

Future-archivism in the open air of history

and the APT7 20 Year Archive

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A good question to ask is if we could imagine meaning out of memories in the future.

Heman Chong

When artists work with an archive it is easy to suppose their labour is absorbed in the reiteration of the past. Another assumption made in relation to archives in the hands of artists is the implicit contract to preserve history, to keep a specific part of its account sacrosanct. But what if the artist's endeavour is a-historic? What if the archive the artist creates exists only in and for the future? What if it contends with the (patri)lineage of false identities?¹ While the archive is generally understood to represent a collection of particular objects that were conceived in the past, what is effectively overlooked is the crucial role of archives in the production of history for the civilised world, and this is just one reason for artistic contention. In this critique, the Archive, with a capital A, emerges as a Machiavellian character, whose rhetoric speaks for him or herself: heritage/heretic, conversation/conservative. History in its unassailable ideological formulation is no different;² as such these two capitalised *archons*, as the chief custodians of pastness, serve each other.³

In its disputed iteration, the Archive can also be understood as a boundary condition and a limit. It comprises a border around what has been excluded from its cases or its storerooms, of what has been forgotten or refused, all of which constitutes a form of the public secret.⁴ In either instance, there is always an author behind the archive, institutional (museum and government), local (community historians) or autonomous (freelance curators, artists and writers), who collects and curates the collection in order to promulgate a specific chronicle, a scripted heritage that is often erroneously imagined to be contained within and vital to the items that make up the archive.⁵ The past in this way is all too often configured to a set of principles that fail to tell the whole story; which portray a version of events that reiterate a set of desirable or dominant ideologies. It is the archive of suppressed material of which Jacques Derrida speaks in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, saying, 'There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory', and, let it be said, the suppression of public memory is paradoxically a primary evidence of civilisation.⁶

Where Derrida's diagnosis is of *mal d'archive* (archive sickness), another kind of fever has taken hold, the urge to make an archive of one's own. The conditions of the mal-Archive apply, without exclusion, to any artist operating in the disputed spaces of cultural memory and with collected and dispersed histories, official or otherwise. For, while artists might move mercurially through archaeological, curatorial, epistemological, historiographical and even ethnographic modes, we should be wary of the seduction of the archive's panoptic spectacle, which is sometimes reproduced by artists in versions of the 15th century Wunderkammer.⁷ It is difficult to avoid the power relations and inherent institutionalisation of the archive, yet out of this apparently barred context rises an opportunity for a counter-practice, which branches from the point of difference between the archive that is open to change and the Archive that is sealed from the future. The Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art exists within an analogous cultural tension, a paradigm partly of its own making, even though the multitude of people, places and voices that comprise its 20-year lifespan inherently refuse the notion of tension as a single manoeuvre, and there is always movement and transformation in the exchange of who we are and who we become over time.

Of the 77 artists in APT7, there are many who work either with archives or 'archivally', most markedly in the case of Atul Dodiya (India), the Jakarta-based artists' initiative ruangrupa (Indonesia), Dayanita Singh (India), and lastly Manuel Ocampo (The Philippines), who has reworked for APT7 a body of his own paintings made over the last 20 years. Doubtlessly conscious that latitude is insufficient, APT7 features three additional curated projects, of which The 20 Year Archive directly addresses the leitmotif of the archive. Given the celebration of its 20th anniversary, APT7 could also easily find itself looking back. The 20 Year Archive, however, cultivates the concept and exercise of looking forward *by* looking back, realised for the 2012 program in various ways of either reworking an existing archive – engaging with range of local and regional archives, including QAGOMA's Australian Centre of Asia Pacific Art – or in producing an entirely new one. Springing from this reflexive premise, five autonomous projects each arise in a unique formulation.

