The archive as artistic practice : Koh Nguang How's Singapore art archive project, from 1980s to now

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**THE ARCHIVE AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE:
KOH NGUANG HOW'S *SINGAPORE ART ARCHIVE PROJECT*,
FROM 1980s TO NOW**

SIE PENG TEO

SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN & MEDIA

**A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of
the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts (Research)**

2019

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Abstract

The Singapore Art Archive Project (SAAP) was first initiated as a personal collection by artist Koh Nguang How in the 1980s. However, it was not formalised until 2005. It consists of over one million articles, art ephemera and the like related to art practices in Singapore. *SAAP* has since materialised into a cacophony of ever-changing forms, including a diverse range of exhibition methods. The work has emerged in the very specific art historical context of Singapore, where there is a distinct lack of historical and archival material. Consequently, recent texts have generally ascribed Koh's archival contents as instrumental for various purposes, particularly filling this art historical gap. Yet, there is little scholarship on Koh's archival mechanism itself and the artistic qualities of his practice. This study thus proposes to understand Koh's work under the rubric of *archive as artistic practice*. The research asks: What does Koh's work do and how does it do it? How can we understand the multiple iterations of *SAAP* as generative sites for discourse and meaning? How can the *archive as artistic practice* inform us of a different modality towards our understanding of the archive?

This state of uneven coexistence is the backdrop to which Koh, an independent artist, can be seen to resort to a unique aesthetic negotiation of Singaporean national history, culture and art. Fundamentally, this research is driven by a lack of documentation of artistic practices in Singapore in general, with a particular absence of artist's own voices and perspectives. More

importantly, until recently, the use of the archive has not been fully understood as an artistic practice and as a malleable construct to engender alternate modes of knowledge production. While many artists keep separate archives for the construction of work, these archives and their artwork are often divided as two separate entities. The scant discourse on *SAAP* appears, similarly, to privilege his archival activities over his art practice, segregating the two. This research argues, however, that Koh's *archival activities and art practice are one and the same*, together constituting an artwork. By no means a comprehensive history of artistic archival practice or even *SAAP*, this research aims to posit Koh's *SAAP* at the interstices of the archive and art practice. By using a narrative inquiry approach, specifically with a significant selection of in-depth interviews with the artist and related persons, this study constitutes several of Koh's exhibitions between 1980s and now as symptomatic of an archive as artistic practice. Such findings may be of specific value to the artist, art historian, curator, archivist and the art patron in Southeast Asia and beyond. The notion is that amidst the stories of Koh and other scholarship in context lies a discursive space for historical, theoretical and methodological possibilities of the archive.

Key Words: Archive, Archival Art, Archival Aesthetics, Artistic Practice, Curation, Performance, Exhibition, Art as Method, Singapore, Narrative Inquiry, Interdisciplinary, Collective Memory

1. Introduction

Fig 1- Koh Nguang How, Artefact: Evidence# 1, from *Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2004), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

In 2004, the Singaporean artist Koh Nguang How participated in an exhibition at p-10, a new curatorial initiative situated near Little India. The title of the work was *Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (see

figure 1), referring to an error Koh had uncovered relating to the provenance of a painting by Socialist Realist painter Chua Mia Tee. The painting, titled *National Language Class*, had been incorrectly dated as 1950, rather than 1959, in *Channels and Confluences: A History of Art* (1996) by Kwok Kian Chow, the then director of the Singapore Art Museum (see figure 2). This was significant as the book is one of the two “the main references for a broad narrative on the history of art in Singapore”, the other being Marco Hsu’s *A Brief History of Malayan Art* (1963).¹ The painting depicts a group of Chinese students attempting to learn and adopt Malay as their national language during the years of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), a critical period for both Singapore and Malaysia as they both aspired toward a unified Malayan union while fending off the threat of communism during the Cold War in the 1950s.² The realization of the incorrect date of 1950 opened up a space for multiple interpretations around the abrupt dissolution of the Equator Art Society in Singapore (est. 1956), of which Chua was a member.³ The society was “alleged” to have had communist associations.⁴

According to Singaporean art historian June Yap, this error unveiled “a web of micro histories”.⁵ Yap cites the museum curators, who quote Koh’s *Errata@p-10* as the impetus for *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*, as a means for further inquiry into untangling history, identity and art’s relation to politics and society.⁶ According to Koh,

¹ Jeffrey Say and Seng Yu Jin, *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art* (Singapore: LASALLE College of the Arts, 2016), 14.

² Seng Yu Jin, *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007), 7. According to Seng, the “Malayan Emergency” (1948-1960), coined by the British colonial government, refers to the period of trench warfare between the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the Malayan government, a critical period in the history of Malaya and Singapore, whom at that time both endeavoured to establish a Malayan identity. It was a tumultuous time amidst racial tensions, riots, and anti-colonialism against the backdrop of the looming threat of communism during the Cold War era.

³ June Yap, *Retrospective: A Historiographic Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (Malaysia: SIRD, 2016), 82.

⁴ Alecia Yeo Kay Ling, ‘Equator Art Society’, Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board, Singapore, 2016, accessed 1 June, 2019, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1253_2006-11-30.html.

⁵ Yap, *Retrospective*, 82.

⁶ Yap, *Retrospective*, 85-86.

Errata@p-10 became the catalyst for a series of projects and further instalments, including one at the Central Library of the National University of Singapore and another at the Singapore History Museum, comprising of selections from his own personal collection of historical materials. Shortly after *Errata@p-10*, in 2005, he named his collection *The Singapore Archive Project (SAAP)*.

In its revealing of “micro histories”, *Errata@p-10* (and by extension *SAAP*), appears to support the idea of the archive as a means for knowledge production. Koh’s *SAAP* provides an invaluable contribution to the history of art in Singapore, providing new primary source material, re-dating significant artwork and filling a gap left by history. To understand this value attributed to *SAAP*, it is imperative to map the context in which Koh’s practice emerged. Singapore, in its archivization of artistic practices, lacks history.

“In 2012, we commissioned a volume of essays to trace the course of cultural policy in Singapore from [the] 1950s to now. We did so because we do not have such a history. We have monographs on the history of various arts across all traditions but not a history of arts and cultural policy as such.”⁷

- Janadas Devan, *Chief of Government Communications, Ministry of Communication and Information, Singapore*

⁷ Janadas Devan, ‘A History of Arts and Cultural Policies in Singapore’ in *The State and the Arts in Singapore*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: World Scientific, 2018), xi.

1996

The next significant point was Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Arts and Literature" in 1942 which set down a theoretical framework for Chinese Social Realist art which called for representational images with positive socialist content or political relevance. The Academic or Liberal Realist line was further substantiated when Xia Bihong became the principal of the Beijing Art Academy in 1948 and this was followed by many Soviet Social Realist artists

visiting and teaching in China in the 1950s.

The Equator Art Society, founded in 1956, is often associated with Social Realism in Singapore although it was more of a realist confluence and to some extent a common front reacting to the emerging formalist interest in the 1950s.

The Arts Association of Chinese High School formed earlier appeared to echo more intense political sentiment in its anti-colonial stance.

[DET] CHUA MIA TEE: *National Language Class*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 112 x 153 cm. Gift of the Equator Art Society.

Page 71, Plate 47

Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class*, 1950

Oil on canvas

112 x 153 cm

Gift of the Equator Art Society

Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art

by Kwok Kian Chow, published by the National Heritage Board/Singapore Art Museum in 1996.

Fig 2- Koh Nguang How, Artefact: Evidence# 2, from *Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How (2004)*, Multimedia, dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

“...There was only the National Archives in Singapore, established 1968, whose role was the keeper of records of national and historical significance, hardly focusing on artists and art events.”⁸

- *Koh Nguang How*

The two statements above reflect some of the preconditions in which *SAAP* first emerged. A lack of both historical material and vehicles for collective memory characterizes the stage for contemporary art in Singapore. Koh’s work, as an archive, appears to address this gap in historical and institutional knowledge. Exhibitions such as *Errata@P-10* are an opportunity for Koh to present new historical materials, providing a platform for discourse and learning.

However, *SAAP*’s categorization as a purely archival practice in the normative sense may appear troubled on a closer inspection. At *Errata@P-10*, the documents and materials were assembled in a distinctly ad-hoc fashion, with books, materials, personal annotations all assembled in a non-hierarchical manner. Furthermore, Koh made himself present in the exhibition space, answering questions, engaging conversation and telling personal narratives. There appeared to be an aesthetic sensibility different to that of the normative archival structure. Koh’s work and presence at *Errata* thus may be seen to blur the boundaries between the positions of curator, historian, archivist and artist. The result was an experience that purposefully allowed for multiple meanings, perspectives and stories. In this way, a closer inspection may reveal that Koh’s collection is anything but a stable archive in the normative sense. Therefore, this study approaches Koh’s work differently, as an *archive as artistic practice*.

⁸ Koh Nguang How, “The Singapore Art Archive Project”, unpublished article, undated, 1.

Until recently, manipulation of the archival medium has not been fully understood as an artistic practice and as a malleable construct to engender alternate modes of knowledge production. Many artists keep archives for the construction of work, yet these are often read as separate to their artistic practice in art historical discourse. Similarly, the relatively scant discourse on *SAAP* appears to privilege his archival activities over his art practice. This research argues that, as read through *SAAP*, Koh's *archival activities and art practice are one and the same, thus constituting an archive as artistic practice*. Furthermore, the processes involved are constitutive of the artwork. Hence, the term archive as artistic practice is meant to be understood in this sense. *Errata@p-10*, and other iterations of *SAAP*, should not be praised merely for its contribution to Singapore history, but for the complex, intricate, and *artistic* methods Koh has deployed in the creation of the work and its display.

For instance, against Singapore's socio-political backdrop, Koh deploys the aesthetic of the archive and its performative acts, including the act of dating. To date objects, documents or events involves inserting them into a historical narrative. This act of dating stabilizes a pre-existing canon and maintains a regime of power, that is, the authority of the archive. *Errata@P-10* reveals that this authority is unstable. By re-dating the object, Koh reveals the significance of dating but also the impermanence of the dating act. He reveals the flexibility of history and destabilizes this authority, including his own authority; Koh's work thus critiques the same archival acts, such as dating that he himself engages in. In this way, Koh's relationship to the archival form is a problematic one.

Here is revealed the complexity inherent in *SAAP*, with which it appears to straddle the categories of artistic and archival practice, which has become manifest in the evolving reception and categorization of his work by Singaporean art institutions. Over the past couple

of decades, Koh's collection of ephemera gradually gained increasing levels of archival authority and legitimization. This adoption of archival performative vocabulary is what slowly established Koh's collection as a veritable archive in the eyes of the institution. In this way, Koh's work has received greater recognition. While Koh uses archival devices to establish his practice's authority, the work simultaneously reveals archives as unreliable in the face of a multi-nodal and ever more complex web of histories, as evidenced by *Errata@P-10*. Part of this research thus is to understand the mechanics of such knowledge production.

The aim is that this new understanding can help bridge the lack of documentation and discourse of artistic practice in Singapore. Another complication in the categorization of Koh's practice emerges from the specific socio-economic context of the arts in Singapore.⁹ Terence Chong, senior fellow and deputy director of ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, has reminded us that Singapore's public policy initiatives towards the arts and culture largely began only in 1989.¹⁰ According to him, "the state has been the largest funder of the arts and culture"; control over public funds thus make the bureaucrat the "de facto connoisseur and patron of the arts in Singapore, outside of his or her field of expertise".¹¹ This condition has led to a disjuncture between the state and art practitioners, where social science experts Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh have noted that the measure of arts have been consistently linked to economic output.¹² Further difficulties aside from heavy regulation underscore some of the challenges of artistic production in Singapore, including censorship leading to a significant lack of artistic discourse and critical spaces.¹³ This state of uneven coexistence is the backdrop to which Koh, an

⁹ For studies on state funding of the arts, see: Chong, 2010, 2014; Kong 2000, 2012.

¹⁰ Terence Chong, 'The State and the New Society: The Role of Arts in Singapore Nation-building', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 34 (June 2010): 140.

¹¹ Terence Chong, 'The Bureaucratic Imagination of the Arts' in *The State and the Arts in Singapore* (2018), xx.

¹² Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of "nation,"* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 177.

¹³ Censorship in Singapore has been documented by many writers including: Langenbach, 2003; Turner, 2005; Sa'at 2001; Kuo 2005; Wee 2012; Tan 2018.

independent artist, can be seen to resort to a unique aesthetic negotiation of Singaporean national history, culture and art.

SAAP thus emerges out of a specific Singaporean context, which has perhaps lead to the categorization of his work purely as an archival practice. This research seeks to re-evaluate Koh's work artistically, focussing instead on the elements of his practice that fall outside the definition of the normative archive. By approaching *SAAP* in this way it may be possible to reveal a complex practice that develops, produces and nurtures other forms of knowing. Koh's *archive as artistic practice* thus allows for a broader understanding of art history in Singapore but also expands the concept of the archive methodologically and theoretically as an artistic practice.

Koh's work has received negligible sustained critical responses of this kind. This research is driven by a lack of documentation of artistic practices in Singapore in general, with a particular absence of artists' own voices and perspectives. By no means a comprehensive history of archival artistic practice, or even of *SAAP*, this study focusses on a selection of Koh's exhibitions from the 1980s to now. By focusing on specific exhibitions, the hope is to focus on a more in-depth analysis of Koh's practice, which has not been done till now. Foregrounding Koh's own voice and perspective will assist in reintroducing the artistic complexity of his work. This research posits *SAAP* at the interstices of the archive and art practice, reading Koh's archival medium and methods as departure points for further research. The notion is that amidst the stories of Koh and other scholarship in context lies a discursive space for new historical, theoretical and methodological possibilities.

1.1. Research Questions and Aims

In the context of modern Singapore's art history, Koh's practice represents a possible rupture, evidenced by the positive reception it received and the chain of projects it engendered. *SAAP* has been granted political and cultural significance from writers such as Woon (2018), Toh (2016), Taylor (2016) and Lenzi (2011). The general narrative, presented by those writing on Koh's work, is that *SAAP* fills a gap omitted by Singaporean history, with many regarding his archive for its content only, and not for its artistic merit as a bonafide artwork in its entirety, as we shall see in the Literature Review. While these writers have pointed to the political and artistic significance of Koh's practice, there is nonetheless limited sustained attention given to the work. This research seeks to begin a process of expanding the critical discourse on Koh's practice. The challenge here is how to consider *SAAP* as an exemplary instance of archive as artistic practice, itself constituting a singular artwork in its entirety. According to Koh, several negotiations for institutional acquisition of *SAAP* fell apart partly because we may not as yet have an adequate system to fully accommodate physically or conceptually an actual or fully functioning archive as artistic practice.¹⁴ Until now, his work is limited to being understood as simply activism, research, or even supplementary material. Viewing it instead as *archive as artistic practice*, *SAAP* can be revealed as a refusal of the assumed categories of art, research, history, and instead as a generative site of knowledge production. *SAAP* can be read as an artwork that defies these assumed categories, creating spaces – both physical and metaphorical, through its multiple iterations – that foreground issues for debate and continuous critical engagement.

¹⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 1 June 2019.

Fundamentally, we can aim to ask these questions:

- 1) *What does Koh's work do and how does it do it?*
- 2) *How can we understand the multiple iterations of SAAP as generative sites for discourse and meaning?*
- 3) *How can the archive as artistic practice inform us of a different modality towards our understanding of the archive?*

These broader questions will be explored via the following three sub-questions, which will provide the focuses of the three main chapters of this inquiry:

- 1) What are the attributes of the archive as artistic practice in Koh's work?
- 2) How does SAAP inform us of a new understanding of the archive as artistic practice?
- 3) How does Koh's practice interrogate the positions of artist, historian/archivist and curator?

Through a critical examination, the aim is to approach *SAAP* in a new way, as an artwork in its entirety: the archive as art practice read through Koh's processes of archivization and deployment. This research considers Koh's archival practice holistically, giving equal attention to both exhibited materials and those in stasis, while giving equal emphasis to past, present and future iterations.

1.2. Significance and Scope

Koh's experimentation with the archival medium generates new avenues of artistic processes and new paradigms of inquiry on the archive as an *artistic* method, which can be further integrated into the discourse of art history here and elsewhere. Southeast Asia represents a diverse art region, not solely as a counter-narrative to the West, but as a network of possible sites of understanding novel artistic practices through their encounters and exchange. Koh's work represents an opportunity to understand a unique dimension of artistic practice not solely because of regional differences but in spite of it. While the area of this research will be confined to focus on Koh's *SAAP*, between the 1980s and now, the outcome of this inquiry should engage a broader dialogue, shedding a new light on Koh's work and the possibilities of the archive.

1.3. Chapter Overview

The structure of this research is organized into Literature Review, Methodology, and three main chapters, followed by a conclusion.

My Literature Review will constitute an evaluation of existing relevant literature and theoretical approaches for my research. This approach can read *SAAP* in reference to what art historian and critic Hal Foster calls the “quasi-archival logic” or “quasi-archival” architecture, examining how Koh uses his arrangements of seemingly incommensurate elements to unveil other modes of knowing.¹⁵ Other interdisciplinary theoretical texts will include philosopher

¹⁵ Hal Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, *October* 110 (Fall, 2004): 5.

Michel Foucault's writing on the resiliency of the archive to categorization and thus hermeneutic monopolization, as well as art historian and curator Huang Chien Hung's interpretation of the migrant archive in Asia. Alongside Hal Foster, curator Okwui Enwezor and Ingrid Schaffner will provide insight in terms of thinking through additional examples of archival art practices. Writings by art historians, curators and other experts on Southeast Asian art practices, including June Yap, Nora Taylor, Woon Tien Wei and Iola Lenzi, will be collated to provide the context for Koh's work. I will also evaluate these writings' contribution to a critical understanding of *SAAP*.

Finally, I aim to utilize academic and art critic Renato Barilli's concept of "the science of culture" as a pathway to integrate an idea with material spheres.¹⁶ Barilli's concept of reading phenomena of culture through material methods will assist in an inclusive approach that gives weight to fine art and craft in equal measure. Philosopher of Science James McAllister will help provide an approach for valuing artistic practices as a method of knowledge production. This approach is supported by a range of thinkers including Graeme Sullivan, Elliot Eisner, J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole. All together, these texts hope to recontextualize Koh's practice theoretically within global interdisciplinary scholarship. The key here is to establish potential new ways of understanding Koh's artistic practice, having recognized the lack of sustained academic discourse that treats *SAAP* as foremost an artistic work. From a broader perspective, it also attempts to contextualize *SAAP* in relation to multiple global voices in the discourse of the archive as art practice. Such findings may be of specific value to the artist, art historian, curator, archivist and the art patron in Southeast Asia and beyond.

¹⁶ Renato Barilli, *The Science of Culture and the Phenomenology of Styles*, trans. Corrado Federici (Montreal; Kingston; London; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 9-12.

The chapter on methodology will explain my choice of narrative inquiry for examining Koh's work. Pedagogical professors, D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, outline narrative inquiry as a concept of knowledge grounded in lived experience and storytelling.¹⁷ I will explore their assertion that this research method is interactive, where the researcher's own subjectivity forms a part of the discourse. Psychologist Jerome Bruner expands this approach by outlining the division between empirical knowing and "narrative knowing".¹⁸ Bruner's contribution can be seen to support Clandinin and Connelly in the assertion of the importance of stories. Art theorist, Graeme Sullivan, may help to benchmark artistic knowing as a rigorous review of data collected, where the aim is to generate discussion and discourse as opposed to finite outcomes and certainty. At this point I will outline in detail my research method according to several categories which are based on a categorical system of 'field texts' proposed by Clandinin and Connelly. My 'field texts' include: interviews (non-structured and semi-structured), observation, personal notes, photographic notes, a range of artefacts (newspapers, books, exhibition catalogues, relics of performances, Koh's photo documents), email correspondence and existing literature. At each stage I will articulate my methods of handling these field texts according to narrative inquiry. Finally, in proposing my methods of analysis, Psychotherapist Donald E. Polkinghorne may prove to be vital in his distinction between "analysis of narrative" and "narrative analysis", with the latter being the intended approach for this study.¹⁹

The following main part of my research will be divided into the following three chapters:

4) Understanding Attributes of the Archive as Artistic Practice Through Koh

¹⁷ D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experiences and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 20.

¹⁸ Jerome Bruner, "Narrative Construction of Reality" in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18 (Autumn 1991): 1.

¹⁹ D. Jean Clandinin and M. Shaun Murphy, "Looking Ahead" in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry*, ed. D. Jean Clandinin (Sage Publications: London, 2007), 634.

- 5) New Experiments, New Ventures: Developing the Archive as Artistic Practice
- 6) Blurring Boundaries and Rearranging Roles: *SAAP*'s Generative Sites for Meaning and Discourse.

In chapter four, *Understanding Attributes of the Archive as Artistic Practice Through Koh*, I will attempt to outline the various characteristics of the archive as artistic practice. By exploring the research question, *What are the attributes of the archive as artistic practice in Koh's work?* we will be able provide a foundation for our study. First, we will trace a history of Koh's life and practice, showing the personal and subjective nature of his archive. Then, utilising two examples, *Archiving the Archivist/SAAP@PpongPpong* (2016) and *Browsing Copy* (2019), we can begin to form an understanding of how Koh's work operates. We can attribute qualities both to Koh's work specifically and to the broader form of the archive as artistic practice.

Chapter five, *New Experiments, New Ventures: Developing the Archive as Artistic Practice*, can now explore the boundaries of the archive as artistic practice as an aesthetic form and medium. I shall pose the question of: *How does SAAP inform us of a new understanding of the archive as artistic practice?* By selecting two examples of *SAAP* in exhibition, *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009) and *SAAP@8Q-SAM/Artists in the News* (2011), the focus can move to Koh's exploration of the aesthetic boundaries of his practice. Here, Koh can be seen to push the limit of the archive as artistic practice. Yet, at the same time, his archive can be seen as shaped by limitations. A tension arises between his artistic and archival strategies with the very real contexts of the material, medium and socio-political forces that surround his work.

Titled, *Blurring Boundaries and Rearranging Roles: SAAP's Generative Sites for Meaning and Discourse*, the sixth chapter has two main focuses. The first is an examination of how Koh straddles and blurs the roles of artist, archivist, curator and historian in his exhibition practice, thereby asking: *How does Koh's practice interrogate the positions of artist, historian/archivist and curator?* Secondly, my aim will be to stress how these iterations of *SAAP* form generative sites for the production of new meanings and a multiplicity of knowledge. They are transformative sites, where boundaries (of curator, artist and archivist) are blurred in the creation and telling of stories. These elements will first be examined in Koh's use of re-enactment in *4 Days in August* (1992). Next, Koh's work *SAAP@SharjahArtBookFair/The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018), provides an example of Koh's manipulation of PowerPoint as an aesthetic, curatorial and archival medium. Finally, by analysing *Errata* (2004/2005), reflections can be made on the archival strategies that Koh uses to defy categorization and find new avenues of meaning.

In the conclusion, I will collate my overall findings, provide in-depth analysis and review these in relation to my overarching research questions. In light of the various iterations discussed throughout the study, it may be possible to draw new conclusions about the unique relationship between Koh's work and Singapore's art institutions. I will then conclude with a summary of my findings after analysis, describing potential significance for both Singapore's art history and for a contemporary global understanding of the archive as artistic practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Archival Histories

The Society of American Archivists defined the archive as the following:

Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contained or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order and collective control; permanent records.²⁰

Using the term “archive” in the work’s title, Koh evokes the history of the archive. The western concept of the archive originated in in Ancient Greece (5th and 4th century B.C), where Athenians kept their important documents in the temple located next to the courthouse in the public square.²¹ According to American archival scholar T.R. Schellenberg, modern public archives developed for several reasons: first, the need for governmental efficiency due to the glut of documents generated following the rise of modern nations; following that, cultural and political purposes related to nation building; and finally official reasons as part of governmental administration.²² As such, we can see that Western archives are tied closely to the notions of power, agency and subjectivity. Historian, archivist and general director of the Staatlichen

²⁰ Society of American Archivists, accessed 12 October 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/a/archives>.

²¹ T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 3.

²² *Ibid*, 8-10.

Archive Hermann Rumschottel established a close interconnection with archivists and historians around the late 18th to early 19th century in Western Europe, at the height of the positivist movement, leading to the function of archives to change from that of the legal to the historical.²³ According to Rumschottel, the then new science of history needed material and relied on the archivists, who used to assume such duties of compiling and recording important and valuable documents of history. The archivists in return were happy to reciprocate for, firstly, a practical reason due to the glut of documents generated with the rise of modern nations and, second, the benefit of provenance established through a historical source; thus, archival science evolved alongside the development of history in 19th century Europe in a mutually beneficial and influential way.²⁴ Sven Spieker calls this development “the irrational underside of modernism’s archival connection” that gave “that underside its necessary historical traction”.²⁵ This observation had already been made by English archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson in 1922. He says “It is hardly necessary to say that History, as it is understood now, has become very largely dependent on Archives”.²⁶ The entanglement of archives with the development of Western concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘history’ reveals the necessity of archives in the Western production of subjectivity; to put it simply, archives are subject machines.

However, this genealogy foregrounds a homogenous, linear history of archival practice. On the other hand, there is an alternate history of archival practice, examples of which can be found in art history, be it Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-1929), Walter Benjamin’s *Arcade Projects* (1927-1940), Marcel Broodthaers’s *Musee d’Art Moderne, Department des Aigles, Section XIXeme Siecle* (1968-1972), Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* (1962-2013); to more recently in

²³ Hermann Rumschottel, ‘The Development of Archival Science as a Scholarly Discipline,’ *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 145-146.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 3. Spieker refers to Western archival art practice as influenced by its archives’ historical approach.

²⁶ Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 1.

