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Passaging from Private to Public:

The Case of Ha Bik Chuen's Archive in Hong Kong

MICHELLE WONG

Abstract

*This paper considers how the personal archive of late Hong Kong-based artist Ha Bik Chuen (1925–2009) is continuously reframed as the archive's accessibility becomes increasingly public. Ha's archive was assembled from the 1950s to 2009, spanning the late colonial to early post-handover period in the city, and comprises a wide range of materials from printed matter to photographic materials and book collages. The curatorial and exhibition projects *Excessive Enthusiasm: Ha Bik Chuen and the Archive as Practice* (2015) and *Striated Light* (2016) are studied in this paper as case studies where materials from Ha's archive were utilised in ways that instrumentalise the archive, but simultaneously expand its possibility within a larger art ecology. At the same time, this paper examines a selection of materials from Ha's archive, including his collection of periodicals from both sides of the Cold War from the 1960s to the 1970s, which represented Southeast Asia, as well as photographs from his travels to Huangshan (Yellow Mountain) in Anhui and to Manila in 1982. While the periodicals demonstrate how Hong Kong was a conjuncture of contesting Cold War forces at the time, the photographs serve as intimate records that registered his aspirations as both a Chinese literati artist and an*

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international artist well versed in Euro-American abstract modern art. This paper argues that Ha's archival practice, which threaded the public sphere and his private life, was a way through which he fashioned himself as a cosmopolitan subject in the port city of Hong Kong.

If the public sphere is the realm of history, and private life the domain of interiority, then history and interiority get constantly dovetailed into each other in all sorts of complicated ways. Dreams, longings, revelations, instances of amazement and other intensely individuated instances become the foundations of public acts, performances, pronouncements and positions.¹

Primarily known as a Hong Kong-based sculptor and printmaker, Ha Bik Chuen was born in Xinhui [新會], Guangdong [廣東], China, in 1925. He left Mainland China for Hong Kong via Macau in 1949, eventually settling in Hong Kong in 1957. He met his wife Leung Siu Mei in Xinhui. They got married in Macau and started a small craft business making paper flowers for visitors of a Catholic church.² By the time Ha and Leung settled in Hong Kong, their craft business had grown significantly and they operated out of their home in To Kwa Wan, Kowloon. Ha and Leung raised five children together. In the 1960s, Ha started participating in art groups such as the Chinese Contemporary Artist Guild [華人現代藝術研究會], which held annual exhibitions at the Hong Kong City Hall, one of the first public exhibition spaces that citizens could apply to use.³ Ha continued his artistic practice full time and went on to win awards such as the Hong Kong Urban Council Award in 1976. He became commercially successful through international print biennales in the 1970s.⁴ Ha Bik Chuen's prints and sculptures combined natural materials such as leaves and bamboo with found materials such as chairs and metal scraps with a collage sensibility (Figure 1). In the last years of his life, he started practising in Chinese ink, holding a large-scale exhibition of his ink works in Shenzhen, China, in 2003.⁵ However, Ha was perhaps best known in Hong Kong as the individual who would photograph every exhibition that he attended as an audience member. Ha started photographing in 1982 when he bought his first camera at the behest of his wife. Since then, he has ferociously photographed exhibitions and many objects of the urban world such as fire hydrants, textures of wall facades and books. This photographic documentation, alongside the books, magazines and pictorials that Ha collected during his lifetime, accumulated to form what was often called his "thinking studio" or "studio of thoughts", or "studio for the brain" [思考工作室].⁶ While Ha stated multiple times in interviews that he intended the materials he collected to be available

FIGURE 1: Ha Bik Chuen with his sculptural works, photo documentation, circa 2000s. Ha Bik Chuen Archive at Asia Art Archive. Courtesy of the Ha Bik Chuen family.

FIGURE 2: The personal archive of Ha Bik Chuen (1925–2009) in To Kwa Wan, Kowloon, Hong Kong. Photo taken in January 2014.

for use by the Hong Kong public, Ha's archive was a strictly private space that visitors could only enter by invitation.⁷ The "thinking studio" was a workspace that his family would enter if they were assisting Ha with something.⁸ After Ha's passing, a large-scale posthumous retrospective at the Hong Kong Museum of Art showcased his works in 2011. The exhibition also included a small-scale reconstruction of Ha's archive and studio as a gesture to contextualise Ha's artistic practice. Since then, Ha's family kept his personal archive more or less untouched in its original location in To Kwa Wan (Figure 2).

