Between Disruption, Witnessing, and Recording: Three case studies examining the use of the Archive in Contemporary Art from the Malay Archipelago

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Abstract

This dissertation presents three case studies focusing the use of archival materials and references to archival processes in contemporary art from the Malay Archipelago, primarily Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Although artists from America and Europe have been incorporating these practices into their practice since the 1960s, this genre has only begun to flourish across the region in the past two decades. By applying Hal Foster's concepts of construction and excavation as well as theories related the interpretation and biography of archives to my selection of contemporary works, I will examine how artists use the archive to process and respond to specific historic events and themes such as memory, history and its multiplicities, historiography, identities, nationhood, and regionality.[1] The three artists I have chosen are Sabah-born Yee I-Lan, Indonesian practitioner FX Harsono, and Singaporean artist Ho Tze Nyen; all of whom have unique methods of incorporating archival material or methods of recording into their work. Through this investigation I aim to illuminate the relationship between contemporary art, the archive, and the archive's role in the construction of history within the context of the Malay Archipelago as well as the wider region of Southeast Asia, and to provide a comprehensive understanding of archival art beyond the typical confines of the West.

[1] See https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/archive-as-method and June Yap's *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* for a more in-depth examination of pervasive themes and concerns.

Contents

Introduction

Since the 1960s, artists from Europe, America, and Japan have exhibited archival and record-keeping materials in their works while dissecting the methods through which archival institutions produce cultural knowledge.[2] In these contexts, artists tend to use archival material, such as calendars and diaries, which record the passing of ordinary and personal time in order to document transitory events[3] and resist the bureaucracy of art institutions.[4] Since then the genre of archival art has garnered a variety of definitions interwoven with the archive's ability to record and situate historic information, and function as a mode of cultural memory.[5] This is not something that begins to appear in Southeast Asia until the 2000s, where contemporary practitioners make use of the archive through referencing methods of archiving and integrating materials that record the past; in particular, old archival photographs, government documents, or personal letters.

Interest in the archive will make up the core of the dissertation, where I will examine how contemporary artists from the Malay Archipelago (specifically Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore) utilise both the materiality and conceptual function of the archive in order to respond to the construction of history across these countries. I intend to situate these artists and their works within the wider discourses of the interpretation and biography of archives, and historiographical art.

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[2] Notable practitioners outside Southeast Asia including On Kawara, Yoko Ono, Hanne Darboven, and Lorna Simpson. See Ernst van Alphen's 'Staging the Archive,' Hal Foster's 'An Archival Impulse,' and Ruth Rosengarten's 'Between Memory and Document: The Archival Turn in Contemporary Art' for further reading.

[3] Jennifer Dalton, "Dream Trash/Trash Dream: the artist as collector, historian, and archivist." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art,* no. 21 (1999): 63.

[4] Claire Hsu, "Archive as Method," *Asia Art Archive.* December 1, 2012. Accessed July 25, 2019, https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/archive-as-method

[5] Nadine Siegert, "The archive as construction site: collective memory and trauma in contemporary art from Angola," *World Art, 6:1* (2016): 105.

With regard to terminology, I will adopt Ernst van Alphen's outlook that archival artworks are pieces that "interrogate the self-evidential claims of the archive"[6] and "foreground the principles on which archival organisations are built,"[7] as well as keep in mind Foucault's broader assertion that the archive "reveals the rules of a practice that enables systems to survive and to undergo transformation."[8] Alongside this framework I will refer to Hal Foster's terms 'excavation site' and 'construction site.' In his 2004 essay 'An Archival Impulse,' Foster briefly outlines that incorporating facets of the archive results in a strict dichotomy, with the outcome being either the excavation site that is closely related to the melancholy and trauma of the past, or the construction site that functions as a site of potential and re-imagining of existing social relations.[9] I will examine how the works by my selection of artists from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore relate to the concepts of excavation and construction, and elucidate how their works, fuelled by vastly different histories and cultural experiences, function within the region's context.

Cornerstone themes such as memory, history and its multiplicities, historiography, identities, nationhood, land, regionality, and subjectivity of experience and epistemology pervade the works of many practitioners in Southeast Asia.[10] The practitioners who integrate the archive as material, method, and inspiration into their works are no exception, but these concerns differ greatly from those outlined by Foster. He is quick to assert the impetus for the creation of archival artworks, stating that "archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or found, physically present."[11] This seems to hold true for the three modern European artists from the late 20th century,

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[6] Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the age of new media* (London: Reaction Books, 2014), 16.

[7] van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 18.

[8] Michael Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 146.

[9] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse" *October* 110 (2004): 4.

[10] See https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/archive-as-method and June Yap's *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia.*

[11] Ibid.

whose archival artworks Foster examines. Varying greatly from the concerns of Southeast Asian practitioners, he relates each practitioner's works closely to a variety of themes present in the lived experience (rather than histories) in the West, such as capitalism, the widespread access of information, utopian visions of the future, and the relationship between space and design. Despite the difference across region and time period, Foster's alleged impetus can be understood to resonate deeply with the contemporary artists of Southeast Asia, and thus the Malay Archipelago, especially once one acknowledges the latter's post-independence conditions and shared histories (or lack thereof).

Each chapter in the dissertation will examine how artists from the Malay Archipelago utilise the archive as material and methodology. Sabah-born Yee I-Lann incorporated colonial photographs from the Dutch administration in Southeast Asia into the series of digital collages 'Picturing Power;' Indonesian artist FX Harsono created diptychs out of family and exhumation photographs; while Singaporean practitioner Ho Tzu Nyen has built a digital archive titled the 'Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia.' These artists were chosen for their diverse methods of incorporating or creating archives, and because their methodology reflects an intention to refer to the construction of history and identity in both individual countries and throughout the wider region of Southeast Asia. Other notable artists from Southeast Asia whose works express similar sentiments—-but I was unable to examine in-depth due to the word count or lack of access to artist websites and images of artworks—include Fyarool Dharma (Singapore), Erika Tan (Singapore/London), Tiffany Chung (Vietnam/USA), Saleh Husein (Indonesia). They have adopted a variety of mediums such as sculpture, video, and map-making to express their related concerns.

Crucial to acknowledge is the three countries' shared experiences under colonial rule, and divergent experiences thereafter. The period after 1945 saw the development of independence across the region: the Dutch recognised Indonesia's freedom in 1949, while Malaysia and Singapore gained independence from the British and established individual rule in 1957 and 1965 respectively.

In the process of gaining independence and establishing a national identity, certain histories, such as those of prior colonial rule or subjugated communities, were, as Foster states, "misplaced."[12] Ultimately, it is through reworking and reconsideration of the material representative of these periods that archival artists are able to grapple with the cost and ramifications of modern nationhood (generally thought to be wartime destruction or an ongoing authoritarian governmentality[13]) in order to "ascertain what might remain for the present."[14]

Interestingly enough, it is not only artists who have been engaging in the archive's abilities to engage the past and its multiple portrayals to inform the present. It is worth noting that the past decade or so has seen a rise in the establishment of archival institutions dedicated to collating and enabling access to documentation and networks of archival knowledge.[15] Early 2012 saw the founding of the Singapore Independent Archive, which documents and makes the history of local visual art practice accessible through collating its records of festivals, group shows, artist talks, solo shows, art-books, artist events, and performances onto a public Excel spreadsheet. The latter focuses on event-specific artworks produced and showcased outside "conventional institutional policy."[16] Similarly, the Arts Education Archive Malaysia (AEAM) processes works by practitioners who remain outside the country's formal education system.[17] Both institutions' missions reveal an intriguing anxiety regarding the art that may have actively been ignored by national or government-approved narratives of history.

