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Reflections on the Southeast Asia Performance Archive

ANNIE JAEK KWAN

Abstract

In November 2017, the Southeast Asia Performance Collection (SAPC) was launched by Something Human, a London-based curatorial initiative, and made accessible to students, artists, and researchers within Study Room Library at the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) in East London.

This report reflects on the organic and incremental process of building the SAPC had undertaken, which in turn raised critical questions regarding the nature, organizing structure, and role of “archives” in the digital era. How may one maintain the non-linear, fragmented and open nature of an archive, and continue to contaminate and contest its presumption of canonizing? How may such an archive of practices, experiences, and stories from artists who work within the blurred and contested borders of Southeast Asia be also activated across borders in the UK and Europe? The report tracks the development of the SAPC and its activities from its launch at LADA and subsequent activation at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, while also considering its possible impact on diasporic scholarship and artistic practice in London.

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The Southeast Asia Performance Collection (SAPC) was launched by curatorial initiative Something Human in 2017, as a digital archive of performance-related materials that is accessible within the Live Art Development Agency's Study Room in East London. Something Human was initiated in 2012 as a platform for transnational curatorial explorations around the theme of 'Movement across Borders', and its agenda has informed the framing of this newly birthed archive. With an awareness of Asian diasporic communities in the UK and diverse live art practices in Southeast Asia, from 2014–16 Something Human curated CCLAP (Cross Cultural Live Art Projects), a series of live art programmes across London and the UK that brought together diaspora UK/European-based and Southeast Asian performance artists to explore connections between practices and contexts of making. As part of its 2015 programme, Something Human organised for its participating artists to visit the Study Room at the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), the UK's leading organisation for the development and promotion of Live Art and its discourses and audiences. When the artists browsed the catalogue, they realised that despite its extensive collection of thousands of materials on UK and international Live Art, there was very little material represented from Southeast Asia. This lacuna of materials raised questions around representation and resources for scholarship related to the nascent art histories of Southeast Asia in the UK.

Something Human responded to this lack of materials for reference and research within the UK over the next few years. Building on initial short research trips in 2013 and 2014, I undertook, as co-director, a four-month long, self-initiated research residency in 2016 with arts organisation Java Arts in Cambodia, supported by the Artists International Development Fund (British Council/Arts Council England) and National Arts Council Singapore. This enabled an in-depth period of research into the conditions for performance, via extensive interviews with artists, curators and researchers in Phnom Penh, Battambang and Siem Reap. The building of relationships with this network also supported the request for donations of materials to build the collection. The process of collecting gained momentum over the next two years, during which I also managed to acquire materials from artists working in performance art in the Vietnamese cities of Hanoi, Hue and Saigon; Singaporean pioneering performance artist Lee Wen (1957–2019) also generously donated his extensive digital archive.

In 2017, Something Human's M.A.P (Movement × Archive × Performance) project enabled the consolidation and indexing of archival materials from previous participating CCLAP Southeast Asian artists and the commission of arts organisation Batubalani's additional research and gathering of materials

FIGURE 1: Lee Wen, *Journey of a Yellow Man*, Pengshan, China, 2001. Image courtesy of Lee Wen's estate and the Southeast Asia Performance Collection.

from the Philippines. The Southeast Asia Performance Collection (SAPC) was launched with the M.A.P symposium at the Live Art Development Agency in November, where it now resides as an open-access archive representing over 50 artists from Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore and the Philippines. With more than approximately 27,000 digital items already indexed, including documentation (photographs, videos, audio recordings), artwork (photographs and videos), marketing materials, supporting literature and written interviews with the artists, and newer items awaiting the next phase of sorting, the SAPC is currently the largest digital collection of performance-based practices in relation to contemporary Southeast Asian art in Europe.

An archive historically refers to a repository of records managed by institutions, government or municipal councils, whose information connotes authoritative or authenticated knowledge. In contemporary art practice, increasing attention has been paid to personal, non-authorised archives, with the understanding that these collections provide access to lesser-known alternative narratives that have been neglected or erased. While traditional archives might seem to represent the affirmation of existing power structures, the act of gathering and building a new archive is arguably thus one of resistance, infiltration and instigation, and posits a challenge to universal assumptions of knowledge. The decision to name the new Southeast Asia Performance Collection as such, in keeping with the existing style of LADA's library catalogue, reflects both LADA and Something Human's awareness of the significant artist-led contributions that produce the collection. As suggested by Hal Foster, artists "are not as concerned with critiques of representational totality and institutional integrity ... [but with] other kinds of ordering—within the museum and without".¹ The SAPC is thus configured with an alternative, non-hierarchical set of guidelines that "not only draws

FIGURE 2: Svay Sareth, *Mon Boulet*, 2011, durational performance, 5 days from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Image kindly shared with the Southeast Asia Performance Collection.

on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private”.² Including both collective and individual archives, at times shared in an informal fashion (personal hard drives and social media accounts were entrusted for sifting through), the indexing of the archive neither privileges the categories of ‘established’, ‘mid-career’ or ‘emerging’, as utilised by the art world at large, nor seeks to place artists under national headings. Instead, the archive is organised primarily according to artists’ names, with multiple and potentially increasing supplementary tag words provided in the index that connects the artist by activity, theme, sites, organisations and events.