The times when Ha invited visitors to enter his archive and the limited restaging of his archive and studio were instances when Ha's interior, private life interfaced with the public sphere. The entanglement of the public and private lives of Ha's archive began to intensify in a more visible manner when Asia Art Archive (AAA) began working on Ha's archive in 2014. Ha's archive has since been selectively digitised and put online, as well as made accessible at a physical site where scholars, curators and artists alike can consult and utilise the materials for their respective practices. If one takes Allan Sekula's reading of photographic archives as "a territory of images",⁹ then these attempts to activate the Ha archive could be said to shift the very grounds of the "territory of images" within Ha's archive. This essay introduces two

curatorial projects that departed from the Ha Bik Chuen archive: *Excessive Enthusiasm: Ha Bik Chuen and the Archive as Practice* at AAA's library in 2015, and *Striated Light*, an infra-curatorial project at *Why Not Ask Again?*, the 11th edition of the Shanghai Biennale in 2016. Through these two curatorial projects, the essay posits that the passage from private to public access of Ha's archive instrumentalises its uses but at the same time expands its possibility within a larger art ecology. In parallel, this essay closely examines three groups of materials that are instances where the public sphere and private lives become entangled through Ha's archival practice. These materials comprise a sample from Ha's collection of magazines from the 1960s–70s, which included pictorial magazines from both sides of the Iron Curtain that circulated widely in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, and a selection of photographs from Ha's travels to Huangshan (Yellow Mountain), Anhui and Manila, in 1982. Both trips were related to Ha's interest in art and to his position as an artist. Huangshan is a subject matter often depicted in traditional Chinese paintings and literature, and a site visited by many artists in Hong Kong when China reopened its doors in the 1980s, and Ha travelled to the Philippines as part of the artist delegation for a large-scale exhibition of art from Hong Kong, held at the Manila Metropolitan Museum. On both trips, Ha travelled with his artist friends, thereby blurring the lines between the personal and professional. This essay argues that not only did these materials reveal how Hong Kong was a conjuncture of contesting Cold War forces at the time, they also demonstrate how Ha fashioned himself as a cosmopolitan subject in the port city of Hong Kong by simultaneously consuming publicly circulating materials and archiving his private life.

From archive to Archive

The passage of Ha Bik Chuen's personal archive from private to public through AAA began when the institution was approached by the Ha family to work on Ha's archive in 2014. Less than a year of onsite part-time digging and mapping revealed the depth and breadth of Ha's archive, then housed in a 700 square foot apartment on the top floor of a walk-up building. The 2014 mapping estimated that Ha's personal archive consisted of photo documentation from over 1,500 exhibitions, over 3,500 contact sheets dating from 1982–97, a personal library of over 2,000 volumes, and a previously unknown artist-book-making practice in which Ha constructed book collages from printed matter that he had collected.¹⁰ To date, the archival mapping created in 2014 continues to be the blueprint from which the expanded structure of Ha's archive is developed.

FIGURE 3: *Excessive Enthusiasm: Ha Bik Chuen and the Archive as Practice*, Asia Art Archive Library, March–July 2015.

The small-scale exhibition *Excessive Enthusiasm: Ha Bik Chuen and the Archive as Practice* was presented at AAA's library in 2015, as an invitation for the public to engage with Ha's archive. *Excessive Enthusiasm* presented a topography of materials inside this archive and possible ways of activation. These modes of display addressed multiple ways of reading one can experience when encountering archival documents. These included actual documents and collage books in vitrines, a video of one of Ha's collage books being flipped, and a cinematic intervention of Ha's collection of magazine cutouts by videographer Luke Casey. Reproductions of a small selection of contact sheets were pinned on notice boards. A group of undergraduate architecture students at a local university were invited by their lecturers Sarah Lee and Yutaka Yano, who run the architecture practice SKY & YUTAKA, and were exhibition designers for this exhibition, to rehang the 1977 exhibition *First Choice* by creating an architectural model based on Ha's detailed documentation. An even smaller selection of ephemera, periodicals and correspondences were placed inside a table vitrine; a floor vinyl replicating the patterned floor tiles of Ha's studio below the table served as a reminder of where these materials came from. Through these varied ways of interpreting the materials, Ha's archive met its public for the first time in an exhibitionary setting (Figure 3).

It was also possibly around this time that Ha's archive slipped into being called the Ha Bik Chuen Archive, especially when a first batch of materials was digitised and placed online as a collection on Asia Art Archive's web

FIGURE 4: The Ha Bik Chuen Archive at AAA's dedicated project space in Fotan, New Territories, Hong Kong.

platform. The renaming of Ha's personal archive as the Ha Bik Chuen Archive on AAA's website officially marked its recontextualising from a physical archive into a growing collection of digital archival materials. By 2016, the studio's physical condition severely deteriorated and Ha's archive was relocated from its original location to a dedicated project space run by AAA. Ha's archive is currently on a three-year loan to AAA as it is being processed. Archival materials selected by AAA, responding to the institution's research focus and interests, as well as those requested by users, are regularly digitised and made available online. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida noted that "there could be no archiving without titles (thus without names and without the archontic principle of legitimization, without laws, without criteria of classification and of hierarchization, without order and without order, in the double sense of the word)." ¹¹ As such, what was originally a private act of Ha—accumulating, self-teaching, organising and processing, almost akin to a digestive process—was transposed into a public register that would be shaped by AAA's own institutional processes. In this particular form, the Ha Bik Chuen Archive is a static resource that when retrieved, can be used for purposes such as the development of new scholarship, exhibitions and so on. *Excessive Enthusiasm* thus functioned as an opportunity to introduce these resources with the hopes of inviting more engagement.

FIGURE 5: *Striated Light*, infra-curatorial project by Sabih Ahmed, *Why Not Ask Again?*, 11th Shanghai Biennale 2016.