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[12] Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 21.

[13] SOAS Department of History of Art and Archaeology, *Issues in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art Module handbook 2017-2018,* (London: SOAS Department of History of Art and Archaeology, 2017), 12.

[14] Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 21.

[15] Hsu, "Archive as Method."

[16] "About Us," *Independent Archive* 2012, accessed June 16, 2019, http://www.independentarchive.sg/about-iarc/

[17] "Scope and Content," *Arts Education Archive Malaysia* 2017, accessed August 23, 2019, https://myartseducationarchive.com/about/scope-and-content/

Overall, the works I have chosen as the focus of each chapter relate to these concepts of excavation, construction, resistance, and misplaced pasts to varying degrees, while offering multiple ways of interpreting the archive within the context of the contemporary Malay Archipelago and the wider region of Southeast Asia. In particular, this dissertation will assert that this archive-centric methodology confers onto these artists the ability to re-interpret and disrupt dominant historic narratives present in the region, specifically national and colonial ones. Not only is this crucial in order to guide a new understandings of the region's past and present, it presents a new method of understanding artistic practice involving the archive beyond the confines of the initial scopes of 20th century Europe and America.

Chapter 1

Disrupting Systems: Exposing the Colonial Archive in Yee I-Lann's series 'Picturing Power'

Written in 1969, Foucault's 'The Archeology of Knowledge' asserts that the archive is not solely an institution or a collection of materials that asserts one's history of culture, but an entity that functions by relating to the history of its discourse; an entity which "reveals the rules of a practice that enables systems to survive and to undergo transformation."[18] Decades later, such ideas concerning the archive remain true as contemporary artists embrace the archive's ability to interrogate dominant modes of representation. Resultant works reveal the critical role of archives in the construction of narratives, as well as their potential for disrupting them, through existing as a selection of images and texts or cultural institutions. A key strategy adopted by such practitioners is that of subverting the archive and the historical order it implies,[19] and one such artist who convincingly utilises archival photographs to expose the long-lasting impact of colonial rule in Southeast Asia is Sabah-born Yee I-Lann (b. 1971).

The revelatory quality of Yee's 2013 series 'Picturing Power' lies in her identifying the provenance and historic function of her archival material—photographs from the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, previously the Kolonial Institute— and re-situate them in new aesthetic contexts that highlight the experience and legacy of colonialism in Southeast Asia. Using Photoshop, Yee creates painterly digital collages featuring compositions made out of images from said photographs, which in turns exposes the relationship between the colonial administration in the region and its ability to foster dominant historic narratives, and the impact of the administration on the subjugated indigenous. Yee's methodology centres on "[reading] against the [archive's] grain"[20] in order to

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[18] Foucault, *Archaeology,* 146.

[19] Siegert, "The Archive as Construction Site," para. 4. Despite Seigert's sole focus on Angola, it is crucial to acknowledge the prevalent use of archive by contemporary artists hailing from regions whose histories have been largely impacted and defined by various colonial regimes.

[20] van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 18.

interrogate the process in which colonial histories are visualised and constructed, as well as the "event of portraying"[21] that constantly pervades visual materials of the era. For this chapter I will outline how one should approach interpreting archival photographs, and examine Yee's methodology of utilising archival photographs from a colonial institution to subvert both institutional ideologies as well as dominant narratives of colonial history. Additionally, I will as situate Yee's methodology in relation to the discourse surrounding the relationships between photographs and visual truth; the construction of institutional and historic narratives; Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry; Foster's concepts of construction and excavation and Mary Louise Pratt's lens of transculturalism.

Yee's integration of archival material reveals the presence of a power imbalance between coloniser and colonised, and these new visualisations can be understood within the framework of mimicry as rejection and subversion of one-sided colonial narratives. Elucidated by the prominent post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha, mimicry is "the representation of difference that is itself a process of disavowal,"[22] as well the strategic reluctance to adhere to the systems introduced by colonial power.[23] By utilising archival materials created during the Dutch administration, Yee clearly disavows the unequal power relationships that defined the colonial period as she breathes new life into the archival photographs which sought to represent differences between coloniser and colonised.

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[21] Hans Peter Hahn, "On the Circulation of Colonial Pictures: Polyphony and Fragmentation' in 'Global Histories" in *Global Photographies: Memory – History – Archives*, ed. Sissy Helff and Stefanie Michels (Bielefeld:Transcript Verlag, 2018), 91.

[22] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of colonial discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 126.

[23] Ibid.

Figure 1. Picturing Power #1: Wherein one surreptitiously performs reconnaissance to collect views and freeze points of view to be reflective of one's own kind, 2013 | Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag® Ultra Smooth Fine Art, 310 gsm 100% cotton rag paper | 25 x 71 in. (63 x 180 cm). Image from: http://www.trfineart.com/exhibition/yee-lann-picturing-power/#artist-works

Consisting of 8 digital collages, the 2013 series 'Picturing Power' refers to the presence of colonial European administration across Southeast Asia and its lingering effects in the present day.[24] Each work's tongue-in-cheek title criticises and essentially rejects the supposedly positive effects of colonial rule prior territories were subjugated to. Through an interplay of the imagery of cameras and material of Dutch archives, the first collage in the series, 'Picturing Power #1: Wherein one surreptitiously performs reconnaissance to collect views and freeze points of view to be reflective of one's own king,' (Fig. 1) alludes to how cameras served colonial narratives and had the tendency of misrepresenting cultures of non-Western origin. At first glance, figures covered in stark, black cloths ominously punctuate the monochrome composition, with three spectral figures standing in the centre. A closer looks reveals the figures (especially those in the left hand corner) to be men

[24] "Yee I-Lann: Picturing Power," Tyler Rollins Fine Art, February 2014, accessed May 20, 2019. http://www.trfineart.com/exhibition/yee-lann-picturing-power/#info

attending to cameras and tripods, hidden under the cloths to prevent the film's overexposure to light. The left hand corner of the composition is the most crowded segment: behind the photographers are men of in white suits either proudly posing or carrying large wooden tables and umbrellas. While Yee does not offer any clues to who the men might be or what culture they come from, it cannot be denied that this work alludes to how cameras were manipulated by those in power to present other cultures in a way that served their interests: how points of view are frozen to be reflective of one's own king, just as the title points out.

Not only does this image introduce the idea that the camera was used by colonial powers to depict distorted narratives of the colonies, it also highlights that these narratives only served to bolster their authority, unveiling the unequal power relationships that defined that period of time, thus carrying out the 'event of portraying' Hahn speaks of. By revealing the nature of construction, Yee's work questions and subverts the authority of such historical narratives, in turn posing what Bhabha deems a "threat to both 'normalised' knowledge and disciplinary powers."[25]

Through focusing on the iconography and function of the camera, one calls to mind a variety of epistemological issues embedded in the production of photographs and the archival process in which photographs are collected, displayed, and made sense of. Allan Sekula maintains that photographs are and have never been neutral, but instead "construct an imaginary world and passes it off as reality."[26] Sekula's ideas grow even more relevant when considering the nature of collecting in the colonial era, stating that photography possesses vast potential to "legitimise and normalise existing power relationships,"[27] as well as to preserve, transform, and restrict any form of historical or social memory.[28] These latter functions are deeply related to another method one might

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[25] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 126.