Raqs Media Collective (India) are using an active workspace to share materials from past and present project proposals related to Sarai, a Delhi-based archive and centre that they founded for the discussion of issues urban geography media, technology and urbanism research. A web link will be available in the workspace, taking us to a concurrent exhibition titled *Sarai Reader 09*, curated by Raqs for the Devi Foundation in Gurgoan, India. In a cartography based on the orientation of experience, the collaborators of MAP Office (Hong Kong, China) have recharted the map itself for APT7, plotting the borders and spaces of Asia in visual and textual form, as the territory of artistic production instead of proprietorial exclusion. Instigating an entirely new exhibition project, titled *{disarmed} imagining a Pacific archive*, Torika Bolatagici (Australia/Fiji), Mat Hunkin (New Zealand/Samoa) and Teresia Teaiwa (United States of America/Kiribati/New Zealand) challenge the representation and economisation of Pacific bodies and people within the history and contemporary politics of the militarisation of the region, with an emphasis on Fiji. Heman Chong (Singapore) delves into the Australian Centre of Asia Pacific Art (ACAPA) archive. Taking up documents chosen by QAGOMA staff, he prises the collection apart, reshuffling its ordered contents according to its internal users' choice of what I assume the material they might like us to see. The gathered fragments constitute an 'epic poem', as described by Chong, that he has used for a sound installation, thus creating a work that looks from the outside in, appropriately performed by Singaporean actor and Nominated Member of Parliament Janice Koh. Lastly, APT7 displays a selection of drawing projects from 10 years' of the APT Kids program, including Khadim Ali's *The Bamiyan drawing project*, 2006, Rich Streitmatter-Tran's *My river, my future: A children's drawing project*, 2009, and the children's drawing project from the DPRK's Mansudae Art Studio, 2009. Through these drawings, people visiting the Gallery will be able to meet with hundreds of children's concerns and dreams, encompassing the future of the natural environment to the effects of war, while *Where I live* will share experiences of life in the family home in a collection works made by children and young people living in communities in Papua and Papua New Guinea.

The 20 Year Archive represents an effort to contend with the contested aspects of the category. It is a curatorial action determination that, in keeping with the selected artists' work, reconceptualises the Archive as a political material, not for what it contains or for what is valorised in a nationalistic way but for what has escaped the major narratives of colonisation and now of markets and the proliferation of global commercial development.⁸ We can only begin to comprehend how fundamental such a contestation becomes when we consider how the unitary Archive really functions (i.e. what it does to objects and people), and that it often denies and thus violates history and memory for nations in flux. The return of APT7 artists to the archive gathers even greater symbolic import for this reason. In the

publication accompanying the 2008 exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, Okwui Enwezor emphasised that, 'Archival returns are often conjoined with the struggle against amnesia and anomie'.⁹ This is especially true of the diasporic contours of Asia and the flow of people across the ocean communities of the Pacific, where any absolute notion of history has no such ground. The concept of 'nation' is difficult inasmuch as the ideal clashes with the internal or the real state of instability, to the extent that it becomes impossible to determine if that political or social union is on the rise or in the process of decline. Many nations in the Asia Pacific region are additionally in the midst of the injudicious transformations common to 'developing countries', as globalisation forces capitalist structures and property to change hands in often opaque and unequal ways, regardless of and probably exacerbated by technological progress.

In the 'labor of the negative,' what occasionally emerges from the long legacy of iconoclasm inherent to the cultural non-reflexivity of imperialism is a counter-narrative. This approach is evident in the practice of a number of APT7 artists who are working against such confiscations of the past from the future, drawing from far less visible archives, from personal research projects, or from collections in which there is possibly nothing material to work with at all. These counter-tendencies, I would add, are not a matter of aesthetic or ideological form but of necessity, and the *detournement* of the existing archive is an effective means of rethinking historical events and the status of history, whereby the archive becomes a medium in its own right.¹⁰ Raising the notion of using the archive against itself, Enwezor also states in *Archive Fever* that Christian Boltanski's work provokes 'questions about the stability of the archive as a means by which we come to know and understand the past...'¹¹ The problem that refuses to be resolved in any retroactive formulation of the reprised archive, that I see in Boltanski's work and in many others, is that it cannot avoid looking back, so that it correspondingly recasts the activated document into a kind of monumental stone. What remains perplexing for curators, historians, anthropologists and artists alike is how to prevent rock-art atavism from being repeated and free a collection or a past to interpretation beyond memorialisation.¹²