Asia, Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia, Vol 1: G for Ghost (writers)*, Chen Chieh-jen's *The Bienwen Book* (2002-2014) or Pak Sheung Chuen's *Familiar Numbers, Unknown Telephone* (2005-2016).²⁷ The meeting of archival and artistic practices produces a highly productive and creative site for experimentation. Here, the archive takes on a great variety forms, with the myriad of ways in which artists borrow, appropriate and manipulate archival material. To understand the scope of archival practice is to look beyond the traditional genealogy and ask: what can an archive be and how can it inform? French philosopher Michel Foucault describes the heterogeneity of the archive in this way:

“...it is *the system of its functioning*. Far from being that which unifies everything that has been said in the great confused murmur of a discourse, far from being only that which ensures that we exist in the midst of preserved discourse, it is that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration ...between tradition and oblivion, it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements...*”²⁸

Koh's work, such as the highlighting of historical inaccuracy in *Errata@p-10*, appears to call into question the stability of archives. The archive's agency and its power to shape language, history and identity, has been emphasised by Foucault's notion of the archive as a social

²⁷ For an analysis of Ho, Chen and Pak's contribution to Asian archival art practices see: Huang Chien-Hung, 'Archiving as an Asian Art Practice', Asia Art Archive, accessed 1 October 2018, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/shortlist-archiving-as-an-asian-art-practice/type/collection-spotlight>.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Mark Sheridan Smith (UK Routledge, 2002), 146. Italics original.

construct, that is, “the archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events”.²⁹

While Foucault posits the fundamental governing power of the archive, he also stresses the potential for “modification” and “transformation”.³⁰ As that which “differentiates discourses in their multiple existence”, we can understand the archive as a generative place for conversation, interaction and interpretation.³¹ Multiple narratives become possible, eclipsing the trajectory of a single, linear one. For this research, Foucault’s notion of the archive will help situate Koh’s archive not in the dichotomy of ascribed and often imposed binary positions (such as museum vs artist, east vs west and so on) but amongst a sea of what has been written or said from different discourses, within or outside the institution, within or outside the history of art, beyond geographical barriers, anchored by the materiality of his archive in its specific time and place. In the archive as artistic practice, as we shall see, discursivity occurs amidst what remains *unsaid* between both the artist *and* the institution, as well as the participants, and requires thinking through the different layers of relations encountered through practice. Foucault’s position not only prepositions the creative potential of working with the archival form, but also underscores the infinite networks of discursivity archival work can enable. As Seng observed of Koh’s practice, “it’s never in the way kind of framed in a particular theme, or a particular issue, like many exhibitions do, but, like... it’s, it’s almost infinite.”³²

Foucault’s understanding of the archive opens the door to further ways of conceptualizing archival practice. In his essay *Archiving as an Asian Art Practice*, historian and curator Huang Chien Hung argues that the “Asian situation” in archival practice should be understood *not* as

²⁹ Ibid, 145.

³⁰ Ibid, 146.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See Appendix, 91.

the Western archetype of meta-archive or even deconstruction as a whole.³³ According to Huang, due to the complexities of the Cold War and colonization in the twentieth century, the concept of the art archive did not take hold in Asia until the 1990s, as a result of globalization. As such, its trajectory and evolution should be studied closely to region-specific histories and geopolitical conditions.³⁴ For him, this involves embracing the “archipelago”, a concept first developed by postcolonial theorist Edouard Glissant in 1997.³⁵ As with Jenkinson’s assertion of the archives role in the formation of history, Huang sees the established canonizing archive of the West to be a founding pillar of national borders and continental self-identity. In response, Huang proposes an alternative, *migrant* archive of moving parts in constant relation, where national, geographical and temporal borders are transcended. Resisting against the static object in linear time, the migrant archive (following the image of the archipelago) is in a state of perpetual re-imagining. He cites the works of Ho Tzu Nyen (*The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia, Vol i: G for Ghost (writers)* (2012-2017), Chen Chieh-jen (*The Bianwen Book I* (2002-2014) and Pak Sheung Chuen’s *Familiar Numbers, Unknown Telephone* (2005-5-16, 13:15-13:18) as reflective of today’s Asian condition. For example, Ho Tzu Nyen’s *The Critical Dictionary of South East Asia, Vil 1: G for Ghost(writers)* develops archival art beyond chronology or geographical boundaries through his methods of piecing fragmentary notions of Southeast Asia by reconstructing information pulled from the internet into a fictive dictionary, working collaboratively with various artists, namely Sebastian Lugert, Jan Gerber, Yasuhiro Morinaga and Bani Haykal.³⁶ Their efforts denote the possibility of alternative forms of ordering and knowledge production, in relation to a normalized dictionary. How might Koh’s

³³ Huang Chien-Hung, ‘Archiving as an Asian Art Practice’.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ This term was first coined by postcolonial theorist Edouard Glissant, for approaching an understanding of a culture as a constellation of moving elements, rather than a fixed binary. (Edouard Glissant, “Conversation with Edouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II”, interview by Manthia Diawara, trans. Christopher Winks, University of Liverpool (August 2009), accessed 18 March 2018, https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/csis-2/blackatlantic/research/Diawara_text_defined.pdf.)

³⁶ Doretta Lau, ‘Ho Tzu Nyen on The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia’, Asia Art Archive, published 19 June 2017, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/ho-tzu-nyen-on-the-critical-dictionary-of-southeast-asia>.

archive as art practice also manufacture new forms of knowledge? Analysing *SAAP*, we can ask: How do migrant materials, marginalia and ephemera, collected from a variety of sources, allow the presence of multiple narratives and perspectives that circumnavigate the prescribed linear history?

The artistic examples Huang lists demonstrate creative re-workings of the archival project that develop and trial new ways of cataloguing, mapping and understanding the constantly migrating Asian world. These projects highlight the difficulty, if not impossibility, to explicate cultural denominations based on historical chronology or geography. It is borne out of this cultural hybridity, that the migrant archive emerges. Koh's practice, alongside the artists Huang highlights, thus may represent an evolution of archival practice in response to these shifting cultural, social and geo-political positions.

But it is not archives alone that can represent the socio-historical context in which they are formed. Artworks too can embody multiple and diverse cultural expressions of a given time.. If we are to understand Koh's archive as art practice, despite the temptation to hastily brand his archive as solely an 'alternate' history, in the context of heavy state regulation in the arts, I will argue that Koh's work is much more complex. The significance is important because it denotes that his archive, as art practice, is not limited to one genre such as institutional critique or postproduction art. In his concepts of "archipelago" and "relation", Edouard Glissant identifies a fundamental element in this thinking to be that "every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity".³⁷ Referring to the African diasporic experience, he argues that despite extraordinary suffering and loss, one *gains* in the sense that he has gained another dimension through interactions and exchange in the New World, without losing himself. He calls this

³⁷ Edouard Glissant, "Conversation with Edouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II".

quality “multiplicity”.³⁸ He further argues that the notion that one needs to lose oneself in any transaction of exchange is a false one; that one can be with the Other while being themselves and therefore simultaneously a multiple. He cites the example of the African Americans and jazz. The fact that they had lost everything when they first landed in the New World, “...they had nothing, not even a song,” yet were able to articulate and reconstruct a new language, of fragmented memories, nuances but also of novel experiences.³⁹ Therefore the idea of ‘unity’ here can be perceived in relation to the world, rather than contrary poles, or racial or historical binaries, as often assumed. The “archipelago” Glissant refers to encompasses different dimensions of human knowledge and experiences *in relation to the world*. In *SAAP*, we must ask how the ‘diasporic’ condition requires consistently negotiating and eluding state regulation on the arts and the archive. However, in Koh’s work, the institutions appear to be simultaneously *included* in it, as evidenced the appropriation of an institutional archival vocabulary, which will be explored further in this research. Foucault describes a similar condition in his notion of the archive: “...its status as an escapee...”. I take this to mean an escape from normative categories and fixed binary positions.⁴⁰ Foucault, Glissant and Huang all gesture toward a specific socio-temporal condition. Is it this perpetual state of mutation and migrancy that allows Koh’s archive as art practice to exist? Is this why *SAAP* eludes categorization because we do not quite have a system to accommodate Koh’s project: a living, fully functioning archive as artwork, the by-product of his practice, with the archivist present at *all* times?

By way of Glissant, Asian archival art can be reconsidered both in its own context, and in relation to a spectrum of different countries and regions, including the West and other Asian

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 146.

regions. Through the development of *SAAP*, one may presuppose that both regional and international encounters might be fundamental in informing Koh's practice. Glissant's concept of tracing the artistic object (archive as material culture) in the shape of an "archipelago", as developed for the Asian archive by Huang, is how I propose to approach Koh's archive in this study.⁴¹ With the global turn in art history, historians have posed fundamental questions on the varied forms of understanding human experiences beyond the concept of Western modernity tied to its 'objective' history and 'scientific' archives.⁴² Singapore and much of Southeast Asia inherited Western ideas through colonialism; today, both Western and Eastern ideas are embodied within our culture, and distinguishing between Eastern and Western ideas or practices becomes increasingly difficult, and perhaps less productive. Fundamentally, Glissant says "the dialectic is not a linear approach towards that which is contrary. The dialectic is a total rhizome of what's different."⁴³ From this vantage point, *SAAP* also poses a rhizomatic range of relational possibility for the Southeast Asian archive.

Foucault and Glissant appear to share common ground. For Foucault, the archive "emerges in fragments, regions and levels.....its locus is the gap between our own discursive practices".⁴⁴ For Glissant, "relation is made up of all the differences in the world and that we would not forget a single one of them, even the smallest".⁴⁵ In a recent conversation, Koh explicitly stated that "art in Singapore" to him meant not just Singaporean artists but also must include international artists showing in Singapore, of which he too archives.⁴⁶ He states that his determining criteria is never formed around national borders but instead considers whether the

⁴¹ Huang, 'Archiving as an Asian Art Practice'.

⁴² The theoretical interrogation of archival practices can be found across a variety of thinkers and historians including: Huang, 2018; Enwezor, 2015; Casid, D'Souza, 2014; Belting, 2013; Preziosi, 2009; Carrier, 2008; Flores, 2008; Elkins, 2006; Glissant, 1997.

⁴³ Glissant, 'Conversation with Edouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II'.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 146

⁴⁵ Glissant, 'Conversation with Edouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II'.

⁴⁶ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 7.

material is “impactful”.⁴⁷ Rejecting prescribed methods of categorization and ordering, does Koh seek new modes of relation? Observing this, we can ask: how does Koh makes use of this “non-hierarchical spatiality to advantage,” to construct his archive?⁴⁸

In light of Glissant, and following Koh’s own divestment of categorization by national borders, this inquiry will not emphasize a postcolonial reading to categorize Koh’s archive, prioritising instead close analysis of his work and materials. Recent conversations regarding ‘emergent art’ in Southeast Asia have expressed the difficulty in ascribing art through geographic borders.⁴⁹ Central to the problem was the use of the term “emergent”, referring to Southeast Asia as an emergent art region. Such a categorization of novel discourses assumes an immediate hierarchy between different styles of expression and more importantly, as argued by Nathalie Johnston, founder and director of Myanmar/art, posits the artist’s existence as solely to connect a region or a globe and side-lines their individual artistic practice.⁵⁰ Aligning with Johnstone’s perspective, this project focuses on the methods and evolution of Koh’s practice, seeing its context as inherently embodied within the artwork. This study proposes to let Koh’s archive unfold as a blueprint for artistic and archival possibilities. The notion is that close observation of Koh’s methods might allow us to develop a deeper understanding of the attributes of the archive as artistic practice. In studying Koh’s work, how can *SAAP* expand upon the historical conceptualizations of the archive? Can Koh’s practice reveal, for the historian multiple histories, for the archivist new ways of recording information, and for the curator the archive

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, 4.

⁴⁹ Take for instance the many stances taken by a variety of writers: Flores, 2019; Gaweewong, 2019; Koh, 2019; Ha Thuc, 2019; Johnston, 2019.

⁵⁰ Nathalie Johnston, ‘Cobo Perspectives: Emerging Art from Emerging Regions, The Case of Southeast Asia’, Cobosocial.com, accessed 23 April 2019, <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/cobo-perspectives-emerging-art-from-emerging-regions-the-case-of-southeast-asia/>.

as an expanded model for the exhibition? *How can the archive as artistic practice inform us of a different modality towards our understanding of the archive?*

2.2. Critical Approaches to *SAAP*

The academic discourse surrounding *SAAP* prompts further questions around the significance of the work. While Koh's project has received little sustained academic and critical attention, there are a few voices which highlight the work's importance. Iola Lenzi, Singaporean art historian and curator, calls Koh's role "unrivalled", relating to his documentation of early contemporary art practices, such as those of The Artists Village in Singapore.⁵¹ Additionally, Yap emphasises Koh's archive's ability in recovering lost narratives as a site for further inquiry.⁵² In addition, in a 2016 installation of *SAAP* through the National Gallery Singapore's international programming, curator Charmaine Toh explained:

At the National Gallery Singapore, we have used Koh's important research as a resource in curating our opening exhibitions and it has helped us contextualize many works in the exhibition, providing new insights into our own collection.⁵³

⁵¹ Iola Lenzi, "The Artists Village and the Birth of Contemporary Art in Singapore - Koh Nguang How in conversation with Iola Lenzi" in *Concept Context Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia*, ed. I. Lenzi (Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Culture Center, 2014), 190.

⁵² Yap, *Retrospective*, 82. Yap is referring to *Errata@P-10* (2004).

⁵³ Charmaine Toh, National Gallery Singapore, accessed 7 July 2018, <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/about/news/press-room/acc-announcement>.

Furthermore, The Singapore Art Museum (SAM) stated in 2011 that “Koh’s documentation of The Artists Village between 1989 and 1999 has become a significant historical resource”.⁵⁴ Finally, Woon Tien Wei, one of the co-curators of *Errata@p-10*, interprets Koh’s archiving and related activities as nuanced “cultural activism” in the context of Singapore, calling him a “unique and important” artist in terms of community-led initiatives.⁵⁵

These perspectives offer insight and bring attention to the importance of *SAAP*. However, they also consider only a limited dimension of Koh’s archive *as art practice*. Yap describes the significance of *Errata@p-10* in terms of expanding art history in Singapore, noting its socio-political ramifications. Yet, there is little mention of Koh’s cataloguing methods or processes. Lenzi’s interview with Koh focused mainly on his membership in The Artists Village (TAV) and his recollection documentation of their activities but does not mention Koh’s own artistic practice. Both Toh’s and SAM’s quotes above suggests that Koh’s archival materials were privileged as an archival resource rather than artwork. Woon does describe the merging of Koh’s archival and artistic activities, but within a limited perspective of “activism” in Singapore.⁵⁶ Russell Storer’s brief article in *Photofile* magazine also categorizes Koh’s work primarily as an archive. While Storer valuably realizes *SAAP*’s roots to extend even earlier than the 1980s, his contribution still posits *SAAP* first and foremost as a “nationally significant archive”.⁵⁷ Beyond *Errata@p-10*, the scant discussion on Koh’s archival methods and process thus represents limited analysis and hardly reflects the possibility of different dimensions of discourses that *SAAP* might *simultaneously* engender, such as his collection and deployment

⁵⁴ The Singapore Web Archive, accessed 10 September 2018, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/webarchives/2013-02-24%2008:42:46.000/wp/details/http://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/singaporebiennale_2011/artists.

⁵⁵ Woon Tien Wei, “Still Here Somehow: Artists and Cultural activism in Singapore’s Renaissance,” *On Curating*, accessed 18 September, 2018, <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/still-here-somehow-artists-and-cultural-activism-in-singapores-renaissance.html#.XI0BFy2p1Bw>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Russell Storer, “Koh Nguang How”, *Photofile*, no. 78, Spring 2006, 38.

of artistic skills including photography, sculpture, performance, documentation, print, publishing and, significantly, archivization, materialized through his encounters with any given set of relations in context.

There remains little information on the theoretical and critical dimensions of Koh's archive as artistic practice and the architecture of *SAAP*. How Koh intervenes within the active site of the archive and its functional relationship with various sectors of the art community both within and outside of institutions has not been fully and critically explored. He is meticulous to a fault when it comes to his process of construction: from the prep work, to the transportation, to deinstallation.⁵⁸ In this regard, his archival practice warrants much closer observation as an artistic practice and artwork in its own right.

Art historian Nora Taylor's remarks underscore this point: "When I first went to see him, I was treating his archive as a source of information... But as people came to talk to him, I realised that he's really tied to the documents and what they trigger. In my mind, he became a storyteller, a performance artist doing this performance of history."⁵⁹ For Taylor, his archival medium is "a storytelling device... neither authoritative or ideological... and relates to a history that has yet to be written."⁶⁰ Expanding on Taylor's position, how can we begin to reassess and understand Koh's practice? What if *SAAP* is understood to be more than just a "storytelling device" but the story itself?

⁵⁸ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See Appendix, 51-53.

⁵⁹ Anthony, "Koh Nguang How: Singapore's One-man Museum."

⁶⁰ Nora A. Taylor, 'The Singapore Art Archive Project and the Institutions of Memory in Southeast Asia,' in *Southeast Asia: Spaces of the Curatorial*, ed. by Ute Meta Bauer and Brigitte Oetker (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 127.

The exhibitions held between 2004 and 2019 of *SAAP* do not represent a coherent image of the work's scope, due to the chronological gaps and varying modes of display. The little discourse generated is limited to what is exhibited and does not account for unseen processes, such as collecting and storing. Collectively, they have failed to describe neither Koh's archival practice in the lead up to *SAAP*'s first conceptualization prior to 2005, nor an understanding of the scope of this ongoing project. The inherent contradictions within the body of work as it oscillates between "latency" and action suggests multiple new lines of inquiry for the historian, curator or archivist as to the artist's thoughts and ideas both in Southeast Asia and beyond.⁶¹ Recognizing the lack of existing literature, this study aims to enact a detailed focus on Koh's work and practice. Only through detailed research we can ask, *what does Koh's work do and how does it do it?*

⁶¹ Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth, Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 87-88. I use the term latency as described in this text, where Eco refers to latency as a technique that modern cultures use as a means to overcome excess information, that is to temporarily set aside and recalled as needed. He cites the library and museum as examples. Could the latency form a strategy of the archive as artistic practice?

2.3. Archival Aesthetics – Understanding the Archive as Artistic Practice

There are many variations of the archive. Some employ a more positivist approach, yet others are more artful, constitutive of sensorial experiences beyond the visual that cannot be so easily delineated or explicated. This is what art historian and critic Hal Foster, describes as: “found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private” in his observations of the archive as artistic practice.⁶² Koh’s practice belongs to the latter. Considering Foster’s exploration of artists’ archival strategies, how can we see with greater detail the approach deployed in *SAAP* in the development of an archive as artistic practice?

In his seminal essay, *An Archival Impulse*, Foster identified that artists “share a notion of artistic practice as an idiosyncratic probing into peculiar figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history”.⁶³ He cites the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, Sam Durant and Tacita Dean, through their mediations of found images, objects or texts, often recovering lost histories or imagining new ones by various means. Foster argues that archival artists are concerned less with *genealogy* than the “*fragmentary*” in art or history, hence their meanings remain unfixed in their artworks and tend toward infinite referentiality.⁶⁴ In addition, they often draw from popular culture for decipherability, frequently using little-known materials and sources to create sites of alternative knowledge and memory. Foster draws a distinction between archival artists and those who engage in “relational aesthetics” or “post-production” artists, whose works highlights further manipulation and prioritizes the “relational ends” of the

⁶² Hal Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, 5.

⁶³ Ibid, 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 5. Italics mine.

artwork rather than their archival means.⁶⁵ Foster considers the “pre-production” process in archival art to be much more material and tactile. There is much discussion on the work of archival artists but few describe the “pre-production” as Foster so eloquently does. Regarding *SAAP*, there exists a plethora of pre-production archival activities between each exhibition; this study will consider how it also appears that a pre-production aesthetic encompasses a vast majority of Koh’s practice.

The post digital age has transformed the characteristics of databases, in the way we store, access and experience information.⁶⁶ One of the very real concerns for Koh is physical space, both actual and digital as we confront the onslaught of information across different networks, which Koh describes as a major challenge in a recent conversation.⁶⁷ One can agree with Foster on the material nature of the pre-production processes of archival artists but his framework does not account for archival artists who integrate digital means, nor does it address the reality of increasing digitalization and the consequential implication for archival artists. Koh’s archive is largely analogue, of which he selectively digitizes parts, firstly for a spacial necessity but also as part of his collaborative working method. This research aims to examine his pre-production archival methods in relation to, and encompassing, both digital elements and dissemination methods, as I will explore later in Koh’s exhibition *The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018).

Woon’s writing on *SAAP* is some of the more detailed critical study on the project, and thus deserves greater analysis. Notably, Woon also invokes the term “postproduction”, citing Koh’s

⁶⁵ Ibid, 4, Foster cites Nicolas Bourriaud’s term “relational aesthetics” in his 1998 text (Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998)).

⁶⁶ The digitalization of information and its implications on knowledge production has been documented by many in both the art and science community including: Droitcour and Smith (2019); Grau, Coones and Rühse (2017); Paul (2017); Kraemer (2016); Cook (2013); Muller (2008); Duranti (2001).

⁶⁷ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See Appendix, 67.

artwork *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009).⁶⁸ *When Photographs Become Drawings* is a multimedia reification of an earlier group exhibition *The Drawing Show* (1989), organized by TAV, which Koh participated in. The work presents a varietal selection of different media, including an extensive series of photographs as framed in five large grid-like frames, with accompanying text on standard clipboards, not only expanding but bending the notion of photography, the archive and various artistic genres such as sculpture, drawing, text, installation and performance; which I analyse further in this research.⁶⁹ Koh describes it as a “screenshot of the artist’s work process on the computer and framed it as a drawing”.⁷⁰ Woon asserts that *When Photographs Become Drawings* demonstrated “a moment in pre-production”, but later also assesses the artwork as “postproduction.”⁷¹

“The customised clipboard showed the process of mixing and cutting up the archive. Through this, he showed what Bourriaud described as ‘postproduction’ in art, where artists manipulate the original materials for the creation of their work”.⁷²

What if Koh did not sample any archive, and the archive *is* his work? Can the photographs and original documents be seen as constitutive of his archive along with materials held in abeyance? If so, they cannot be assimilated into an artwork as they are part and parcel of the very same archive/artwork, *SAAP*, in all its different configurations.

⁶⁸ Woon, ‘Still Here Somehow’. Woon cites Nicolas Bourriaud’s term “interactivity” as proposed by Bourriaud as an aim of “relational aesthetics” in his 1998 text, *Relational Aesthetics*.

⁶⁹ The work is presented as a mixed media work, though I suggest that Koh’s presence and interaction with the participants provides an auditory and performative element, making it a multimedia work.

⁷⁰ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 May 2019.

⁷¹ Woon, “Still Here Somehow”.

⁷² Ibid.

Koh is “the sole author of this work”, asserts Woon, while later claiming that it “challenges the idea of originality and authorship”.⁷³ This difficulty arises I believe because of an attempt to categorize Koh’s work under ‘relational aesthetics’, which Bourriaud stated as relying heavily on sociability in “post-production” as its main aesthetic component. *SAAP* enacts relationality throughout production, before and/or after, but does that make it “post-production” art as Woon sees it, or instead the preproductional archival art as Foster describes? I hope to argue that the relational aspect of Koh’s work is instead a *by-product* of his archival practice. Categorizing *SAAP* as relational aesthetics risks losing some of the artwork’s scope and complexity. Is *SAAP*, in its unique use of the archival form, particularly elusive, resistant to categorization?

SAAP’s relationality is only one aspect of the artwork. Koh’s photographs were selected and arranged for display but remain *unmanipulated*, which is one of the distinctive attributes of Koh’s archive as art practice across all iterations. Perhaps this is a *deliberate* process of inference and marking (evident in the case of *Errata@p-10* and *When Photographs Become Drawings*), rather than manipulation of materials as suggested by Woon. Koh even stated that he switched from news cuttings of art related articles to keeping whole pages intact because they reflected the historical context.⁷⁴ It also solved the problem of sourcing materials from artists, where some would only cut out the portion related to their work.⁷⁵ In my aim to understand the attributes of the archive as artistic practice, I will need to look beyond the properties of relational work and manipulated materials.

In addition, Woon simultaneously sees the artist and researcher roles as being “one and the same”, yet argues that exhibitions are a “legitimization” of the work as art, which is only

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 47.

⁷⁵ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 18.

enacted to maintain the collections, implying that the archiving role is of greater importance and maintained by the artist role.⁷⁶ In this assertion, he maintains a distinction between archivist and artist. Furthermore, this hierarchy between the two roles, latent in the writer's argument, is apparent later when he determines that Koh's presence in the gallery does not belong to the artwork itself. He writes, "for the exhibition of this work, he was at the exhibition venue every day. Although his presence was not necessary for the work...".⁷⁷ Yet seeing Koh's presence as not constituting part of the artwork may contradict Koh's strong intent to be always present at the exhibitions. Woon's perspective does not consider *Errata@p-10* and *When Photographs Become Drawings* as different iterations of one artwork. Alternatively, expanding that term further, specifically with *SAAP*, the archive and the *artist* are one and the same. What if the archive/artwork does not cease its functioning because the archivist/artist is continuously collecting, storing and displaying, within or outside of what is exhibited?

We will remember that Koh self-proclaimed his collection an archive in 2005, after *Errata@P-10* (2004). Rather than a return to order, the artistic archive appears chaotic, even lawless or "anomic" – the term coined by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh to describe Gerhard Richter's enigmatic and partially mnemonic *Atlas* (1962-), which Foster draws upon.⁷⁸ All the examples that Foster highlights, be it Dean's always-unfinished allegorical non-place or Durant's cultural and political comments on the entropy of the archive by the restaging of incommensurable elements, reflect that artistic archives remain in the realm of the subjective. These archives resist easy categorization, often multi-layered and multidimensional. Foster relates them as subject to "other kinds of ordering".⁷⁹ These gestures demonstrate the artist's subjective and idiosyncratic method of assimilating and circulating information, hence "found yet constructed,

⁷⁶ Woon, 'Still here Somehow'.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive', *October* 88 (Spring, 1999): 117.