[26] Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital," in *The Photography Reader* ed. Liz Wells (London New York : Routledge, 2003), 443.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Sekula, "Reading an Archive," 444.

use to interpret the archive: understanding what Igor Kpoytoff calls an 'object's biography.' Kpoytoff states that one has to acknowledge the many facets of an object's life beyond just its ownership history, stating that it is necessary to also recognise various 'periods' in the object's lifespan, identify each period's cultural markers, and consider how an object's function and usefulness might change with age and setting.[29]

These ideas pertain closely to Yee's choice of Dutch archival photography, as one has to acknowledge the full extent of the photograph's functions within the context of the colonial museum in order to process Yee's subversion of those original functions. The archival photographs used in the series came from the archives of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, which was originally founded as the Koloniaal Instituut (Colonial Museum) in 1864 with the intention of arousing commercial interests in Dutch colonial territories.[30] Currently, the Tropenmuseum is a large anthropological museum with over 175,00 objects dedicated to investigating and expanding globalisation.[31] The 50,000 photographs the Tropenmusem released into Wikipedia Commons sheds light onto the potential reasons behind them being acquired in the first place: they might have once been able to play a role in constructing "stereotypical representations about race"[32] and environments outside the West in to order to entice colonial-era visitors into supporting the Dutch trade and presence in Southeast Asia.

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[29] Igor Kopytoff, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1985), 66-67.

[30] Pamela Pattynama (2012) Tempo Doeloe Nostalgia and Brani Memory Community: The IWI Collection as a Postcolonial Archive, Photography and Culture, 5:3, 265-279.

[31] Niek Lohmann, "The Postcolonial Transformation of the Tropeninstituut: how development aid influenced the direction of the institute from 1945-1979," (MA History of International Relations Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2016), 4.

[32] Sekula, "Reading an Archive," 445.

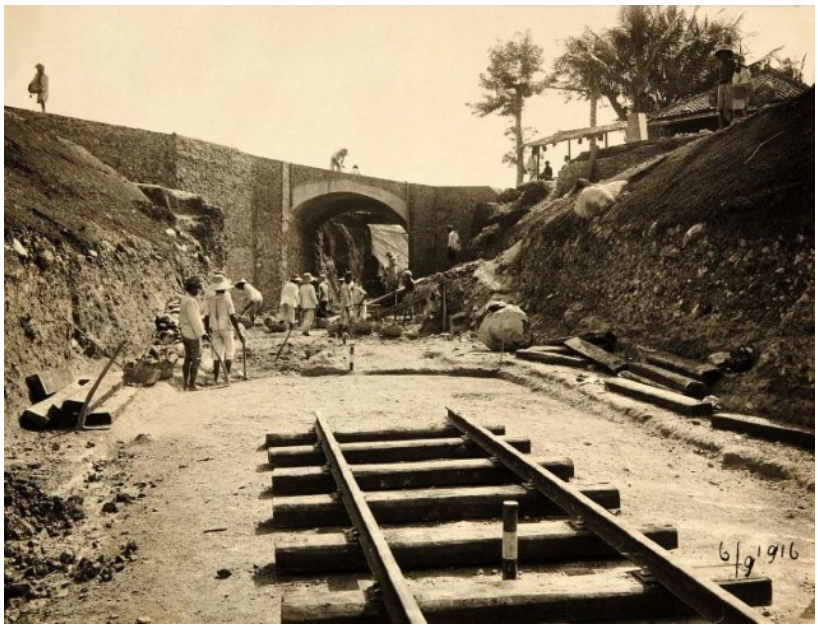

Fig. 2. C.M. Luijks. *Railway under construction with viaduct above it.* 1916. Photograph. Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Image from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_Aanleg_van_een_spoorweg_met_viaduct_TMnr_60052205.jpg

Fig. 3. Photographer unknown. *Construction of the Railway Bridge over the Si Loengkang river on the Soengei Lassi-Siloengkang line in west Sumatra.* Photograph. Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_Aanleg_van_spoorbrug_over_de_Si_Loengkang_rivier_op_de_lijn_Soengei_Lassi-Siloengkang_op_west_Sumatra_TMnr_10021567.jpg

For example, many photographs released into Wikipedia Commons feature the construction of railways in Java, which were (and still are) considered colonial symbols of progress and modernisation.[33] If photographs such as these (Figures 2 and 3) were displayed in the Koloniaal Instituut prior to the Dutch administration leaving, it is likely that the function of these photographs would have shifted from objects of documentation to (self-serving) visual evidence that Dutch authorities were indeed bringing Indonesia up to their concept of 'modernisation' and 'civilisation.' This ties in scholarship from recent decades that highlights how crucial it is to acknowledge that visual sources are indeed "subjective interpretations of reality."[34] The awareness of such a subjectivity is further compounded by the assertion of Pamela Pattyama, a professor in Dutch-East Indies literature and culture, that photographs "operate in histories told by the subsequent owners,"[35] which only underscores the potential of individuals and institutions to collect objects that serve their own interests and propagate certain ideologies. Not only does this highlight the malleability of photographs and how their functions shift based on their setting, it reveals how the railway images, and thus archival images as a whole, would have, in the context of the Kolonial Instituut, further "[served] to legitimise and normalise existing power relationships"[36] between the coloniser and the subjugated. With this mind, one can now see how it is these power relationships,

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[33] Alexandra Moschovi and Alexander Supartano, "Contesting colonial (hi)stories: (Post)colonial imaginings of South East Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2018): 33. [REMOVE UNLESS NEEDED https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/10232/]

[34] Jens Jäger, "Elective Affinities?: History and Photography." In *Global Photographies: Memory – History – Archives*, edited by Helff Sissy and Michels Stefanie (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), 42.

[35]Pamela Pattynama, "*Tempo Doeloe* Nostalgia and *Brani* Memory Community: The IWI Collection as a Postcolonial Archive," Photography & Culture 5, no. 3 (2012): 267.

[36] Sekula, "Reading an Archive," 444.

legitimised by colonial photographs that wrongly performed the role of "public witness"[37] and unquestioned visual truth, that Yee explicitly disavows through tapping into the problematic historic functions of her chosen material.

Fig. 4. Picturing Power #4: Wherein one tables an indexical record of data-turned-assets and rules like the boss you now say that you are, 2013 | Giclée print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag® Ultra Smooth Fine Art, 310 gsm 100% cotton rag paper | 25 x 71 in. (63 x 180 cm). Image from http://www.trfineart.com/exhibition/yee-lann-picturing-power/#artist-works

Yee's integration of archival railway photographs in **'**Picturing Power #4:Wherein one tables and indexical record of data-turned-assets and rules like the boss you now say you are' (Fig. 4) reveals the reality of railway construction across Southeast Asia under colonial rule, as well as the unequal power relationship embedded within. Here, a winding railway bridges two vastly different scenes: on the left, a group of darker-skinned indigenous labourers toil over the railway tracks and infrastructure, rakes in hand, whereas on the right, a Western administration sits comfortably in a well-furnished office. These labourers can be potentially understood as allusions to the Southeast Asian locals who were subjugated to forced labour in industries such as sugar, coffee, and rubber,

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37 Hans Peter Hahn, "On the Circulation of Colonial Pictures: Polyphony and Fragmentation." In *Global Photographies: Memory – History – Archives*, edited by Helff Sissy and Michels Stefanie, (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018): 93.

either through purposefully low wages[38] or opium addiction,[39] by their respective colonial authorities.[40] Furthermore, a large expanse of negative space sits between the two scenes, with only a small, linear portion of the railway connecting them. This indicates Yee's choice to foreground the unequal and alienating power relations between local, barefoot labourers who work outside in harsh conditions to build what colonial powers deem 'modern', and the colonial administrators who sit comfortably indoors by their desks, away from the intense heat and physical labour.