Apart from *Excessive Enthusiasm*, which was curated by AAA's own team to introduce the archive,¹² Ha's archival materials have also been included in exhibitions where the curatorial approach was more speculative. One of these curatorial projects included *Striated Light*, by Sabih Ahmed, as one of the infra-curatorial projects that was part of the 11th edition of the Shanghai Biennale *Why Not Ask Again?*¹³ In *Striated Light*, a selection of Ha's contact sheets were blown up and installed in modular, undulating units that invoked an abstract landscape and territory that extended to fold visitors into itself. According to Ahmed, the idea behind *Striated Light* is to

[redeploy] Ha's personal archive to draw out over 3,000 digitized contact sheets as a way to explore the changing optic of the archive in the 21st century ... From [the] hand-held camera, into the dark room, then locked onto the surface of contact prints, stored in dark boxes in a studio space in Hong Kong, re-illuminated some four decades after with scanners, enlarged on high tech computer monitors and reprinted onto new undulating surfaces 40 feet wide, resembling thumbnails on our personal computers, and re-circulating in further unpredictable environments and forms, [such] is the journey of the archive as it comes into our age.¹⁴ (Figure 5)

Ahmed's selection of contact sheets disrupted the chronological order of Ha's own system, and the decision to transform digital scans into an undulating physical structure created an experience that attempted to highlight the all-enveloping excess of information that now marks contemporary life. It is perhaps paradoxical that a digital landscape, or a speculation of such a digital landscape, finally found form in a physical, architectural structure. But what this paradox suggests is that while the physical experience still defines the human experience at the moment, the digital realm has indeed begun to shape our cognitive capabilities. *Why Not Ask Again?* was frequented by over 300,000 visitors during its run time, and its potential impact and resonances, including *Striated Light*, is not to be underestimated.

Any public-facing exhibition that includes materials from Ha's archive marks a usage of the archive that is different from what Ha initially envisioned. Originally meant for his private self-learning as an artist and participant of Hong Kong's art world, Ha's archive is now a participant of a larger art world, the terrain of which is open to the shaping of speculative curatorial approaches. However, one could also argue that Ha's private archival practice was also an attempt to create a world using the materials from the location of Hong Kong. Ha Bik Chuen's private aspirations as an artist, his solitary instances of amazement when he glued cutouts from different art magazines onto pages of banal living rooms found in books circulating in Hong Kong, are now the foundations of our exhibitions, writings and speculations from different locations in space and in time. Through these public acts, performances, pronouncements and positions that draw on Ha's private dreams found in his archive, future researchers/users of Ha's archive, too, as contemporary subjects, may attempt to create new imaginaries.

Consuming the Cold War Worlds through Print

In addition to supporting curatorial efforts that critically consider ideas on archive and exhibition histories, the opening up of Ha's archive also encourages new scholarship on Hong Kong art history towards greater complexity and nuance. Ha's archive has complicated the narrative that modernist artists practising in 1960s–70s Hong Kong were not well connected to the Southeast Asian region. Printed matter amassed by Ha, ranging from exhibition leaflets to publications, and Chinese and English newspaper clippings from this time, offer a different picture of the cultural milieu. Ha's periodical collection reveals that not only were artists from Hong Kong regularly featured in United States Information Services (USIS)-funded magazines that circulated widely in Southeast Asia, they were also eager consumers of images of Communist

China through pictorials published by the Chinese state. Ha's archive captures the experiences of some Hong Kong artists who were born in Mainland China before World War II and who had fled to and come of age in the city. In existing literature, these artists often outwardly claimed to be apolitical; their works were personal quests for universal qualities such as beauty; and the hybridity of East and West as concepts were stable and unchanging. Ha's photo documentation of his travels to Mainland China and Manila thus becomes a singular but important entry point to examine and speculate on Hong Kong artists' relationship to, and sense of belonging with, Mainland China. This tension lurks beneath a formal pursuit of being a literati artist, as well as the aspiration of being international by participating in an art world that was then more or less dominated by abstract art and which received direct or indirect support from the United States of America.

The sheer volume of Ha Bik Chuen's collection of magazines came to light in 2016 as his archive in his former studio was being relocated by AAA to a dedicated project space in Fotan, New Territories. Amongst Ha's magazines is an eclectic collection of *World Today*, a Chinese-language magazine that ran in Hong Kong from 1952–73 with financial support from the United States Information Services.¹⁵ *World Today* was published in Hong Kong and circulated widely in Chinese-speaking regions of East and Southeast Asia. Its many distribution points were located in cities such as Manila, the Philippines, Chợ Lớn, Vietnam, Taipei, Singapore (for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei), and Bangkok, Thailand.¹⁶ While its cover pages featured a variety of images ranging from portraits of film stars to illustrations by craftsmen and works by modernist artists, *World Today* regularly featured a spread titled 圖畫世界, which can be translated as 'Pictorial World', or 'Pictures of the World', or 'The World in Pictures' (Figures 6 and 7). All of these three possible translations point to the primary function of this section, which is to depict the world for *World Today's* readers, to mediate such a world through visual representations. The world depicted in 'Pictorial World' is often that of the so-called 'Free World'—the United States of America and its allies during the Cold War. The 'Free World' was often presented in a positive light through celebratory events, civilised and dignified visits of head of states, or majestic landscapes. In addition to natural landscapes and current affairs, *World Today* also regularly reported on artists from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. This publication also included coverage on art from the United States of America and Europe, photography, and emerging media at the time such as kinetic art. *World Today*, a publication heavily imbued with capitalistic ideology and Cold War rhetoric from the US perspective, was thus one of the key means

FIGURE 6: Cover of USIS-funded magazine *World Today* featuring Hong Kong artist Hon Chi Fun's work *The Pond* 《潭》, issue 265, March 1963. Ha Bik Chuen Archive at AAA.

through which Hong Kong artists received information about art outside of Hong Kong.