⁷⁹ Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', 5.

factual yet fictive, public yet private”.⁸⁰ Very little of these aspects of Koh’s archival construction have been closely examined as yet. Though difficult to encompass, it is imperative to consider the entire archive as an artwork. Similarly, Seng describes how, despite the multiple ways we can frame *Errata*, such as the historical, archival or the curatorial, “it was really an artwork itself...because it slips between all these very established categories and kind of challenges them but also draw from them at the same time”.⁸¹ Thus, for Koh, we can say that he has turned the archive into an artistic medium.

More recently, Okwui Enwezor recapitulates the point of subjectivity of artistic archives in his analysis of Meschac Gaba’s *Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997-2002), a fictive ‘museum’ the artist constructed to pose an inquiry on “the crisis of historical knowledge, and therefore the instability of African memories and absence of archives” due to colonialism and the notions of Africa being “unhistorical” and “unarchival”.⁸² Gaba filled the twelve wings of his museum (the *Architecture Room, Library, Summer Collection, Museum Shop, Draft Room, Museum Restaurant, Humanist Space, Marriage Room, Game Room, Music Room, Art and Religion Room and Salon*) with peripheral objects from African daily life, laid out in the style of a West African bazaar, defying conventional museum taxonomy. The objects invite contemplation, sociability and play as an extended concept of the (museological) archive, axiomatically belying the power structures and inherent agency tied to the archival systems of acquisition, interpretation and dissemination. In doing so, Gaba questions the value system, both economic and cultural, of the Western historical enterprise and postcolonial redaction, in this case represented by the (Tate) museum, as Enwezor has argued.⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See Appendix, 89.

⁸² Okwui Enwezor, ‘The Death of the African Archive and the Birth of the Museum,’ in *Museum and Archive on the Move*, ed. by Oliver Grau, Wendy Coones and Viola Rühse (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 134-135.

⁸³ Ibid, 143-145.

Enwezor's study of Gaba's archive can be greatly informative for understanding the complexity in the reception of *SAAP*. In a recent conversation, Koh shared that a significant challenge is *SAAP* being perceived as *either* archive or artwork, which in turn affects its value. As Koh has explained, from an institutional standpoint, *SAAP* is assessed via a spectrum of copyright laws pertaining to publications and photographs of other artists' artworks.⁸⁴ From a theoretical standpoint, is the artistic value of Koh's work the same as its archival or commercial value? Yet, despite failed negotiations, there was recent institutional interest to acquire *SAAP*.⁸⁵ As Enwezor observes, artists such as Gaba or Koh have, through their works, challenged these categories and benchmarks of use, commercial and artistic valuations, questioning the intersections of value present in museological archives.⁸⁶

By tracing back the history of Western empiricist and positivist methods of archiving, Enwezor situates Gaba's work in a similar realm as Hirschhorn's work, existing amidst the tension of multiple possible modalities of a museum; the commercial, the artistic and the functional. He argues that Gaba's work "induces the absence of a discourse of the museum, the logic that governs aesthetic categories, as well as the systems of production, the conduits of circulation of artworks in specific localities."⁸⁷ (As Koh says, "a museum is not a place. It's not a building... It's the program, it's the collections [and] how all these programmes and collections relate to the visitors..."⁸⁸) Enwezor identifies some of the ways in which Gaba achieves this; first, by constructing a new syntax to articulate museology, transcribing through re-inscription and transmitting them through multiple codes such as orally or performatively, thereby creating

⁸⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 1 June 2019.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Enwezor, 'The Death of the African Archive and the Birth of the Museum', 143-145.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 138.

⁸⁸ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 12.

simultaneous discursive formats.⁸⁹ However, Enwezor is quick to point out that Gaba's museum is not a mere oppositional critique with a singular viewpoint. Rather, it is a much more complex ensemble. Discursivity occurs not between his museum and against the institution's but straddles both creating "an entirely different framework of modernity."⁹⁰

Gaba's work exists in conversation with the authority of the museum, dependant on its specific vocabularies and internal tensions to create new meaning. Can we draw a parallel here with Koh's work, as evidenced by *Errata@p-10*, where Koh similarly appropriates institutional authority in his academic staging of his archive, posing fundamental questions on the functionality and the value of an archive, both historically and *artistically*? Enwezor further says that "it is works like Gaba's that the analysis of historical encounters between Western and non-Western Cultures can produce profound reflections of modernity as multiple", thus further correlating with Foucault's and Glissant's concepts of multiplicity, where Glissant says the diasporic experience multiplies in its relation to the other.⁹¹ Furthermore, Enwezor says that "its form and method are not defined solely within African systems of knowledge", that the foundation of the artistic archival enterprise in fact reveals the convergence of different systems of modernities via different articulations of varied attributes of knowledge.⁹² In Singapore, art historian T.K. Sabapathy articulates a similar lack of discourse, whereby "the consequences of the absence of critical activity related to the context of modern art activity in this country have yet to be suggested".⁹³ This current lack of criticality was also articulated by Seng.⁹⁴ Could Koh's archive project inform us to a different modality such as Gaba's? Implicit

⁸⁹ Enwezor, 'The Death of the African Archive and the Birth of the Museum', 135.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 142.

⁹¹ Ibid, 146.

⁹² Ibid, 136.

⁹³ T.K. Sabapathy, Ahmad Mashadi, Susie Lingham, Peter Schoppert, and Joyce Toh, *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973-2015* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 345.

⁹⁴ Seng Yu Jin, "Constructing the contemporary: Theories and histories," in *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art*, ed. Jeffrey Say and Seng Yu Jin (SG: LASALLE College of the Arts,

in Gaba's museum is that of the unsaid within the archive; "If I create a museum of African contemporary art, it's because I say that the people who gave me that kind of education didn't give us everything. They shut us up inside tradition".⁹⁵

The archive as artistic practice can find further precedent in past artistic and curatorial explorations of 'storage'. The theme of *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art* (1998), curated by Matthias Winzen, Ingrid Schaffner, Hubertus Gabner and Bernhart Schwenk, Stephan Iglhaut, based on a concept by Ingrid Schaffner, considers the artistic process holistically, including the acts of archiving and collecting: to them, material, practice and exhibiting are no more important than the by-products of such activities, namely artists' archives, informal collections, personal possessions and stored objects. For them, these marginalia can be seen as bonafide, distinct artworks in themselves. *The practice cannot be separated from the object*. In the accompanying catalogue, Schaffner cites the works of multiple artists, including Marcel Duchamp's portable museum *Boite-en-valise* (1936-1941/1941-1949) and Marcel Broodthaers's *Musee d'Art Moderne, Department des Aigles, Section XIXeme Siecle* (1968-1972), amongst many others, not in terms of the exhibited product, but its potential as a stored object; for Schaffner, this "deep-storage-style" both anticipates the future but also contemplates the past.⁹⁶ In Duchamp's case, it is his suitcase and for Broodthaers, his private apartment. Some push this style to the extreme where the

2016), 34. When interviewing Seng, he noted that there was a criticality in the print media in the '50s, '60s and '70s, but that it was subsequently dismantled. See appendix, 97.

⁹⁵ Meschac Gaba, 'Meschac Gaba and Chris Dercon in Conversation', Tate Modern, accessed 1 April 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/meschac-gaba-museum-contemporary-african-art/my-museum-doesnt-exist>.

⁹⁶ Ingrid Schaffner, "Deep Storage", in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner, Matthias Winzen, Geoffrey Batchen and Hubertus Gassner (Michigan: Prestel, 1998), 13. Here, Schaffner cites Marcel Broodthaers' term 'deep storage', in his open letter dated 29 Sept 1968 as quoted in Birgit Pelzer, 'Recourse to the Letter', *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), 170. It relates to Broodthaers' documentation of the opening and activities of his museum with the customary trappings of authority of a museum, such as it being written on "official" letterhead within the 'Section Littérature'. We might consider Koh's actions within this realm.

packaging supersedes the object, becoming the artwork itself, such as Richard Artschwager's *Crate Sculptures* (ca.1990).⁹⁷ Additionally, Douglas Blau's serial images, selected from a vast collection of film and photographic images and cuttings from various sources, highlight a deeply subjective mode of organization, "...whereby every exhibition is an essay reflecting arbitrary predilections and biases, what's at hand and what somebody remembers to dig out of storage."⁹⁸ Here, the notion of the artwork should be understood as process-based and therefore read to also include the entirety of their archive, not just the resulting aesthetic object. Another example is Andy Warhol's *Time Capsules* (1974-1987), whereby the artist 'archived' his life by stuffing everyday paraphernalia into utilitarian cardboard boxes. For Schaffner, "the artist's life is a grand archive, in which every discarded receipt, marginal note, or studio scrap may be deemed tremendously significant."⁹⁹

These theorists, Foster and Enwezor, alongside artists and curators, such as Schaffner and Duchamp, all present a certain modality in the archive as artistic practice. To them, the work of art mimics institutional trappings of authority, acquiring status, while also refuting this position by means of embracing the personal and subjective. The paradox of such an impulse to archive while maintaining an anti-archival structure, resistant to categorization, is ironically also the unstable paradigm for infinite iterations. In terms of Koh's archive, how does he install these utopian ideals? What form would the personal cloaked in a vitrine of the neutral and the objective take? And how can we reconsider the unexhibited in its entirety?

In the accompanying text to Enwezor's seminal exhibition at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York City, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary*

⁹⁷ Ibid, 11-13.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 19-20.

Art (2008), Enwezor further explored how contemporary artists expand the use of the archive through film and photography to destabilize history and memory.¹⁰⁰ With a Foucauldian approach towards the instability of archives, in relation to structures of power, Enwezor posed the question of how photography and film have been instrumentalized for multiple purposes, from private rituals of commemoration, to commercial applications and bureaucratic propaganda.¹⁰¹ Enwezor further argues that contemporary artistic archival practices challenge the position of photography and film in the archive.¹⁰² Koh's archives contain photographs and recordings of many significant moments in Singapore art history, many of which remain undocumented elsewhere, such as the artistic activities of The Artists' Village. More importantly, Koh's practice pushes the limits of photography as drawing, as sculpture, as installation and even performance, challenging the established genres of art in his archive. Examples include *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2011) or even *4 Days in August* (1987/1992), which I analyse further in this research. It is worth mentioning that Enwezor borrowed his book title from Jacques Derrida's own book with the same title in 1995. Implicit is Derrida's notion of agency, authority and access, relating to the instability of memories in the act of archiving, both in private and public spheres.¹⁰³ The fact that Koh's archive is stored in his private apartment and studio, only to be deployed in various exhibitions, becomes significant as to the authority of his archive, which fluctuates between the status of a private collection and an institutionally bonafide work of art. By approaching iterations of *SAAP*, we can explore the work's resistance to categorization and ask how Koh integrates the roles of archivist, curator and artist. We can ask: *How can the archive as artistic practice inform us of a different modality towards our understanding of the archive?*

¹⁰⁰ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), 26-39.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁰² Ibid, 11-26.

¹⁰³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. E.Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

2.4. Art as Method

Many experts in the artistic research community have acknowledged that collectively the arts represent a rich, distinctive mode of knowledge outside of the empiricist tradition that warrants further exploration. Their concerns were how to qualify the subjective so that it may be properly disseminated and communicated. Elliot Eisner saw the arts as linked to different cognitive processes that fall outside the spheres of 20th century empiricist study¹⁰⁴. For Eisner, the arts “provide an evocative image that generates the condition for new telling questions and fruitful discussion.”¹⁰⁵ J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole calls this “a *mode* of inquiry.”¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Shaun McNiff sees it as the “systemic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic processes...”¹⁰⁷ Their insight underscores the point that from the vantage point of the artistic lens, quality in the arts is not to demonstrate a ‘truth’ but rather to arrive at a point of understanding through sustained and rigorous study, discourse and critique so that the data can come up “for empirical review”, as argued by Graeme Sullivan.¹⁰⁸ Here the objective is “understanding, not explanation”.¹⁰⁹

In exploring the concept of an archive as artistic practice, we must explore further this notion of artistic knowledge being a form of “understanding, not explanation”. In finding the potential for meaning in artistic and archival objects, Renato Barilli’s concept of styles or phenomena of

¹⁰⁴ Elliot Eisner, “Art and Knowledge” in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, ed. J. Gary Knowles and Ardra Linette Cole (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2008), 3-12.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰⁶ J. Gary Knowles and Ardra Linette Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2008), 1. Italics original.

¹⁰⁷ Shaun McNiff, “Art-based Research” in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, ed. J. Gary Knowles and Ardra Linette Cole (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2008), 29.

¹⁰⁸ Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 44.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 45.

culture, in his book *The Science of Culture and the Phenomenology of Styles*, will become a key resource.¹¹⁰ Barilli argues for correlating the style or phenomena of a given culture to its material existence, read through the methods and practices of its creator. This resonates with Foucault's statement that discursive space occurs when "archaeology describes *discourses as practices* specified in the elements of the archive" (italics mine).¹¹¹ Barilli's approach of understanding culture through the observation of practice (in this case Koh's) appears to extend Foucault's idea that process (in this case Koh's archaeology or archivization of *SAAP*) is material evidence of a discursive space, that is, the archive as artistic practice.

Recent research has now acknowledged the importance of artistic knowledge.¹¹² Artists are often engaged in unconventional, interdisciplinary methods of developing new logics for knowledge production, in contrast to 'scientific' methods of qualifying data. Perhaps Koh's *Errata@p-10* can be seen to support the idea of the artistic archive as a possible site for such engagements? Yet, scientific methods have resulted in aesthetic objects that blur the perimeters of arts and science, such as "anatomical works, botanical works or astronomical drawings", as argued by philosopher of science James McAllister.¹¹³ How then, might we qualitatively assess practices of an artistic archive? It would seem then that a critical examination of the artist's practice and methods may be worthwhile. A recent conversation, 'Art and Method' at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, on how best to qualitatively assess artistic practice, sparked fierce debate. Gerard de Vries argues that the artistic practice (not research) should be assessed as a distinct category than in scientific research (he relates the term research as a

¹¹⁰ Barilli, *The Science of Culture and the Phenomenology of Styles*, 9-12.

¹¹¹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 148.

¹¹² A great variety of contemporary theory has propelled this emphasis on artistic knowledge production. Relevant to this specific research, such writers may include: Eisner, 2008; Knowles and Cole, 2008; Klein, 2010; Mersch and Ott, 2007; Dombois 2006; McAllister 2004.

¹¹³ James McAllister, 'Art and Method', Workshop notes, Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (7 February 2003), accessed 12 April 2019, <http://www.lierboog.dds.nl/research.html>.

specific social network tied only to the sciences).¹¹⁴ McAllister sees no such need. He points out that the distinction in artistic research is not that it differs from scientific research but that they are assessed and applied differently.¹¹⁵ Although the definition of what qualifies as artistic research is slippery, McAllister's argument shows the necessity of analysing artistic practice and methods, such as Koh's, qualitatively.

For McAllister, there is a foundational understanding that artworks contain knowledge about the world. This knowledge possesses a validity that is maintained by its social context as 'art'. In this way, science and art are equatable due to both their functions as knowledge producers and their functioning by means of social validity. As in science, artistic practice can be assessed if "a network of validity exists" that legitimizes the work.¹¹⁶ From this perspective, the only criteria is quality. For example, in the sciences, it is translated through hard empirical data whereas in the arts, the expressive and communicative function of the work would be considered 'empirical' evidence. In this way, the artwork should embody distinctive knowledge about the world, which is communicated to varying degrees according to the work's quality.¹¹⁷ This perspective asserts that creative and alternative ways of knowing beyond typical methods of knowledge production exist. The attributes of these methods will be analysed and developed further in my thesis through an arts-informed methodology.

McAllister's delineations of artistic practice provide a foundation for a qualitative assessment of Koh's work across the fields of artistic practice, yet to understand the dimensionalities of Koh's practice, Renato Barilli can extend this mode of analysis further. In his concept of "*the*

¹¹⁴ Gerard de Vries, 'Art and Method', Workshop notes, Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (7 February 2003), accessed 12 April 2019, <http://www.lierboog.dds.nl/research.html>.

¹¹⁵ McAllister, 'Art and Method'.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

science of culture”, Barilli integrates concepts and their material presence by correlating fields of specific technological knowledge to the arts rather than the conventional methods of describing art historical evolution through successive periods such as contemporary or postmodern.¹¹⁸ Barilli does not distinguish between knowledge and craft, arguing that the skill sets and techniques acquired through intelligent, physical applications, as evidenced by the material culture of different periods, allow for the theories of future applications to advance through a series of feedback loops and re-applications. To Barilli, both knowledge and craft belong in the same field of culture - as “applied epistemology”.¹¹⁹ By tracing the etymology of the words culture and *teche*, Barilli observed that throughout time, specific prejudices and biases created a distance between its material origins and its symbolic meanings.¹²⁰ In this way, Barilli sees an opening where history had prevented the possibilities of craft to inform culture. In other words, the symbolic potential of ‘lowly’ material crafts has not been fully explored. For Koh’s archival practice, this might involve an exploration of his “technomorphic manoeuvre[s]”.¹²¹ This research investigates how examples of such integration of craft and knowledge in *SAAP* may include Koh’s creative use of story-telling, photographic craft, academic theory, traditional crafts, oral histories, and body language in *Archiving the Archivists* (2016). Similarly, *4 Days in August* (1992) includes the transfer of knowledge through performance, re-enactments, gestures, customs and everyday rituals. *Browsing Copy* (2019) opened up a space in artistic publications, vernacular language and translations as well as unorthodox methods of book making and distribution as a craft. Read through Barilli, the various strata of cultural decipherability of Koh’s various inventive “symbolic forms”, unifying

¹¹⁸ Barilli, *Science of Culture and the Phenomenology of Styles*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 27.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 12-16.

¹²¹ Ibid, 21.

aesthetics and craft yet masked by the mundane tasks of bureaucracy becomes a blueprint for further understanding *SAAP*.¹²²

Combining McAllister's insights with those of Barilli, this research hopes to bring to light how Koh's artistic practice can generate new forms of knowledge that are qualitatively assessable. Barilli's perspective enables us to evaluate the materials of Koh's practice, the craft and the practical strategies, that can then inform a broader overview of the work and context. Meanwhile McAllister's proposal of the two criteria for qualitative assessment can evaluate the work in terms of its 1) Quality and 2) Networks of Validity.¹²³ In moving through each iteration of *SAAP*, we can therefore focus our attention on Koh's specific strategies and exhibited archival materials. By assessing their quality and networks of validity, we can explore the artistic contributions of Koh's work in each iteration. Each site becomes a place for the enabling of, to return to Sullivan, "understanding, not explanation".¹²⁴ In this way we can ask the question: *How can we understand the multiple iterations of SAAP as generative sites for discourse and meaning?*

¹²² Ibid. Barilli cites Erwin Panofsky's notion of "symbolic forms" which integrates arts and sciences as a symbol of culture as a construct, rather than merely a representation of nature for aesthetic contemplation. However, Barilli argued that Panofsky never correlated these concepts to include the applied arts, which represent a new field of potential knowledge.

¹²³ McAllister, 'Art and Method'.

¹²⁴ Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, 45.

3. Methodology

Following McAllister's criteria for qualitative assessment (Quality and Network of Validity), these can become a guiding foundation for the study of *SAAP*. Thus, the question here is how to qualitatively unpack Koh's artistic expression as seen through the artistic lens. What sets of methods are best suited to tease out highly complex works of art that span multiple perspectives? Which approaches can examine how Koh distils the archive into an artistic medium for dissemination? When the objective is "understanding, not explanation", methods other than empiricist ones are needed to qualitatively assess artistic expression.¹²⁵ My task was thus to review the various pathways and come up with a research design plan that can qualitatively assess *SAAP* as an artistic phenomena with much broader potential for generating new knowledges.

3.1. Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry arose out of the social sciences in the early 1900s in response to the difficulties encountered by the positivist approach towards qualifying experience.¹²⁶ Since then, it has been applied through various methods in the social sciences, including: Bateson, 1994; Geertz, 1995; Polkinghorne (psychiatry), 1988; Coles (psychology), 1987; Czarniawska

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 1-20.

(organizational theory), 1997).¹²⁷ Psychologist Jerome Bruner, via the literary field, further argued that there were two forms of organizing thought, one in the positivist scientific tradition of categories and the other narratively. “Narrative knowing” relied on daily experiences as we interact with one another within a cultural and social milieu, before being organized and expressed in story form.¹²⁸ They are enacted through social rituals and muscle memory, accrued overtime and non-linear. A corresponding research methodology was eventually codified by Clandinin and Connelly in their publication *Narrative Inquiry* (2000), based on John Dewey’s belief that knowledge is derived through actual practice and experience. Narrative Inquiry, according to Clandinin and Connelly, uses storytelling as a method to express and elicit experience as a contribution to inquiry. They described it as “*stories lived and told*”.¹²⁹

Accordingly, Clandinin and Connelly argue that knowledge is embodied within a culture and these experiences can be elicited and better understood through individual stories from multiple perspectives, held together through narrative unity as a *continuum*. The stories are tied closely to their contexts and are situational, from “the personal and the social, simultaneously thinking about the past, present and future. in ever expanding social milieus”.¹³⁰ They call this framework a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space”.¹³¹ The coordinates Clandinin and Connelly stressed are “interaction” (personal and social), “continuity” (past, present, future) and “situation” (notion of place), where the future is shaped through a negotiation of personal and social space, as past experiences inform the present within specific moments in time.¹³² In this way, multiple narratives can emerge as they intersect within an operational site *beyond* a list of isolated understandings, such as cause and effect, but goes further to explore their

¹²⁷ Ibid, 2-16.

¹²⁸ Bruner, “Narrative Construction of Reality”,1.

¹²⁹ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 20.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 2-3.

¹³¹ Ibid, 50.

¹³² Ibid.

“experiential origins” prompting further queries, writings or research texts in storied forms that invite multiple interpretations.¹³³ The suitability of this method for studying Koh’s practice is underscored by Patricia Leavy’s assertion that this approach is a “reflexive, participatory and aesthetic process”.¹³⁴

Currently, there is scant documentation on *SAAP* as a whole and almost no sustained study of Koh’s artistic practice. Elicitation of his experience through his and others’ stories can provide deeper insight to *SAAP* as a *phenomena* reflective of an artistic experience situated regionally and beyond. More importantly, *SAAP* is a complex work spanning almost three decades with multiple iterations and collaborations, yet its *story* remains largely untold. Inquiry into Koh’s methods and interactions can significantly expand our understanding of the archive as art practice with the potential to inform the historian, curator and archivist in their own practices, perhaps towards a more inclusive institutional practice and from a broader perspective, further informing the still emerging field of artistic research. Crucially, Clandinin and Connelly’s approach of “thinking narratively” not only incorporates the representing of phenomena but argues that it is also the *method* by which it is studied, that is “thinking narratively” as part of the phenomena.¹³⁵ In other words, the outcome of the research text is as in life, the “telling” and/or the “living” of “life as it unfolds” to be constantly adapted through multiple perspectives, not only of the artist’s, but other participants *including* the researcher’s as co-collaborators.¹³⁶ How our stories intersect each other’s across time and space thus can be understood as an interactive phenomena; as a living forum. Thus, meaning remains unfixed and subject to constant interpretation, a fertile research ground for “ongoing life”.¹³⁷

¹³³ Ibid, 54-55.

¹³⁴ Patricia Leavy, *Methods Meets Art: Art Based Research Practice* (New York: Guildford, 2015), 46.

¹³⁵ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 18.

¹³⁶ D. Jean Clandinin, ed., *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), xi.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

3.2. Data Gathering: Field Texts

Via Clandinin and Connelly, the data collected is termed “field texts” to differentiate it from normative representation of data in other qualitative research.¹³⁸ Clandinin and Connelly assert that in narrative inquiry research, data is not ‘objective’ but embodied with nuanced information and carries with it various interpretations.¹³⁹ The representation or selection of data towards our interests and research aims thus requires the researcher to be constantly aware of the various social or cultural influences we as researchers carry as we negotiate the material through multiple relations in varied situations. Data in the “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” is thus not dormant but, rather, active, allowing us critical access to *SAAP* through layers of information to better understand the artistic expression and experience, which may not be apparent on first read.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, in the “three-dimensional narrative inquiry”, field texts are always composed, “because they are created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent field experience”.¹⁴¹

In terms of data selection, Barrilli’s notion of knowledge through material evidence of practice is helpful in ensuring data integrity with regards to assessing Koh’s methods and artefacts. Yet, Clandinin and Connelly’s concept of ‘field texts’ appears to greatly enhance the experiential qualities of the materials gathered. Together, they appear to correlate with the experts discussed earlier, and I reiterate, that this approach presents experience (in this case *SAAP*) through a

¹³⁸ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 92.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 93.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 50.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 92.

sustained and rigorous appraisal of the material to present them “for empirical review”.¹⁴² This is what, for J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole term the artistic “mode of inquiry”.¹⁴³

This approach informs my research design. While field texts are varied in nature, ranging from interviews and artefacts to texts and journals, for this inquiry, the field texts selected can be grouped as follows:

- Interviews (non-structured and semi-structured)
- Observation
- Personal Notes
- Photographic Notes
- A range of artefacts from *SAAP*
 - a) newspapers, books, exhibition catalogues
 - b) relics of performances
 - c) photo documents (Koh’s)
- Email correspondence.
- Existing literature on *SAAP*

Following these groupings, I can now describe my process of data gathering for each of these seven field texts.

¹⁴² Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, 44.

¹⁴³ Knowles and Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, 1.

3.2.1 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with four participants:

- Mr. Low Eng Theong (Assistant Chief Executive, Sector Development (Arts) at the National Arts Council, Singapore),
- Dr. Seng Yu Jin, art historian and curator (National Gallery Singapore)
- Dr. June Yap, art historian and curator (Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications, Singapore Art Museum)
- The artist himself, Koh.