The distinctly future-focused adaptation of archives by a selection of APT7 artists, I would argue, conversely turns the archive away from its characteristic historicisation, so that personal and feasibly public memory might, as Enwezor suggests, convert monuments back into documents, bits of paper that in turn might catch a gust of wind and take flight in the open sky of change.¹³ Consider Heman Chong's capitulation that it is possible to 'imagine meaning out of memories in the future'.¹⁴ In the context of Chong's established work and his inclusion in the 20 Year Archive, the 'future' provocation is not empty. Take, for example, the installation *Calendars (2020–2096)*, 2004–10. In its gridded configuration, Chong's *Calendars* work possesses formal and conceptual similarities to Hannah Darboven's *Konstruktion* (1967–), Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* (1964–present), and to On Kawara's *Today* series (1966–). On the other hand, despite the repeated presence of the photographic object and its sequential structuring, something of a futurity is produced in the calendars aporias into 2020–2096, into our coming *over* in time, in the *not yet* of time, which is the opposite of a Gestalt ambition that might attempt to record everything. Even so, when Chong makes this ideological and temporal leap, we could well be confused. Isn't it an outright contradiction? Aren't memories products of the past? Chong's statement is, however, a 'tiger's leap' into the open air of history. The tiger I refer to here is an allegory of future hope that Walter Benjamin envisaged in 1940, on the eve of the Nazi occupation of Paris.¹⁵ Benjamin's leap runs parallel to the 'charged time of the now', a notion that is extant in the essay titled *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where Benjamin identifies the French Revolution's reprise of ancient Rome as a 'now' blasted out of 'the continuum of history'.¹⁶

In similar fashion, Chong atomises the history of the Asia Pacific Triennial, taking us directly to its heart, the usually cloistered (yet unsealed) Australian Centre of Asia Pacific Art research library. In a red-lit room, deep within its faceless head, we hear the voice of woman who speaks from afar, taking up the words of multiple uncited authors. She offers us their words as the broken fragments of catalogues, articles and correspondence. The giant brain (which can only be a space odyssey), does not explain itself, and we cannot recount history from its historical fragments, so we are cast forward, perhaps into nothingness yet into a space for the future because of a shared past. In an earlier work called *Philip*, 2006, the cover blurb of Chong's collaborative science fiction novel asks, 'does history, like all stories, ultimately have an end?' Based on this question, I wonder if Chong's temporal projection might yet be a ruse, a 'Leap into the Void,' harking back to Yves Klein's 1960 photomontage, *Le Saut dans le Vide*, which constructed the artist's notorious dive into the future as a trick. In his counter-intuition and fictions of futurity, I can see why sci-fi might be attractive to Chong. Futurism could nonetheless be a *telos*, the end at which the vision culminates, whereby the future is just another edifice. I fear too that my allegory inheres a form of perspectival thinking, in the tradition of classical rectilinearism, narrowing to a point. And here I meet an impasse: While artists of the Asia Pacific might ideally sail their airships in Benjamin's 'open air of history', beyond historicism's ideological borders, such a utopic notion could be just another 'commonwealth', or the false prophecy of a destined or desired social future. Arcadia's islands exist in the mutability of political, environmental and social change, in which the future and the past are not historically or temporally distinct. Capricious time is similarly essential to the work that the above APT7 artists are doing on the counter-archive – against the archiving of archives – which at once adopts and subverts History to make a leap across époques into the future.

Atul Dodiya, one of the artists in the principal APT7 program, describes his merging of found images, as a 'kind of provocative glamour'. He also says that combining the opulent eyes and lips of actresses with pictures of Gandhi and distorted photographs of his father and grandfather 'contributes to the uneasy tension that surrounds us all the time'.¹⁷ Yet how are we able to decipher any meaning from the mad jumble of images? What is the logic of Dodiya's kaleidoscope? Without a structure, we look for a ground. Is it an empty page or a blank canvas; or is there a substrate meaning to the graffiti-covered wall or that reclaimed roller door? As artists recast reprised images into future memory, it seems to be part of the open sky of history, not into a void. In this way, Dodiya's passage to the future is made possible through the roller door of social polemic, where the context of history is firmly located in the present political world, even if satirical intent unsettles its veracity; a world where Bill Clinton wanders past the Taj Mahal, while Greek Olympic runners meet Meret Oppenheim, alongside famous Indian schoolbook icons.

The performance of all of these emblems stages a series of enactments, actions that remind me of the shape and gestural metaphor of language in the hysterical figures of Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: fragments*. Dodiya likewise deploys myth as a contemporary metaphor, resisting the stereotype of the tabula rasa or blankness of eastern historical temporality. For Dodiya, the anomalous morsels that make up the new picture are not temporal drifters but are part of a new ground that is generated as they carry the mnemonic flame of multiple worlds. Dodiya's race around the globe thus poses a challenge to the easy notion of the pastiche as a series of unrelated, timeless fragments, diverging both from modernity's 'rupture' with the past and postmodernity's strangely concomitant evacuation and salvage of history. A closer look at Benjamin's montage technique reveals the related concept of the decisive political recognition of an image (or a text) as part of a constellation