At the same time, Ha Bik Chuen's collection of magazines also contains a considerable number of pictorial magazines such as *China Pictorial*, *Time Magazine* and *Life Magazine* from the 1960s–70s. *Time* and *Life's* perspectives were unmistakably a US view of the world, and *China Pictorial* was a key mouthpiece for the promotion of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which was published in 12 languages and circulated widely in the communist world. The large spreads of *China Pictorial* represented not only the “red, bright, and shining” optimism of the proletariat class, it also included images of dignified visits of heads of state to Beijing. As a flexing of China's national strength, the *Pictorial* portrayed industrial and agricultural projects from across the nation, such as the fishing industry in the still-contested territories of Xisha Islands (Paracel Islands), salt farms in Tianjin, mines and weather stations on Huangshan¹⁷ (Figure 8). Many issues of *China Pictorial* in Ha's collection included coverage from and images of Southeast Asia, featuring the communist struggle in Vietnam and Cambodia. In 1960s–70s Hong Kong, it was possible to get access to magazines and publications from both sides of the Iron Curtain because the United States of America and China had offices responsible for

FIGURE 7: Inside an undated issue of *World Today*, circa 1960s. The right side of the spread is the section 'The World in Pictures' and the left side shows a selection of books published and distributed by World Today Publishing in Hong Kong, such as *The Declaration of Independence* and *The Federalist Papers*.

FIGURE 8: Cover of *China Pictorial*, issue 10, 1975.

the publishing and distribution of printed materials in the then British Crown colony. The United States Information Agency in Hong Kong ran a library and its Chinese Language Program—essentially a translation unit—commissioned writing and literature. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, pro-Chinese communist publishers such as Sinminchu Publishing [新民主出版] and Joint Publishing [三聯書店] had branches in Hong Kong due to its physical proximity and cultural affinity to Mainland China. These two Mainland Chinese publishers were general distributors of publications endorsed by the government and they also distributed books from the Soviet Union.¹⁸ They were thus key conduits through which publications from Mainland China were inserted into circulation, as well as points at which information and intelligence about other parts of the ‘Free World’ was collected and transmitted back to Mainland China. Hong Kong’s status as a British colony, which was a close ally of the United States of America, as well as the city’s physical proximity to Mainland China, accounts for the juxtaposition of communist and capitalist ideologies. The availability in Hong Kong of publications from both ideological blocs indicates that the city was a conjuncture of opposing forces.

Periodicals and magazines are commodity goods that have a limited shelf life and varied afterlives other than what was intended by their publishers. In 1960s–70s Hong Kong, these printed matter that quickly became outdated, regardless of their ideological leanings, were gathered for resale at a much lower price outside the Wing On Department Store in Sheung Wan. Ha Bik Chuen’s family noted in multiple interviews that Ha purchased pictorial materials and magazines, sometimes in bulk, from this location.¹⁹ The coexistence of *China Pictorial* and *World Today* inside Ha Bik Chuen’s archive is evidence that Ha Bik Chuen was consuming media representation of Southeast Asia and of art from both sides of the Cold War through printed matter. At his studio, often working at night, Ha processed his finds—selecting what he found interesting and useful to him as visual references or research materials, cutting them out and organising them into smaller folders and dedicated boxes that were labelled thematically. This coexistence of ideologically opposed publications within the private archive is possibly evidence of political ambivalence, which Ha might not have stated explicitly but was made manifest through his archival practice. Ha Bik Chuen’s collection of magazines, as well as the zones of inclusion and exclusion that he demarcated by cutting, discarding and retaining these already mediated images in fragments or in whole, reflected an appetite for the world that was not only satiated, but perhaps also fuelled, by flows of information coming into and out of the port city of Hong Kong.

From Huangshan to Manila

Ha Bik Chuen's aspiration and eagerness to experience and consume the world extended well beyond print media. In 1982, Ha acquired his first camera upon the suggestion of his wife Leung Siu Mei, who suggested that Ha take his own photographs rather than hire professional photographers. Ha thus bought his first camera, a Canon AE-1, and began his prolific career as a documenter of events and daily life around him.²⁰ In the same year, Ha travelled to Huangshan (Yellow Mountain) with three of his artist friends, and to Manila with another group of artist friends for a large-scale exhibition of Hong Kong art later in the same year. Ha's Huangshan travel companions included Chen Ruohai, a Chinese calligrapher, and Henry Chan Fat Hing, a photo artist who often documented events with Ha throughout the 1980s, and the artist Xu Jiayang. Then 57 years old, this trip would have been quite an event for Ha, who had left the country in 1949 in search of a better life and had not set foot on the Mainland for more than 30 years. The photo documentation kept by Ha of this trip suggests that this was a pilgrimage of sorts, to one of the most exceptional sites depicted in Chinese literati paintings. Ha kept a dedicated clear folder for the 37 contact sheets of his Huangshan trip. Most of his clear folders of contact sheets do not have any written account of why they were put together and what they were commemorating, thus making the Huangshan folder an exception. The first page of the folder is a handwritten note by Chen Ruohai, in which the calligrapher accounted for the purposes of the trip:

壬戌夏，四友結伴遊黃山，途經廣東、福建、浙江、安徽四省，而抵達夢寐縈懷之黃山。黃山之天都峰，天帝之所都也。潘耒集詩云：黃山百千峰，茲何獨稱長？大巧不炫奇，尊嚴故無兩。中天開帝庭，萬靈此朝饗。肅穆垂冕旒，森嚴排甲杖。梯空一萬重，拔地九千丈。煙雲升及腰，日月行在掌。群山自言尊，對之失氣象。譬如見真人，羣雄自頭搶。[...]（筆者註：漏4句）石闕望峨峨，天橋矚朗朗。載肉無由升，徒然結遐想。 若海識

鈐印：伯子、美意延年 陳若海

Four friends went to Huangshan together in the summer of 1982. After passing through the four provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang and Anhui, we finally arrived at Huangshan—a place we have dreamt of visiting since long time ago. The Tiandou Peak at Huangshan is where the Heavenly Emperor resides. Pan Lei wrote in his poetry, “Amongst the hundreds and thousands of peaks in

Huangshan, why is [the Tiandou Peak] most spectacular? The Peak is vast and complicated, but it does not blatantly show off its features; its grandeur and dignity is therefore unmatched. On this peak, the skies open and the gods build their palaces; thousands of spirits dine on the peak in the morning. The canopies of trees hang solemnly, and the forests tightly align along the mountain ridge. Ten thousand steps lead you up the mountain into the sky, as the Peak is nine thousand zhangs²¹ above ground. As you reach the top the clouds rise up like smoke around your waist, and the sun and moon revolve on one's palm. Other mountains may call themselves great, but their images are no match to the Tiandou Peak. It is like when one meets a true hero—he stands out from the crowd. [...] [Author's note: four lines from the original poem are missing here] From the stone monument one sees the spectacular mountain; and from the mountain one gets a clear vision of the stars. While the mortal body has no reason to depart this world yet, we can only ponder such thoughts. (Chen Ruohai)

Seals: Bozi (bottom left; Chen Ruohai's other name); long lasting goodwill (top right)²²

Huangshan became accessible to visitors in the 17th century when the Buddhist monk Pumen constructed pathways and steps in the mountain rock. Since then, artists practising Chinese art routinely travelled to Huangshan to experience the scenery such as the twin peaks Tiandu Feng (Heavenly Citadel Peak) and Lianhua Feng (Lotus Peak), and many treated their experiences as sources of visual inspiration.²³ The late, internationally renowned art historian of Chinese art James Cahill (1926–2014) noted that “the scenery of Huangshan continues to offer artists the possibility of reconciling abstraction with naturalistic representation, since the angular patterns of the fractured rock formations can suggest cubist or minimalist forms of art, while permitting also evocations of the grandeur of nature at its most sublime”.²⁴ The Huangshan scenery was so popular in art in the Anhui province that an international conference dedicated to Huangshan paintings and the Anhui School was held in Hefei, the capital, in 1984.²⁵

It is thus no surprise that a destination as iconic as Huangshan found itself included in the travels of artists from Hong Kong when Mainland China reopened its doors in 1976. Hon Chi Fun (1922–2019), Hong Kong's first recipient of the prestigious John D. Rockefeller III Fund grant in 1969, also travelled to Huangshan in the mid-1970s. The ways in which artists from different

times documented their journeys to the mountain ranges reflected the shifts in technology. Artists from the 17th and 18th centuries created albums of drawings as a means to document their pilgrimages, while artists such as Hon Chi Fun, Ha Bik Chuen, Chen Ruohai, Xu Jiayang and Henry Chan Fat Hing resorted to photography. The sheer number of photographs that Ha took with his friends of this trip—over 1,300 photographs—signalled the importance of this trip to the travellers.²⁶ The contact sheets, arranged in chronological order, are hand-annotated by Chen Ruohai to denote which place the four friends travelled through (Figure 9). A close examination of some of the contact sheets reveal that all four of the travellers took turns to carry the cameras that they brought with them, thus suggesting that all four of them were involved in photographing their journey. It is not possible to clearly identify who took which photographs. These photographs of Huangshan's majestic ranges, gravity-defying rock features, reminds contemporary viewers why Huangshan captured artists' attention across different times. One of the rock features often represented in paintings of Huangshan is Feilai Feng (飛來峰, 'The Peak that Came Flying'), where a strangely leaning rock emerges from a flat surface while surrounded by the majestic mountains of the larger Huangshan range. Hongren (弘仁; 1610–63) depicted this scenery in one of the albums attributed to him.²⁷ Similarly, Ha and his friends also photographed the same rock, even inserting themselves into the picture, leaning on to the rock as if holding it up.