These interviews were structured to gain insight into Koh's practice in relation to other participants where they have encountered *SAAP*. The intention was to understand their experiences as told by them, allowing for a multiperspectival vantage point toward a more holistic understanding of *SAAP*. Aside from the artist himself, the other participants were selected because they formed part of the cultural and social milieu surrounding *SAAP*, forming what McAllister calls a "network of validity".¹⁴⁴ These participants form a network around *SAAP* either through their encounters or collaborations with Koh through the *Errata* exhibitions, such as Dr. Yap (who subsequently analysed *Errata@p-10* in her publication *Retrospective*) and Dr. Seng (who collaborated with Koh at *Errata@NUS*), or by other means, such as Mr. Low, who was a peer and at one time held membership at The Artists Village in which Koh was actively engaged in. Aside from their current institutional posts, I was curious to find out how they saw and understood *SAAP* from both a personal perspective as well as an artistic one. Equally, I was also curious if the participants' institutional practice in their current

¹⁴⁴ McAllister, 'Art and Method'.

roles may result in any tensions, as they encounter *SAAP* within the context of heavy state sponsorship and the challenges of censorship in Singapore.

My goal at this stage of the inquiry was to listen to their stories in their own voices as a dynamic primary resource to construct my field notes and restructure them into my research text through my own interpretation. A total of eleven interviews were conducted, six with Koh (five unstructured, one semi-structured); and five with the participants (two unstructured, and three semi-structured). Ultimately, five interviews (three with Koh and two with the other participants) were recorded and appended and non-recorded interviews (marked as direct conversations) are cited accordingly. Below is a summary of the eleven interviews conducted:

With Koh Nguang How:

15 February 2019

1:05:20, 6B Kim Tian Road, Kai Fook Mansion, Singapore 169246 at 2.pm.

23 February 2019

55:01, Yishun, Singapore

10 April 2019

1:03:58, Kaki Bukit, Singapore

Additional (unrecorded, marked as 'conversations with the author') interviews conducted with Koh Nguang How:

15 October 2017

2-5pm, Kaki Bukit, Singapore

15 July 2018

2-5pm, Kaki Bukit, Singapore

21 April 2019

3-6pm, Yishun, Singapore

Mr. Low Eng Teong, Assistant Chief Executive, Sector Development (Arts) at National Arts Council:

23 April 2019

41:59, Goodman Arts Center, Singapore, Recorded, *transcript attached*.

8 April 2019

5-6pm, Goodman Arts Center, Singapore

Mr. Seng Yu Jin, curator at National Art Gallery, Singapore

16 May 2019

44:03, National Gallery, Singapore, Recorded, *transcript attached*.

25 April 2019

12.30-1.30pm, National Gallery, Singapore

Dr. June Yap, Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum:

16 May 2019

5-6pm, Singapore Art Museum

With Koh, three interviews were largely unstructured, in conversational style and open ended, returning by email to the interviewee for additional questions or clarification. The goal was to hear *his* story, *his* experience and what *SAAP* meant to him, in his own words, uninterrupted and unimpeded. Here, I draw from Dr. Robert Atkinson's research method on life-story interviewing in order to ask "what is the story this person wants to hear and what meaning does it convey?"¹⁴⁵ I planned the interviews to take place over the course of my research at Koh's home, his studio and his art residency at Grey Projects, a semi-independent art initiative in Tiong Bahru, Singapore. I wanted Koh to speak freely, to feel comfortable with a sense of autonomy, within the environment of his practice and home; additionally, it allowed me access to better understand Koh's personal interior disposition, feelings and aesthetic choices (what Clandinin and Connelly termed as "*inward*") whilst observing his physical environment and

¹⁴⁵ Robert Atkinson, "The Life Story Interview as a Bridge in Narrative Inquiry" in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, ed. D. Jean Clandinin (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 233.

projections (“*outward*”), at different moments in time (“*backwards and forward*”) as a reflexive field of knowledge, which I further draw from to construct my research text.¹⁴⁶ Some of the more memorable moments occurred over shared meals, or Koh taking me through a guided tour of his neighbourhood with a view of The Artists Village’s original site which I myself documented with photographs. Subsequently, after a period of time, Koh permitted me recordings of three semi-structured interviews. The structure of semi-structured interviews differed a little, with a set of questions in line with my overarching research objectives. However, I was cautious to allow the flexibility for new information or queries from someone else’s vantage point that may lead to a new re-telling or discussion in my research. Again, the questions asked were open ended for the reason stated above. Also, in one specific interview with Koh, and with the other participants, the semi-structured format allowed for the same questions (see appendix) to be asked to different interviewees. This gave me the ability of close comparison, providing further insight to how each participant may view the archive as an art practice operating within the “textured space” of *SAAP* as an interrelated and reciprocal phenomena rather than a solitary act.¹⁴⁷ This was also the approach I took with the other participants in terms of structured and semi-structured interviews. In all interviews and taped recordings, I sought informed consent from the participants prior to conducting any interviews with them. All participants were aware and indicated consent on the forms they signed, which were then turned in to my supervisor for follow up.

¹⁴⁶ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 50.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, xvii.

3.2.2. Observation

Throughout my inquiry, observation was an important tool, particularly during my interviews and engagement with the participants. My approach was not to perceive them as objects or subjects of study, instead I saw myself amidst the field of stories, relations and networks.¹⁴⁸ Keen observation was necessary to listen and convey the nuances, contradictions, omissions or silences that may come up through what Clandinin and Connelly describes as a “narrative-analytic interpretive” framework to parse out some of the complexities of the different stories.¹⁴⁹ Here “negotiation occurs from beginning to end” and cannot be neatly abstracted solely with descriptive representation.¹⁵⁰ It is an interactive process. In this way, the act of observing became one method of not just recording but actually ‘living out’ the inquiry. I will elaborate on this process further in the discussion of data analysis.

3.2.3. Personal Notes

Throughout the interviews, I relied on personal notes, an important part of my research design. They served as a memory aid during transcription for my interviews and reflective tool when constructing my research text. More importantly, they also allowed me to note down queries without interrupting the interviewee, as well as record personal observations during the interviews, such as nuances, silences or omissions that may indicate a subtext or a possible point of tension. All notes were handwritten. I deemed it less intrusive and more personal than mechanical devices during the interview process, important for building a reciprocal

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 63.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 131.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 132.

relationship with the participants. Furthermore, writing their words slowed down the process of recording and transcription and allowed me to think more critically as I interpret and reflect on the different meanings shared by the different participants.

3.2.4. Photographic Notes

My photographic documentation also served as an integral part of my field texts. I used my iPhone snapshots to document the spaces, environments, and artefacts (including during interviews where applicable), as well as being in the field, such as museum visits, exhibitions and field trips. It was a visual method to capture the richness and complexity of my research inquiry. Photographic snapshots became an efficient method of notation to sketch out the aesthetic organization of an artwork, event or situation for further reflection when writing my research text. These photos helped me visualize the stories of Koh and other participants; from the private spaces such as Koh's studio and home to the public spaces where *SAAP* is displayed, I was able to consider how *SAAP* came to move from the personal to the social. For example, a photographic field note of Koh's own photo documentation at a different time, such as Professor Hsu's folders in *Browsing Copy* (2019), allowed me access to the temporality and evolution of his practice from various vantage points, including my own documentation of Prof Hsu's story as materialized through *SAAP*, which drew further questions. What did Koh mean and what was he trying to convey and how does this meaning translate to myself or others in another iteration today? Did their meaning change and how might they engage others in the discussion of uses of the documents in artistic practice today? Having the photographs (both his and mine) side by side afforded me a vantage point of multidimensional visual perspective of the fragmentary nature of the archive across time and space. With regards to documenting

his home, his mother's home and his studio, questions surrounding the boundaries of public and private space became blurred in the realm of *SAAP* as I hesitantly sought his consent to photograph his private domicile and he graciously agreed. It was at that moment during photographic notation that I understood that for him, his private domain was an exhibition forum of sorts. As with the interviews, informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants as indicated in the consent forms they signed.

3.2.5. Artefacts, Relics, Photo Documentation of Koh's

Following Clandinin and Connelly, I took the approach that the artefacts such as newspapers, exhibition catalogues, relics and photography in *SAAP* were not isolated, 'objective' documents to be examined for a 'truth' but rather subjective vessels of information situated within personal and social realms of *SAAP* across time and space. In other words, living documents, tied closely to Koh's and others' stories as an unfolding archive. Clandinin and Connelly read these materials in the context of the inquiry as "an archaeology of memory and meaning".¹⁵¹ This "archaeology of memory and meaning" can be glimpsed across *SAAP*, from the newspapers in *SAAP@SAM 8Q*, which took us to the early days of The Artists Village (TAV) and the performative acts of Tang Da Wu and other artists, or Koh's own performance relics such as *There is a Hole in the Sky* (1989) which started as a sculpture, *The Rain Tree* (1989), in its original iteration in The Drawing Show at TAV, before being transformed into a photographic 'drawing' by Koh, and later used as a prop by Tang at an untitled performance at the C.A.R.E (Concerned Artists for the Environment) show. The re-photographing and cataloguing of Tang's performative act, along with a re-created sculpture on a roof top at Grey Projects in

¹⁵¹ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 114.

2019, with Koh further highlighting the incorporation of green wool used by artist Cheo Chai Hiang in his work *Gentleman in Suit and Tie* (1988), reveals the different “social narratives” charted across various retellings, as Koh and others begin to recount their experiences.¹⁵² The artefacts become a rich and abundant field with multiple entry points for the constitution of my field texts. Furthermore, Koh’s large cache of photo documentation during our interviews and studio visits became a trigger to his recounting and my understanding of his (as well as other artists featured in his archives) experiences. Apart from the experiences of the collective as a whole, from the national archives or institutions, these photos attend to what Yap refers to as “micro histories”.¹⁵³ They focus on the particular, the very personal, even idiosyncratic. These micro histories would be difficult to envision through universal hard numbers, statistics, diagrams or charts.

3.2.6. Email Correspondence

Email correspondence with Koh and the other participants allowed me to reach out to them with any questions for clarification. This became very useful particularly when composing my field texts and research. It opened up a space in terms of critical distance and private reflection in my writings. Furthermore, it allowed me to slow down the research process and verbalize some of my thoughts in relation to the inquiry. More importantly, the answers provided a feedback loop in real time which afforded further clarity, meaning and purpose of my inquiry. Particularly with Koh, our correspondence took on a critical life of its own. An example is my notion of a living archive, which came about rather late in our correspondence. Approximately

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Yap, *Retrospective*, 82.

seventy five conversation email threads took place and it was helpful to be able to return and reread them as the inquiry began to take shape. One pattern I observed was that Koh would answer my question on a past iteration and then almost invariably, consciously or unconsciously jump back to a present iteration he was working on or a future upcoming project and describe the different collaborators and how they function or might function in his future project. At that moment it occurred to me that these correspondences appear to represent a living dimension of *SAAP in the making* for Koh and for me, situated within a continuum. In this realm, he was literally creating and representing material for his archive as a medium of constructing his archive in the present, for the future whilst describing its past. In the context of the narrative method, via Clandinin and Connelly, I became aware of the “consequences for the epistemological status of the texts and, ultimately, of the research texts that draw from them”, that is, the telling and retelling of stories as an interim allows further access for multiple interpretations and meanings, always in the making.¹⁵⁴

3.2.7. Existing Literature

There is scant literature on *SAAP*. Some of the more critical analysis have already been introduced in Literature Review so I will not repeat them here. However, via Clandinin and Connelly, this does not mean that they cannot be more clearly scrutinized through a narrative approach in terms of constructing research texts and the questions that we can draw from them as we negotiate the different voices (“Voice”), author (“Signature”) and participants (“Audience”).¹⁵⁵ In fact, the early literary texts allowed me insight into how *SAAP* has been

¹⁵⁴ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 118.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 144-151.

generally viewed, particularly its categorization as more of an archival resource and less of an artwork, and how different people may draw different meanings from the material. To that end, one can then ask, what is the larger social significance and how might that be addressed? Clandinin and Connelly assert “social significance” as an important criteria for the narrative method in order to interpret the material in a meaningful way.¹⁵⁶ Revisiting existing literature also helped me to contextualize Koh’s and others’ perspectives, broadening my understanding of what an artistic archive could mean. One example is the Asia Art Archive which Koh cites as an inspiration.¹⁵⁷ A cursory look at their website states their assertion that “Art is knowledge” and the artistic archive to be a vessel of ‘ideas.’¹⁵⁸ These texts gain new meanings when placed in dialogue with *SAAP* and its surrounding narratives. This new field of meaning possesses a greater “social significance” in considering the archive as artistic practice. Here we can find a whole new range of artistic modes by thinking critically as I consider the different modalities of the archive through Koh’s artistic expression.

Together, these methods constitute a framework for accessing artistic knowledge qualitatively through keen observation, constant attention and rigorous inquiry toward the construction of field notes as I negotiate them into research texts for critique, debate and discussion. In this process, one might begin to see, hear and sense the multiple stories and experiences that operate within the realm of *SAAP*, generating what McAllister calls the “network of validity”.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 136.

¹⁵⁷ Koh, “The Singapore Art Archive Project”, 1.

¹⁵⁸ “Mission”, Asia Art Archive, last accessed 17 October 2019, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/about/about-asia-art-archive>.

¹⁵⁹ McAllister, ‘Art and Method’.

3.3. Data Analysis and Narrative Constitution

When working under narrative inquiry, we must be careful of the differences between “narrative analysis” and the “analysis of narrative”.¹⁶⁰ For Donald E. Polkinghorne, Professor of Psychotherapy and author of *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, this is exactly the issue at stake.¹⁶¹ Polkinghorne warns against the qualitative nature of analysis of narrative and proposes instead the methodology of “narrative analysis”, where “the final result [is] a story”. Using field notes, the aim is to constitute a narrative. My analysis is therefore enacted in the composing of this story out of the researched materials. The subjective nature of my re-telling is a vital part of the analysis process. As psychologist Jerome Bruner posits, narrative thinking is a form of interpretation, where “the best hope of hermeneutic analysis is to provide an intuitively convincing account of the meaning of the text as a whole in the light of the constituent parts that make it up”.¹⁶² This relates directly to my research question: How can we understand the multiple iterations of SAAP as generative sites for discourse and meaning? Constituting a narrative from these multiple sites, elements, field notes and fragments, is at the forefront of my analysis process. Each object of study will be constituted within the narrative. My aim in interpreting these research materials was understood to be, following Bruner, a study where “the events themselves need to be constituted in the light of the overall narrative.”¹⁶³ This research does not foreground an empirical, or even literary, form of qualitative analysis, but rather an interpretive and subjective process of storytelling. As Bruner summarises, “in a word, then, it is not textual or referential ambiguity that compels the interpretive activity in

¹⁶⁰ Clandinin and Murphy, “Looking Ahead” in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry*, 634.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Jerome Bruner, “Narrative Construction of Reality”, 7.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 8.

narrative comprehension but the narrative itself”.¹⁶⁴ The subjective nature of this process follows Clandinin and Connelly’s assertion of a “three dimensional narrative inquiry” framework, where the researcher and text is shaped and sized by multiple stories lived, told and retold. What does this mean in practical terms? When approaching my objects of study I may look for themes across the material, but my primary concern will be the (re)telling of story. I will analyse materials in terms of their relationship to the narratives present in *SAAP* throughout its various iterations. Each exhibition or iteration of Koh’s practice will be constituted as part of a narrative. My own subjective readings will play a part here in developing a broader interpretation. Clandinin and Connelly warn against the precarity of the “duality” of the narrative methods. Researchers can “slip in and out” of the experience being studied (pg 82) as somewhere between “falling in love (and) cool observation” which can become a challenge for them. Via their approach, however, the consistent upkeep, composition and reflection of field notes became an important tool for negotiating critical distance in my inquiry. Self-awareness, and reflexivity are integral qualities of this methodology. The successful project will be a narrative of my own construction that is also rigorously faithful to the materials of study.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 9.

3.4. Ethics and Responsibility

Narrative inquiry requires a collaborative effort between the participant and the researcher. As such, many issues can arise through the process such as issues of ownership and consent, particularly regarding how one is portrayed. Establishing trust in the relationship and viewing it as one of “relational responsibility” rather than one of possession can be helpful in the process.¹⁶⁵ Following Clandinin and Connelly’s approach, the informal conversational style interviews were deployed to build trust with the participants, reassuring them how the information would be used.

In any semi-structured interview, the participant was informed of the nature of questions, but I kept the conversation open to let him proceed uninterrupted, should our conversation lead to another area. All other participants were provided with questions in advance.¹⁶⁶ In all interviews and taped recordings, I sought informed consent from the participants prior to conducting any interviews with them. All participants were aware and indicated consent on the forms they signed, which were then turned in to my supervisor and the ADMNTU graduate office for follow up.

The next four chapters will describe the process of my inquiry into Koh’s working methods, both data gathering and analysis read through different iterations of *SAAP*.

¹⁶⁵ Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 117.

¹⁶⁶ The questionnaire is attached. See appendix, 68.

4. Understanding Attributes of the Archive as Artistic Practice Through Koh

Despite *SAAP* being initiated around the late 80s, and becoming more formalised around 1999, it remained officially unnamed till 2005 and largely unexhibited until 2004.¹⁶⁷ Today, it consists in excess of one million articles.¹⁶⁸ It is a labyrinthine account of critical art practices in Singapore ordered in a non-hierarchical fashion. They include newspaper cuttings, exhibition catalogues, out of print-books, photographs, audio recordings, ephemera and such, accumulated over a 30-year period. The physical materials in Koh's archive are stored in three places: a rented warehouse, his home and his mother's home. Since 2005, *SAAP* has emerged in a myriad of ever-changing iterations. With each installation, Koh presents his archive with an informal performance of art history, which is punctured by questions or comments from the audience. The audience is invited to peruse and handle the materials throughout this experience. It is an ongoing work that oscillates between archive and collection, artwork and refuse, as Koh says "it could be mistaken for ...junk".¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 October 2017.

¹⁶⁸ Scott Michael Anthony, 'Koh Nguang How: Singapore's one-man museum', BBC News, published 28 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38754054>.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Fig 3 - Koh Nguang How, Artefacts: 1980s -1999, *SAAP* (2005- Present), Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

One could argue that Koh's work ought to be primarily categorized as *archival*, while the selection and dissemination of his collection constitutes his *artistic* practice. However, a closer inspection sees that through the artist's lens, provenance, original order, collective control and permanent records are all subjected to contestation. Koh's practice translates the use of the archive into an artistic arena with destabilized structures of information. Thus, with closer analysis, Koh's work can be seen to straddle archival and artistic practice, while also interrogating both categories. To begin to understand the specific attributes that comprise his archive as artistic practice, we must first outline the personal trajectory that formed this unique approach. At the same time, we must recognise the significance of the personal and the subjective to Foster's articulation of archival art. In this vein, Koh's work and narrative can be shown to exemplify what Foster calls the "public yet private" nature of archiving as artistic practice.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', 5.

4.1. SAAP: A Personal Practice

Koh developed an interest in the arts as a student in junior college in the early 1980s. His earliest collections were art-related news articles from the Straits Times, Sin Chew Jit Poh, Nanyang Xang Bao and Lianhe Zaobao, amongst others, the last 3 being Chinese language newspapers.¹⁷¹ Then, from October 1985 to January 1992, Koh worked as an assistant curator for the then National Museum Art Gallery Singapore (NMAG). The museum library was an invaluable resource for him and it was there that he honed his skills in art history, having lacked formal training at art school.¹⁷² There, he obtained curatorial skills such as accessioning,

Fig 4 - Koh Nguang How, Select Images of exhibitions at the National Art Museum Galley (1985-1992), Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

¹⁷¹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See Appendix, 8.

¹⁷² Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 October 2017.

storing and retrieval of artworks and artefacts.¹⁷³ Koh would often also translate Chinese language materials for work related matters at the museum as he was fluent in both English and Chinese.¹⁷⁴

Fig 5 - Koh Nguang How, *KNH- 031 Waiting for Demolition?* (ca.1980), Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

Photography was another skill he practiced as he developed an interest in documenting the artists and art events at the museum. He did this with his personal camera, even though photography was not part of his official job requirement.¹⁷⁵ Koh saw a need to document the practices of the artists up-close, stating that with the rise of performance art in Singapore, many of the presentations were ephemeral in nature and would not survive past the event and

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See Appendix, 5

¹⁷⁵ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

henceforth the need to record and preserve them.¹⁷⁶ Invested in capturing in photographs what could be later lost, he also took photos of the disappearing landscapes from his childhood village when his family relocated to a Housing and Development Board (HDB) flat under Singapore's urban modernization housing scheme (see Figure 5).^{177 178}

According to Koh, the museum was not only a space for exhibitions, it was also a gathering space for artists and the like from various art societies and associations and as such, the museum became a social space where Koh developed a network of friends and peers.¹⁷⁹ It was at the museum in 1986 that Koh first met performance artist and founder of The Artists Village (TAV), Tang DaWu, of whom Koh credits as a major influence in his artistic trajectory.¹⁸⁰ Koh would later go on to become associated with TAV. Founded by Tang in 1988, at Lorong Gambas in Ulu Sembawang, then a rural space at the outskirts of Singapore, TAV was a vital space and network for artists at that time. According to Koh, Tang invited many friends and artists to engage with the land, leading to a place of artistic experimentation and intellectual ferment.¹⁸¹ It was there that Koh documented a variety of early performance art practices and events from its opening in June 1988 until its closure in March 1990, when the site was reclaimed by the state for development.¹⁸² According to Koh, TAV was within walking distance to his house and it was during these walks that he often photographed not only artistic activities but the changing cityscapes around him. By then, his knowledge in experimental and alternative art practices had grown exponentially through varied interactions and exchanges

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Housing and Development Board (HDB) is the governmental arm that develops and manages public housing in Singapore. It was established in 1960, shortly after Singapore gained self-governance as a solution to a housing shortage. Today, 80 percent of Singaporeans live in such flats, according to its website: HDB, accessed 5th Jun 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151010150928/http://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/about-us/our-role/public-housing-programmes>.

¹⁷⁸ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 45.

¹⁸¹ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

¹⁸² Ibid.

with both local and visiting artists.¹⁸³ At this point, Koh's collection had grown substantially and had broadened to include catalogues, books, art journals, photographs, video and audio recordings and art ephemera.¹⁸⁴

Fig 6 - Koh Nguang How, Artefact: TAV Timeline from *SAAP* (2004-present), Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the artist, 16 October 2017.

In 1992, Koh left the National Museum Art Gallery to become a full-time artist. Subsequent conversations and his CV revealed exhibitions and residencies abroad in Germany, the US and Australia¹⁸⁵ In 1996, Koh worked as an art coordinator for the Fukuoka Art Museum called *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artist and Movements* where he rediscovered many older Singaporean artists and their little known artworks. Subsequently, Koh was invited as a researcher in residence from 1999 to 2000, then again from 2000 to 2001. It was at that time that due to time and space constraints, Koh decided to prioritize his documentation of the fast disappearing histories of these forgotten older artists over that of contemporary art. To him, his collection had become overwhelming.¹⁸⁶

One may argue that his archive as artistic practice did not develop till now, when the collection became more formalized. I disagree. His collecting activities and photo documentation required the selection skills of an archivist and these skills manifest in multiple iterations of *SAAP* and constitute his archival activities. He just had not defined his practice yet. The archive as *artistic* practice requires for us to think outside of the normative categories of a collection or archive. This moment, however, represents a turning point in the delineation of the archive and its associated practices.

In 1999, Koh began to formalise his collection, coinciding with the purchase of his flat at Yishun New Town. The idea was to share his collection as a place for artistic research and practices and also function as a residency space for visiting artists. According to Koh, the National Archives (established in 1968) had hardly any records of artistic practices in Singapore.¹⁸⁷ After 2000, Koh began to focus on the collection at hand. The focus on forgotten

¹⁸⁵ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 October 2017.

artists also led many friends and family members of such artists to reach out to Koh to manage some of their archives. According to Koh, these were arranged through either loans or donations and exhibited under *SAAP* in order to give more visibility to the artists and artworks.¹⁸⁸ The very material structure of *SAAP* as being formed out of a network of individual and personal collections premises its functioning as both a highly subjective and idiosyncratic artwork, as well as a site for collective and shared memory. It is via this presence of the personal and the shared that Koh's archive asserts its position as a subjective and artistic practice. However, this straddling between archive and artwork demands significant further analysis.

¹⁸⁸ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See Appendix, 17-18.

4.2. Between Artwork and Archive – Theorizing Koh’s Collection

Fig 7 - ©Luigi Serafini, Rooster from *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981)¹⁸⁹

“This book first arose out of a passage in [Jorge Luis] Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the

¹⁸⁹ *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981) is an artistic encyclopaedia with surrealistic imagery and unknown language created by Italian artist Luigi Serafina. In an interview with *Wired* magazine ‘Look Inside the Extremely Rare Codex Seraphinianus, the Weirdest Encyclopaedia Ever’ in 2013, Serafina claimed that there was no meaning behind it. *Wired* asserted that it has been often compared to another codex, the *Voynich Manuscript* (1404-1438), also in an unknown language. In terms of Koh’s archive, we can think about the various non-hierarchical kinds of ordering in some archives that blur the boundaries between artwork or book, fact or fiction, corresponding to Foucault’s or Foster’s notions of the arbitrariness of artistic archives, as well as McAllister’s observations of archives that straddle both science and art, creating a new order.

Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.”¹⁹⁰

- Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

Jorge Luis Borge's 1952 essay "*The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*" underscored the perhaps futile efforts of our attempts to classify the world; yet Foucault's reference to Borges denoted the different systems of thinking possible, which was pointedly noted by Eco.¹⁹¹ Foucault's more holistic understanding of knowledge provides a method to comprehending *SAAP*, , from the spectacular to the marginalia, the speculative to the erroneous, the omissions to the silence of the archive.

Foucault emphasized that a discursive space is possible through material evidence of practice.¹⁹² Similarly, Barilli extends this concept further by grounding it through an artist's specific techniques and technologies.¹⁹³ Following Barilli, the artistic archival categories that Koh creates thus belong to a methodological system that Koh has constructed through his own

¹⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), xv.

