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Editors' Introduction

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Editors' Introduction

FIONA ALLEN, ANNIE JAEI KWAN, AND JOANNA WOLFARTH

Taken from Ho Rui An's 2016 project *Green Screen Studio, Medan, c. 1898*, the cover image of this special issue of *Southeast of Now* embodies many of the key concepts, themes and ideas addressed by the volume. Working across performance, art and cinema, Ho's practice frequently mines historical archives and explores the lives of the images contained within them. In this case, the insertion of a lurid green screen into a historical photograph invites multiple narratives to be projected onto the scene, whilst also bringing together material and virtual conceptions of space; a seemingly ironic gesture that highlights how objects in the 19th-century photographer's studio were used to create narratives which were then circulated and negotiated through the cultural economy of images. Moreover, Ho's image is indicative of the renewed interest in the status and function of the archive, both in art history and its adjacent disciplines, in which questions of materiality and the object are brought into dialogue with a series of broader debates on temporality, the production of knowledge and power.

Researchers, artists and curators, as well as those simply interested in discovering the histories of their homelands, are all familiar with the archive: a physical or digital space that houses documents from the past. As engagement with the archive has become increasingly commonplace within Southeast Asian visual culture, practitioners have used this material to challenge both the dominant narratives of colonialism as well as their neo- and postcolonial legacies. The body of work has also explored the possibility of subverting the archive through acts of reappropriation and disruption,

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a strategy that was previously discussed by figures such as Hal Foster, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Okwui Enwezor. These issues gain a new significance, however, when viewed within a range of postwar and postcolonial Southeast Asian contexts, in which the loss—and subsequent recuperation—of artistic and historical archives is a recurring theme.

In the case of Cambodia and its diasporas, this archival impulse and its accompanying modes of reappropriation is exemplified by the work of filmmaker Rithy Panh. In 2006, Panh cofounded the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh to collect television programmes, photography, films and audio footage of Cambodia from across the world. Comprising over 700 hours of footage, the collection includes recent work by Cambodian directors, made-for-TV documentaries, copies of the first films by the Lumière brothers, Norodom Sihanouk's movies and a vast array of other educational resources. By bringing together these materials, the Center gestures towards the institutional view of the archive, that is, as a permanent depository of materials from the past. Yet the archive is also always forward-thinking; Bophana was created as a gift for future generations of Cambodians, a Derridean articulation of the archive as a "responsibility for tomorrow".¹ Indeed, for Derrida,

It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.²

This conception of the archive also informs Panh's filmic work, notably, his attempts to construct personal and national narratives from historical fragments, often from histories of erasure. Although he uses the archive as a means of producing knowledge, Panh's work is equally informed by a sensitivity to the possibilities contained within. "The archives," he notes in *The Elimination*, "[...] are alive. Nothing in them is silent."³ Although visible elsewhere in his oeuvre, the broader implications of this claim are particularly visible in *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*. Commissioned for television by France 3, the film gives voice to Hout Bophana, a young woman who was imprisoned, tortured and executed by the Khmer Rouge in 1977. Pieced together from the pages of her forced confession, the story accounts for but a fraction of the bureaucratic materials produced by the regime between 1975 and 1979. His 2015 film, *La France est notre patrie*, in contrast, adopts a more wide-reaching approach, splicing together archival footage from a range of colonial projects in Africa and Asia. In doing so, it reveals the layers of artifice

and complex power relations that surround France's colonial past, whilst also inviting the viewer to reflect upon the technologies by which these relations are made visible.

On a more personal note, *La France est notre patrie* was the catalyst for a series of discussions between the editors of this special issue of *Southeast of Now*, conversations that centred upon the ways in which practitioners, curators and academics were approaching the place of the archive within Southeast Asian visual culture. The outcome was a one-day conference and film programme, "Reframing the Archive", held at SOAS, University of London in June 2017. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the speakers and attendees who made the day such a rich, intellectually stimulating event. Special thanks are also due to Pamela Corey and Ashley Thompson for their ongoing support and to the Centre of South East Asian Studies and the SOAS Faculty of Arts and Humanities for generously funding the event. By bringing together research on a range of Southeast Asian political and aesthetic contexts, the conference raised and attempted to answer a series of questions about the changing nature of the archive and its implications for the construction of art historical narratives: how have artists and film-makers sought to subvert existing power relations through the use of colonial imagery? To what extent have these techniques been utilised by diasporic populations? What role does the archive play in the formation of emerging national identities? How do digital and diasporic archives differ from centralised, historical repositories of records? What is the relationship between alternative, personal archives and the institutions of art and its history?