On the one hand, the number of photographs Ha collected from his travels to Huangshan demonstrates his interest in, and pursuit of, the literati-artist figure in the Chinese tradition. On the other hand, they also suggest a complex negotiation of belonging by these artists, who were returning to their birth country after decades away. The four artists' attire was completely different from the inhabitants of Mainland China at the time, making it obvious that they were visitors from elsewhere, in spite of their Chinese ethnicity. Their cameras would also be a visible indicator of wealth, another reminder that they were foreigners and temporary visitors. To date, none of the very few manuscripts identified in Ha's archive mention his trip to Huangshan. It is thus difficult to speculate what emotions and struggles Ha might have experienced around his sense of belonging and identity as a person who was born in Mainland China but came of age in Hong Kong.²⁸ In all likelihood, Huangshan was a symbol of a country that they had long left, which also overlapped with their interest in art and self-identification as artists. This double symbolic nature of Huangshan therefore allowed for a negotiation of an impossible belonging that finds a landing in their individual aspirations in art.

FIGURE 9: Ha Bik Chuen and three friends on Tiandu Feng at Huangshan, 1982. Ha Bik Chuen Archive at Asia Art Archive. Courtesy of the Ha Bik Chuen family.

The travelling westward by Asian artists to metropolitan cities such as New York and Paris have often been considered as pivotal moments in their development as artists, or as milestones in their careers. Although Ha eventually did travel to various metropolitan cities in Europe and the United States, his earliest international travels were towards the southeast—to Manila. Ha travelled there in September 1982 on the occasion of *HK Art*, organised by the commercial gallery Art East/Art West at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila. The exhibition showcased works by artists living and working in Hong Kong. Featuring over 100 works by 16 artists, it was considered one of the largest international survey exhibitions of art from Hong Kong at the time. It also included a catalogue that historicised the development of art in Hong Kong as unique to the territory, much akin to how a national art history would be written. Such historicisation of Hong Kong art could thus be interpreted as one attempt for Hong Kong's search of identity through art. Ha's documentation of this exhibition revealed not only how he viewed and experienced the event, but also how he personally desired the event to be remembered. Ha's extensive documentation consists of two A4 folders of carefully arranged photographs, envelopes of English- and Chinese-language newspaper clippings, and boxes of positive slides that recorded various visits to artist studios and the installation process. One of the two A4 albums included a cutout of a Chinese press announcement that listed the names of all participating artists, the organising gallery Art East/Art West and individual patrons, who were part of the land developer Hopewell Limited.²⁹ While the title of this exhibition was *HK Art*, the Chinese announcement reported it to be the inaugural edition of "Asian Art Exhibition" 亞洲藝術大展. Ha's line drawing and signature framed the press cutout in the middle of the page and subsequent pages featured photographs of the trip with fellow artists.

The photos in Ha's folders of *HK Art*, meticulously pasted on backing paper and inserted into plastic folders, move chronologically through various events from the group of artists seated on the plane to Manila, to visiting the exhibition site, various stages of installing, and calligraphy workshops and demonstrations. The Hong Kong artists were photographed visiting the studio of sculptor Castillo. One of the photos depict Vietnam-born, Hong Kong-based sculptor Van Lau showing Castillo a maquette of his own sculpture (Figure 10). There were also many posed photographs of the entire group waiting and loitering outside the Manila Metropolitan Museum, which was the de facto exhibition site for art coming from outside the Philippines, as art from the Philippines would be shown at the nearby Cultural Center of the Philippines. The way in which the photographs were arranged reflected Ha's gaze. This became particularly visible as the photographs sometimes steered

off to focus on other surrounding elements that may not pertain to the exhibition itself. In one instance, Ha started photographing the exhibiting artists resting outdoors at the Philippine Plaza, and Ha's camera subsequently focused on Mrs Ha and the artist Irene Chou practising tai chi. On the next page, the photos suggest an elapse of time, and the artists are seen seated in another location, Heritage/PAG, a heritage gallery run by the late Odette Alcantara in Quezon City, posing for the camera and talking candidly.

Ha's photos of the 1982 Manila exhibition also captured private and playful moments of friendship, which blurred the lines between personal and professional, between the artist's personas in public and in private. One photo showed gallery director of Art East/Art West Petra Hinterthuer dancing with artist Kwong Yieu Ting (b. 1922, Macau; d. 2011, Vancouver). Another photo showed the artist Antonio Mak (b. 1951, the Philippines, d. 1994, Hong Kong) standing in front, head bowed down and holding one end of a long ladder extending it backwards. Holding the other end of the ladder was Michael Wong Cheung (b. 1939, Hong Kong), who was bending forwards. Mak and Cheung were, in fact, emulating Mak's bronze work on show at the MET, *Horse and Ladder*, which Ha also photographed (Figures 10 and 11). The two were quite literally horsing around.