¹⁹¹ Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, 27-28. Eco references Foucault in explaining his concept of the encyclopaedia as a theoretical model. He argues that the encyclopaedia records not the truth but what people believe to be the truth and therefore reflects not only "knowledge of the world, but also to understand discourses about the world". Unlike Foucault though, who characterize it as typical of the 16th century knowledge, Eco argued that it is typical of all encyclopaedias. Though Eco was describing the encyclopaedia, it is not difficult to draw a parallel given the close association of history and the archive in the modern Europe and also the archive's potential as a discursive space that Foucault discussed.

¹⁹² Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 148.

¹⁹³ Barilli, *The Science of Culture*, 12-16.

unique practice. With a critical understanding, we can map out an extended range and scope of *SAAP*'s artistic and archival possibilities. Barilli stresses a return to the material origins of the terms - culture and craft - through a rereading of their functionality and material evidence, by observing differences in practice over time.¹⁹⁴ In this research, I attempt to analyse how Koh's archive evolved from one to the multiple, that heterotopic space that Foucault and Glissant conceptualized. Again, not within the ascribed boundaries of narrative and counter-narrative, but of one and multiple voices, materialized in real time. To recapitulate, Foucault's notion of the archive emerges in fragments, regions and levels "...its locus is the gap between our own discursive practices".¹⁹⁵ Meanwhile, Glissant's idea of one and the multiple asserts that "relation is made up of all the differences in the world and that we would not forget a single one of them, even the smallest".¹⁹⁶ These concepts form a foundation in which to propose a new reading of Koh's archival work: his entire archive is his artistic practice.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 14-16.

¹⁹⁵ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 146.

¹⁹⁶ Glissant, 'Conversation with Edouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II'.

Fig 8 - Koh Nguang How, Selections from *Singapore Art Archives Project* (2005- present), Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

Koh's practice of assembled materials is purposefully permeable, migratory and in constant relation. In this way, it is difficult to articulate the overall structure of Koh's archive. Taking the perspective of the entire totality of his practice being his artwork reveals the role Koh plays in *SAAP*'s structure. Not only are the materials in *SAAP* often highly personal to the artist, but Koh himself can be viewed as the fulcrum that binds the entire network of materials and

memories together. This highly personal foundation of the work diverts significantly from the historical prescribed notion of the archive, as archival scholar Hilary Jenkinson explained in 1947,

“Archives are not collected: I wish the word “Collection” could be banished from the Archivist’s vocabulary... They are not there, or they should not be, because someone brought them together with the idea that they should be useful to Students of the future, or prove a point or illustrate a theory. They came together and reached their final arrangement, by a natural process: are a growth; almost as you might say, as much an organism as a tree or an animal. They have consequently a structure, an articulation and a natural relationship between parts, which are essential to their significance: a single document out of a Group of Archives is no more to be taken as expressing in and by itself all it has to tell us than would a single bone separated from the skeleton of an extent and unknown animal. Archive quality only survives unimpaired so long as this natural form and relationship are maintained.”¹⁹⁷

Hilary Jenkinson’s statement underscores the difference for him between a collection and an archive. Clearly, *SAAP* does not fit the mould. How are we to consider *SAAP*’s oscillation between the impersonal nature of the archive and the personal nature of the collection or artwork? To decipher this artwork beyond what is already exhibited would require taking a critical look at multiple archival registers, methods and practices throughout Koh’s artistic activities.

¹⁹⁷ Schellenberg, *Modern Archives, Principles and Techniques*, 19. Schellenberg makes the distinction between archives and collections. On this point he agreed with Jenkinson, though Schellenberg believed that Jenkinson’s strict definition of archives particularly on Jenkinson’s insistence on maintaining an absolute chain of custody for documents only for primary use and never for secondary purposes such as history or research too limiting and impractical. Schellenberg preferred to broaden the function of archives to include secondary uses such as research purposes and expand the role of the archivist in matters of appraisal. In archival theory, Jenkinson and Schellenberg are considered preminent even though their views differed.

A closer examination of Koh's practice unveils this statement: "...*SAAP* pretends/acts as an archive related to art in Singapore and its wider international connections".¹⁹⁸ If we take Koh's statement to be factual, then we must consider *SAAP* in its entirety as an artwork because his archive is performing under deliberate pretence, an *ongoing* performative act. In recent correspondence, Koh explains, "I call the *SAAP* a work-in-progress... the performative elements come under work-in-progress".¹⁹⁹ Thus, all elements of his work must be considered, including activities and objects not in exhibition. In a subsequent conversation, Koh says that his "archive is an artwork... once I exhibit it's mine", thus, the name *Singapore Art Archive Project*.²⁰⁰ The term 'project' thus denotes the creative realm of his archiving method and the performative quality of its exhibition practice, for the purposes of institutional validity. In an interview with journalist Mayo Martin, when asked if he was an artist or an archivist, Koh says explicitly, "I am an artist. I use photography, I do mixed media collage, normally with my own photographs. I do installation..."²⁰¹ Koh's aspirations for *SAAP* should not be limited to either a formal experiment with the archival medium, or an attempt to piece together forgotten histories. Due to the lack of official documentation, Koh's archive on art-related practices fills a gap in Singaporean art history. While many institutions perceive this to be the primary function of Koh's archive, this reading of the work fails to consider *SAAP* for its artistic merit. He further states that "My practice for residencies is archiving for two or three months, to use the *material for my installation*" (*italics mine*).²⁰² Through Koh's own perspective, the archive can be seen as acting as a framing device in order for the collection of his artistic acts to survive.

¹⁹⁸ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 October 2017.

¹⁹⁹ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

²⁰⁰ Koh Nguang How, Interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See Appendix, 27.

²⁰¹ Mayo Martin, 'We RAT on Koh Nguang How and his newspaper collection!', TODAYonline, 18 January 2019. Accessed 9 May 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/blogs/forartssake/we-rat-koh-nguang-how-and-his-newspaper-collection>.

²⁰² Ibid.

Looking at the materials themselves reveals further the nature of this collection and its positioning as archive as artistic practice. After talking with the artist, the materials that form *SAAP* can be understood to span a great variety, including:

- 1) Art- related newspapers
- 2) Texts, art books, exhibition catalogues and ephemera as well as objects from yard sales, flea markets, vacating buildings, the garbage
- 3) Other artist's archives directly acquired from the artists themselves, such as those of Shui Tit Sing and Chng Seok Tin, which he disseminates through *SAAP* exhibitions and projects.
- 4) Photo and audio documentation of art practices and urban scapes, both at the museum and also independently at private galleries, workshops, collective spaces and such.

Collectively, these materials represent *SAAP*. However, it is important to recognize that Koh's collection extends beyond its material objects. While some archival material is physically evidenced through these material objects, others are stored mentally and not so easily accounted for. By that, I mean knowledge such as oral accounts, body language, gestures, codes and personal relations that Koh accumulates through his acts of collecting. I attempt to delineate both the material and mental as co-existent through two iterations of *SAAP*:

- 1) *Archiving the Archivist/SAAP@PpongPpong* (2016)

2) *Browsing copy* (2019), a collaborative project which Koh and seven other artists were invited to participate. I analyse this as read through his studio practice, through his meeting with the initiators and curators Cheng Jia Yun, Selene Yap and graphic designer Melvin Tan.

Via exploring these two exhibitions, we can examine the generative sites *SAAP* engenders, as well as Koh's potential for handling non-material objects. These non-material objects can be revealed as a significant attribute of the archive as artistic practice.

4.3. Archival Experiments: Performing the Collection and Reconstructing Memories in *Archiving the Archivist/SAAP@PpongPpong* (2016)

Archiving the Archivist/SAAP@PpongPpong (2016) was a result of Koh's 3-month residency at Phong Phong Art Space, an independent project space managed by sculptor Shin Ho Yoon in Gwangju, South Korea. Koh was introduced to Shin by Korean curator Lee Byung Hee, who had seen his installation *SAAP@NTUCCA* in Singapore.²⁰³ It was initiated as part of an exchange that Koh had hoped to facilitate with TAV in Singapore.²⁰⁴ Unfortunately according to Koh, TAV was unable to host the exchange at that time, so Koh proposed instead for Lim Shengen, a fellow VR member at TAV to participate in the collaboration. Lim Shengen presented a VR work of an image of a Tang Da Wu tiger sculpture appearing above the Merlion as an individual work as well as developing VR and AR technology for Koh's installation of Shui Tit Sing's archives.²⁰⁵

Chiefly, the exhibition explores three simultaneous layers of archival practice. It examines the archives of artists as seen through Koh's eyes, followed by his own methods of archiving them and finally the act of archiving the exhibition itself. Koh's many works range from papermaking related to the Gwangju Uprising, to his personal memories of ropemaking during his childhood, to his archives of Shui Tit Sing, Tang Da Wu and Chng Seok Tin. It was a multimedia installation including paintings, photographic works, sculptures, digital media and performance. According to Koh, this exhibition was an extension of an earlier exhibition *SAAP@AsiaCultureCentre* (ACC) from September 2015 to February 2016. As this earlier

²⁰³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 2 June 2019.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

exhibition was an institutional initiative, facilitated by the National Gallery Singapore (NGS), *SAAP@PpongPpong* was an opportunity to be more experimental outside the confines of an institutionalized museum setting.²⁰⁶

As Koh explicitly states that his archive “*pretends/ acts as an archive*”, we must assume a gesture of make-believe related to the narrative and format he constructs.²⁰⁷ Does *SAAP* represent a marriage of the archive’s impersonal authoritarian voice, and the personal voice of the artist, where the latter can be glimpsed through cracks in the former? *SAAP*’s institutional voice may be a performative gesture. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor argues that “performance functions as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behaviour’”.²⁰⁸ She further goes on to say that “culture is not a reified given but an arena of social dispute”.²⁰⁹ Following Taylor, *SAAP*, as embodied in Koh’s performative narrative, rather than a stagnant container for material, functions as an active network for transferring knowledge. This is evident from *SAAP@PpongPpong*, where the exhibition featured the knowledge, skills and relations that Koh had accumulated. Different iterations of the same material produce different translations, as exemplified by *SAAP@PpongPpong* and its institutional version *SAAP@ACC*. In each instance, Koh selects, mimics, conceals, unveils, stages. They represent a selection of the varied knowledge that he has gathered since the 1980s.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 October 2017.

²⁰⁸ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 7.

Fig 9 - Koh Nguang How, Detail of *Archiving the Archivist/ SAAP@PpongPpong* (2016), Multimedia, Dimension: Variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

For example, in one of his installations at Ppong Ppong, Koh exhibited select pages of reportage from the 12th Anniversary Celebrations Souvenir Magazine of Jalan Hwi Yoh residency (see Figure 9). Jalan Hwi Yoh was the name of the village he grew up in. It no longer exists, torn down as part of the urbanization initiatives for modern housing in Singapore in the 1980s. According to Koh, his maternal grandfather Chua Ho Chuan was a ropemaker and was quite well known for his craft in Singapore. Koh juxtaposed the book pages against a small A4 carbon drawing of a rope making device he made in 1985 as part of an installation. Earlier, this carbon drawing had been shared over social media along with a link to the Oral History Department of the National Archives, Singapore in 2012, under “vanishing trades”.²¹⁰ Koh had arranged for the sitting at the National Archives where his grandfather and the second of his three wives Lim Siew Eng told their story, *prior* to *SAAP@PpongPpong*. Koh further states that another iteration was exhibited at *SAAP@NTUCCA* (2014-15).²¹¹ At Ppong Ppong, Koh

²¹⁰ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the artist, 19 June, 2019.

²¹¹ Ibid.

resurrects this narrative and constructs a sculpture based on his memories of watching his grandfather (Figure 10). The sculpture thus becomes a new site for engaging participants and audiences. Koh's narrative fills a historical gap, providing informative knowledge on 1980s housing developments, as well as traditional, local craft. For Koh, the ropemaker story is more than just a "vanishing trade". His practice, exploration and dissemination of his own personal narrative reveals a story that is anything other than "vanishing". Furthermore, rather than providing unmediated data, Koh presents an artistic experience that has the potential to generate various interpretations, understandings and memories. Here the medium of the archive unveils multiple narratives across time and space, demonstrating further the possibilities of an artistic archive.

Fig 10 - Installation view of *Archiving the Archivist/ SAAP@PpongPpong* (2016), Multimedia, Dimension: Variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Sara Kenderline and Jeffrey Shaw, in their essay *Archives in Motion*, examined cultural heritage within the artistic process, arguing for the artist as conduit of embodied cultural knowledge.²¹² Frequently, in conversation with the artist, Koh mentions that much of his collection is scavenged material or photographic work created during walks he would take; specifically he recalls how he “collected materials for the archive project from the events and places I visited.”²¹³ Here he is referring to ‘walks’ he takes to photograph places and things. These ‘walks’ or, as he refers to them, ‘walkabouts’ can be seen to form a central component of Koh’s collecting practice. In his article on Koh’s practices, Scott Michael Anthony used the term “peripatetic” to describe Koh’s archive.²¹⁴ Furthermore, Koh himself calls his archive a “mobile” device.²¹⁵ Aside from Tang Da Wu, Koh references some of his earlier influences to be the English walking artists Hamish Fulton and Richard Long.²¹⁶ This is evident in many of his early works such as “*Rain Tree*”, “*Reconstructed Tree*” (1989) or “*There is a Hole in the Sky*” (1990) [Figure 11] or “*Tree Cemetery*” (1991), many inspired by his habitual walks around the city and suburbs.²¹⁷

²¹² Sarah Kenderline and Jeffrey Shaw, ‘Archives in Motion’ in *Museum and Archive on the Move: Changing Cultural Institutions in the Digital Era*, ed. Oliver Grau Wendy Coones and Viola Rühse (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 211.

²¹³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 October 2017.

²¹⁴ Anthony, ‘Koh Nguang How: Singapore’s one-man museum’.

²¹⁵ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 7.

²¹⁶ Koh Nguang How, conversation with the author, 15 July 2018.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

Fig 11 - Koh Nguang How, Artefact from *SAAP* (2005- Present): *There is a Hole in the Sky* (1990), Multimedia, Dimensions: variable. Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

At Ppong Ppong, Koh not only created the works which were shown at exhibition, he also archived the exhibition itself, in addition to the scenes of the surrounding village Palsan and its residents, during his three-month residency experience (Figures 11-12). These were shared over social media. In fact, many iterations of *SAAP* include these ‘walkabouts’, such as *Walkabout Taipei II (To Market)* or *Phnom Penh Residency/Walkabout* or *Walkabout in Gwangju (Spring, Summer)*.

Fig 12 - Koh Nguang How, Artefact from *SAAP* (2005- Present): *Phnom Penh Residency/Walkabout* or *Walkabout in Gwangju [Spring, Summer]* (2016), Multimedia, Dimensions: variable. Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

Researchers Menelaos Gkartzios and Julie Crawshaw argue that “artistic performance (the walk) became a mode of inquiry itself, a method”. They cite the work of artist Sander Van Raemdonck, *Guide the Guide* (2016), as a trigger that facilitated communication between residents of a town and housing planners over a development site.²¹⁸ Sander created a map of twenty two images as “stops”, some banal, others more noteworthy, and invited both residents and visitors to meet at a car park in Spital Point, Northumberland.²¹⁹ Every image or ‘stop’ functioned as a trigger and became a juncture for sharing ideas, memories and experiences.

²¹⁸ Menelaos Gkartzios and Julie Crawshaw, ‘Researching Rural Housing: With an Artist in Residence’, *Sociologia Ruralis* 0, no.0 (April 2019): 18. Accessed 3 June 2019, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/soru.12224>.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 11.

They further argued, “We thus see walking as a multi-sensory way of communicating different knowledges; a way to ‘get under the skin’ of a place..”; the idea that knowledge is mobile rather than static can assist toward “a more nuanced understanding”.²²⁰ For them, lived experience transcends the visual or verbal and offers a powerful communication device.

Fig 13 - Selections from *Archiving the Archivist/ SAAP@PpongPpong* (2016), Multimedia, Dimension: Variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Similarly, *SAAP@PpongPpong* denotes a holistic system whereby the tacit know-how of cultural practices and social customs such as ropemaking is disseminated through various articulations, from text to social media to augmented reality, thereby not only preserving history but making, reworking, and exploring history. *SAAP* becomes a *living system*, disseminated through the physical body as well as virtual networks.

²²⁰ Ibid, 19.

4.4. *Browsing Copy* (2019): Collecting Outside the Institution

One of the first things that Koh shared when asked about his criteria for selection was that the materials were “salvaged” and “I collect but ...without spending money”.²²¹ This requires selection and appraisal skills. According to Koh, many of the earliest modern art documentation in Singapore, a period from the 1930s to 1960s, were Chinese art journals. This is largely due to the fact that most of the pioneer artists had emigrated from China and were Chinese educated.²²² For Koh, this kind of contextual historical knowledge is essential to understanding Singapore’s art history.²²³ Koh states that aside from his skills acquired during his employment at the museum, much of his education came from reading these materials which helped him develop an eye for collecting.²²⁴ Koh also mentioned that many of his books came from vacated buildings such as those of defunct business clans and associations, Chinese schools or Chinese bookshops (see Figure 15 and 16).²²⁵ When asked how he knew about these places, Koh mentioned how some “antique hunting friends” or used-book sellers would share such information, having been asked to appraise neglected collectibles and realising most of the marginalia were of no use to them.²²⁶ Such information is often known only through a specific network of friends and acquaintances and not available elsewhere. Thus, Koh states that his information often comes not from history books or the academy but rather from the street, through word of mouth, as well as from these Chinese art periodicals, many now long out of print.²²⁷

²²¹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See Appendix, 42.

²²² Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See Appendix, 41.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 12 April 2019.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

Fig 14 - Koh Nguang How et.al, Artistic publication at *Browsing copy: Book Launch and Panel Programme* (2019). Image: TeoSuzi©2019

This aspect of Koh's collecting is evident through his studio practice, as read through an encounter prior to the exhibition of *Browsing copy* (2019) in April 2019 (see figure 14). *Browsing copy* is a collaborative project initiated by curators Cheng Jia Yun and Selene Yap in collaboration with Currency Design and KHL printing press. Eight international artists, specifically Sookoon Ang, Chua Chye Teck, Nina Djekie, Lai Yu Tong, Ryan Benjamin Lee, Susie Wong, Ian Woo and Koh Nguang How were invited to participate, to culminate in eight artistic publications, investigating the artistic potential of bookmaking. At his studio, Koh met with the exhibition curators Cheng Jia Yun, Selene Yap and graphic designer Melvin Tan to

discuss the project. Koh's contribution, selected artefacts from *SAAP*, relates to his discovery of four folders of personal papers belonging to the late Professor Hsu Yun Tsiao (1905-1981), a scholar of Overseas Chinese and Southeast Asian history. According to Lew Bon Hoi, lecturer at the Chinese Studies Department, New Era College, Professor Xu is an important scholar in the field of Nanyang Studies but has not received sustained academic attention.²²⁸

One way that Koh orders his archive is through the preparatory process for exhibition. Koh states that when planning for specific exhibitions, he often needs specific information that he does not have and therefore begins researching new discoveries.²²⁹ In the early 2000s, he was conducting research on art and the Japanese invasions of China and then Malaya.²³⁰ Serendipitously, he came across some Chinese war-time cartoon books entitled *ㄗ Q (Little Q)* by Penang artist Khaw Sia and published by professor Hsu in 1946.²³¹ According to Koh, there were three volumes of Little Q, depicting life in Penang under the Japanese occupation.²³² A copy of Vol I is available at the National Library, Singapore, whilst he found copies of both Vol I and II abandoned in a vacated building (see Figure 19a-b).²³³

²²⁸ Lew Bon Hoi, 'An assessment of Xu Yunqiao's Contributions to Academia in Malaysia and Singapore', *New Era College Academic Journal* 3 (July, 2006): 1-27. Accessed 12 April 2019, <https://www.newera.edu.my/files/mces/xuebao2006/2006%20V3%20L1.pdf>.

²²⁹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See Appendix, 47.

²³⁰ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 3 June 2019.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

Fig 15 - Artefact: Professor Hsu Yun Tsiao's room from the old Hokkien Huay Kuan Building [2001] from *SAAP* (2005- present), Multimedia, Dimension: Variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Fig 16 - Artefact: Vacated Library section of schools in the building [2001] from *SAAP* (2005- present), Multimedia, Dimension: Variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Koh observed that the end of Vol II contained an announcement for the upcoming Vol III, though he was unable to locate any such volume despite subsequent attempts.²³⁴ Based on Koh's understanding, Little Q had been influenced by the novella 阿Q正傳 (*True Story of Ah Q*), written by Lu Xun in 1921. Lu Xun (1881-1936) is considered to be China's first novelist to utilize vernacular Chinese for his essays and novels, such as *True Story of Ah Q*.²³⁵ Koh came across these books in the abandoned libraries of a few Chinese language schools including Ai Tong School and Chong Hock School, which were housed in the vacated building of the old Hokkien Huay Kuan (Hokkien clan association) [Figures 15-16].²³⁶ He had heard about the vacated building from a friend, a used book seller (nicknamed "my collaborator") who told him "Hokkien Huey Kuan wanted to clear the building.... Go and take things!"²³⁷ Koh was also aware that Professor Hsu's office and library were housed in the same building and decided to take a look. It was there that he came across the four personal files of Professor Hsu. According to Koh, Professor Hsu had hoped to sell his personal collection shortly before he passed away but it was passed over by several institutions thus he considered selling it overseas.²³⁸ In a Straits Times article, Mr Hsu was cited as saying that "Local libraries, were not interested in the collection which he wanted to sell as a 'package deal'"²³⁹. Subsequently, it was acquired by Singaporean businessman Mr. Koh Bak Weng, according to Koh. He further states that the collection was later transferred to the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Luo Jing, *Over a Cup of Tea: An Introduction to Chinese Life and Culture* (University Press of America, 2004), 84.

²³⁶ Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, 'The History of Clan Associations in Singapore', accessed 28 June 2019, <https://www.sfcca.sg/en/node/446>. According to the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, Chinese clans emerged in the 19th century in colonial Singapore, the first being the Cho Kah Koon clan in 1819. The swell of Chinese immigrants to Singapore saw the creation of Chinese clans as a way to advance community and alliances in their new country. The clans were organized by regional ties such as the Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese or familial names such as Cho.

²³⁷ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 12 April 2019.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Yong Pow Ang, 'Private library to be set up here for scholar's books', *The Straits Times*, 12 March 1981, 7. Accessed 3 June 2019, 2019<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19810312-1.2.32?ST=1&AT=search&k=hsu%20yun%20tsiao&QT=hsu,yun,tsiao&oref=article>.

Associations (SFCCA), located at the very same Hokkien Huay Kuan building prior to its demolition. Hsu's collection was donated by SFCCA to the National Library Board (NLB) recently.²⁴⁰ According to Koh, Mr Hsu's library should have been preserved in its entirety, given the importance of his contribution to the field of Nanyang Studies related to Malaya. Most of what Koh found were non-Chinese language books or personal files, which he speculated was deemed irrelevant for unknown reasons and therefore abandoned.

Fig 17 - Koh Nguang How et al, archiving session of *Browsing copy: Book Launch and Panel Programme* (2019) at Koh Nguang How's studio, 10th April 2019. Image: TeoSuzi©2019

²⁴⁰ 谢燕燕 ‘, ‘许云樵珍贵藏书 落户国家图书馆’, Zaobao, 28 February 2017. Accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/news/singapore/story20170228-729872>.

Fig 18 - Koh Nguang How et al, archiving session of *Browsing copy: Book Launch and Panel Programme* (2019) at Koh Nguang How's studio, 10th April 2019. Image: TeoSuzi©2019

The four folders he found contained personal, governmental, academic and business correspondence including personal notes, names of journals and even photographs, providing invaluable insight in multiple ways, historically and methodologically. Many letters were also handwritten or endorsed by Mr Hsu himself. For example, there were correspondence related to other regional artists, or detailed receipts of his purchase of printing machines for his publishing house allowing us access to the various artistic practices or mediums of reproduction (Figure 17-18).

For *Browsing Copy* (2019), Koh selected what he described as “precious” folders of Hsu (figure 17-18) as well as the two “forgotten” volumes of war time cartoons that were published by Professor Hsu in 1946 (figure 19a-b).²⁴¹ It was Koh’s idea that by going through two related sets of artefacts, “we discover things related to a Southeast Asian scholar, editor, publisher, professor.”²⁴² This aligns with Koh’s explanation of how his art historical knowledge was acquired through this process of collecting and handling materials, and “not the academic route”.²⁴³ At the meeting, what unveiled was not only new information but a collection of historiography, language, translation, code, reproduction.

Based on Koh’s accounts, one can see how his archival methods require a network outside of institutional frameworks. His encounters with regional pioneer artists, conversations with friends, as well as overseas artists, publishers, book sellers, vendors all contribute to the knowledge he has accumulated to stage his archive as a site of alterity. For Koh, his archive represents an active site to “introduce all possible elements and scenarios.”²⁴⁴ They are “recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible, and as such they call out for human interpretation, not machine reprocessing.”²⁴⁵

Every encounter and/or object to be collected poses a potential new act of translation. In a conversation with Koh, he explicitly states that part of his practice includes acts of translation, of both language and cultural cues, “..all depending on the new condition...”²⁴⁶ This goes as far back to his days working in the museum, where he would often translate articles. For example, *Sunshower@Fukuoka* would be different than *Sunshower@Tokyo*. Koh would often

²⁴¹ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 12 April 2019.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 37.

²⁴⁵ Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, 5.

²⁴⁶ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 40.

have to prepare his materials with language in mind due to diverse audiences or cultural conditions.²⁴⁷ Koh says explicitly that, “I want to challenge myself” to create new forms and “...as an artwork, there is no definite endpoint”.²⁴⁸

Since the mid-1980s to approximately 2001, we see the development of his collection grow from newspapers to include art books, exhibition catalogues and journals, photographs, audio, video and ephemera. Through his dedicated acquisitions and interactions, *SAAP*, still then unnamed, began to unfold into people, places, moments, stories, from the personal to the collective.