Although not a set of conference proceedings per se, a number of the essays in this volume have developed from papers presented at SOAS. Like the event that preceded it, the issue explores the ways in which colonial and postcolonial film and photographic archives have been rearticulated within a range of Southeast Asian political and aesthetic contexts. Rather than attempting to provide an overview of the artistic and theoretical developments that have emerged from this gesture, it offers an insight into the ambiguities that underpin them, from the creation of fictitious archives to the development of re-narrativisation strategies. By combining insights from various fields of study, including art history, anthropology, film studies and contemporary practice, the volume seeks to offer an interdisciplinary perspective on the debates that continue to surround the archive.

At present, there are a number of large national archives in cities throughout Southeast Asia. In the majority of cases these contain documents from colonial administrations, while those wishing to research the histories of art and culture in the region often find themselves travelling to archives in Europe and America. One of the recurring themes within this issue of

Southeast of Now is the development of independent archives across Southeast Asia. In Singapore, for example, the Independent Archive, founded by the late Lee Wen, was crucial to the development of performance art in the country. Similarly, Koh Nguang How's extensive personal collection of ephemera, photographs and recordings of art activities since the mid-1980s, has since been recognised for its significance as a resource for Singapore's nascent art history. In December 2000, Claire Hsu and Johnson Chang cofounded Hong Kong's Art Asia Archive (AAA) in response to the urgent need to document recent histories of art from across the region. The collection now includes a vast array of photographic documentation, video recordings and artists' personal archives. Questions of identity and belonging also form the basis of Michelle Wong's essay, which details the AAA's acquisition of the personal archive of late Hong Kong-based artist Ha Bik Chuen. By focusing on select materials from the collection, Wong examines how Ha navigated and presented himself across the cultural and political milieus within which he worked, crossing the national and ideological borders that divided Southeast Asia in the 1980s.

This drive to record also informs the contributions of Eva Bentcheva and Annie Jael Kwan to the project. Taking her lead from the Philippine conceptual artist Roberto Chabet (1937–2013), Bentcheva considers how individual or personal archives can also be used to chart the development of national art histories. In addition to shedding light on Chabet's multifaceted practice and his role in the national art scene, these materials, she argues, also reveal a series of shifts in the development of conceptual and performance art specific to the Philippine context. Operating in a similar vein, Kwan's report focuses on the development of the Southeast Asia Performance Collection, a digital repository of performance-related materials held at the Live Art Development Agency in London. Launched in 2017 by the curatorial initiative Something Human, the collection contains over 27,000 pieces of documentation relating to artists in Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore and the Philippines. Combining factual details with a series of personal insights, Kwan guides the reader through the process of building such a resource, from the politics of soliciting contributions to the research that has subsequently emerged from the collection. In doing so, she invites them to reflect upon the challenges of writing new art histories and, by extension, the importance of raising the visibility of Southeast Asian visual practices, both in London and further afield.

In a continuation of this line of enquiry, the volume then considers the role of anonymous, everyday and 'non-artistic' forms of archival practice, projects that, until recently, have received significantly less attention, for

example, 'popular' or 'vernacular' photographs, the kinds of images kept within family archives, as well as those that circulate in the digital sphere and on social media. In her groundbreaking study of Indonesian photography, *Refracted Visions*, anthropologist Karen Strassler notes that the rise of popular photography has also resulted in the rise of popular archives. For Strassler, these photo collections offer divergent modes of accessibility, as they move within black market visual economies, both online and in hardcopy, and between public and personal spaces.⁴ It is these materials that inform Emiko Stock's response to the theme of archive. Drawing upon recent work with Cambodian Cham Muslims, Stock explores the sociocultural significance of the family photographic album, both as a tool for tracing genealogies and the origins of a future yet-to-come. By staging a dialogue between images contained within the album and the individuals who view them, she invites the reader to reconsider the significance of the absences, silences and disavowals that surround the 'difficult to picture'.