It is worth noting that the Caucasian administrator, who was identified by Alexander Supartono and Alexandra Moschovi to be sugar industrialist Pietermaat-Soesman,[41] does not face the labourers at all. Seated comfortably by his desk, a symbol for the "violence of colonial administration"[42] and unequal power relations, the industrialist's gaze reaches beyond the confines of the composition, undoubtedly turning a blind eye to the exploitation of native labourers. The figure of Pietermaat-Soesman was taken from the album 'Souvenir from Purwokerto and Kalibagor.'[43] The original photograph depicted him in his home study with walls covered in framed photographs of tropical landscapes and Pietermaat-Soesman's portrait at the Kalibagor sugar factory. [44] However, Yee seamlessly replaces them with photographs of botany and land taxation, thus "[bringing] colonial administration and scientific activities into the industrialist's domestic space,"[45] further hinting at how European colonial administrators purposefully managed the

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[38] P. Ramasamy, (1992) "Labour control and labour resistance in the plantations of colonial Malaya," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19:3-4 (1992): 98.

[39] Ramasamy, "Labour Control," 93.

[40] For a more comprehensive understanding of labour practices in colonial Southeast Asia, please further refer to Ramasamy's article and Amarjit Kaur's 2004 study, "Wage Labour in Southeast Asia since 1840."

[41] Moschovi and Supartano, "Contesting," 33.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

colonies in Southeast Asia in a way that created opportunities for its own industrialists to flourish, and how physically and emotionally detached colonial supervisors were from those who worked hard to sustain his lifestyle.

Alternatively, Yee's methodology for the Picturing Power series can also be understood through the lens of transculturation. Theorised by Mary Louise Pratt with regards to examining written or visual materials documenting colonialism, she believed that the correct method to understanding them involved viewing them as being located within a transnational zone where connections between several cultural perspectives existed [46] and understanding how subjugated groups absorbed and made use of dominant cultures.[47] Transculturation also makes certain demands of the viewer, as one would have to at least have a basic understanding of the European colonial presence in the region before understanding Yee's visual criticism of it and its legacy today. Applying this lens to the work allows for both colonial and post-colonial interpretations to exist while acknowledging how their interactions reveal layers of meaning. For example, this would reveal how colonial administrations previously functioned in the region *while* acknowledging that this was due to unequal power relations and a result of local labourers who were subjected to extremely poor working conditions.

Returning to Bhabha's conceptualisation and application of mimicry, he firmly states the "success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensures its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace."[48] In this light, the 'inappropriate objects' Yee uses are revealed to include archival photographs, as well as the institutional framework of the Kolonial Institution in which they once existed, in order to question and effectively subvert the authority of the colonial history associated with them. Ultimately,

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[46] Hahn, 'Circulation,' 96.

[47] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7.

[48] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 128.

‘Picturing Power’ highlights that the power of the archive as material lies in its ability to concurrently depict the past and the one-sided nature of constructing history, and to reveal narratives of injustice and resistance by fracturing colonial imaginaries. Not only does Yee’s work refer to the ability to refer to an archival document’s own past as an object responsible for furthering the goals of colonial institutions, it also reinforces the importance of an object’s biography and how incorporating such material into contemporary allows for critical analysis of its provenance.

Chapter 2

Establishing a Historical Aesthetic: Presenting FX Harsono's 'Diptych' and Amy Lee-Sanford's 'Scanning' as Witnesses

In her paper 'Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive,' University of Brighton Archivist and former head of Tate Archive Sue Breakell proposes that an archive is not only the inevitable result of its immediate social context, but also a result of that context's dominant systems and entrenched prejudices. Breakell asserts that our curiosity towards archives is stemmed in the entity's "latent ambiguity,"[49] and ability to refer to events and narratives beyond what its content solely conveys. It is this facet of the archive that Indonesian artist FX Harsono (b.1949) taps into across his oeuvre. Blitar-born Harsono uses a selection of materials that pointedly refer to moments of intense turmoil across Indonesian history in order to negotiate the relationship between such history, himself, and the wider Chinese-Indonesian community, as well as to propel experiences and memories of past cultural trauma into the present setting of contemporary art. More specifically, Harsono incorporates archival material related to the Blitar massacres of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese in the 1940s to elucidate the socio-political conditions that contributed to such violence and to ensure memory of those events in the backdrop of a country that refuses to acknowledge the widespread violence.

For this chapter, I will examine the provenance of certain documents, particularly photographs from family and exhumation albums, in order to outline how Harsono's works elucidate the long-lasting trauma and personal negotiation of such violence. Through this process of embedding such archival material, Harsono not only furthers the materials' life cycle (a phenomena

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[49] Sue Breakell, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive," *Tate Papers* Spring 2008, accessed 17 June, 2019, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive

noted by Breakell to be the 'archive continuum'[50]) but also creates contemporary art that voices the experiences of communities who have been excluded from national narratives. I will also situate Harsono's work within June Yap's concept of the 'historical aesthetic' due to the artist's concerns with the positions from which history propagates specific narratives and the cost of purposefully ignoring a select few, rather than the sole depiction of histories. Furthermore, Harsono's process of revitalising the archive through contemporary art contrasts with Foucault's belief that the archive is "the law of what can be said,"[51] as he brings to life the brutalities the Indonesian government refuses to acknowledge. Contemporary art provides a more public and historically-aware setting for the continuation of the contents of an archive as well as the history associated with it, no matter how violent. In the context of Harsono's work and Indonesia's national history, the artist's use of the archives in his work allows him to expound on what could never be mentioned previously: the widespread violence aimed towards the ethnic Chinese during the Suharto regime, and its long-lasting impact on Chinese-Indonesian identity today.

Upon his father's death in 1999, Harsono returned to his father's hometown of Blitar in East Java and on this trip discovered a collection of black-and-white family albums that would serve as both impetus and material in his future works.[52] While some albums contained family photographs depicting regular events family and marriage portraits, Harsono also discovered an album containing photographic records of the exhumations of Chinese mass graves in the 1950s. As a studio photographer and one of the few locals who had access to proper equipment, Harsono's father was commissioned by a national ethnic Chinese organisation to document the exhumation of the 191 Chinese dead who were massacred during Indonesia's Revolutionary War.[53] In 1948,

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Foucault, *Archaeology, 145.*

[52] Karen Strassler, "Zones of Refuge: Fugitive Memories of Violence in the Work of FX Harsono," *History of the Present* , Vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall 2018): 180.

[53] Strassler, "Zones," 177.

Chinese people in the areas surrounding Blitar were massacred under the pretence that they were spies for the Dutch; just one example of the widespread ethnic violence that took place under Suharto's brutal regime.[54]

The exhumation album contained 80 photographs, which documented the process of excavating remains and the team involved, accompanied by handwritten inscriptions providing dates, locations, and explanations of each image.[55] Undeniably, just as Breakell outlines, these photographs are "a product of the social systems of its time, and reflects the position and exclusion of different groups of individuals within these systems."[56] Here, Harsono's works rely on the archive's ability to refer to social contexts and lived experiences of individuals that rather than the desire to "intervene critically in a preexisting archival formation of power and knowledge"[57] the way Yee does.

Fig. 5. FX Harsono. *'Preserving Life, Terminating Life #2,'* 2009. Diptych, acrylic and oil on canvas, thread (200 x 350 cm). Artist's collection. Image from: *FX Harsono: Testimonies* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2010), 50.

