of the Hong Kong art scene today.

While researching your practice, I was struck by the transformation of your artistic language and trajectory. Between 2009 and 2011, you primarily produced ink drawings with delicate, seductive marks that remind me of Vija Celmins's works. In contrast, your recent projects take the form of site-specific installations that intervene into the phenomenology of space, perhaps in the vein of artists like Koo Jeong A. Could you describe how your thinking evolved over the years?

In my final year of university, I was quite confused by the relationship between the image and the narrative. It wasn't that I stopped believing in the potential of images, but it occurred to me that I couldn't quite articulate and formulate a story through a single drawing. I remember asking myself: "How could I make a representational drawing that could literally 'contain' a narrative rather than a set of discrete ideas and associations?" My answer to that question was to draw a book cover without any images and words, which was titled *Book I* (2009). The project then called for a rendering of the cover for *The End of Art* (2004) by Donald Kuspit, which I titled *Book II* (2009). On the original cover of this book is an ashtray with a dozen cigarette butts, which I reproduced rather painstakingly down to the tiniest detail. For the final piece in this series, I replicated the back cover of the same book; this time, though, there is no clear-cut image. A dark gray rectangle with small marks along the left edge denotes the spine, but it could stand in for the cover of any book.



Later on, I began to consider how the scale or gesture of a work could create a different sense of distance and influence how people respond to it. Framing became an important part of this consideration. For example, in *Flag I–II* (2013–14) and *Corner Protector I–III* (2014), the drawings were presented with custom-made stainless-steel frames, which transformed the works into objects—or, perhaps more accurately, emphasized their objecthood—by imposing specific constraints on how they were installed in space. This object-like presence, combined with a sense of theatricality, led me to think more deeply about the spatial dynamics of an exhibition.

After making these early projects, elements like lighting, the walking path, and modes of viewing all became a critical part of my practice. I also began to experiment with an engraving tool to make marks on glass, which felt similar to the act of making drawings on paper. These evolving conceptual and technical interests opened up new possibilities for engaging with structure and space.

How did these gradual transformations affect your approach to form? What were the aesthetic choices that shaped your most recent projects?

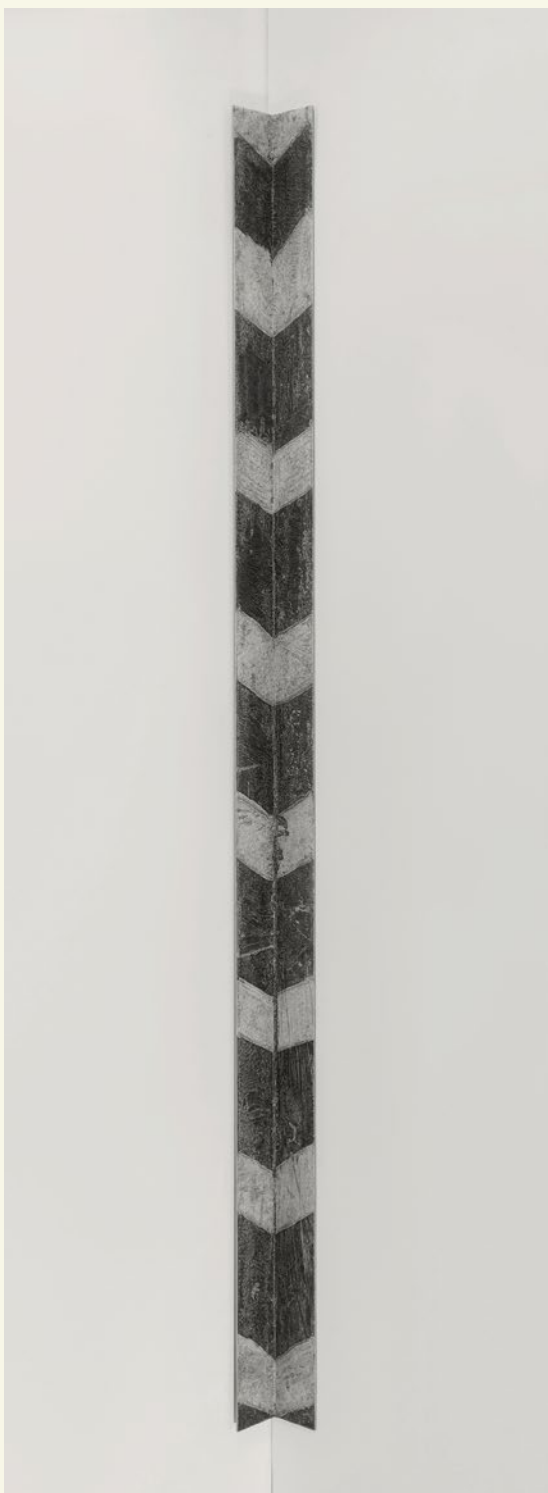
I often consider whether structural elements in an exhibition—like walls—can serve purposes beyond simple separation or support. Sometimes, the ability of a single artwork to create moments of division or hesitation becomes especially compelling to me. This is one reason I have been drawn to found objects and industrial materials. The other reason is their directness: they express their function clearly without carrying too much emotional weight. Their distinctiveness allows me to use these materials in a way that feels straightforward and unembellished.