Fig 20 - Koh Nguang How et.al, [L] installation view, [R] Koh Nguang How documenting at *Browsing copy: Book Launch and Panel Programme* (2019). Image: TeoSuzi©2019

In this way, *Browsing copy* (2019) exemplifies how Koh’s collection of artistic acts is embodied within his practice. This practice is comprised of the actions, the untold history, his walks, his networks - they are simultaneously comprised of material and non-material. His

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 37-38.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 38.

artistic practice and perspectives are manifested through both physical items themselves and the performative and non-material dimensions they enable. They are present within the publications and exhibitions, yet also embodied within his acts of collecting *prior* to, during and after exhibitions, such as walking, reading, listening, learning, selecting, recording and so on. Through *Browsing copy* (2019), we can observe how Koh collects and circulates knowledge through multiple channels and languages including the visual, oral, auditory and tactile, as well as collaboration, thereby establishing parallel “network(s) of validity”, as described by McAllister.²⁴⁹ Furthermore, as evidenced by his artbook in *Browsing Copy*, Koh firmly establishes the various means of artistic archival publication, from unsanctioned reproductions to illicit publication. This extensive collection of information can only be accumulated through a gathering together of records of knowledge, histories, scenes, episodes, rumours, codes, tendencies and legends *of the future*, always in the making.

Koh’s archive follows a non-hierarchical trajectory, a key attribute of his work embodying the archive as artistic practice. His criteria of selection are of a deeply personal nature. Initiated by a lack of history, he seeks art historical ephemera, such as newspapers, periodicals, and so on. These are then interwoven through a series of artistic interventions that may be personal, such as his memories of his grandfather, or official, such as Professor Hsu’s papers reflecting a period of Singapore’s art history. Read this way, the archive was always part of a much larger entity - *a body of work that exists in its totality, only ever partially manifested in each exhibition*. As Koh puts it, when describing an iteration, “this selection of newspapers for the Biennale is part of my *SAAP*, which of course is part of my collection since 30 years ago”.²⁵⁰ Koh refers to his archive as an “imagined place” – appearing in different configurations in

²⁴⁹ McAllister, ‘Art and Method’.

²⁵⁰ Mayo Martin, ‘We RAT on Koh Nguang How and his newspaper collection!’.

different places.²⁵¹ For him, *SAAP* is a “work-in-progress”.²⁵² We see a “mobile” archive in parts, each reflecting the whole yet always in progress. In this process, Koh is recording ideas, places, people, opening up multiple spaces historically (Shui Tit Sing, Tang Da Wu and Chng Seok Tin, Hsu Yin Tsiao, Koh’s grandfather, ropemaking, his village and so on). As Koh recounts presenting artist Chng Seok Tin’s archive via *SAAP*, he described it as “I got to work on her archive, for 30 years, without owning them...”.²⁵³ Theoretically (the migrant archive, a living system, work in progress, unfinished work and so on) and methodologically (performance, re-enactments, walking, craft, storytelling, pirated text, artistic publications, curatorial, art historical and so on) we are called upon to consider artistic and archival possibilities. It is archiving without possession, archiving without property. To borrow Huang Chien Hung’s formulation, it is a migrant archive. It is archiving as archipelago.

At this point we can consolidate a list of attributes for the archive as artistic practice. From our exploration of *SAAP*, the attributes can be seen to consist of:

- The engagement with the blurring of the distinction between art and archive
- A continuously ongoing project, without beginning or end, unbound to the restraints of historical time
- The blurring of boundaries between historical categories, foregrounding untold stories, including what Yap may call “micro histories”.
- An emphasis on the personal, the idiosyncratic, the minute details and fragments

²⁵¹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 10.

²⁵² Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

²⁵³ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 43.

- A performative quality, particularly in Koh's bodily presence inserted in the archive
- An embrace of the fragmentary structure, the archival ephemera, that may not achieve significance in the normative archive, yet here can achieve a greater social significance
- A proliferation of interpretation and acceptance of the importance of subjectivity and multiplicity
- A lack of medium specificity, working across the genres of form in an inter-disciplinary practice
- A complex relationship with institutionalized methods and practices, one where the work is partly subsumed yet retains a kind of distancing, such as in *SAAP@PpongPpong* where the personal histories are conflated with the institutionalized historical narrative
- A side-stepping of many Western empirical aspects of archival practices, such as the homogenization of historical knowledge and the conceptual foundations of property

However, the conclusion that must also be drawn at the close of this chapter is that this list of attributes is anything but complete. As we have already seen in the two iterations of *SAAP* discussed, the qualities of archiving as artistic practice are, by their own nature, varied, shifting and elusive. Many properties are, if not related, dependant on others. Each facet of the archive as artist practice allows for the flourishing of other aspects, potentials and possibilities. In the next chapter, these aspects can be shown to be stretched, multiplied and compounded, as Koh's practice continues to flex the boundaries of his own archive as artistic practice. The elusive quality of the form becomes a highly generative site for new possibilities of meaning.

5. New Experiments, New Ventures: Developing the Archive as Artistic Practice

Fig 21 - View of Koh's storage facility [1 of 3] for *SAAP* (2005-present). Image: TeoSuzi©2019

Having begun to develop an understanding of the archive as artistic practice and its characteristics, it is now possible to explore how Koh pushes these to their limit. Evaluating the complexity of *SAAP*, Koh's practice can begin to inform us of new understandings of the archive as artistic practise. Working at the periphery of the institution and purposefully between the prescribed categories of artwork and archive, Koh constantly reworks and develops the limits of his practice. Part of this constant evolution for Koh, is driven by the very real demands

the artist must face. Archiving, for Koh, involves the management of physical, logistical and literal space (see Figure 21-22). His artistic and creative process is shaped by the different solutions he must continuously reinvent to tackle the overwhelming materiality of his collection. According to Koh, “most of my archives’ material are in rented storage and in my own and parents’ flats in Singapore. The strategy to curate and present archives in different ways and themes will continue as long as possible”.²⁵⁴

Fig 22 - View of Koh’s storage facility [2 of 3] for *SAAP* (2005-present). Image: TeoSuzi©2019

Focussing on what happens between exhibitions, in the depths of the archival practice, we can see how Koh seeks new ideas and formulations. How does Koh develop our understanding of the archive as artistic practice? How does Koh make visible or invisible his archiving practices to his audience?

The need for a future-oriented strategy belies the self-conscious nature of Koh’s artful archive design. In the exhibition catalogue *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art* at

²⁵⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 October 2017.

MoMA PS1 (1998), Schaffner interprets Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41), containing miniature reproductions of his oeuvre in a suitcase, braced and ready for both the impending war in 1938 and the vulnerability of his artworks (the *Large Glass* shattered in transit).²⁵⁵ Schaffner suggests that the artist had strategically reproduced 300 miniatures of his key works, to be kept and shown via a carrying case, customised in varying configurations on his move to America.²⁵⁶ For Schaffner, the artist's desire to be validated in art history is ironically underwritten by the rules of his archival activities to ensure their designation into an anti-archivic structure.²⁵⁷ Enwezor might refer to this as "the a priori archive of the artist's practice".²⁵⁸ This chapter will explore how Koh pushes the limits of the archival strategy, Koh's 'suitcase', that being the different ways in which Koh archives his material (mechanically, electronically and biologically), developing new modalities for the archive as artistic practice.

²⁵⁵ Schaffner, 'Deep Storage', 11.

²⁵⁶ Ingrid Schaffner, 'Deep Storage: on the Art of Archiving', *Frieze*, 8 June 1995.

²⁵⁷ Schaffner, 'Deep Storage', 11.

²⁵⁸ Enwezor, 'The Death of the African Archive and the Birth of the Museum', 18.

5.1 Archival Composition in *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009)

When Photographs Become Drawings (2009) was exhibited in *Drawing as Form* at Sculpture Square, Singapore in 2009. The work references an early exhibition “The Drawing Show” of 1989, organised by The Artists Village, of which Koh was a founding member, at Lorong Gambas. Then, the artists experimented with creative forms to expand upon concepts of a drawing. Koh’s multimedia installation *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009) presented four large frames with select 4R size photographic images from the 1980s to 2009, and a fabricated large clipboard of the same dimension filled with one of each: collage, drawing, painting and photography. In addition, four smaller clipboards designated under the photo frames display the detailed captions for each image. According to Koh’s artist statement, “the work suggested a ‘screenshot’ of the artist’s work process on the computer and framed it as a ‘drawing’” (see Figure 23).²⁵⁹ In this piece, over 200 images were selected, arranged and framed for exhibition. From afar, the installation is visually akin to educational materials one might encounter in a seminar or lecture room. A closer inspection reveals a seemingly random range of subjects, from the artist as a witness of his father’s passing, to a view of a lone tree against a backdrop of urban construction, to Japanese viewers in an art exhibition or even European castles. The naming, itemizing and listing of each separate photograph residing on a clipboard comes close to obsession. From afar, the artwork reads like a neatly ordered and coherent installation. One steps closer to read the individual photographs and corresponding captions expecting to discover a pattern or unifying theme. Yet, neither the images nor the clipboard captions entirely explain the piece and we are once again compelled to step back in

²⁵⁹ Koh Nguang How, artist statement ‘*When Photographs become Drawings*’ (2009) in the exhibition ‘*Drawing as Form, The Artists Village Show*’, Sculpture Square, Singapore, 2009. Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 May 2019.

futile attempts to instil some continuity to this ‘drawing’. This recalls Enwezor’s reflection on how contemporary artists push the medium of photography in its relation to the archive, fundamentally transforming both their forms and their medium.²⁶⁰ Here we will be able to see how Koh pushes the medium, not just of photography, but of the archive as artistic practice, via virtuoso strategies of composition, storage and archivization.

Fig 23 - Installation view of *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Koh’s ‘drawing’ suggests several important considerations in terms of the composition of Koh’s archive as artistic practice. First, following Koh’s statement, we understand that some of his materials are stored electronically in his computers. This was confirmed by Koh in a

²⁶⁰ Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 26-39.

recent interview at his home where the files are neatly grouped on his home-screen.²⁶¹ On the one hand, this serves a real need in terms of economic and efficient storage methods. However, interestingly, Koh has developed the composition of images both in “the computer or in [his] head” into an aesthetic dimension of his practice - and at times has pushed this to the extreme.²⁶² He has even displayed these mental and digital archival methods, presenting them as artworks in several other iterations of *SAAP*, one being *SAAP* (2018) and *Singapore Art* (2018), both being PowerPoint presentations at the Shajar Art Book Fair in Dubai, 2018, which I analyse further in subsequent chapters of this paper (see Figure 24).

Fig 24 - Koh Nguang How, selections from *SAAP@Sharjah Art Book Fair* (2018), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

This work reveals a unique working method and aesthetic choice. We see this yet more evidently in the exhibition text for *When Photographs become Drawings* (2009), with the use of the word ‘screenshot’ to denote his installation method and composition.²⁶³ However, there

²⁶¹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019.
²⁶² Mayo Martin, ‘We RAT on Koh Nguang How and his newspaper collection!’
²⁶³ Koh Nguang How, Exhibition Text, *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009). Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 May 2019.

is even greater idiosyncrasy in the photographic quality of the work. According to Koh, he used two personal analogue cameras, the Nikon FG and Contax 137 MD, usually with 36 exposures and 35mm film in colour to record these scenes. Occasionally, black and white film would be used.²⁶⁴ Low Eng Teong, Assistant Chief Executive, Sector Development (Arts) at the National Arts Council (NAC), used the word “film maker” to describe the photographic aspect of Koh’s practice.²⁶⁵ Low described that he first got to know Koh at the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) in 1988, where Koh was documenting many of the art events. Low subsequently became a member of TAV and participated in various TAV exhibitions. For Low, Koh’s practice extends beyond just documentary and cannot be easily “pigeonhole(d)” into genres of “research” (he meant artist-as-researcher) or “archive”, stating that the images themselves mean little without his artistic lens and his personal recollection of the event.²⁶⁶ Low believes that both the subject and the object should be viewed as one if we are to understand Koh’s practice holistically. With regard to viewing Koh’s process as film making, Low described that Koh often had to focus both on the art performance and his equipment (focus, changing film, selection). Since many performances were ephemeral (for example Tang Da Wu’s *They Poach the Rhino, Chop Off His Horn and Make This Drink* [1989], which Koh documented extensively), he often had to anticipate the next scene. Low described that in 1988 digital photography had just been introduced and not yet in wide circulation.²⁶⁷ With the analogue camera, Koh had to select the right frame with a limited number of shots. As Low recalls, Koh never ceased looking for the right vantage point including climbing up ladders or assuming awkward positions in order to capture the right moment as he saw it. Low observed that eventually Koh became so adapt that he was able to do this exigently, like a “machine”.²⁶⁸ He

²⁶⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 5 May 2019.

²⁶⁵ Low Eng Teong, interview with the author, 23 April 2019. See appendix, 74.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 73.

²⁶⁷ Low Eng Teong, interview with the author, 23 April 2019. See appendix 74.

²⁶⁸ Low Eng Teong, conversation with the author, 8 April 2019.

further stated that over time, Koh could almost anticipate Tang Da Wu's next move.²⁶⁹ As such, for Low, any given sets of frames of Koh's documentation becomes cinema, the scenes tied together as chosen by the author. He considers it to be a work of art, separate and distinct from mere documentation.²⁷⁰ Another observation he shares is that Koh is never without his camera, either at work in the museum or at personal gatherings. In fact, he noted that on multiple occasions, in the middle of a meal or conversation, Koh would often stop in order to pick up his camera and start documenting.²⁷¹ Thus for Koh, archiving never stops. From these observations, one can see how Low equates Koh's role with that of an auteur.

Fig 25 - Koh Nguang How, select artefacts: 'Tang Da Wu's 4-day event in Aug 1987, 5th ASEAN Youth Painting Workshop and Exhibition in June'[c-print], *SAAP* (2005 - present), Multimedia, Dimension: Variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Images: Koh Nguang How

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Low Eng Teong, interview with the author, 23 April 2019. See appendix, 75.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 72. Low, like Koh, was a member of TAV at that time and had access to many of their artistic and social events.

The term “auteur theory” was first coined by American film critic Andrew Sarris, expanding on the *French New Wave* cinematic theories such as those of directors Francois Truffaut or Andre Bazin.²⁷² Sarris views the director as author, a creative force who employs strategic creative tropes such as the *mise-en-scène* or technical aesthetics to realise a story, rather than one who adheres strictly to the script or content of the story.²⁷³ Sarris notes that there are three attributes that constitute an auteur; first, “technical competence”, next, “distinguishable personality” which he states “must exhibit recurrent characteristics of style”, and finally that the auteur is “concerned with interior meaning” (the director’s manoeuvring of the material against his interior disposition).²⁷⁴

Low’s observations of Koh as a creative auteur is significant in multiple ways. One of them being the composition of mass, motion and energy in *SAAP*. At first, Koh’s camera functions as a physical and mechanical device for holding visual data in abeyance. We can multiply that with various other scenarios or events, privately or publicly, in which Koh selects to document his practice. Furthermore, Low saw the camera as an extension of Koh’s body.²⁷⁵ This leads us to the next pertinent aspect, how Koh’s body, as an artist and archivist, is linked so closely with his materials. Here Koh is pushing the limits of the archive as artistic practise. As he documents performances, he himself is performing his archive in real time. The composition of both sensorial and historical information is a vital part of Koh’s distinctive and persistent style, one that is evident in *When Photographs Becomes Drawings* (2009). In the 200-plus photographs presented, Koh conflates the very personal with the public, compressed in a grid-like fashion tightly bound within their frames (see Figure 26).

²⁷² Andrew Sarris, ‘Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962’ in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 7th edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 451-454.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 452-453.

²⁷⁵ Low Eng Teong, conversation with the author, 8 April 2019.

Fig 26 - Koh Nguang How, close up of Frame 1, *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Fig 27 - Koh Nguang How, clipboard for Frame 1, *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Gazing at these arrangements, one eventually realizes that we may be viewing a mnemonic device. The grid-like representations in grid-like frames, with captions ordered in grid-like boxes on standard A4 paper lists attached to standard clipboards (see Figure 27), appear to function as a storage compartment for the author's lived experiences. It is as if the installation materialises an interior ordering of his varied ideas and experiences, each with a recall on a blank slate (another clipboard, customized to match the size of the photo frames). The work enacts a visualization of memory, of archival storage and of artistic thinking. The grid-like

pattern installs an attempt to categorise and impose order that contrasts with the idiosyncratic and complex networks of relations that link the seemingly disparate parts. Koh himself explains that “each individual image or photograph should be shown as a work itself, but they are also like raw materials from the archives to draw upon when needed” (see Figures 28-32).²⁷⁶ In this sense, Koh’s pioneering work can be seen to further blend aesthetically both archival and artistic strategies.

Fig 28 - Koh Nguang How, *KNH-016- A view of Khatib from the Reservoir* [c-print], *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

²⁷⁶ Koh Nguang How, artist statement, ‘*When Photographs become Drawings*’ (2009). Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 16 May 2019.

Fig 29 - Koh Nguang How, *KNH-111- Japanese audiences in front of painting by Lim Yew Kuan in Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997*. The painting entitled 'Night Arrest' was based on his elder brother [s] arrest by Kempeitai during the Japanese Occupation [c-print], *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Fig 30 - Koh Nguang How, *KNH-041 Dream Castle (Mont St. Michel), 1993* [c-print], *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Fig 31 - Koh Nguang How, *KNH-076 to 085 Room*, a collaboration by Tim Maslen and Koh Nguang How, *ARX3 - The Third Artists' Regional Exchange*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Western Australia, *When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

One is reminded of Schaffner's comment on "storage and archiving as imagery, metaphor or process" and its associations with "memory", "history" or "an ideal form of relieve" from the enormous barrage of material culture we are confronted with.²⁷⁷ The dictionary definition of "storage", "to keep in store for future use", indicates perhaps Koh's compulsion to encase the past for a possible future.²⁷⁸ In this way, one can say *When Photographs Becomes Drawings* (2009) conveys the notion of the archived potential of a mnemonic structure, that is, the archive in stasis, its author arrested in the act of recollection, of people, places, moments, and art practices. Koh describes it as a form of "annotation".²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Schaffner, 'Deep Storage', 10.

²⁷⁸ Oxford English Dictionary Online, 3rd ed., s.v. 'store, v.', accessed 28 May, 2019, <https://www-oed-com.ezlibproxy1.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/190929?rskey=j1PFDH&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

²⁷⁹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 64.

Koh's practice becomes imbued with a greater significance when situated in the context of land-scarce Singapore, its rapid development, and the challenge of censorship. Koh himself has said that "storage is not a problem" if the objective is solely to make things fit, revealing that his concerns are more than material.²⁸⁰ The constant need to juggle both the physical material in its three locations, alongside budgetary concerns, amidst the psychological pressures of the constant erasure of physical landscapes, places and memories, conveys a sense of precarity and anxiety that can be difficult to discern on the surface. It is also what makes this work compelling. Koh's modality to archive, to "improvise and modify" and to, what he calls, "stacking" is akin to his arrangements in his HDB flat, which constitute very experimental methods of building, presenting and extending the migratory archive.²⁸¹ Put another way, as observed by Anthony, "his archive was built partly by applying the techniques of a land artist to a place where there is almost no land".²⁸²

Fig 32 - Koh Nguang How, *KNH-033- No Camera is Allowed, 1990s, When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

²⁸⁰ Koh Nguang How, Interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 59.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 57.

²⁸² Anthony, 'Koh Nguang How: Singapore's one-man museum'.

Following Sarris' criterion for an auteur – technique, reflexivity and distinctive style – Koh's work becomes demonstrative of an auteur's quality. Firstly, his technical expertise, not just in terms of photographic craft but also his control of the narrative in making meaning is evident. Meanwhile, reflexivity is expressed in the attempt to portray the interior workings of the artist's memory, as well as a self-aware experimentation with the form of the archive as artistic practice. Finally, as for a distinct style, this method of constructing his archive is not just evident in *When Photographs become Drawings* (2009), but can be traced as far back as 1987 (and subsequent exhibitions) in an iteration that Koh pitched to the National Museum Art Gallery (N MAG)'s Centenary Art Exhibition. This work consists of his documentation of Tang Da Wu's performance "*Four days in August*" (1987), over 400 unmanipulated photographs in a black heavy dossier, a work he himself also titled *4 days in August* (1987) (Figure 33). It has never been exhibited.

Fig 33 - Koh Nguang How, *4 Days in August* (1987), Mixed media, c-print/folder Dimension: 8.9X12.7cm/40 x 30 x 5 , Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: TeoSuzi©2019

According to Koh, *4 Days in August* (1987) was instantly rejected by the NMAG selection team, with photography rarely considered a fine art form then.²⁸³ He stated that out of the 218 works selected, only one photographic work was featured; an image of a sports car entitled *Prototype* (1984) by artist Ding Poi Him. The work was explicitly experimental in its manipulation of the standardized forms of archive and artwork. In Koh's own words, he wanted to present this "experimental work of presenting photography of performance art in an album, not a single or a series of enlargements".²⁸⁴ Working at the museum gave him an opportunity to observe various fine art forms and how photography represented them. As such, we can say that as early as 1987, Koh was already developing artistic methods of archival practice; first, by pushing the limits of photography as a fine art form, and secondly, in a serial format of presentation in an album as cinema that challenges the notion of a static archive and/or artwork.

Fig 34 - Koh Nguang How, *4 Days in August* (1987), Mixed media, c-print/folder Dimension: 8.9X12.7cm/40 x 30 x 5 , Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

²⁸³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 10 May 2019.

²⁸⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 25 June 2019.

There was no reason given for *4 days in August*'s rejection.²⁸⁵ However, Koh states that “the art historical reason” of *4 Days in August* and other works’ rejection (Koh had shared some stories of works such as Tang da Wu’s *Earth Work* not accepted by the mainstream) “was [for him] secondary”.²⁸⁶ Thus, one can say for Koh, his concerns were centred more on formal interventions, and furthering his own archival artistic practice, than seeking a positive critical or public reception for the work. He said “if the work was accepted it might also get poor response from the press and audiences, especially photographic club people, who [were] missing in the open call”.²⁸⁷

This work had lay in storage until he recently came across it whilst preparing for another exhibition. This method of cataloguing recalls Schaffner’s observation of the seemingly arbitrary nature of artistic archives, that the items given priority are often simply “what’s at hand and what someone remembered to dig out of storage”.²⁸⁸ Koh himself has said that due to the physicality and volume of his material, “I do not fix my archives in a certain way that is categorize by museums and by archives. They are very fluid... my system is whatever that is important is always, more easily accessible, which is, of course it’s always within my reach and it will not be stuck right in the end of my flat”.²⁸⁹ But, as Sarris notes, this seemingly random constellation of technique, style and personal meaning of an auteur’s formulation “is the pattern theory in constant flux” and not “a fixed orbit”, open and subject to a viewer’s interpretation. Thus, he concludes that it is a “*tentative classification*” (italics mine).²⁹⁰ This further corresponds with Foucault’s notion of the archive’s existence as unstable and Huang’s notion of a ‘migrant archive’ *of a personal style*. Subsequently, Koh presented a second

²⁸⁵ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 10 May 2019.

²⁸⁶ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 25 June 2019.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Schaffner, ‘Deep Storage’, 19.

²⁸⁹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 59-60.

²⁹⁰ Sarris, ‘Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962’, 454.

iteration of *4 Days in August* (1992) during *Performance Week* at 21 Gallery. According to Koh, it was the first performance art event organized by a private gallery in Singapore. Koh describes throughout *SAAP*, what is important for him is to “find meaning” and interpret for dissemination.²⁹¹ He states that through his photography, he wanted to relay the information as he experienced it in the event captured.²⁹² Most significantly for Koh, this documentation of ephemeral art practices was also a way to speak about them. More specifically he asks, “if the people have all these big archive[s] [that] do not have any annotation, then what is the value of the material?”²⁹³

Fig 35 - Koh Nguang How, *KNH-038 SAM/Old SJI seen from the art bus by TAV, 1996, When Photographs Become Drawings* (2009), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

²⁹¹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 63.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

If *When Photographs Becomes Drawings* (2009) allows us insight into the potential of archival practice in art exhibition, *SAAP@8Q-SAM* amplifies this aspect through a larger event, by way of a biennale. It exposes a repository of ritual, anxiety and hope. And, most poignantly, can be seen to tackle what Sven Spieker refers to as the possible failure of the archival machine.²⁹⁴ As Koh continues to push boundaries of the archival and artistic form, he encounters the limits of his own practice.

²⁹⁴ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, ix-xiii. Sven Spieker speaks of the possible failure of the archival machine, citing Ilya Kabakov's *Sixteen Ropes* (1984). He considers the perhaps futile act of Kabakov to resurrect history through his archival medium of a static installation of written labels attached to bits of garbage, both chaotic and incoherent, yet arranged neatly in a grid to suggest order. This inability to reconcile both elements is attributed to the lack of a coherent living voice or stable narrative in a normative archive. For Spieker, Kabakov's installation *highlights* the failure to establish a normative sense of history, which is its point. This becomes interesting when we consider that for Koh, his 'junk' materials, unlike Kabakov's, in fact function. They are literally related to art history and actual artefacts. But, at the same time, they are also an artwork. Koh's archive thus adds an interesting dimension to the archival artistic discourse.

5.2. Deconstruction and Destruction: Unravelling the Limits of the Archive in *SAAP@8Q-SAM/Artists in the News* (2011)

“So, I mentioned on my Facebook that I would throw [the archive] because I’ve lost faith, I’ve lost hope”

- Koh Nguang How, 2013 ²⁹⁵

In a recent conversation with Koh, the artist made a seeming casual remark “I don’t mind showing the storage... actually, exhibition is cleaning up”, said during a conversation relating to him providing access to his physical archive space at his mother’s home.²⁹⁶ Koh later explained that the comment was meant in the context of preparing for an exhibition. A curator had met him at his mother’s home to select certain artworks to fit the gallery space and curatorial theme, which triggered an issue he had been thinking of since his working days at the museum. He states that “*But I spent my money, time and space to create. What people see at (the) gallery is not my idea and process*” (italics mine). He further adds that “the visitors for shows and readers for publications are not experiencing close to the artists’ conditions”.²⁹⁷ In other words, for Koh, the exhibition space becomes a place for organizing, sorting, classifying part of his collection and reveals only a small portion of the artwork and practice. In exhibition, Koh stages his archive and practice. He reveals the difficulty and complexity of his work.