If Ha's consumption and archiving of both *China Pictorial* and *World Today* can be interpreted as his interiorising of contesting ideological forces in the public sphere in 1960s–70s Hong Kong, Ha's travels to Huangshan and Manila can also be seen as a manifestation of his interiority, his personal desires in a public manner through the archival materials he left behind. The impetus behind travelling to Huangshan could be a desire to see the significant site of Chinese traditional literati paintings, but it could equally be driven by a yearning for a homeland with which the artist had lost touch. Meanwhile Ha's trip to Manila was motivated by a desire and aspiration to exhibit publicly as an artist. In doing so, Ha and his fellow artist friends were inadvertently submitting to the nation-building project of the Philippines, which was also very much supported by the United States of America as part of its Cold War efforts to curtail the spread of communism. It would be an oversimplified reading to say that Ha and his peers were unaware of the political climate that so defined the cultural milieu that they lived in. After all, some had made the life-changing decision to flee to Hong Kong as the political terrain in Mainland China drastically shifted in the first half of the 20th century. The collection of materials from China during the Cultural Revolution in Ha's archive could in turn be read as a suppressed yearning and continuous negotiation of belonging with Mainland China, where Ha could not return for decades. Much like how he processed and consumed printed matter from

FIGURE 10: Ha Bik Chuen's documentation of Antonio Mak's bronze work *Horse with Ladder*, 1982. Ha Bik Chuen Archive at Asia Art Archive. Courtesy of the Ha Bik Chuen family.

FIGURE 11: Michael Wong Cheung and Antonio Mak re-enacting *Horse with Ladder* in Manila, 1982. Ha Bik Chuen Archive at Asia Art Archive. Courtesy of the Ha Bik Chuen family.

both sides of the Cold War with equal enthusiasm, Ha perhaps travelled to both Huangshan and Manila decidedly focused on the pursuit of art—a concept that was in itself an entanglement of Chinese literati tradition and modern international art from elsewhere.

Conclusion

The three kinds of materials from Ha's archive that have passed from private to public access—whether from magazines from the 1960s and 1970s, or photographs from 1982—each presented how Hong Kong was embedded

in a larger, global flow, as well as the circulation of information, ideas and connections in the cultural field. Ha's collection of printed matter from both sides of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War era reveals Hong Kong's exposure to ideas and propaganda from both camps. Their coexistence in Ha's personal archive can also perhaps be read as the artist-archivist's interest in the cultural products representing both ideologies. Meanwhile, the material wealth in Hong Kong also meant Ha had the means to travel internationally, and his access to camera technology enabled him to document his travels. Such photographic documentation of international travels in turn captured entangled senses of belonging, ideas of tradition and aspirations associated with both Mainland China and Southeast Asia. The depth and breadth of materials accumulated in Ha's personal archive present themselves as a singular example that illustrates a cosmopolitan context that was specific to Hong Kong. These materials also present a holistic picture of Ha as a subject who passionately consumed the changing contemporary visual and cultural worlds that enveloped him. These nuanced readings of Ha, and of Hong Kong art history, much like the curatorial projects examined in this essay, are in turn made possible by Ha's archive becoming public. The extractive and instrumentalising nature of using archival materials to curate and weave new historical narratives are not dismissible. At their best, scholarship and curatorial projects do not merely consume the archive: through interpretation, juxtaposition and analysis, they can critically situate archival materials back into contexts of the larger worlds in which they circulate.

What underpins the processes of generative and generous scholarly and curatorial work is, perhaps, the insistence on articulating the archival materials' historicity: how they are mediated and framed by the individuals and institutions that collect and take care of them; how the paradoxical and sometimes conflicting desires between institutions and individuals are negotiated and documented; and how these materials are made visible and set into circulation. These articulations are many and warrant complex work and reflection themselves. They are, after all, an intricate and continuously evolving overlay between different models of publicness and privacy.³⁰

BIOGRAPHY

Michelle Wong is an AAA researcher based in Hong Kong, where her research focuses on histories of exchange and circulation through exhibitions and periodicals. Her writing has been published in *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art, 1945–1990* (2018) and *Oncurating*. She is a 2019 Pernod Ricard fellow at Villa Vassilieff & Bétonsalon, Paris.

NOTES

- ¹ Raqs Media Collective, “Public Privations”, *Public* 39 (2009), edited by Nina Möntmann.
- ² See interview with Leung Siu Mei (Mrs Ha) and Alex Ha Cheuk Hung by Kurt Yuk-keung Chan, Lam Kar-man Carmi and Cheung Ngai-yee, in Kurt Yuk-keung Chan, “Ha Bik-chuen: A Self-made Artist” [夏碧泉: 素人藝術家], in *Hong Kong Visual Arts Year Book 2009* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), p. 75 (Chinese), p. 93 (English). Mrs Ha and Alex Ha gave similar accounts in the interview conducted by the author on behalf of AAA in 2016.
- ³ See interview with Brian Tilbrook, conducted by Enid Tsui as part of the Hong Kong Art History Research Project, Asia Art Archive and Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2015. <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/hong-kong-art-history-research-project-interview-5277/sort/title-asc>.
- ⁴ Ha has kept extensive records of his participation in various international print biennales since the 1970s as part of his personal archives. Ha consistently participated in the Norway International Print Biennale since its first edition in 1976, through to the tenth edition in 1992. Other international print biennales he participated in include the British International Biennale in the 1980s.
- ⁵ *Ink Painting and Sculpture by Ha Bik Chuen* (Shenzhen: Shenzhen Fine Arts Institute, 2003). The exhibition took place at Shenzhen Fine Arts Institute from 6–15 Nov. 2003. For more details about the exhibition and its related publication, see Asia Art Archive’s exhibition database entry: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/event-database/ink-painting-and-sculpture-by-ha-bik-chuen> [accessed 21 August 2019].
- ⁶ See interview with Leung Siu Mei (Mrs Ha) and Alex Ha Cheuk Hung by Kurt Yuk-keung Chan, Lam Kar-man Carmi and Cheung Ngai-yee, in Kurt Yuk-keung Chan, “Ha Bik-chuen: A Self-made Artist”, p. 76 (Chinese), pp. 95–6 (English).
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid. Mrs Ha and Alex gave a similar account in the interview they did with Asia Art Archive before Ha Bik Chuen’s studio was relocated to AAA’s Fota Project Space in July 2016.
- ⁹ Allan Sekula, “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital”, in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 444–5.
- ¹⁰ To date, there are over 90 collage books found and catalogued in Ha’s archive as a sub-series under the larger series of modified books. There are other sub-series of modified books such as modified magazines, folders of collages and inserts, which amount to over 200 items in total under the series of modified books.
- ¹¹ Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, *Diacritics* 25, 2: 30.