A further theme explored in this issue is the relationship between the body and the archive. Although previous discussions of this pairing have encompassed a wide variety of topics—from the development of the Bertillon card to facial recognition software—Darcie DeAngelo considers the possibility of locating the archive on the body itself. Given the histories of violence that can be found throughout the region, this expansive approach to the archive is a necessary one. Photographs and documents were often deliberately destroyed in order to erase an individual's identity; by destroying one's personal archive, one could hope to exist. Recalling Giorgio Agamben's writings on the archive and its relationship to the sayable and unsayable, DeAngelo offers a re-reading of the protective tattoos found on the bodies of former soldiers in Cambodia. Presenting these tattoos as sites of "negative space", the outcome is a complex analysis of the ways in which bodies allude to unsayable histories of violence and the ultimate impossibility of their representation.

The question of what constitutes an archive also serves as the starting point for Cristina Martinez-Juan's essay. Taking her lead from Jovi Juan's *The Terms of War* and *Bontoc Eulogy* by Marlon Fuentes, a digital artwork and a semi-fictitious documentary respectively, Juan explores the ways in which artists and filmmakers have sought to challenge the established narratives that surround historical figures and events. Through an analysis of the formal and conceptual structures that underpin the two works, she offers a series of reflections on Anglo-American imperialism, counterfactual narratives and the act of writing history. The outcome is a sustained discussion of the ways in which artworks can affect, imitate or trouble the archive, and vice versa.

Renato Loriga's article for this issue offers a series of meditations on the theme of absence. Beginning from the films of Raya Martin and John Torres, it seeks to consider how the lack of a national archive has shaped contemporary Filipino cinema. Although an initial attempt to produce such an institution occurred during the Marcos regime, the National Film Archive of the Philippines was only founded in 2010. With reference to the work of Bliss Cua Lim and Jacques Derrida, specifically their writings on the anarchive, Loriga addresses the various strategies that have been used to account for this lack of a recorded past, from the reconstruction of "Golden Era" narratives to the use of decaying film reels. In doing so, he invites the reader to consider how this absence has contributed to both the postcolonial identity of the Philippines and the creation of alternative definitions of archive.

Finally, the reviews in this issue explore the ways in which contemporary practice has sought to critique the authoritative power attributed to archives. For her contribution to the volume, Chloe Ho reviews *Conspiracy of Files* by artist and writer Ho Rui An. Delivered at the 'Pathways of Performativity in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art' symposium in June 2019, the performance-lecture echoed a press conference held in Singapore in 1987, during which then Prime Minister Lee Yuan Yew presented a series of documents that supported the state's arrest of 22 alleged Marxist leaders; a gesture that, Ho notes, serves to remind the viewer that the authority of the archival document is produced by both its form and content. Charmaine Toh, in contrast, examines the work of Singaporean artist Robert Zhao, who amassed an archive of old photographs of Singapore, which he exhibited as part of *The Bizarre Honour* in 2017. In this large-scale installation, the artist created a museum of natural history, combining archival photographs, objects and texts. In response to the work, Toh begins by providing an overview of the ways in which photography and colonialism intertwine in the history of Singapore. Drawing on the work of Derrida and Allan Sekula, she argues that Zhao's practice challenges the authority of the archive by inserting fictional objects—and, by extension, histories—into the museum, thereby frustrating the viewer's attempts to create a coherent narrative.

Overall, this volume seeks to address a series of questions pertaining to the status and function of the archive in Southeast Asia by looking both at and beyond formal, institutional archives and the acts of restaging that they perform. Whereas some of our contributors have considered the crucial role that archives play in documenting, legitimating and creating new art histories, others have sought to decentre the archive by examining alternative archival sites and processes that are not rooted in models derived from European colonialism. In bringing together this material, we hope that this

issue of *Southeast of Now* will serve as a starting point for further discussions on ownership, audience agency and the emergence of alternative archives across Southeast Asia. We would like to thank the editorial collective for allowing us the space to do this.

BIOGRAPHIES

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NOTES

- ¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 36.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ³ Rithy Panh, *The Elimination: A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts His Past and the Commandments of the Killing Fields*, trans. John Cullen (London: The Clerkenwell Press, 2013), p. 82.
- ⁴ Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 4–5.

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