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# Between Record and Archive:

## The File in Question

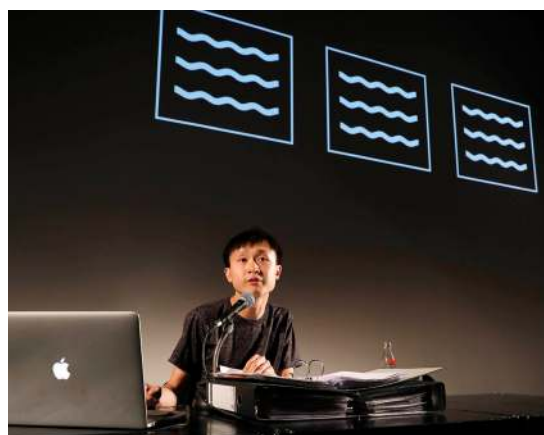
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CHLOE HO

The archival system mediates and provides the researcher with access to archival documents. In the Southeast Asian art context, access is further mediated and provided by the amateur nature of many archives and their owners.<sup>1</sup> The archivists' performance, or narrative storytelling, gives credence to the documents they hold, what Dr Ray Langenbach may refer to as the performance's success.<sup>2</sup> The individual's ability to perform as archivist produces a collection of documents as archive, simultaneously authorising these documents as archival and implicating their personality in the understanding of this archive. Southeast Asian researchers are usually unperturbed by this situation—it is often accepted as a reality of the field in which we work. Ho Rui An's *Conspiracy of Files*, a lecture-performance delivered at the symposium *Pathways of Performativity in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art* (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 27–28 June 2019), was not so assuming. Rather, as a self-reflexive act, Rui An looks back at a historical instance of an 'archival performance' in Singapore's history, examining how the archive, accessed through performance, was used as political action.

Rui An's episode of choice was the so-called Marxist Conspiracy of 1987. This event, reported on Singaporean television news and newspapers, resulted in the detention of 24 alleged subversive leaders under the Internal Security Act (ISA). One of these leaders was Vincent Cheng, a lay Catholic

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*Pathways of Performativity in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, 27–28 June 2019*

*Conspiracy of Files*

Haus der Kunst, 2019

Performance and Concept by Ho Rui An

Photos: Marion Vogel

worker. Under the ISA, the Singapore state is allowed to enact “preventive detention, the prevention of subversion, the suppression of organised violence against persons and property in specified areas of Singapore, and for matters incidental thereto”.<sup>3</sup> Vincent’s detention drew the attention of the Catholic Church, which demanded proof of his subversion from the Singapore state. Then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew acquiesced with a closed-door meeting with then-Archbishop of Singapore Gregory Yong on 2 June 1987, the positive outcome of which was immediately reported to the Singaporean media in a press conference held on the same day. The video footage of this press conference, and Lee’s “performative gestures” at this press conference, became the springboard for Rui An’s critique of archival authority.<sup>4</sup> It is this video footage that Rui An uses to open his performance-lecture.

*Conspiracy of Files* leads us through selected videographic, photographic and newspaper records of the so-called Marxist Conspiracy of 1987. Through his narration and performative actions, Rui An reflects on the public actions of PM Lee and how the ‘Conspiracy’ was reported in national media.<sup>5</sup> He begins with Lee’s treatment of three blue binder files, the visual manifestation of the investigation on Vincent. During the press conference, Lee perused the first few pages of one of the binders in front of him and spoke brief words to denounce Vincent’s intentions. That the investigation was comprehensive and Vincent had confessed was what Rui An saw the file visually expressing. Mimicking Lee’s perusal, Rui An enacts this looking, flipping and speaking with his own three ring binder files at Haus der Kunst, Munich. That these ring binders were obviously not about the ‘Conspiracy’ or his script for the performance was irrelevant. Or perhaps, it was what Rui An was implying to his audience: like Lee’s audience, we do not see any proof or evidence to back up what is being said.