- ¹² The exhibition team for *Excessive Enthusiasm* included Ingrid Chu, Stephen Lam, Hammad Nasar, Vivian Poon, Michelle Wong and Hazel Wong.
- ¹³ Curated by Raqs Media Collective, the 11th edition of the Shanghai Biennale, *Why Not Ask Again?*, took place from 12 Nov. 2016–12 March 2017. For the Biennale's publication *Blueprint*, edited by Raqs Media Collective and Shveta Sarda, see: <https://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/pdf/c71bf61e-789c-4920-a365-71d2a12d4ca9.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ See "On the need to de-canonize, and curating as a form of re-coding: Rosalyn D'Mello in conversation with Sabih Ahmed", <https://experimenter.in/2018-conversation-with-sabih-ahmed.html> [accessed 21 August 2019].
- ¹⁵ See Te-Hsing Shan 單德興, "America as the World?: The Story of *World Today*" [美國即世界?——《今日世界》的緣起緣滅], *Voices of Photography* 20: 18–25.
- ¹⁶ See *World Today*, issue 389, 16 May 1968. From Ha Bik Chuen Archive at Asia Art Archive.
- ¹⁷ See *People's Pictorial*, issue 8, 1974; issue 1, 1975; and issue 12, 1972.
- ¹⁸ See interview with Shaw Tze See conducted by Jack Lee Sai Chong as part of Hong Kong Art History Research Project, Asia Art Archive and Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2015. <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/hong-kong-art-history-research-project-interview-5288>.
- ¹⁹ Mrs Ha and Alex described the process of how Ha collected his materials from Sheung Wan in the interview they did with Asia Art Archive before Ha Bik Chuen's studio was relocated to AAA's Fota Project Space in July 2016.
- ²⁰ From 1982–97, Ha documented over 1,500 exhibitions and events in Hong Kong and outside, creating over 3,500 hand-annotated contact sheets that functioned as an index of his photo documentation. If Ha had printed all of the photos in his contact sheets, there would have been over 100,000 prints in those 17 years alone.
- ²¹ *Zhang* is unit of measurement in Chinese; one *zhang* amounts to roughly 3 metres.
- ²² Handwritten note by Chen Rou Hai in Ha Bik Chuen's contact sheets documenting their trip to Huangshan in the summer of 1982, from Ha Bik Chuen Archive at Asia Art Archive. The contact sheets of this trip can be found online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/ha-bik-chuen-archive-1982-huangshan-13041/page/2>.
- ²³ James Cahill, "CLP 115: 1995 'Huangshan in Modern Chinese Painting.' Preface, reproductions of paintings of Huangshan by recent and contemporary Chinese artists": <http://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/80-clp-115-1995>.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Not all of the prints of Ha's trip to Huangshan have been identified in Ha's archive. A number of photo albums containing prints from the Huangshan trip were

severely deteriorated beyond repair due to humid conditions in Ha's studio and have since been de-accessioned by Asia Art Archive. Some negatives of this same trip had also succumbed to vinegar syndrome and were beyond repair; these negatives have also been de-accessioned by AAA with due documentation of the decision.

- ²⁷ James Cahill, "CLP 88: 1984 'On the Album of Scenes of Huangshan Attributed to Hongren.' 'Huangshan School' symposium Hefei". <http://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/251-clp-88-1984>.
- ²⁸ Sentiments in Hong Kong on issues of immigration and immigrants from Mainland China also shifted significantly from the 1950s to the 1980s. As Hong Kong's economy took off from the 1970s–80s, the territory's attitudes as well as its immigration policies became significantly more hostile than in the mid-1950s, when Ha first arrived in Hong Kong from Guangdong via Macau. See Agnes S. Ku, "Immigration Policies, Discourses, and the Politics of Local Belonging in Hong Kong (1958–1980)", *Modern China* 30, 3 (July 2004): 326–60.
- ²⁹ See Ha's documentation of *HK Art*, and his trip with fellow participating artists to Manila at <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/ha-bik-chuen-archive-1982-contemporary-hong-kong-art/sort/title-asc>.
- ³⁰ Raqs Media Collective, "Public Privations", *Public* 39 (Spring 2009), ed. Nina Möntmann.

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