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[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Breakell, "Perspectives."

[57] Strassler, "Zones," 197.

Harsono's 2009 diptych, consisting of 'Preserving Life, Terminating Life #1' (Fig. 5) and 'Preserving Life, Terminating Life #2,' (Fig. 6) juxtaposes 2 sets of 2 black-and-white photographs depicting members of Harsono's family alongside the 1950s exhumations side-by-side. All of these photographs were derived from the same source: the albums Harsono found in his father's home.[58] The former features a photograph of Harsono's relatives getting married (as indicated by a woman in a long, white dress holding a bouquet with a man in a suit standing next to her) alongside that of an exhumation team standing behind a collection of human skulls. The latter contrasts a casual family portrait, depicting a father, young child, and heavily pregnant mother sitting on porch steps, with a set of 5 skulls neatly lined up on a mound of earth, accompanied by handwritten exhumation notes. Not only does this poignant juxtaposition blatantly refer to the binary of life and death, it also invites one to consider the circumstances of those lives and deaths, and how deeply intertwined national and personal histories are.

Fig. 6. FX Harsono. *'Preserving Life, Terminating Life #2,'* 2009. Diptych, acrylic and oil on canvas, thread (200 x 350 cm). Artist's collection. Image from: *FX Harsono: Testimonies* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2010), 51.

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58 Singapore Art Museum, *FX Harsono: Testimonies* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2010), 50.

The living depicted in the photographs were likely to be Harsono's relatives, or members of the Chinese community who were fortunate enough to survive such state-sanctioned violence and ensure the survival of future generations. On the other hand, the visibility of human skulls retrieved from the exhumation serve as physical testaments and witness to the deaths of those who lost their lives as a result of the Republic's 'Scorched Earth' policy, which involved leaving the cities the Dutch tried to reoccupy from 1947-1948 barren and empty.[59] Furthermore, these photographs serve as visual evidence of the widespread ethnic violence that ravaged Indonesia in the decades leading up to and after independence but still remained unacknowledged by national narratives.

A line of threaded red words is stitched through both halves of the diptych, echoing the continuous nature of life and death, and hints at the significance and visuality of the colour red in Chinese culture. Karen Strassler identifies the sentences to be poignant reflections on how death can come at the hands of uncontrolled circumstances, such as other humans: "Marriage keeps life going/ death ends it/ Marriage can be planned/ but no one can predict death /Blitar 1948," and, "A marriage is nurtured by and bears forth life and continual growth—human beings should not end their own lives or those of others/Blitar 1951"[60] While red has traditionally been regarded as an auspicious colour in Chinese culture, red threads in particular have long possessed inauspicious associations. For example, red clothing is frequently worn at celebratory events for good fortune, whereas red threads are given to funeral guests when they leave in order to ward off unhappy spirits.[61] With this in mind, the choice of a red thread can also be read as a subtle allusion to how the expression and visuality of Chinese culture had been historically impeded in Indonesia. In 1967 during Suharto's reign, the introduction of Presidential Instruction 14 banned the use of written

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[59] Singapore Art museum, *FX Harsono: Testimonies,* 52.

[60] Strassler, "Zones," 189.

[61] Singapore Art museum, *FX Harsono: Testimonies,* 52.

Chinese characters and the observance of any Chinese cultural or religious practices beyond the individual's home, drastically restricting the means by which Chinese-Indonesian identity was expressed.[62] Although this was retracted following the fall of Suharto's regime in 1998 and this diptych was made over a decade later in an age where Chinese-Indonesians are more free to express their culture, this reflects how even the inclusion of a red thread might prove a symbol of resistance against the purposeful forgetting of government-led discriminatory practices.[63]

June Yap's writings on the 'historical aesthetic' also further illuminate the relationships between Harsono, his lived experience as a Chinese-Indonesian, and the promotion of certain histories by the Indonesian government over purposefully forgotten ones. According to Yap, the 'historical aesthetic' is both the approach and expression of artworks that goes beyond illustrating the past, and instead seeks to engage with national histories and art historical narratives.[64] In drawing on photograph albums imbued with both personal and historical significance, Harsono foregrounds the lived experiences of ethnic Chinese families and communities, undoubtedly fulfilling Yap's beliefs that historiographical artwork usually draws on histories that have been usually been "neglected, suppressed, suspended and left behind,"[65] against a "backdrop of national narratives."[66] Not only does the process propel the forgotten knowledge of the Blitar massacres into present consciousness, it also depicts Harsono's attempt to reconcile his personal history and shared cultural trauma against the backdrop of a country that has long failed to acknowledge events of past

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[62] Phillip Smith, "Writing in the rain: Erasure, Trauma, and Chinese Indonesian Identity in the recent work of FX Harsono," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46, (2015): 122.

[63] Harsono expands on this in his 2016 exhibition, 'Chronicles of Resistance,' where multiple pieces feature outward expressions of Chinese culture that were once banned.

[64] June Yap, *Retrospective: a historiographical aesthetic in contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor:Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), 2016), 6.

[65] Yap, *Retrospective, 273.*

[66] Yap, *Retrospective,* 9.

brutality and its government's accountability in such events.[67] Lastly, what is intriguing is that while Yap's own research solely deals with the art of contemporary Singapore and Malaysia, her categorisation seems to apply seamlessly to the works of Blitar-born Harsono and Cambodia-born Amy Lee Sanford as well, whose work I will discuss next.

An intriguing comparison to make with Harsono's diptych is Cambodian-born artist Amy Lee Sanford's single-channel video work, 'Scanning.'[68] (Fig. 7). Although geographically located in Southeast Asia rather than the Malay Archipelago, Sanford's work proves an effective case study in showcasing the shared concern with the continuation of personal history via archival documents in the wider region. It delves into the relationship between personal individual circumstance and larger historic events (in particular the Cambodian civil war) through incorporating personal archival material, such as letters written by and exchanged between her parents. Filmed facing top-down, the work features the artist scanning letters filled with sentences that have been written in blue ink, as a single beam of light from the scanner swiftly makes its way across the page. Seemingly mundane at first, the video becomes significantly more poignant when one learns that the letters were exchanged between her mother, who had moved to the U.S. to escape raids and bombings in Phnom Penh in the 1970s, and her late father, who had remained in Cambodia.[69]

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[67] Strassler, "Zones," 186.

[68] Amy Lee Sanford, "Scanning," accessed 21 Jun, 2019. http://amyleesanford.com/portfolio/scanning/

[69] Annie Jael Kwan, *Exhibition Catalogue: Unauthorised Medium,* (Amsterdam: Framer Framed, 2018) 6. https://framerframed.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FF_UM_HANDOUT_EN_DIGITAAL.pdf TO DELETE