There aren't specific references that directly inform my work, but I must admit that certain artists frequently come to mind: Richard Serra, particularly his seminal film *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) and *Splash* series (1968–70); Rachel Whiteread; Cornelia Parker; and Edith Dekyndt.

Given your evolving observations and curiosities on the specificities of the exhibition space, it seems worthwhile to further unpack your interest in site-specificity—not only because it is a concept that grounds many of your projects, but also because it is a historically loaded term with a range of precedents that are still influential to a younger generation of artists. How do you situate your practice in the dense, evolving web of art history?

I don't position my practice squarely within art history, but I do find it fascinating, as it is essentially

KONG CHUN HEI, *Corner Protector III*, 2014, ink on watercolor paper mounted on stainless steel plate, 5 × 5 × 120 cm. Courtesy Gallery Exit, Hong Kong.



Detail of **KONG CHUN HEI**'s *Corner Protector I–III*, 2014, ink on watercolor paper mounted on stainless steel plate, 5 × 5 × 120 cm. Courtesy Gallery Exit, Hong Kong.



a narrative about what art can be. Art reflects dominant tendencies of thought that unfolded over particular periods of time, as well as various forms of resistance that challenged structures of power. For example, the emergence of Minimalism in response to Abstract Expressionism feels, to me, like a kind of *détournement*. These shifts introduce new languages of thought and execution, which I find inspiring.

As I mentioned earlier, I see found objects as things created with specific purposes. They carry with them an implied gesture or instructed use, which shapes how we perceive and engage with them. I think of space in a similar way. Even though museum or gallery “white cubes” are often described as abstract or fictional spaces, they’re still bound up with desire and fantasy—something that can be reflected physically in the space itself. I’m drawn to observing these kinds of elements.

Your response makes me want to dig deeper into the repository of knowledge you have built over the years that seems to continue to shape your work. Are there any theoretical precursors that guide your practice?

I think reading and making art are related activities, but their connection is indirect and often entangled. Sometimes, it is helpful to set those readings aside before beginning a new piece. Two writers I return to are Boris Groys and Hal Foster. Their analyses offer compelling perspectives—Groys, for example, draws a connection between the image of Jesus and the

concept of the readymade, while Foster suggests that the negation present in Minimalism echoes the spirit of the early 20th-century avant-garde.

I also enjoy reading Milan Kundera. His idea of kitsch is striking—ruthless, but often accurate—particularly in a world saturated with layers of over-interpretation. His writing offers a sharp lens on the ways we construct meaning around us.