of historical origins, thereby exploding the myth of history's progress and continuity.¹⁸ As the cut-up was for William Burrows, so montage generated for Benjamin an awakening to the relationship between the pieces and the whole, which will never be whole. Akin to the work of Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective, Dodiya's use of the appropriated image is a version of the Nietzschean eternal return, a passage of the present that is not at all a futile recycling of the past, nor the return of the same but the *returning* which *of itself* synthesises time and diversity. The recurrent existence of events and experiences as both past and present is comparably epitomised in the Maori word for the past, 'mua', which also means in front.¹⁹ Teresia Teaiwa's writing, likewise, severs notions of linear (and forward moving) temporality. The oral tale is also vital is for cultural continuity and the reinvention of the collective memory, for it refuses to fall in line with dominant language and historical systems: storytelling has long evaded the imposition of imperial language precisely because it is not written down. Teaiwa's enfolding of identity, time and space emerges in this way from the practice of non-language, adopting a necessary process of *ekphrasis* – of art's translation within and without form that ciphers the woman's experience *through* the fish.

Te onauti *²⁰

Be te onauti
And fly.
Walking is for
Pathetic bipeds,
And swimming
Only half an option.

Men see one horizon
Where you always see two.

Perhaps that is why
fishermen lost and
unable to stomach
any more of the sea
feel fortunate to
catch you
so they may suck on your eyes.

Fish out of water: fly.
Fish, out of water, see two horizons.

* *Kiribati for flying fish*

The fish-eye-voices of *Te onauti* speak of the multiple histories and dimensions of (a woman's) body in its 'other' states, and of being outside oneself. With *{disarmed} imagining a Pacific archive*, the fish leaves the water altogether, as Bolatagici, Hunkin and Teaiwa combine their independent approaches to depict unrepresented aspects of war and military culture in the Pacific. Hunkin adopts a graphic illustration mode to narrate the history of the World War Two First Commando Fiji Guerrillas, and referencing forms of documentary photography Bolatagici examines the mass export of Fijian men for employment as military and private security, while Teaiwa's poetry emanates from her research into three generations of Fijian women serving in the British Army and Fiji Military Forces. In the initiation of a new 'Pacific archive' these three artists engage the body in history and its

biopolitics. If we take the word 'arms' in several senses, two kinds barriers are being taken down: the archive and ours. We find ourselves listening to silenced histories being openly enunciated: how bodies in the Pacific have been and are still made into a sacrifice. This is unlikely to be a bare account, because the fish, once out of water, once drawn in unyielding outlines, loses its flesh, leaving only scales, which is why transmutability of image and text across the {*disarmed*} collaboration has a crucial role in re-imagining political possibilities.

'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' So begins L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, first published in London in 1953. If this is so, how can we travel to that land? We need ambassador, an emissary. The artist working with the archive calls up the personage of the go-between, not because artists as carriers are powerless or oblivious to the messages they deliver but because there is a flow of desire in society, through which the boy or the artist becomes an agent, even a diplomat. Meanwhile, the literary imagination for the remembrance of things past courses through the work of writerly APT7 artists such as Dayanita Singh and through Teaiwa's meta-language. Singh's *House of Love* (2011), for instance, is a book of photographs with a text by writer Aveek Sen that runs parallel to the pictorial fiction of Singh's nine short 'stories'. The image-text helix engenders the sense of an autonomous narrative; the two components braided around the motif of the Taj Mahal, loaded as it is with contentions of love and illusion collectivised in romantic fiction. These and other libidinal guerrillas of the archive do the boundary traversing across history's disciplined or chastised zones, even as art making and curating, being bound within hegemonic forms of cultural production, remain bedded down with Enlightenment codes. Yet, taking up a go-between role at the moment of encountering APT7, we too can imagine (and desire) its work reflexively: to read history against History and archive against Archive, to allow time to transform matter and our minds. We still need to scrutinise how the creation of a new public memory might begin when access to the Archive has been denied, or its items lost or 'consigned', in Derridean terms, within the historicised past.²¹ As Chong proposes, this first of all entails the incitement of an imagination for a *memory of the future*, an open sky for dreaming, not under the burden of experience but out of an autonomous yet shared making of an archive to come – a future that is approaching for all of us.