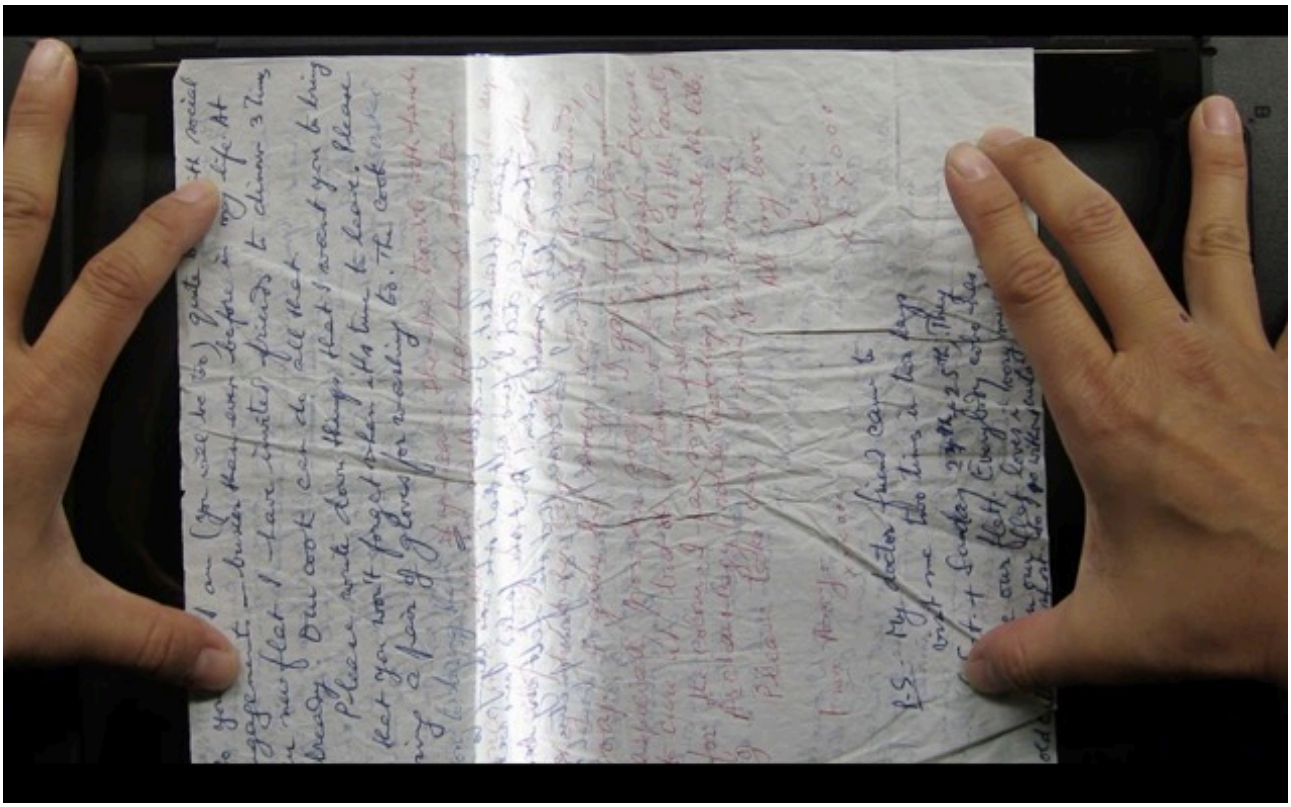

Fig. 7. Amy Lee Sanford. Screenshot of *'Scanning,'* 2013. Video, 41'56." Image from: http://amyleesanford.com/portfolio/scanning/

Typical of works that utilise archive as material, 'Scanning' is a prime example of how personal archives can be re-invigorated. Not only do the letters gain a new function as a digital artwork that can be easily circulated and thus express its personal history to viewers more easily, the letters have also secured new modes of existence as the digital format they have been scanned as; a seemingly eternal method of record-keeping. Sanford's work also hints at the potential of digitising the archive: a topic I will discuss in further detail in my third chapter with regards to Ho Tzu Nyen's online archive 'the Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia.'

Through integrating photographs from this album into his works, both Harsono and Sanford further Breakell's paradigm of the 'archive continuum.' It is usually assumed that records become 'inactive' after they have served their purpose in supporting positions of power and authority. Breakell argues that in reality, archival documents never cease to function and instead continue to

retain “qualities both current and historical from the moment of their creation.”[70] One can view both artist’s works as having symbiotic relationships with the archive: the archive relies on the artwork to provide it with a new purpose (to express whatever the work means to convey), while the artwork taps into the archive’s historical content and contextual associations in order to foreground the brutal realities of its original context.

Ultimately, Harsono’s use of archives in his art is cemented in a deep understanding of the multiplicities of history, as well as a personal experiences of ethnic violence and discrimination. Applying Yap’s methodology to the works effectively draws out the potential of the exhumation photographs as ‘witnesses’. This illuminates why archival material is suited to Harsono’s desire to remember and provide evidences for histories that have been purposefully forgotten, as well as to express personal experiences of violence and prejudice. Furthermore, Yap’s theories allow for the examination of how archives function in contemporary art to elucidate and negotiate legacies of trauma, echoing Strassler’s belief rather than concerns with the archive as institution. On the other hand, Breakell’s ideas of the archive’s multiple readings and lives, and its relation to social contexts and systems of authority, also keenly contribute to understanding the archive as a deeply historically and socially-charged material in Harsono’s work.

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[70] Breakell, “Perspectives.”

Chapter 3

The Artist as Archivist: Constructing Records for the Present and Future

> It is part of [the archivist's] role to collect the traces, highlight them and rehabilitate them, and in doing so continue the memory of the actions represented there, and open them up for new beginnings and juxtapositions. This too is an aspect of archives which many artists find of particular interest: the opportunity to subvert and re- figure existing orders and practice…
>
> -Sue Breakell & Victoria Worsley, Collecting the traces: an archivist's perspective.[71]

With this in mind, Sue Breakell and Victoria Worsley seem to have predicted the framework of Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen's digital artwork, 'the Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia,' perfectly. Comprising concepts, anecdotes, motifs, and biographies pertaining to the question of the region's unity,[72] the Critical Dictionary seeks to categorise and examine what cultural and geographical phenomena bring together Southeast Asia: "a region never unified by language, region or political power."[73] This work is key in revealing how Ho constructs an archive free from any ideological bias or hierarchies of knowledge in order to offer new, multi-faceted readings of the region, and in furthering the discussion of the concept of the artist as archivist (someone whose practice is essentially based on record-keeping and making inventories[74]) and how it might differ from the role of the archivist in general. It is worth noting that I will be mainly focusing on how

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[71] Sue Breakell & Victoria Worsley, "Collecting the Traces: an archivist's perspective," *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 6:3 (2007): 178.

[72] Heidi Ballet, Ho Tzu Nyen: The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia," *Vdrome*, 2017. Accessed 16 June, 2019. http://www.vdrome.org/ho-tzu-nyen

[73] Ibid.

[74] van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 170.

Ho's methodology in constructing and showcasing CDOSEA can be considered archival, rather than examining individual components of its alphabetical index.