While Lee wielded ring binders that presumably records evidence of Vincent’s guilt and his confession of his communist leanings in the press conference, television viewers did not get to see the record. Projected on the screen at Haus der Kunst was a quote from Lee expressing his impatience at hard evidence:

It is not the practice, nor would subversives be allowed to get away by insisting that the government has got to prove everything against them in a court of law or evidence that will stand up to the strict rules of evidence of a court of law. So long as we know it’s true, so long as there’s been no torture, no coercion, no distortion of the truth that we are satisfied, we are prepared to act. But we will not act on concocted evidence.<sup>6</sup>

ISA, a 'preventive' measure against 'subversives', allowed Lee to detain persons like Vincent, suspected of treason, without trial. Neither the Singaporean public nor the judiciary needed to be convinced of Vincent's guilt; Lee's closed-door review of evidence and pronounced judgement was sufficient. In Foucauldian terms, the people of Singapore were not allowed to see the truth of Vincent's crime, since the evidence was withheld from their eyes.<sup>7</sup> Their agency, and right to witness, in this matter was denied.

In Rui An's performance-lecture, newspaper clippings about this 'Marxist Conspiracy' followed the video footage, framing the 'Conspiracy' as a completed investigation. That the average newspaper reader skims the headlines before choosing which articles to read does not need to be belaboured. In *Conspiracy of Files*, Rui An presents headlines he found off Google Images, pointing out the oversized typography of the word 'Marxist' in comparison to the illegibility of the articles. In reality, he commented, none of the images were of good enough quality for him to read beyond the headline. He argued that "what [was] held up for examination [was] not what [was] within the page but the page itself", a point he could also have been making in relation to Lee's binders.<sup>8</sup> As Rui An spoke with his left hand resting easily on his three binders, his point that it was the "form and aura" of the page, rather than its content, that was the most significant, was hard to deny.<sup>9</sup> Like Lee's television audience, Rui An's audience see him draw strength from the page and must trust that what he said corresponded with what was written.

Archiving does more than retain a record of past activity. It is an activity in itself that transforms our access to the document. Like Rui An at Haus der Kunst, Lee had displaced the act of reading the papers with the act of looking at them at his press conference, or perhaps physically touching the binders. The papers have been filed together, the investigation completed, and the event archived. It was no longer a record, since the investigation was no longer active. It was now an archival document of an event that is already over and in the purview of historical research.

What Rui An's performance draws attention to is the subtle yet crucial difference between the archive and the record. The archival document is dated; the information within it is no longer current. It can be seen as something from the past that no longer impinges on the present. The record, in contrast, is current, its contents still germane to an analysis of the contemporary moment. Bureaucracy gives us a clear example of this: a *record* of a company's fiscal accounts have to be submitted every year. A *record* of the last three years of said accounts must be maintained in anticipation of possible checks by the relevant authority. Accounts older than three years

are not subject to the same auditing procedures and may be *archived* in the company's storeroom.

In Dr Chương-Đài Võ's presentation, part of the same panel at Haus der Kunst as Rui An's performance-lecture, she reflected on the different levels at which researchers can access documents at Asia Art Archive (AAA).<sup>10</sup> AAA is a non-profit organisation founded in Hong Kong with the aim of collecting and documenting Asian art histories, and the place of Chương-Đài's employment. For her presentation, Chương-Đài used the example of Singaporean artist Lee Wen's sketchbooks and notebooks from 1978 to 2014, the focus of a digitisation project that she led at AAA in 2018. While a primary resource for the study of Lee Wen's draughtsmanship, the sketchbooks and notebooks were simultaneously a secondary resource for Lee Wen's performance works and thought processes. It was this secondary archival function that Chương-Đài and her co-curator Özge Ersoy highlighted in *Form, Colour, Action* (AAA, Hong Kong, 13 March–13 September 2019), which presented Lee Wen's sketchbooks and notebooks in digital and physical forms, alongside video documentation of the *Journey of the Yellow Man* (1992–2001) series of performances, Lee Wen's signature work. The exhibition was an instance of how AAA's resources could inform our understanding of a certain artist's known artwork. Chương-Đài's presentation at Haus der Kunst further revealed her awareness of the sketchbooks and notebooks' primacy, namely, thinking of the works as independent of Lee Wen's performances. While the drawings may suggest how Lee Wen approached his performances, he also considered them as complete in themselves, sometimes tearing out pages and framing them for exhibition. Chương-Đài thus proposed that it was the level of enquiry at which researchers approached these sketchbooks that limited their understanding of them. By moving between artwork and archive—what I am rephrasing as between record and archival document—Chương-Đài argued for an expanded and richer analysis of this collection.