The SAPC was also launched into public existence with a symposium programme curated by Something Human as self-reflexive interrogation, deconstructionist critique and expansive resistance to establishing a canon of Southeast Asian live art. Employing his architectural knowledge of construction, artist Noel Ed De Leon’s opening performance, *Does it Matter?*, explored the intertwined relationship between construction and destruction as historical and social processes, by building a shelter with 100 vintage saws previously associated with military use. Dr Ray Langenbach, artist and ardent

FIGURE 3: Production photo from *I am LGB* (2016), The LGB Society of Mind, Singapore International Festival of Arts, 2016. Photo by Wan Zhong Hao. Image kindly shared with the Southeast Asia Performance Collection.

archivist, followed with a keynote that questioned the possible methodologies for archiving as a critical device, and with artist Loo Zihan, facilitated the participatory workshop that invited visitors to bring an object associated with Southeast Asia, then playfully questioned the phenomenology of objects and the imperative urge of ‘sorting’ and its challenges. The two-day programme also invited artist Erika Tan, with curator and researcher Hammad Nasar, LADA Director Lois Keidan, and artist collaborators Whiskey Chow, Jess Heritage and Michael Taiwo, to work with a selection of SAPC documentation materials to create discussions around re-enactment, authorship and reinscription. Alongside the British Library’s video documentation of the programme, artist collective DARC also documented the programme using video, drawings and doodling. The documentation of these activities will be lodged in the SAPC during the next collation, underscoring the SAPC’s insistence on the archive as an act of futuring—as a call to those interested in Southeast Asia to continue the research and gathering, responding and creating.

Hence, while the building of the SAPC was arguably fuelled by a diasporic urge for institutional representation as well as what Derrida describes as a form of “archive fever” towards “an impossible archaeology” and desire “for a return to the authentic and singular origin, and for a return concerned to

FIGURE 4: Staking the Inventory: A Sorting Exercise, a workshop led by Loo Zihan and Dr Ray Langenbach, for MAP3: Archiving 'Asia'. Image by Marco Berardi.

FIGURE 5: Documentation of MAP3: Archiving "Asia" performed by DARC Collective. Image by Marco Berardi.

FIGURE 6: Anida Yoeu Ali, *The Buddhist Bug (Oxcart Grazing)*, 2014. Image kindly shared with the Southeast Asia Performance Collection.

account for the desire to return”,³ the emergence of the SAPC insists on taking up space, literally, metaphorically and politically. Its very existence creates a shift—in the catalogue index, in the composite identity of its host site and city—locating a network of transnational and diasporic relations, and creating possibilities for ripple effects of responses in research and discourse.

The character of an archive is derived from its contents and constituted by its processes of accumulation. While the SAPC sought to raise visibility of Southeast Asian artistic practices in London and the UK, in line with Something Human’s broader vision of developing the relatively new art histories of Southeast Asian performance practice, the SAPC’s process of gathering was not mapped deliberately but was in fact idiosyncratic and opportunistic. Working within its independent budgetary limitations, its mode of collecting was channelled through a network of domino-effect efforts of generosity and trust. Introductions by US-Cambodian artist Anida Yoeu Ali and Java Arts’ director, Dana Langlois, and curator Kate O’Hara (from the now defunct Romeet Gallery), opened doors to a network of artists in Phnom Penh, Battambang and Siem Reap. Similarly, social media connections made by Professor Nora Taylor, an art historian from the School of the Arts Institute in Chicago, led to initial meetings with artists and curators in Hanoi and

Ho Chi Minh City, such as Tuan Mami from Nha San Collective and Đỗ Tường Linh, who helped provided access to the local scene. From one meeting to another, knowledge and recommendations were shared along an existing skein of relationships to gather materials. The collection thus represents artists working in relation to Southeast Asia, as well as the interpersonal network of friendships that characterises the particular emergent contemporary art scenes, where the lack of infrastructure and resources have meant that collaboration and exchange have been essential. As most of its established and emerging artists are alive and still in the process of making work, the SAPC is also a living archive, cognisant of its incompleteness and contingency. It is resistant towards any intention of creating a canon, but perhaps represents the complex and entangled histories of artists and of a region.