How do these interests translate into your artistic process? I am curious about how these ideas manifest into works of art in your studio.

I wouldn't describe it as a direct translation between readings and my studio practice. Instead, reading offers different perspectives that help me reflect on broader aspects of life—not just art. It prompts me to think about underlying forces, or what I sometimes refer to as inertia.

I usually begin a project by drawing. It's a way for me to enter a focused state of mind, where ideas and questions naturally begin to surface. During times of political instability or the Covid-19 quarantine, for

instance, I found myself reflecting on the relationship between anxiety and the overload of information. The government's daily briefings seemed to direct our attention toward chaos, rather than clarity, and this directly spilled into my work.

That's where the idea of found objects re-emerged—like in *Fulfill* (2022), which is a work that responds specifically to this dynamic. It explores how our attention is constantly redirected in a shifting, unstable reality. The notion that rationality itself can become a tool of disruption was particularly striking to me. This further inspired *Pinpoint* (2022), where every spot appears calculated, yet remains elusive—carefully placed, but slippery and uncertain.

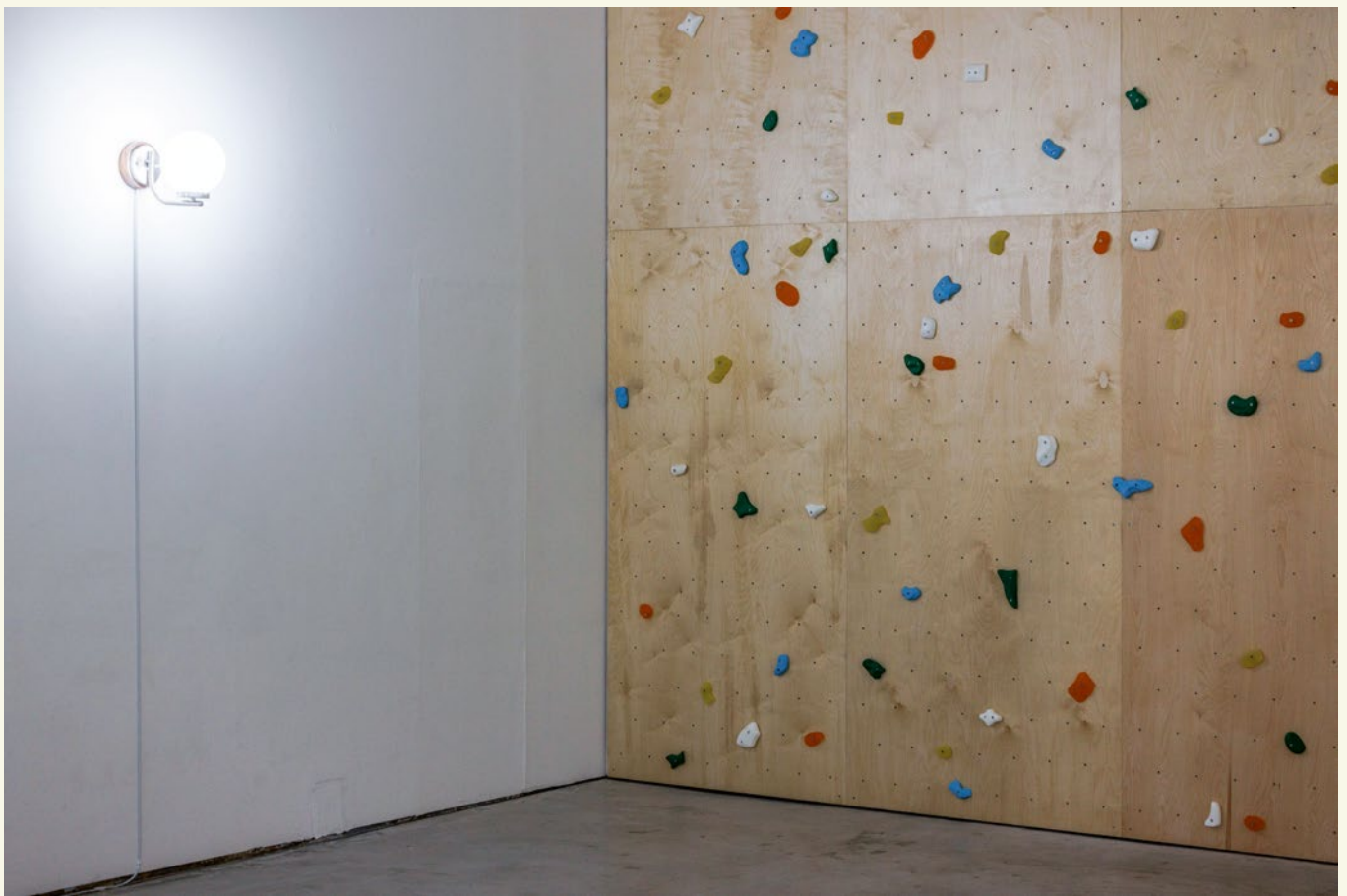
I am fascinated by the ways in which these sociopolitical observations are embedded in your explorations of form. I wonder, then, what you imagine as the stakes for your projects—not to place a prescriptive outlook onto your work, but to contemplate, more broadly, the role of art when it comes to these concerns.