As archival documents, Lee Wen's sketchbooks and notebooks are closed from further analysis, merely informing the bigger performance work, that is, *Journey of a Yellow Man*, much like how then-PM Lee's binder files informed the pronouncement of Vincent's guilt. Yet, on 2 June 1987, when the press conference was held, detentions were still under way. Six more people were detained on 20 June 1987, more than two weeks after the press conference.<sup>11</sup> The binder files, in other words, were literally part of an active record and not an archival one. While strict temporal rules govern the bureaucratic system, they do not apply in other instances, as Chương-Đài had pointed out, which may explain why Rui An neglected to tell us about this incident in his

performance-lecture. Instead, Rui An points us toward another performative demonstration obfuscating the distinction between record and archival document. He tells us about a two-part documentary, *Tracing the Conspiracy*, produced in relation to this investigation and broadcast on Singapore's national English television channel, Channel 5, on 28 and 29 June 1987.<sup>12</sup> Presenting interview footage with the detained and commentary of the investigation against them, *Tracing the Conspiracy* reported on the detentions as if they were already justified. Yet, critique of the documentary's demonstrates the opposite: Rui An narrated that viewers felt that Vincent looked coerced and that his guilt did not look convincing.<sup>13</sup> The investigation that Lee archived in the press conference returned as a record document, refusing to be filed away and refusing to authorise Lee's pronouncement of guilt.

Perhaps what Rui An was really questioning was the archive as known through performance, the kind of mediation that binds all the documents together into a singular archive. Rui An's recognition of Lee's bound folder as archival document incisively identifies this closure. In wielding the unreadable folder in a 'performative gesture', the investigation record on Vincent was performatively archived and no longer open for auditing. *Conspiracy of Files* questioned the permanence of this act of archiving by revealing the irruptions against this closure. That is, as if plotting its own conspiracy, records cannot, and will not, stay filed in the archive.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Chloe Ho** is a doctoral candidate in Art History at the University of Melbourne. Her interest is in 20th- and 21st-century Singapore art, specifically in relation to performance and installation art and art historiography. She investigates the place of performance in the transmission of art and the art historical in the Singapore context, looking at artistic works, social phenomena and its relation to society.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Nora Taylor, "Performance as Site of Memory: Performing Art History in Vietnam and Singapore", Seminar (Tate Research Centre: Asia, SOAS Contemporary Art Research Seminar and SOAS Centre of South East Asian Studies, Tate Britain, UK, 6 May 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> For Langenbach, performance in the Singapore context is tied up with Taylorist ideas of performance indicators and productivity assessment, what I rephrase as the performance's ability to accomplish specific intents. See William Ray Langenbach, "Performing the Singapore State 1988–1995", PhD diss., University of Western Sydney, 2003, <http://handle.uws.edu.au:8081/1959.7/576> [accessed 4 Aug. 2019].
- <sup>3</sup> The Republic of Singapore, "Internal Security Act (Chapter 143)", *The Statutes of the Republic of Singapore* (Singapore: The Law Revision Commission, 1986), <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/ISA1960> [accessed 5 Aug. 2019].
- <sup>4</sup> Rui An Ho, "Performance Lecture: Conspiracy of Files", Abstract in printed handout at *Pathways of Performativity in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 27–28 June 2019* (Munich: Haus der Kunst), p. 14.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> This quote, attributed to then-PM Lee, was read by the narrator in the video clip.
- <sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [*Surveiller et Punir; Naissance de la prison* (1975)], trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 56.
- <sup>8</sup> Rui An Ho, "Conspiracy of Files", lecture-performance at *Pathways of Performativity in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 27–28 June 2019* (Munich: Haus der Kunst, 28 June 2019).
- <sup>9</sup> Neither does Rui An ever provide clearly traceable citations for any of the videos, photos or newspaper clippings he uses in his lecture-performance. While seemingly authentic, there is a very real possibility that some, if not all, of the documents were fabricated. For the audience, however, Rui An was the sole authority, an authority that he conjures through his performative actions.
- <sup>10</sup> Chương-Đài Võ, "Form and Process", presentation at *Pathways of Performativity in Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 27–28 June 2019* (Munich: Haus der Kunst, 28 June 2019).
- <sup>11</sup> Alan John, "Govt detains six more", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 21 June 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>12</sup> *Tracing The Conspiracy* (Singapore: Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, 1987).
- <sup>13</sup> As Foucault tells us, the modern judgement of guilt is simultaneously a judgement of "the 'soul' of the criminal [...] We punish, but this is a way of saying that we wish to obtain a cure." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 18–9, 21–2.



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