The SAPC thus works across geographical boundaries, connecting art-making contexts and histories. While the performing body becomes a site of memory and activation via its agency, so the SAPC is itself an ongoing, ever-expanding and open-ended coalition of performing bodies that connects spatial and temporal narratives. These stories and concerns are embodied into the performers who travel across borders through their practices, bringing histories together in dialogue and in collision, while expanding 'regional thinking' and inter-regional relevance with its presence in the UK and Europe. In the UK, according to feedback from LADA, the SAPC has served as a resource for researchers, students and artists interested in performance from Southeast Asia. As an associate lecturer teaching performance, politics and place at Central St Martins, University of the Arts in London in 2018–19, I received student assignment submissions that drew upon research from the SAPC. One key example of both an academic and artistic response to the SAPC was found in Singaporean artist Nicholas Tee's work. As an undergraduate student at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London, Nicholas undertook research on performance art in Singapore. In his live art practice, he also paid tribute to Lee Wen's seminal performance series *Journey of the Yellow Man* (1992–2012), in his formulation of his public performance of *The Rising* (2018) and *Yellow Peril* (2019). In both these performances, Tee revisited issues of ethnicity and identity embedded in perceptions of skin colour. He applied gold leaf on his face behind a magnifying Fresnel lens, echoing Lee Wen's act of covering himself with yellow paint. For the latter performance, which was staged in response to the exhibition *Speech Acts: Reflection-Imagination-Repetition*, curated by Hammad Nasar and Kate Jesson at the Manchester Art Gallery, just three days after Lee Wen's passing, Tee layered the gold leaf on his face atop a heavy layer of yellow paint, while playing Lee Wen's recorded track of "Missing You"

FIGURE 7: Nicholas Tee, *Yellow Peril*, 2019. Image by Andrew Brooks. Image courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery, University of Manchester, Paul Mellon Centre, Something Human and University of the Arts, London.

from multiple tape recorders. Tee's performance, playing on the visibility and invisibility of migrant artists in the institution, resonated with a particular poignancy in the context of an exhibition that explored themes associated with diaspora artists and their somewhat fragile legacies.

Outside of the UK, the SAPC has continued as a travelling body of knowledge materials across national borders to take up residence in Germany as an Archive in Residence at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. The SAPC was activated by an exhibition in the archive gallery that I co-curated with Eva Bentcheva and Damien Lentini, in close cooperation with Archive Curator Sabine Brantl. The exhibition opened with an adapted performance of *The Buddhist Bug* (2009–ongoing) by Anida Yoeu Ali, alongside the two-day symposium “Pathways of Performativity in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art”, which brought art historians, critical thinkers and artists in the field together in Munich for the first time. Their presentations offered multi-layered and discursive perspectives on the development of performance-related practices in the region. If the SAPC as a body of knowledge could be said to trigger discussion, then its transit and sojourn brought to the house its transnational network of critical and social conversations. Documentation from the exhibition and symposium will be added back into the SAPC, reaffirming again the SAPC's recursive methodology that loops back into

FIGURE 8: Archive in Residence: Southeast Asia Performance Collection exhibition at Haus der Kunst, Munich. Featuring Anida Yoeu Ali, *The Buddhist Bug* series, Haus der Kunst, 2019. Image by Marion Vogel. Image courtesy of Haus der Kunst.

itself with the next activation. The generative mode of this digital archive is further enhanced by the new Southeast Asia Performance Collection Research Commission, launched in July 2019, which offers a modest grant incentive for early career researchers to respond critically and creatively to the archive. It remains to be seen what impact this newly formed archive will have on research and art production, especially given its open-ended, resistant nature.

BIOGRAPHY

Annie Jael Kwan is an independent curator and researcher based in London who works between Europe and Asia. She founded the curatorial partnership, *Something Human* in 2012 to focus on the critical ideas surrounding movement across borders. In 2016, she completed a self-initiated curatorial research residency with Java Arts in Cambodia, with the support of the Artists International Development Fund (British Council/Arts Council England) and the National Arts Council Singapore. This generated the collection of interviews and digital materials that would form a significant part of the pioneering *Southeast Asia Performance Collection* (SAPC), was launched at the Live Art Development Agency in London during Something Human's 2017 *M.A.P.* (Movement × Archive × Performance) project. In 2018, she curated the exhibition and public programme, *UnAuthorised Medium* for Framer Framed, Amsterdam, which featured 12 artists working with “alternative archives” in relation to Southeast Asia. In 2019, she co-curated the *Archive-in-Residence Southeast Asia Performance Collection* archive exhibition, and consulted on the *Pathways of Performativity* conference exploring performance in Southeast Asia at Haus der Kunst, Munich. Since 2018 she co-leads *Asia-Art-Activism* (AAA), an interdisciplinary and intergenerational network of artists, curators and academics investigating “Asia”, “art” and “activism” in the UK—currently in residence at Raven Row till November 2020 with a programme of sharing sessions, mini residencies, research workshops, talks, screenings, radio show and other live events. In 2019 she was awarded Live Art UK's Diverse Actions Leadership Award.

NOTES

With thanks to Alessandra Cianetti (Something Human co-director March 2014–March 2018).

¹ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse”, *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 5.

² Ibid.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 85.