²⁹⁵ Koh Nguang How, ‘We RAT on Koh Nguang How’.

²⁹⁶ Koh Nguang How, conversation with the author, 21 April 2019.

²⁹⁷ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 9 May 2019.

However, in so doing, his modes of presentation powerfully interrogate the role of the archive and its function.

This perspective of Koh's came to the fore in a new presentation for the city of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, where many of the audience members are Chinese speaking. He included a Chinese version of the wall text and title. The Singapore Art Archive Project is translated to Chinese as “新加坡艺术文献库计划” (simplified Chinese) or 《新加坡藝術文獻庫計畫》 (traditional Chinese). The Chinese word 库, translates to a ‘store’ or ‘vault’, usually by appointment and not accessible to the public. Koh asserts that through his display and presentation, he hopes to make this designation *open*. This suggests that what often remains hidden in the archive, his “idea and process”, perhaps the greater part of what constitutes *SAAP*, may have been relegated to the margins by exhibition selection, unseen and with little attention.²⁹⁸ Part of what Koh attempts through his practice is to make visible the unseen, and one of his methods involves sharing his studio practice.²⁹⁹ An example is *SAAP@8Q-SAM/ Artists in the News* (2011), where some hidden aspects, such as the preparatory work and the aftermath, the rituals and codes embedded that are far less visible during exhibition, revealed considerable implications for understanding Koh's practice. These attempts to make visible his archival methods reveal the true extent of his investment in the limits of the archive as a form and medium for creating meaning, sharing information and artistic expression.

In 2011, Koh participated in the Singapore Biennale with *SAAP@8Q-SAM/ Artists in the News*. According to Koh, it was *a continuation* of *Errata* (2004, 2005) in terms of thematic and material elements. The way the two exhibitions were six years apart, yet are regarded by the

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 52.

artist as a continuum, becomes significant in reading *SAAP* as an entire work with multiple iterations. Where he had previously exhibited books, art catalogues and magazines, he would now focus on newspapers.³⁰⁰ In particular, Koh aimed specifically to shed light on thirty years of art related coverage in the newspapers, suggestive of the inherent power of the press to shape our perceptions according to how information gets disseminated. Upon entering the exhibition space, one was instantly confronted by the wall to wall display of thirty years of accumulated newspapers, compressed and materialized into a cacophony of text, images and headlines (see Figure 36). We also come face to face with the archivist himself, Koh.

Fig 36 - Koh Nguang How, Installation view *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Debbie Ding <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arielst0rm7/5721607269/>

³⁰⁰ Koh Nguang How, Interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 10.

Fig 37 (T) -41 (B) - Koh Nguang How, Installation view of Viewing/ Study Room (40), Sorting Room (41), *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: (25) Koh Nguang How, (26) Debbie Ding <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arielst0rm7/5722192210/>.

Fig 38 - Koh Nguang How, Installation view of Gallery Room, *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Debbie Ding <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arielst0rm7/5721607269/>

For this exhibition, Koh states that he was given relative latitude in terms of the curation of the space, unusual in his experience. He divided the space into three sections. Firstly, the largest space became the exhibition or gallery space (see Figure 36). In it, he devised an installation (see Figure 37) where he highlighted a news article on the 1980 opening of Tang Da Wu's *Earth Work* (1979), one of the earliest examples of land art in Singapore at the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG).³⁰¹ The original exhibition containing *Earth Work* had been abruptly shut down by NMAG after three days, according to Koh.³⁰² The next room became a viewing/study room (see Figure 38), where select news articles were framed and displayed on the wall with tables and chairs for reading. In addition, Koh installed slide-videos of select *SAAP* images, viewable through a TV monitor. In the third space, the 'office' (see Figure 42), Koh replicated his studio and installed his actual working desk from home, provenance:

³⁰¹ Charmaine Toh (ed), Tamares Goh and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, *Tang Da Wu Earth Work 1979* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2016), 11.

³⁰² Koh Nguang How, interview with the author. 15 February 2019. See appendix, 53.

“second-hand from Lianhe Zaobao at Genting Lane before they moved to Toa Payoh”.³⁰³ Koh also installed his junior college school uniform next to his desk, along with new articles as evidentiary of time, “symbolizing how [he] started collecting newspapers in junior college”, immediately signalling *SAAP*’s long and convoluted history prior to conceptualization.³⁰⁴

Koh had several objectives in this exhibition. First, he wanted to highlight some of the issues artists faced with heavy state intervention, a lack of funding and spaces in land-scarce Singapore, providing a window into these challenges, as read through reportage of the last thirty years. According to Koh, the installation simultaneously magnified the absence of artists who had been marginalised or omitted by the media.³⁰⁵ In a subsequent interview, he points to the headline on the highlighted article on *Earth Work* (1979), “Art for learning more than appreciation” (figure 39). He further adds, “...thirty years after *Earth Work*...based upon the “quality of writings...”, “in relation to the hype of the so called Biennale”, there appears a chasm between commercial art writing (of commercial art fairs such as the Biennale) and art critique, perhaps as a consequence of heavy state funding and regulation in the arts.³⁰⁶ It would seem that Koh and the artist’s concerns were more focussed on “art funding... controversy, art education, art places...”.³⁰⁷ Read through Koh’s lens, one of the unintended consequences of heavy state intervention may come at the expense of losing criticality and thus space, necessary for the survival of experimental art practices.

³⁰³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 10 May 2019.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 53.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 53.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

Fig 39 - Koh Nguang How, Installation view *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Debbie Ding <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arielst0rm7/5722154526/>

For Koh, the newspaper headline of Tang's *Earth Work* suggests a dialectic forum, yet he witnessed the show being shut down only after three days for no apparent reason. Furthermore, he presents the Museum's lack of interest to document important artistic practices in Singapore, including performance or land art as exemplified by Tang's *Earth Work*.³⁰⁸ This time, for Koh, the error he infers is not factual, as in *Errata@p-10*, but rather an error of omission, the loss caused by the press' silence when *Earth Work* was shut down. More broadly, these news article consider the potential of other overlooked artists in Singapore, now lost to history. From a wider perspective, Koh's work points to a broader contemporary global challenge on silence, censorship and complicity of the media in the current era of 'fake news'. Koh amplifies our

³⁰⁸ The lack of documentation on Tang Da Wu's *Earthwork* (1979) has been observed by curator and historian Charmaine Toh.

shifting perception of the relevancy of different artworks at different times in any given society, another reminder of the close relation of history and archives as described earlier. The fact that NGS saw value in *Earthwork* by resurrecting it in its inaugural, thirty-seven years after the show was shut down by NMAG becomes relevant in the discourse of use, commercial and artistic values in terms of art appreciation. Through information as relics and newspapers as objects, one can visualize the political, social and cultural dimensions of his archive and how they relate to multiple value systems, corresponding to Enwezor's observation of Gaba's fictive museum.³⁰⁹ Ironically, neither history nor the archive alone may be adequate to explicate some of these complex issues. In later correspondence, Koh shared that funding from a certain institution had been withdrawn from *SAAP*, about a month before this *Biennale* opened.³¹⁰

The next objective Koh had was to provide access to his process of archival selection in his day to day activities, hence the installation of reading room and the 'office'/sorting room, this being a rare opportunity with the curatorial flexibility granted him.³¹¹ According to Koh, the reading room allows for the participant to sift through the news material, as if they were researchers, and reach their own informed opinions (see Figure 40).

³⁰⁹ Enwezor, 'The Death of the African Archive', 143-145.

³¹⁰ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 10 May 2019.

³¹¹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 52.

Fig 40 - Koh Nguang How, Pre-production view of Sorting Room, *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

The ‘office’/sorting room was for the participant to physically experience some of the tasks involved in maintaining his archive and his system of categorizing and pre-selection. As such, the office is a stand in for his studio and storage space in terms of how he conducts his business. For Koh, the exhibition is only a part of the entire process.³¹² In fact, in subsequent interviews, Koh spent an inordinate amount of time detailing some of the unseen aspects of this exhibition.

³¹² Ibid, 58.

Fig 41 - Koh Nguang How, Pre-production view, *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Fig 42 - Koh Nguang How, Pre-production view, *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

When I requested images, many of the images he provided in our correspondence were not of the exhibition. More than half the images were of cardboard boxes (two hundred and fifty of them, in which he used to transport his materials) in various stages of undress (see Figures 41-42), with some meticulously stacked and arranged, in pre-production, en route and during de-installation. When asked about it, Koh states “...that is my work... that’s part of my practice...”³¹³ Furthermore, he states that “...before [boxes] are open... this documentation is actually my work...”, but that they “may be visible in the exhibition in the future... through documentation as archival material[s]”.³¹⁴

In the last week of his exhibition at the Biennale, Koh turned the space into “a forest” to signify the beginning of de-installation (see Figure 43).³¹⁵ Some of the newspapers were shredded, while others were cut up into shapes of leaves and branches, a symbolic gesture to return paper back to their origin, trees. Even the lighting was gradually dimmed. A final act saw him sweeping up the paper remains and returning the space to pristine condition, though there was no viewer because, as he explained, the exhibition had ended by then.³¹⁶

Thus, we can see that the act of destruction, the omittance, becomes another method in Koh’s array of methods that constitute the archive as artistic practice. Amidst the backdrop of a very real lack of physical space in contemporary Singapore, as well as the persistent erosion of his surroundings due to urbanization, coupled with the mental pressures to cope existentially with having to prioritize and select information in part due to heavy state censorship, weighed against the fear of forgetting and, most pertinently, the loss of institutional funding and validation, Koh turns to destruction. He cuts up his own archival materials (see Figure 44). The

³¹³ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 56.

³¹⁴ Ibid, 57.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 54.

³¹⁶ Ibid, 58.

destruction of his own archive enables the creation of artwork, of discourse and allows for an emotional endurance amidst a plethora of institutional, financial and governmental pressures. The shredding of his own materials reveals, more than anything, the great void between Koh's archive and its institutional cousins. Koh's practice lacks the impenetrable permanence of the normative archive; his is supple, fragile and paper-thin. This fragility houses its beauty, its ability to communicate and its adaptability to evolve. As Koh said himself of the event, "I am creating a new work."³¹⁷ In this way, Koh's mode of storage is revealed to be the opposite of permanent, with its impermanency becoming necessary in ensuring his archive's enduring survivability.

Fig 43 - Koh Nguang How, installation view, *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

³¹⁷ Ibid, 57.

Fig 44 - Koh Nguang How, installation view, *SAAP@SAM8Q/ Artists in the News* (2011), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

The works in abeyance, in the form of Koh's physical archival space, studio processes, manual and electronic tools, hidden rituals and ceremonies, are indicators of a system of categorization much more complex and encompassing than one might think. *SAAP* and its many iterations therefore must be considered together as a singular artwork. The exhibition represents only a juncture to ensure both the survivability of his practice, and his membership in the institutionalised art economy. To recapitulate, through a close examination of Koh's practices, we see no delineation for Koh between his materials whether in storage or at exhibition. In fact, it reveals the opposite. The exhibition is just another mode to archive, sort and organize, as evidenced by *SAAP@8Q SAM* where the storage spaces became another mode of exhibition. His archivization is a continuous act. For Koh, his exhibitions are reflective of artistic thinking as archival storage. What new concepts or ideas might this lead to?

Having outlined the attributes of the archive as artistic practice, we can now see how Koh further expands the possibilities of this form. In terms of the historical, we can think of how he transforms individual to collective memories through concepts such as serial photography, cinema in an album, rituals capturing the ephemeral, representations of reportage, a merging of aesthetic and storage composition, future-oriented practices, all challenging the static archive. In terms of methodology, multiple trajectories open up including but not limited to serial work, unexhibited work, photography as land art, unopened works, improvisation, durational practices, storage space and domicile as exhibition space, his own performative presence, deconstruction and failure. It is a self-referential process encompassing transformation in each exhibition, non-systematic or even on the fly thinking, repression, and even destruction. Theoretically, we can see that for Koh, the archive represents only a 'tentative classification', to borrow the words of Andrew Sarris, towards the next act.

6. Blurring Boundaries and Rearranging Roles: *SAAP*'s Generative Sites for Meaning and Discourse.

Many relate Koh's work to its ability to recover lost moments in the art and cultural history of Singapore. Yet on close examination, Koh's archival mechanism is far more complex in his reference, reinterpretation and deployment of the archival lexicon. *SAAP* can in fact be seen to dislodge history by instigating multiple narratives, through idiosyncratic modifications in each iteration, echoing how the archive, as Foucault stated, "is that which differentiates discourses..., [revealing] the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification."³¹⁸ It is in this vein that Koh can be seen to constantly blur the boundaries between the established roles of the art institution. Inhabiting and performing positions of curator, artist and archivist/historian, Koh interrogates and challenges their nature. Here we will discuss the many ways Koh problematizes the different roles through each iteration of *SAAP*. In examining this, we will begin to see how each of these iterations is itself a generative site for meaning and discourse.

The display and exhibition practices of art, gallery culture, and museum studies have formed a vast discipline of related discourse. The networked relations of artist, curator, historian and archivist are complex for any artwork. This chapter does not intend to grapple with the ever-evolving discourse around gallery and museum practice. Instead in this chapter, I will take a close analysis of the exhibition practices Koh deploys. In this way we can examine the aesthetic and performative techniques Koh uses, and how these practices destabilize the roles curator,

³¹⁸ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 146.

historian, archivist and even that of the artist. By doing this, the aim is to reveal the complexity of meaning and discourse held within an iteration of *SAAP*, which we can see as the true extent of Koh's offering of a new modality of the archive as artistic practice.

6.1. Undoing the Exhibition: The Aesthetic of De-installation, Erasure and Aftermath in *4 Days in August* (1992)

4 Days in August (1992) was Koh's documentary-performance during *Performance Week* at Gallery 21, Singapore, named after a piece by Tang Da Wu. In this piece, Koh re-enacts the performances of other artists, integrating left-over relics from those acts, such as those of artist Juliana Yasin's *Untitled* (1992) or Tang Da Wu's "*4 Days in August*" (1992), as well as 're-performing' his own photographic installation on display. In the final segment, Koh removes all of his photographic images from the wall, all the while documenting the sequences with an automatic camera (figures 45-46).

Fig 45 - Koh Nguang How, on view, *4 Days in August* (1992), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

According to Koh, it was to announce how performance art had been marginalised by the press and the rarity and precociousness of their practice as “such event like ‘Performance Week’ would also disappear in people’s memories soon”.³¹⁹ In other words, Koh had in essence exhibited the deinstallation and aftermath of the artists’ work, including his own, carving a void of noteworthy silence, perhaps symbolic of hope, fear, anxiety and renewal, implicitly or explicitly. In his act of re-enactment and erasure, Koh highlights the then lack of institutional validity for performance artists in Singapore.³²⁰ Koh’s act appears to correspond with a notion of selective forgetfulness as framed by Eco as “*the presentification of absence*”, that is, absence as a symbol of reinforcement of expression.³²¹ In specific reference to Singapore’s heavy state intervention in the arts, art historian Joan Kee describes a similar condition of such ‘absence’ in terms of a “spatially oriented term” for artistic experimentation, signifying “an overlap of different meanings.”³²² In Koh’s “presentification of absence”, he artistically inhabits the role of the historian in the archivation of his own work, compounding these positions in a exhibition space, he provides an event for the enabling of new interpretations and meaning.

³¹⁹ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 28 February 2019.

³²⁰ The lack of institutional validity and support for performance art practices has been documented by many scholars including ,Yap (2016),Tan (2012), Langenbach (1996), Lee (1996); most notably on the de-facto ban on performance art (through a withholding of funding and strict licensing requirements), issued by the state between 1994 to 2004, shortly after artist Joseph Ng’s controversial performance *Brother Cane* (1993) at the 5th passage Gallery in the Parkway Parade Shopping Center during the Artists’ General Assembly (AGA), a week long arts festival in Singapore.

³²¹ Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, 72-82. Eco developed the term ‘Ars Oblivionalis’ or the art of forgetting to denote the possibilities of selective forgetfulness in semiotics as a mnemonic device.

³²² Joan Kee, ‘Envisaging Hollowness in Contemporary Singapore,’ *Art Journal* 60, issue 3 (2001): 67-68.

“4 Days in Aug”,
 Koh’s performance on the final day of “Performance Week”
 It involved Koh’s re-enactments at selected relics/sites from the past week by other artists.

Surviving picture show Koh at Juliana Yasin’s broken glass relic

Koh narrating about “4 Days in August” by Tang da Wu in 1987

Fig 46 - Koh Nguang How, on view, *4 Days in August* (1992), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How³²³

Many earlier precedents of artistic archives engage with themes of aftermath, such as Ilya Kabakov’s *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* (1985), Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled (Death by Gun)* (1990) or Hans-Peter Feldmann’s *9/12 Front Page* (2001), among many others. However, the ceremony that Koh accords to what most might consider less than marginalia, or dispensable, even among extreme artistic archival practices who traffic in found images or reportage in the postmodern era, is in fact one of the defining characteristics of Koh’s aesthetic, identifiable from the 1980s till now. Many artistic archives rely on a blend

³²³ Photo captions within images are original, the text being part of Koh’s documentation.

of both fact and fiction such as Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia, Vol 1: G for Ghost(writers)*(2017), or shock value concealed within the banal, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres *"Untitled" (Death by Gun)*(1990) as a means of activation. In comparison, Koh's archive is much more subdued, meagre even, languidly operating under the shadows of other performances, other exhibitions, other books, catalogues or ephemera. How is one to read a re-enactment commencing immediately after the event of an already temporal medium, in this case decorated with leftover relics, no less? Is it a display of documentary photography? A re-performance of performance art? Photographs as paintings? Archivization or art making? In her seminal book *Performance Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactments*, Rebecca Schneider argues that re-enactments extend the performative beyond its disappearance where "repetition is *both* reiteration of precedent *and* the performance of something occurring 'again for the first time'".³²⁴ Schneider argues that reenactments, alongside documents as relics of performative acts, have been largely overlooked by performance studies scholars concerned with the temporality of the performative act and therefore ready to consign it to the archive in the normative sense, as static.³²⁵ For Schneider, this view is limited as it fails to consider that the relics themselves can be resurrected and retransmitted through other gestures such as the live body, that is "flesh as a network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment - evidence, across generations, of impact".³²⁶

Here Koh's act of re-enactment compounds the positions of artist and historian. If Schneider, via performance studies, reads the archive's power in this way, then Koh's archival repertoire of reenactments can be also read as alive, and representative of a new mode of understanding the archive. Koh himself says this of his archive: that it should be "an ongoing experiment, to

³²⁴ Rebecca Schneider *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactments* (UK: Routledge, 2011), 90.

³²⁵ Ibid, 94-96.

³²⁶ Ibid, 100.

be an archive in... different situations”, denoting a continuous act.³²⁷ Rarely fictionalized or manipulated, the semi-impermeability or the ability to refute categorization is perhaps one of the reasons why *SAAP* remains enigmatic. With Koh, what’s on display is never the whole picture, only uncertainty, reverberated through echoes, codes and gestures. Koh later notified me that in actuality he had forgotten there was an earlier version of *4 days in August* (1992), producing a large black four inch thick dossier entitled *4 days in August* (1987), which he had just found.³²⁸ As discussed earlier, this work had been rejected by the National Museum Centenary Art Exhibition in 1987. At the time of this writing, he sent me some images with a notation, with his characteristic attention to detail, “...the cover of black album should be just the ‘*4 days in August*’, the small label came off the cover and I kept it before the Chinese New Year”.³²⁹ In other words, the serial work, *4 days in August*, remains unfinished for further interpretations, be it 1987, 1992 or possibly 2020. In observing the malleability of the archive as medium, Spieker asserts how “the efficacy of archives as media that allow for the perception of the past within the context of the present is tied to the transformation of temporal relationships into spatial ones.”³³⁰ In this way, the temporality of moving time has been co-opted by Koh to be materialized into the concrete spaces of his archival acts, within or outside of exhibition. Koh’s work is a complex spacialization of the temporal dynamic within the exhibition. Blending and inverting the roles, Koh, the artist, curates a living archive of his colleague’s work. One that becomes immediately subsumed into his greater archive project and its surrounding web of histories and personalities.

³²⁷ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 16.

³²⁸ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 10 May 2019.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 27.

6.2. The Archive Reconfigured

Considering Koh's reconfiguring of the archive and its related roles of artist, historian, archivist and curator, we can examine further additional aesthetic strategies that Koh deploys. In her review of *SAAP@8Q-SAM*, Martin referred to the aesthetic of Koh's exhibition as "analogue".³³¹ Indeed, most of Koh's archive is in analogue format, much of it remains undigitized even though later instalments of *SAAP* saw collaborations with designers such as Lim Shenggen incorporating VR technology. As discussed earlier, Koh has incorporated this 'esthetic of pragmatism' to an extreme in various configurations, pushing the limits of the archive as artistic practice. In many conversations, Koh stated how every portion of his process including seemingly mundane archival tasks, such as boxing, filing data physically or in his computer, is constitutive of his work – with him asserting that "each process" is "part of my practice".³³² For Koh, some of his working devices include "foolscap and A4 paper", "manual and electronic typewriter, fax machine or personal computer".³³³ Adding to this list was "PowerPoint talks".³³⁴ In an up-close survey of *The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018), Koh's presentation slides project a lyrical orchestration of time in space. Examining these works closely, Koh appears to inhabit the role of the artist (in their compositional arrangement), the role of the curator (in their selection and gearing towards exhibition display) and the role of the archivist/historian (in that these materials constitute his archival cataloguing).

³³¹ Martin, 'We RAT on Koh Nguang How and his newspaper collection!'

³³² Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 56-57.

³³³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 26 May 2019.

³³⁴ Ibid.

Comprising of two parts, with a total of 142 slides, 60 years of art exhibition periodicals and reportage is artfully compressed into each and every slide (see Figure 47-49). Every slide is meticulously organized; layers of text, images and photographs reintroduced and modified to fit within the format of Microsoft PowerPoint. Among them are screenshots of Koh's searches, re-photographed art images from periodicals, images of other artists archives, found maps, exhibition posters, receipts, correspondence, art association and artist activities, even obituaries, all arranged and reconfigured according to Koh's titles and subcategories. Shrank to fit a slide image, the periodicals' texts in both Chinese and English are mostly indecipherable, except for a headline or two. Text in both Chinese and English disintegrates and dissolves into a larger image becoming an interplay of various shapes, a collage of fragmentary jargon, punctuated by the white noise of ellipsis and Koh's translations.

Fig 47 - Koh Nguang How, select slides, *SAAP@SharjahArtBookFair/The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

In a recent article *The Underground Art of PowerPoint*, senior writer for *WIRE* Andy Greenberg, who covers issues from security to hacker culture on the internet, argued for the ubiquitous PowerPoint as an efficient medium and creative tool due to its simple interface and

cheap cost, citing Jeremiah Lee's PowerPoint movie *Infiltration* (2008), Shawn Toh's *PowerPoint Haven*, a web-based gallery focused on PowerPoint art including films and videogames, as well as musician and artist David Byrne's "PowerPoint art exhibitions" both in New York City and Tokyo, amongst others.³³⁵ Greenberg sees them as evidentiary of how "a subculture of PowerPoint enthusiasts is teaching the old application new tricks, and may even be turning a dry presentation format into a full-fledged artistic medium".³³⁶

Fig 48 - Koh Nguang How, select slides, *SAAP@SharjahArtBookFair/The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018) , Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Fig 49 - Koh Nguang How, select slides, *SAAP@SharjahArtBookFair/The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

³³⁵ Andy Greenburg, 'The Underground Art of PowerPoint', *Forbes*, 11 May 2010. Accessed 16 May, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/2010/05/10/microsoft-software-iphone-technology-powerpoint.html#4a4821327208>.

³³⁶ Ibid.

Another artist that explores the limits of PowerPoint as medium and content is Frankfurt artist Michael Riedel. In his work *PowerPoint* (2013), PowerPoint is utilized as a cipher for translating found text as well as the artist's own previous works such as his *Poster Paintings* (2011) to create new reifications. The artist states that instead of "sampling" such as the cut and paste of post-production art, he is rather investigating the systems of communications itself such as complete websites or html codes. By means of translation, he arrives at new methods of art production.³³⁷ Art critic Daniel Birnbaum describes Riedel's work as "a world of echoes, after images and replicas", creating "a kind of parallel universe" of "filmed films" and "clubbed clubs" that result in "displaced facsimiles" or any number of "other mining" of "cultural situations".³³⁸ Riedel himself says, in reference to another work, *Ohne Tiel (L-Serie)* (2017), where he presented an artwork based on his recordings of Art Cologne's selection committee's meeting, "translation and transmission of the system's communication is the defining approach of my work. The material I use is already in existence at the time of its intervention... my works are witnesses to a temporally continuing process within the art system".³³⁹

Koh himself says that "...archives are readymade[s] present[ed] differently," recalling his ongoing reworkings with limited existing material.³⁴⁰ The press release for *PowerPoint*, describing Riedel's method as having "advanced his own model of a self-sustaining artistic production", could be seen as indicative of a contemporary investment in a new mode of production that generates future manifestations while working in the present.³⁴¹ Koh

³³⁷ Michael Riedel, 'Visual Artist Michael Riedel Speaks on "PowerPoint"', interview by Tamara Warren, *Life and Times*, 26 February 2013. Accessed 16 May 2019, <http://lifeandtimes.com/visual-artist-michael-riedel-speaks-on-powerpoint-art-exhibit>.

³³⁸ Daniel Birnbaum, 'Michael S. Riedel', *Art Forum International* 44, issue 2 (October, 2005): 262.