The role of art continues to shift over time, and through that process, things that were once considered *not* art can become legitimized within the language of art. I could even add that what was *not* art could soon transform into a form of "legal" language of art. In this sense, art is always political—whether it directly engages with sociopolitical ideas or symbols seems secondary.

Throughout history, countless artists and historians have asked the following questions, albeit in different forms: What can be sensed? How do we sense it? How is perception distributed? These questions seem to always hover around the role of art. But I think we could argue that the role of art itself might be described as being both connected

Installation view of KONG CHUN HEI's *Fulfill*, 2022, electricity meter, electric box, projector, surveillance camera, metal profile, live single-channel video projection, HD, and no sound, dimensions variable. Photo by Chong Kok Yew. Courtesy TKG+, Taipei.





to these questions and yet ultimately unrelated. To take it a step further, these questions may even be completely useless. This inherent contradiction makes it feel more like a game—a structure with its own rules, which is constantly being reshaped but never fully resolved.

Understanding your worldview is even more generative at present, particularly as the world that we live in is filled with an unprecedented degree of uncertainty. I am curious about your vision of the future, both in terms of your practice and that of humanity at large.

Things that once appeared free or liberating have increasingly become subtle instruments of domination. Pluralism, instead of dissolving boundaries, has led to more labels and distinctions. Globalization, having distributed crises more evenly than benefits, now seems to be entering a new, erratic phase. Despite paradoxical waves of optimism and certainty, it appears that we are headed toward a future of greater instability and fragmentation.

In the face of this, the question becomes: how do we remain resilient amid all these uncertainties and sudden, unexpected changes? What may be essential as we move forward—if I dare say—is the ability to maintain critical distance, to adapt resiliently without surrendering, and to preserve a sense of humor.

KONG CHUN HEI was born in 1987 in Hong Kong, and currently lives and works in Hong Kong. His work has been shown at various institutions, including Para Site and JC Contemporary in Hong Kong, the Hong-Gah Museum and Keelung Museum of Art in Taiwan, Taikang Space in Beijing, and the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester.

HARRY C.H. CHOI is an art historian, curator, and writer. He served on the curatorial team of the 14th Gwangju Biennale and has held curatorial fellowships at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. A regular contributor to *Artforum*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, and *Texte zur Kunst*, he is completing his PhD in art history and film and media studies at Stanford University.

Installation view of KONG CHUN HEI's *Pippoint*, 2022, wood boards, soaps, and screws, each board 112 × 215.5 cm. Photo by Chong Kok Yew. Courtesy TKG+, Taipei.