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¹ See Dragan Kujundzic, 'Archigraphia: On the Future of Testimony and the Archive to Come', In Charles Merewether ed, *The Archive: Documents in Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2006: 172-6

² Late 19th and early 20th century critics Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault branded this contested notion of History 'historicism'. See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life', *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997; and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. The literature in this field is extensive, including key thinkers such as Hayden White, Karl Popper and Paul Hamilton. Alternatively, Foucault's archaeologies might be thought to circulate in their own binary and re-historicise History, a retrospectivity with which New Historicists also might arguably fail to break.

³ Jacques Derrida traces the etymology of the word archive and discovers the *archons* of ancient Greece, the superior magistrates of 'archontic power', whose role was to interpret official documents. 'Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law.' Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998: 2-3

⁴ For the notion of the public secret in relation to colonial iconoclasm, see Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999

⁵ 'A science of the archive must include the theory of institutionalisation, that is to say, the theory both of the law which begins inscribing itself there and of the right which authorizes it.' Derrida, *Archive Fever*: 4. See also, Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* 110, Fall 2004: 2-22

⁶ Derrida, *Archive Fever*: 4 (footnote). The same paradox underpins the deadly irony of a mimetic mausoleum for one's own work that Marcel Duchamp instituted in the *La boîte-en-valise* (1935-41)

⁷ Okwui Enwezor makes this list of artistic modes in a footnote to *Archive fever: uses of the document in contemporary art*, New York, N.Y.: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2008: 48

⁸ On the colonisation and the migrant archive, see Arjun Appadurai, 'Archive and Inspiration,' in Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder, eds, *Information is Alive*, Rotterdam: V2_Publishers/NAI, 2003: 14-25; and Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009

⁹ Enwezor, *Archive fever*: 37. On the archive and forgetting, see also Benjamin C. Hutchens, 'Techniques of Forgetting? Hypo-Amnesic History and the An-Archive', *SubStance* 36: 2, 2007: 37-55

¹⁰ For Hegel, the 'labour of the negative' is a process of self-becoming that *Geist* (mind, spirit, ghost) attains in the dialectical transformation of an opposition and its negation. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998: 10. Slavoj Žižek notes that 'Against this false ideological spectre of Hegel, one should nonetheless insist that the Hegelian dialectic of the Notion is indispensable in the critique of historicism.' See Slavoj Žižek, 'History Against Historicism', *European Journal of English Studies*, 2000, Vol. 4, No. 2: 104. For another incisive context for the Hegelian phrase 'labour of the negative', see Taussig, *Defacement*, 1999

¹¹ Enwezor, *Archive Fever*: 31

¹² Azoulay's 2011 essay 'Archive' analyses the right to deposit and access archival material, see Ariella Azoulay, 'Archive', *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* (December 2011), available online <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/2011/archive>

¹³ Enwezor, *Archive Fever*: 23

¹⁴ Interview with Heman Chong for the British Council Singapore, <http://vimeo.com/30831892>

¹⁵ The symbolism of the tiger is doubly charged too for Singaporeans, the naming of city narrated as a case of mistaken feline identity: the word 'Singapore' approximates the Malay for lion. The Singaporean tiger moreover represents colonisation, being aggressively hunted and yet a sign of the wildness within that resists western invasion, the tiger sometimes eating its predators too. Thinking of the 'tiger economy' metaphor, tigers might be imagined also to attack the west by subterfuge too. Kevin Chua discusses the Kiplingesque dream of the tiger on the Singaporean colonial frontier in the fascinating text, 'The Tiger and the theodolite: George Coleman's dream of extinction', *Broadsheet* 36.2, 2007

¹⁶ By 'now' Benjamin means to invoke, among other things, an expanded present that encompasses both the past and the future and charged because of its consciousness of the political continuity between eras. See Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn trans, Hannah Arendt ed, Fontana: London, 1973: 263

¹⁷ Interview with Atul Dodiya: 'Work in progress', *Little Magazine*, available online <http://www.littlemag.com/faith/atuldodiya.html>

¹⁸ In *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades project*, Susan Buck-Morss delineates that Benjamin's 'aim was to destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins that has the power to explode history's 'continuum'. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989: x

¹⁹ H. W. Williams, *Dictionary of the Maori Language*, Wellington: GP Print, 1971

²⁰ Teresia Teaiwa, 'Te onauti', The Other Voices International Project online, Volume 3
<http://othervoicespoetry.org/vol3/teaiwa/index.html>

²¹ 'Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration.' Derrida, *Archive Fever*: 3