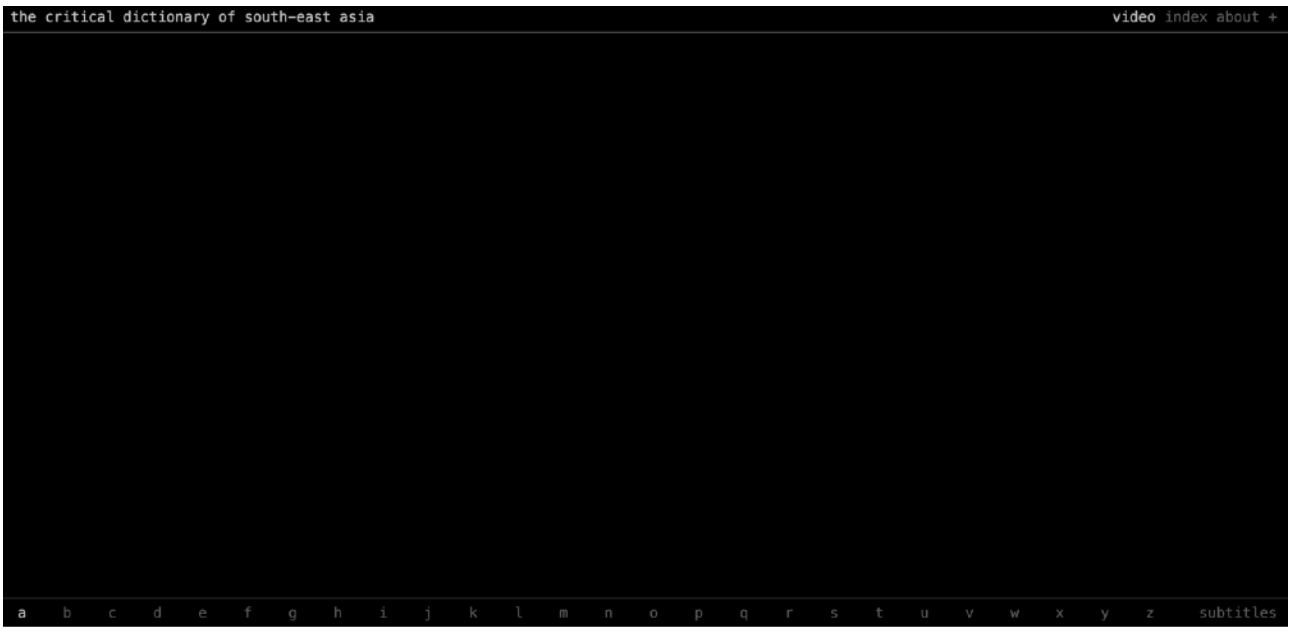

Fig. 8. Screenshot of the front page of the The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia (CDOSEA), https://aaa.cdosea.org/

The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia (CDOSEA) exists online at https://aaa.cdosea.org/, and provides an index of the 27 English alphabet. (Fig. 8) Ho assigns to each alphabet a variety of phenomena associated with the region, ranging from the social, cultural, political, geographical, and historical. These associations are revealed when the viewer selects an alphabet, and this diverse selection can be understood to be new methods of presenting knowledge, what Foster deems to be the "matrix of citation and juxtaposition."[75] A digital montage plays when an alphabet is selected, and its contents are frequently associated with or evoke Ho's chosen phenomena. Each alphabet is accompanied by Ho's own texts and notes about each alphabet's related phenomena, which are rendered into multiple vocal performances by Singaporean musician

[75] Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5.

Bani Haykal.[76] For example, selecting 'H' reveals the section, 'H for Humidity,' which in my case, showcases a montage of sweat glistening on a tanned person's back, an animation of the sun pointing its rays at the Earth, a close-up of a working water sprinkler in a grass field, and a worker fixing an air conditioner. All of these are associated with Southeast Asia's warm and humid climate, and how it impacts people who live in such an environment; most obviously, with the sweating body and the introduction of air conditioners to cool down indoor settings. Ho expands on these physical experiences through espousing on the relationship between humidity, water, agriculture, irrigation, contemporary political power and the role of water in region's traditional animist religions. In this light, Ho undeniably reveals "mutations of connection and disconnection"[77] between the many diverse facets of landscape and lived experience in Southeast Asia, and continues to foreground the endless possibilities through which the region's heterogenous nature can be understood.

The CDOSEA is a prime example of Ho embodying the concept of the artist-as-archivist, as outlined by Breakell and Worsley to be someone who "recovers gaps from the past and convert them into beginnings, perhaps to remind a culture of its own wish symbols and forfeited dreams."[78] This is noteworthy considering Ho does collect fragments (essentially each concept, historical fact, biography, or digital visuals included in CDOSEA) and while he does verbally synthesise the interwoven relationships between the fragments themselves and the region, he does not propose a single, all-encompassing answer to the unity of the region. For example, the 'L' section in Critical Dictionary is broken down into key nouns, concepts, and historical figures such as lineage, linear, landscape, legibility, linguistic complexity, localisation, location, lowlands, labour and Lai Teck.

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[76] Ho Tzu Nyen, "About," *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, 2016. Accessed 16 June 2019. https://aaa.cdosea.org/#about/l

[77] Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5.

[78] Sue Breakell & Victoria Worsley, "Collecting the Traces: an archivist's perspective," *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 6:3 (2007): 177.

What is interesting is that these fragments were chosen and categorised not on the basis of a similar theme but simply due to the fact that those English words began with the letter 'L' and that those fragments have some sort of cultural relationship to the region. Take for example, the mention of the mysterious historical figure Lai Teck—one of the 50 or so aliases of the Sino-Vietnamese who was the secretary-general of the Malayan communist party from 1939 to 1947, and who was also a triple agent working for the french, the British and the Japanese during the World War II.[79] His close relationship to Communism can be viewed as the ideologies that were quelled, and thus made 'forfeited dreams', across the modernisation and independence of certain countries in Southeast Asia. On top of creating a new structure which showcases forgotten facets of the region's history, Ho's chosen methodology to carry out the CDOSEA is a testament to his intention to collect fragments of the past and convert them into new ways of understanding the region's shared phenomena.

While CDOSEA taps into the authoritative nature of a traditional dictionary through its title and format, there are multiple instances in its construction that do not adhere to the strict structure and categorisation of a dictionary or a typical record-keeping method. A key instance of this would be Ho's choice to implement a digital algorithm to control CDOSEA's algorithm for display. The CDOSEA's layout features an index of the 27 English alphabet at the bottom of the screen, and once the viewer clicks on an alphabet, a series of video clips associated with the chosen alphabet begins to play. However, these video clips are controlled by a digital algorithm and played in a random order. In an interview with Asia Art Archive, Ho states that this method "strips away the authority just to present findings, and allowing chance [via the algorithm] to communicate this, so that there are no judgements or values attached to anything."[80] What this means is that Ho has consciously

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[79] Ho Tzu Nyen, "Index: I," *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, 2016. Accessed 16 June 2019. https://cdosea.org/#index/l

[80] https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/ho-tzu-nyen-on-the-critical-dictionary-of-southeast-asia/type/conversations paragraph 25

chosen not to enforce a hierarchy of value onto video clips, and instead create kaleidoscopic myriad of possibilities through which the viewer can experience the sections dedicated to each alphabet. Furthermore, this rejection of valuing and meticulously classifying his material (beyond just associated it with each alphabet) reveals an entirely new archival practice, one that varies greatly from Breakell and Worsley's statement that the chronological order of objects entering the archive is usually retained and continues to exist due to having "evidential value"[81] and the potential to create foundations of historic knowledge.

Ho's refusal to impose a hierarchy of value onto his materials is considerably tied to his insistence on incorporating "raw material"[82] that have no provenance beyond originating from the internet. In an interview with Asia Art Archive, Ho states that it is important to him that the footage used in each alphabet's visual montage is "all downloaded, legally or illegally,"[83] due to his belief that it is "a very key part of my practice as an artist working with moving image is the historicity of the tools that we are working with."[84] Interestingly, Ho's choice to randomise the presentation of non-historic material echoes the two writers' statement that "raw materials offer an endlessness of readings,"[85] thus ensuring the portrayal of "a torn and tattered tapestry of Southeast Asia,"[86] rather than a single homogenous understanding of the region. Furthermore, the choice to use downloaded material circumvents issues of provenance, and essentially renders Kopytoff's biographical approach to objects and materials useless, and ensures that any material remains untainted from any

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[81] Breakell & Worsley, "Collecting the Traces," 177.

[82] Kim Tay, "Ho Tzu Nyeyn & the Treachery of Southeast Asia," *The Artling*, December 8, 2017. Accessed 20 June, 2019. https://theartling.com/en/artzine/ho-tzu-nyen-the-treachery-of-southeast-asia/

[83] Ibid.

[84] Doretta Lau, "Ho Tzu Nyen on the Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia," Asia Art Archive, 19 June 2017. Accessed 18 July 2019. https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/ho-tzu-nyen-on-the-critical-dictionary-of-southeast-asia/type/conversations

[85] Breakell & Worsley, "Collecting the Traces," 177.

[86] Ho, "About."

ideological associations with an institution or collection. Ultimately, this contributes to the idea of Ho fulfilling the concept of artist-as-archivist, someone who "recovers gaps from the past and converts them into beginnings"[87] and essentially offers related concepts, rather than strictly-defined frameworks, as methods that contribute to understanding the region. Ho's archival practice, particularly in the CDOSEA, can be defined by two methods: the refusal to impose a hierarchy of value onto objects and his conscious choice in incorporating found material that have no traceable provenance.

The phenomenon of artist-as-archivist, as primarily demonstrated by Ho and the CDOSEA, is fascinating to compare with the role of professional archivists working in cultural institutions. In 'Collecting the Traces,' Breakell and Worsley, tap into their roles as archivists in leading arts institutions, with the former working in the Tate Library and Archive and the latter in the Henry Moore Institute. Both writers believe that it is part of their role to "collect the traces, highlight and rehabilitate them, and in doing so continue the memory of the actions represented there and open them for new beginnings and juxtapositions."[88] In short, it is the job of the archivist to collect and collate material, and to uncover new modes of presentation that would allow for new understandings of the material, as well as to subvert and reorder existing relationships and practices.[89] Important to note is how the two scholars don't delve into the implications of being bound by mission statements and the "ideological discourses of a museum."[90] Aside from the idea that the artist-as-archivist adopts and subverts traditional frameworks of archiving for the sake of creating art, it is also crucial to acknowledge the varying degrees of freedom experienced by the institution-based archivist and the artist-as-archivist are determined by intention and setting. With

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[87] Breakell & Worsley, "Collecting the Traces," 177.

[88] Breakell & Worsley, "Collecting the Traces," 178.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Breakell & Worsley, "Collecting the Traces," 176.

regards to the former, archivists in institutions are traditionally in charge of making sense of existing documents whereas the artist-as-archivist adopts an archival practice for the sake of creating art. On the other hand, artists tend to possess more independence in practice than institution-based archivists, which frees them from any potential ideological paradigm archivists in institutions might have to adhere to.

Ho's practice is deeply related to the role of the traditional archivist (as outlined by Breakell and Worsley), as proven by his successful rehabilitation of fragments and methodology surrounding the (dis)continuing of memory. Ho can only continue the lives of his found digital materials in their present state, and by using only downloaded material, he cannot access their original provenances and subvert past functions the way Yee I-Lann does. This means that Ho can only try to make sense of them and imbue meaning in them through utilising them as components of CDOSEA. Additionally, through rejecting a hierarchy of value and using the alphabet as a democratic method of categorisation, the CDOSEA successfully challenges previous methods of organising material from the region and elucidates the interdisciplinary nature of the phenomena that helps define Southeast Asia.

Recalling Foster's concepts of construction and excavation, one can understand that the artist-as-archivist enables the creation of a new infrastructure or method of presentation (and therefore a paradigm of cultural knowledge), and this is deeply rooted in the conceptual "construction site."[91] This idea is more focused on expressing or 'reactivating' the potential of the materials in order to create a new paradigm for considering the knowledge at hand. By abandoning the view that values archival material's provenance, Ho challenges the meaning of ownership with regards to how knowledge and history are produced and defined. His working with downloaded material that is essentially found and bears no provenance ensures the portrayal of Southeast Asia as

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[91] Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 22.

an endless, multifaceted entity with various points of entry rather than a one-dimensional concept.[92] This contrasts with Foster's other concept of an excavation site, which is centred on foregrounding the historicity and provenances of material in other to express and record lived experiences, and in particular, trauma. The works of Yee, Harsono, Sanford can easily be understood as 'excavation sites,' because they "manifest the multiple,"[93] and foreground lived experiences that function as alternative narratives of violent colonial rule and national histories. Using the archive to reveal the malleability of historic material, its role in fostering dominant historical narratives, paradigms, and attitudes, these artists ultimately contest dominant historical narratives through exposing forgotten events and individual histories.

Consequentially, the CDOSEA and Ho's methodology in building it have great implications for the relationship between art, archives, artists, and knowledge production in contemporary Southeast Asia. What sets Ho apart from the other artists in this dissertation is his choice not to focus on the provenance of his materials in order to make a point about the construction of history in the region. Instead, Ho relies on systems free of institutional or national ideology, such as the dictionary and the digital algorithm for display, in order to present a democratic display of phenomena through which viewers can understand Southeast Asia. In making these decisions, Ho effectively achieves the goals of the archivist, and successfully offers new methods of understanding the region in terms of its multiplicities of history, geography, and culture.

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[92] Hsu, "Archive as Method."

[93] Ibid.

Conclusion

New Re-interpretations beyond the Malay Archipelago

These three case studies have revealed various methods through which the physical aspects, institutional constructs, and reasons for creating the archive can be harnessed to enable a critical examination ('excavate') and re-interpretation ('construct') of dominant historical narratives. Firstly, Yee I-Lann's integration of archival photographs into her work effectively reveals the role of the archive in constructing the imagery of colonial Southeast Asia while harnessing its potential to disrupt those ideals. Harsono and Sanford utilise old photographs and documents possessing cultural and personal significance in order to bear witness to the often negative or traumatic impact of violent events in the region. On the other hand, Ho's construction of an actual archive, the CDOSEA, contrasts significantly against these three practitioners as it reveals the intricacies of building a provisional source of knowledge in the digital age and how artists can adopt the role of the archivist to present new ways of understanding the region's past, present, and future.

As a result, it can said that artists from countries across the Malay Archipelago utilise the archive in order to negotiate their violent histories and present identities. Additionally, these works also foreground forgotten narratives, echoing how the Singapore Independent Archive and AEAM seek to preserve artworks on the brink of becoming sidelined by government authorities. Consequentially, Foster's dichotomy of excavation and construction should not necessarily be viewed as a binary because the former is needed to enable the latter. This is reflected by these artists' interrogation of archival material prior to the creation of works that mediate the past and present, individual and nation, nation and region.

In a larger context, these artists and their works appear to illuminate the fragments of shared history between countries in the Malay Archipelago and the wider region of Southeast Asia, although further research into what degree artists from the wider region adopt similar practices must

be undertaken as well. This dissertation also calls into question to what extent artistic practices should be categorised purely by geographic location, as this does not necessary equate to a homogenous culture or shared history. Worth acknowledging are artists from the rest of Southeast Asia such as Thai photographer Dow Wasiksiri and conceptual Philippine artist Gary Ross Pastrana, whose works function as archives that interpret photographs, oral histories, and local speech in order to record lived experiences. The archive as method and material also appears to be growing beyond Southeast Asia and Europe, with Nadine Sieget proposing a similar idea with regards to the South African country of Angola. Citing the archive's ability to "fill the gaps, heal trauma, or redefine power,"[94] this connection indicates not only an interest in the archive and its ability to offer new perspectives of history on a regional scale, but potentially a global one as well.

[94] Siegert, "The Archive as Construction Site," para. 31.

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