³³⁹ Michael Riedel, 'Michael Riedel Made an Artwork Out of Art Cologne's Selection Process', interview by Perwana Nazif, *Artnet.com*, published 20 February 2017. Accessed 16 May 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-michael-riedel-art-cologne-859799>.

³⁴⁰ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 41.

³⁴¹ 'PowerPoint', press release, David Zwirner, published 16 February 2013. Accessed 16 May 2019, <https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/powerpoint/press-release>.

Fig 51 (T)- 52 (B) - Koh Nguang How, PowerPoint artefact, SAAP@SharjahArtBookFair/The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project (2018), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

For Koh, the work is never done. Koh himself explicitly asserts that *SAAP* is a work in progress, as displayed in the slides of *The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018) (see Figures 50-56). Koh states that “I called the *SAAP* a work-in-progress, ...the performative elements come under ‘Work-in-progress’. I also give guided talks

in the space of the *SAAP* too”.³⁴³ Koh further adds that “there is no definite end point”.³⁴⁴ In every iteration, he explicitly challenges himself to rework the archive into new configurations.³⁴⁵ For example, in *SAAP@ SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* (2017/2018), new iterations were produced for National Art Centre, Tokyo, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and Kaohsiung City, Taiwan, often with translations adapted to regional cultural nuances. With one version never the same as the next, Koh describes this process as constant “thinking”.³⁴⁶ Each iteration presents another opportunity to both curate, share and acquire new information or “make my... own documentation”.³⁴⁷ He describes that in preparation for each exhibition, he has to “purposely seek for those missing items”.³⁴⁸ Here Koh’s curatorial approach to exhibitions is reconfigured as an enduring artistic and archival practice. Seeming to assert the curatorial quality of Koh’s method, Yap describes that with each iteration, *SAAP* unveils new forms adaptive to its surroundings and henceforth “shapes what can happen next”.³⁴⁹ As such, we are encountering an active archival system, in constant mutation and growth, reconfiguring its relationship to the institution, while systematically generating materials that become by-products for future projects whilst in the process of its own creation. Curator and co-author of Riedel’s book *Michael Riedel: Poster - Painting - Presentation*, Tina Kukielski, argues that “Riedel’s art is based in text and its production, not its reading and interpretation. And despite my best assumption that the system must and will collapse, it self-perpetuates.”³⁵⁰ Though Riedel and Koh’s work results in very different aesthetics, one working very much within the digital realm while the other analogue, and both

³⁴³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

³⁴⁴ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 41.

³⁴⁵ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 10.

³⁴⁶ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 65.

³⁴⁷ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 47.

³⁴⁸ Koh, *Ibid*, 47.

³⁴⁹ June Yap, conversation with the author, 16 May 2019.

³⁵⁰ Tina Kukielski, “Fade Through Black,” in *Michael Riedel: Poster—Painting—Presentation* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2016), 9.

having risen out of very different contexts, one can say that based on the evidence of *The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project*(2018) or even *Four Days in August* (1987/1992), Koh's process beginning since the 1980s shares a philosophical and theoretical affinity with artists such as Riedel, in terms of their active reworkings of their presentation of information, rather than relying on established genres. For Koh, what's on display is the archival, the autobiographical and the unfolding art scene of Singapore, encompassed in a novel account as read through the artist's lens.

6.3. Disordering Order: *Errata: page 71, plate 47. image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How (2004/2005)*

Some of the most experimental qualities of Koh's work can be found in an iteration titled, *Errata: page 71, plate 47. image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How*. Erratas are generally appended to the end of the document or writing. Koh's erratum, however, is prominently displayed as the title for his artwork as "reported by Koh...". *Errata@p-10* was conceptualized around the erroneous dating of Socialist Realist artist Chua Mia Tee's *National Language Class* (1959). In 1996, whilst coordinating the exhibition *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements* at the Fukuoka Art Museum, Koh noticed that the exhibition text had attributed the painting to 1950, based on documentation from the loaning institution, Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Upon further research, Koh found that this mistake had also made its way into Kwok Kian Chow's book *Channels and Confluences: a History of Singapore Art*, published by SAM in 1996 (see Figure 54). Koh was familiar with the painting as he assisted in two previous exhibitions, a retrospective on Chua Mia Tee's work (1988) (see Figure 53) and *Urban Artists* (1990) (see Figure 55), organized by the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG), attributing the painting to 1959. According to Koh, Fukuoka Art Museum did later issue an erratum, whereas SAM did not.³⁵¹

He further stated that neither the accession records of NMAG nor SAM are available for verification.³⁵² Subsequently, according to Koh, the book's author Kwok Kian Chow and artist Chua Mia Tee did acknowledge the mistake in a conversation in August of 2005.³⁵³ Upon his

³⁵¹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 33.

³⁵² Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 21 September 2018.

³⁵³ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 34.

discovery of the mistake, Koh felt it necessary to issue an erratum as he noticed that the erroneous date continued to be circulated on the original editions of these books, as well as several other web publications, including scholarly ones, though he states that much of the institutions' digital data has been amended.³⁵⁴ Yap describes how it concerned Koh that “the mistake [was] being perpetuated - repeated across other publications and historical citations, in school curricula and websites....” whereby it “may never be fully corrected”.³⁵⁵

The incorrect dating reveals a web of potential histories and narratives. One of these might be the enigma surrounding the painting and its possible relation to the mysterious abrupt dissolution of the Equator Art Society in Singapore (est. 1956), of which Chua was a member.³⁵⁶ The society was “alleged” to have had communist associations.³⁵⁷ According to curator Woon Tien Wei, the members have denied these allegations.³⁵⁸ By tracing the history of the Equator Art Society, contextualized against the exhibition text of *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency* (2007), which drew from *Errata@p-10*, Yap offered a conjecture whereby the lineage of the *National Language Class* (1959) might have been influenced by the more radical and revolutionary Soviet Union (Stalinist) strain of Socialist Realism and therefore more closely aligned with tactics that may have been perceived as subversive by the government.³⁵⁹ According to Koh, “Chua Mia Tee in the past (until the late 1970s) openly admired Russian painter Repin, who was a Socialist Realist [and] EAS members admired Xu Beihong, Basoeki Abdullah, Repin”.³⁶⁰ Yap observed that this aesthetic is different than Kwok's interpretation in *Channels and Confluences*, attributing the painting to the

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 34-35.

³⁵⁵ Yap, *Retrospective*, 85.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 87-88.

³⁵⁷ Alecia Yeo Kay Ling, ‘Equator Art Society’, Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board, Singapore, 2016, accessed 1 June, 2019, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1253_2006-11-30.html.

³⁵⁸ Woon Tien Wei, “Still Here Somehow”.

³⁵⁹ Yap, *Retrospective*, 84.

³⁶⁰ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 4 June, 2019.

Chinese Social Realist Art movement which was invested in developing an anti-colonialist aesthetic and the value of Realism as a positive aspect for the greater good of society.³⁶¹ According to Seng Yu Jin, curator at the National Art Gallery, Singapore, 1959 was also the year where Singapore won internal self-governance led by the People's Action Party (PAP), which led to the creation of the Ministry of Culture subsequently in 1965, which was charged with the responsibility of initiating a common Malayan culture.³⁶² Critic and historian Lim Cheng Tju observed that prior to 1959, there was “a convergence of interests between the Socialist Realist artists and the (then) strongest left-wing party in Singapore, the PAP”.³⁶³ He further added that “Social Realism was the art style favoured by the PAP in the 1950s”, their common stance with Socialist Realist artists being the emancipation from the British colonial government and the established right-wing government.³⁶⁴ With the establishment of self-governance though, Socialist Realist works became too “left-wing” for “social cohesion” and “political stability” and the government now favoured the “apolitical” aesthetics of the Modern Art Society, as observed by Lim.³⁶⁵ One could speculate then that the painting's date of 1959 thus served as an uncomfortable reminder of the ideological split between the Socialist Realist artists and PAP. According to Koh, the original painting had only a Chinese title “上國語課”, not an English one.³⁶⁶ The new PAP government had just adopted Malay as the national language in 1959. Koh further states that to a Chinese educated speaker, as Chua and many of his peers were, the term “國語” (meaning national language) would have referred to Chinese if the painting was created in 1950, as Malay had not been adopted as the national language; yet, the writing on the blackboard figured in the painting is in Malay. For Koh, this was further proof that the painting was created in 1959. Absent of sufficient data, we can only hazard a

³⁶¹ Yap, *Retrospective*, 86.

³⁶² Seng, *From Words to Pictures*, 12.

³⁶³ Lim Cheng Tju, ‘Political Prints in Singapore’, *Print Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (September, 2004): 274.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 281.

³⁶⁶ Koh Nguang How, conversation with the author, 21 April 2019.

guess at the real events in the painting's history. These fragments, provided by Koh in *Errata@p-10*, become a rare and invaluable means for reconsidering Singapore's artistic past in relation to its political developments. His new model of the archive thus breaks down the walls of nationality and language, operating beyond borders.

Errata@p-10 sheds a poignant light on the error, while reviving interest in the Socialist Realist movement in Singapore.³⁶⁷ Yap goes further to suggest *Errata@p-10*'s success is testament to Koh's archive as a regenerative machine of memory and history.

³⁶⁷ A number of authors have argued for Koh's involvement in the recovery of the Social Realist movement. These include: Anthony, 2017; Woon, 2017; Yap, 2016.

Fig 53 (T) - 54 (B) - Koh Nguang How, PowerPoint artefact, 57 showing the exhibition catalogue of Chua Mia Tee (1988) with the painting *National Language Class* dated as 1959 and 58 showing the date of the painting documented as 1950 in Kwok Kian Chow's *Channels and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art*; SAAP@SharjahArtBookFair/The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project (2018) , Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

Fig 55 - Koh Nguang How, artefact: installation view of *National Language Class* at Urban Artists [1990], *SAAP* (2005- present), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How

東南アジア- 近代美術の誕生展 図録正誤表 The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements 1997 A LIST of ERRATA			
		(誤) error	(正) correction
・ p.20 左列30行目		葉巻会社として	→ 葉巻会社の奨学生として
・ p.33, 46, 49 No.7, 20, 21所蔵者		バリウノ・ケ夫妻蔵	→ バウリノ・ケ夫妻蔵
・ p.65 No.30解説		(JM)	→ (JS)
・ p.85 No.49題名		ムラヒ山	→ ムラヒ山
・ p.94 左列9行目		(イス教徒)	→ (イスラム教徒)
・ p.183 左列36行目		シヨード・バラツツオーリ	→ クロード・バラツツオーリ
・ p.206 凡例		ジム・スパンカット (JM)	→ ジム・スパンカット (JS)
・ p.242 right 1.48		Chaude Palazzoli	→ Claude Palazzoli
本図録のデータはコーディネーターから提供されたデータに基づいているが、実際の作品に記された年記および使用されている材質は異なるものであった。 This catalogue is based on the data provided by the coordinators. But as compared to actual information on the works, the dates and materials which are listed below differ.			
Errata National Language Class →		(誤) error	(正) correction
	・ p.89,269,281,285 No.52制作年(date)	1954	→ 195 2
	・ p.123,271,281,285 No.74制作年(date)	1949	→ 194 8
	・ p.129,272,282,286 No.80制作年(date)	1950	→ 195 2
	・ p.136,273,282,286 No.92制作年(date)	1956	→ 195 7
	・ p.192,278,283,287 No.140制作年(date)	1943	→ 194 4
	・ p.195,278,283,287 No.143制作年(date)	1960	→ 1959-61
	・ p.198,278,283,287 No.146制作年(date)	1951	→ 194 9
	・ p.200,279,283,287 No.148制作年(date)	1958	→ 195 2
	・ p.280,284 No.6	1927	→ 192 6
	・ p.280,284 No.30	油彩・画布/oil on canvas	→ 油彩・板/oil on board
	・ p.280,284 No.31	グアッシュ/gouache	→ 油彩・画布/oil on canvas
	・ p.281,285 No.44	油彩・画布/oil on canvas	→ 油彩・板/oil on board
	・ p.281 No.52	木版・紙	→ 油彩・板
	・ p.283,287 No.130	テンペラ/tempera	→ テンペラ・メソナイトボード/ tempera on masonite
	・ p.283,287 No.145	水彩/gouache	→ 水彩・紙/gouache on paper
	・ p.283 No.146	漆・紙	→ 漆・板

Fig 56 - Artefact: Evidence #2, Fukuoka Art Museum's errata for The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements [1997]; *Errata: page 71, plate 47. image caption. Change Year: 1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How (2004), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.*

At the exhibition in p-10, Koh staged his archive as a think tank or research facility in an ad hoc fashion, staging his thought processes that led to his discovery of the error. Periodicals were sectioned into five groups, allowing viewers to freely access and peruse leisurely atop the long table and chairs. There was also a video component of Koh's archival process and a large chalkboard, parodying the one in the original painting, with handwritten text depicting Koh's "mind map".³⁶⁸ As previously discussed, *Errata* generated a whole host of serial projects, discourse and interpretations, suggesting a political gesture insofar as the artist generating an alternate narrative against the official history. Yet, it is far more than this. In terms of criticality, Koh's *Errata* not only unveiled new histories, it suggests new modes of configuring and dispersing information historically, theoretically and methodologically.

Curator of the National Gallery, Seng Yu Jin, suggests that Koh's project "opened the door in terms of a particular way of working [in archival art practice]"; and he did this in four ways - the artistic, the archival, the historical and the curatorial.³⁶⁹ Koh's artistry slips in between the other three disciplines into a distinct practice.³⁷⁰ He cites the *Errata* iterations as a case study vis-a-vis its subject (history painting), presentation and relational aspect (curatorial), selection (archival), thereby leading to an "infinite" system methodologically (art practice).³⁷¹ Seng goes on further to highlight this artistic aspect of Koh's practice as a highly complex method.³⁷² Koh's artistic practice not only incorporates the historical, archival and curatorial, it challenges them.³⁷³ Seng argues that Koh achieves this by means of encoding the subjective and the personal, coupled with his extensive art historical knowledge, into a bricolage of object and

³⁶⁸ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 36.

³⁶⁹ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 103.

³⁷⁰ Ibid, 89.

³⁷¹ Ibid, 87-91.

³⁷² Ibid, 90-91.

³⁷³ Ibid, 87-91.

subject, objectivity and subjectivity, that is difficult to separate.³⁷⁴ Yap similarly highlights this by citing an occasion where Koh, on one of his routine walks of documentation, turned the camera upon himself, adding a personal dimension in his art practice.³⁷⁵ Low maintains that it is the static material as well as Koh's presence that denotes his aesthetic form.³⁷⁶ All these acts point toward a distinct habit of reflexivity and self-awareness that constitutes part of his archival practice, as if he was cataloguing his oeuvre for future historicization, corresponding further to Schaffner's observation of artists' conscious and conscientious interventions throughout their practice.³⁷⁷ More importantly, it revealed some of Koh's strategic devices that he deploys both in exhibition and in private showings. Two aspects merit further in depth discussion: i) naming, as a means of marking; ii) the performance poetics of narrative - as read through the *Errata* series, particularly *Errata@p-10* (2004) – as we shall explore in the two following sub-chapters.

Fundamentally, *Errata* questions the stability of the archive. Koh's archive enacts the act of dating, while revealing the flawed nature of archival dating itself. Koh does not enforce a narrative nor inflict a prescribed reading, which is the normative function of the institution and its archive - to create order. Koh does not present order but, in its place, *disorder*. He presents the evidence in a subjective, complicated, non-linear way. This immediately triangulates Koh's archive into a set of functional relations to allow for the subtle performative gesture of inference (in this specific instance, among many others). In other words, Koh's circumstantial evidence, standing in for the absent painting and lack of erratum as yet to be issued by SAM, opens up a site for multiple interpretations to take place: those of the artist, the curator, the historian, the archivist, the institution and the viewer.

³⁷⁴ Ibid, 91.

³⁷⁵ June Yap, conversation with the author, 16 May 2019.

³⁷⁶ Low Eng Teong, interview with the author, 25 April 2019. See appendix, 73.

³⁷⁷ Schaffner, 'Deep Storage', 11.

6.3.1. Naming *Errata*

Fig 57 - Koh Nguang How et al, artefact: *Errata@p-10 exhibition poster*, SAAP (2004/2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How. Graphics: p-10

The naming of things, as with dating or marking, connotes a designation. One dictionary definition of the word ‘name’ means “a designation”.³⁷⁸ In her essay, *In the Name of Picasso*, art historian Rosalind Krauss concluded that art history is often quick to prescribe meaning based solely upon an artist’s autobiography or other contextual factors. Her point is that the associative functions of artists’ names act as a prescribed label, thereby “limiting the play of meaning”.³⁷⁹ She explains that “with it has come a massive misreading and processes of

³⁷⁸ Oxford English Dictionary Online, 3rd ed., s.v. ‘name, *n.* and *adj.*,’ accessed 28th May, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/124918?rskey=7GjmNN&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

³⁷⁹ Rosalind Krauss, ‘In the Name of Picasso’, *October* 16 (1981): 21.

signification and a reduction of the visual sign to an insistent mouthing of proper names”.³⁸⁰ In other words, a name conjures up various associations which might then suppress other interpretations. Krauss charts Picasso’s various periods and links his cubist collage with structural linguistics as a methodological possibility for an alternative understanding of his artworks not based on autobiography. The basis for her argument rests with the sign as a proxy for an absent referent as conceptualized by Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure.³⁸¹ Krauss says “this structural condition of absence is essential to the operation of the sign within Picasso’s collage.”³⁸² According to Krauss, reading the artwork (in this case Picasso’s collage) and not solely the label, or drawing upon its context, can expand the interpretations of a work into “a system of signifiers”.³⁸³ Yet what happens when an artist such as Koh includes naming or labelling as constitutive of the artwork, even as a deliberate strategy in conflating both the label and the object?

What does one make of a title *Errata@p-10/Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported September 2004 by Koh Nguang How*? The title is clearly specific, reporting the facts with dates, pages and plate numbers, yet he tags on ‘reported by Koh Nguang How’ in his title. This gesture renders the artwork an object and subject at the same time, simultaneously pointing to multiple references, not only the object in absence (said missing erratum from SAM), but also implicating the historical, the curatorial and the archival, the three elements noted by Seng.³⁸⁴ The point of turning the objective into the subjective was also underscored by Yap in a conversation where she stated that it is Koh’s presence that makes the artwork.³⁸⁵ Koh himself has mentioned that he conceives of *SAAP* in terms of structural

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 22.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 15.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid, 19.

³⁸⁴ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 87-91.

³⁸⁵ June Yap, conversation with the author, 16 May 2019.

differences to other archives both institutionally and independently.³⁸⁶ In essence, Koh's addition of his own name as part of the title is a kind appropriation of institutional language and labelling practice; it is a collapsing of the structure of the institution into his archive. Positions of artist vs. institution are collapsed into each other, their divide no longer upheld by the normative archival form.

He specifically calls his archive a "project"³⁸⁷. By this act, *SAAP* remains an artwork and therefore bypasses bureaucratic processes that may impede creative methods. Given the art historical context in Singapore of heavy state intervention and funding as discussed earlier, Koh stated that as an independent artist, he had little choice but to name his collection an 'archive' for his work to be transmitted, circulated and acknowledged. In fact, Koh even said he "do[es] not want *to be the institution*" and he was "*forced* to make [an] archive project" (italics mine).³⁸⁸ Thus, for Koh, naming is a strategic act. Each marking represents an index for his struggle for autonomy, a personal stamp, in a practice that began developing way before *SAAP* was itself named. Koh maintains that his archive is also not an official company, different than some other artists or creatives who have registered their archival collection as bonafide corporate entities as a form of formalization for funding and outreach purposes. As Koh says "I am not answerable to sponsors, donors or board members".³⁸⁹ Therefore, *SAAP*, as a *project*, circumvents the commercial valuation that can lead to a loss of autonomy and creativity. There is further evidence in the self-appointed names he creates in the various iterations of *Errata* (*p-10*, *NUS Central Library*, *Singapore History Museum*). Koh himself says "it's a strategy of exhibiting"³⁹⁰

³⁸⁶ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 26.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 16.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 17.

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 11-14.

Thus, the presence of Koh's name, as part of the title, in addition to his physical presence, problematizes the reception of his work. According to Seng, this remains the “most complicated part” of his archival practice.³⁹¹ It conflates the personal with the objective so that the work cannot be so neatly explained away through a singular narrative. This problematizing also belies what Seng described as a “fundamentally distinctive” kind of archival practice.³⁹² In this instance, the acts of subjectively naming, marking, noting, and selecting, combined with objective archival materials all become significant in terms of their theoretical and methodological implications. According to Koh, he has been making notes as an important part of his practice since the 1980s.³⁹³ Some of them remain private, while others have found their way into exhibition, such as in the *Errata* series.

Fig 58 - Koh Nguang How, post-it notations in publications, *Errata@p-10; Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year: 1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2004), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

³⁹¹ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 91.

³⁹² Ibid, 89.

³⁹³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 22 October 2018.

When *Errata* is exhibited, Koh displays both his handwritten notes and post-it memos on the catalogues and books on display, demarcating the ambiguous space between the discrepancies in dating, simultaneously introducing multiple versions of a narrative. Whether he chooses to display these notes is subject to solely his discretion. As Koh says, “before the use of the personal computer, I would write on anything including bus tickets and receipts when ideas came to my mind/thoughts. I still have various notebooks till this day but I would never want to display them like some artists’ sketchbooks and diaries that were neat and organized”.³⁹⁴ In other words, what’s on display are shreds, traces, or fragments. They initially appear as traces of an archivist’s approach, yet their personal nature and poetic potential shifts their presence towards something more artistic. With these notes, time is suspended as one shifts between different bits of data, between the explicit and implicit, in lieu of the missing painting (absent in exhibition), and the still unissued erratum. They serve as proxy for history, identity, memory, loss and redemption, of the very personal and the collective.

What we see here is symptomatic of something across Koh’s practice as a whole: a disguised appropriation of an institutional aesthetic – something inferred and not easily gleaned. Every installation of *SAAP* is unique and, in each, the artist selects items depending on the site and situation of display, revealing Koh’s sharp and focussed curatorial sensitivity. In a museum setting, Koh’s archive may take on a more formal aesthetic whereas in a residency or independent setting, the display becomes more ad-hoc. This aspect is most evident through the *Errata* series, as we have seen. *Errata@p-10* took place in a studio setting and, as such, Koh’s display took on a seemingly improvisational look, or what Seng describes as “makeshift”.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 92.

Group visits

Fig 59 - Installation view, *Errata@p-10* (text in image original); *Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2004), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

According to Koh, in the second iteration, *Errata@Singapore History Museum* (2005), his arrangements were much more formal, confined by institutional rules. Here, formal notations such as printed bookmarks took the place of his handwritten memo, with some original publications bound in plastic covers, experientially different in terms of accessibility. The third iteration, *Errata@NUS* (2005), at the National University Singapore library, represents another experience.

Fig 60 - Installation view, *Errata@NUS*; *Errata*:page 71, plate 47.image caption. *Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

Here, the publications were encased in glass while the accompanying symposium offered a dialectical forum. For Koh, the glass cases, imposed due to institutional rules, limited accessibility, requiring further interventions in exhibition design and experience.³⁹⁶ Nevertheless, what remains unseen is Koh's appropriation of the academy's authority and the mimicking of institutional archives, thus a name or designation becomes an artistic gesture, either parodic or sincere, encoded within its institutional setting. This is evident in *all three* iterations of *Errata*. This becomes most significant when we consider Koh's configuration as a response to his archive's survivability against the institutional backdrop.

³⁹⁶ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 28 June 2019.

Fig 61 - Installation view, *Errata@SHM; Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

This tactical appropriation of institutional aesthetic strategies is evidence of Koh's curatorial approach that is simultaneously blended with the roles of the historian and artist. According to Koh, many items of his archival collection were salvaged from yard sales, second-hand bookshops, vacated buildings and even garbage sites.³⁹⁷ This may indicate that, for whatever reason, their purpose or use value were deemed expired at given moments and only resuscitated through his artistic means. Only by masking his work under the vitrine of scientific research, namely the archive, was he able to perpetuate and sustain these objects' artistic value, later transformed into cultural and social value, reconfiguring the very same documents, along with

³⁹⁷ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See appendix, 19-20.

omissions and errors that had been previously relegated to the margins of history. This brings to mind Gaba's museum, which interrogated notions of value by parodic and critical appropriation of museum display vocabulary.³⁹⁸ Similarly, Koh provided a seemingly off the cuff remark when discussing this approach, that if the presentation is very "general", it usually means that there is something he does not want to say.³⁹⁹ He could not elaborate further. The hermetic dimension of Koh's archive is clearly evident in the *Errata* series as well as many other iterations of *SAAP*. It also underscores the friction at play as the artist attempts to install his utopian vision in every reification. This blending of archival authority and artistic arrangement creates a fertile ground for discourse, theoretically, methodologically and historically.

6.3.2 The Poetics of Performing Error

For Koh, error serves as a function in *Errata* to dislodge the official historical accounts. However, there are other functional dimensions that accompany Koh's seemingly benign gesture. They become apparent through Koh's sequencing of the error as 'episodes' in *Errata@p-10*, *Errata@SHM* and *Errata@NUS*. Koh's method and approach not only reveals a disregard for the prescribed roles of curator, archivist and artist, but also a means to turn the exhibition into a generative site for discourse and meaning.

³⁹⁸ Gaba, 'Meschac Gaba and Chris Dercon in Conversation'.

³⁹⁹ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 39.

Fig 62 - Installation view, *Errata*@p-10; *Errata*:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How (2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

In his book *Episodic Poetics*, Matthew Garrett explores the use of the episode as a rhetorical device in literary forms. Garrett argues that viewing existing episodic literature as evidence of material culture can present an opportunity to unveil new modes of configuration that can provide methodological pathways.⁴⁰⁰ His argument spans the relations between early American literature and the history of literary form. What is relevant here is Garrett's key proposition about the functionality of episodes, particularly in analysing Koh's narrative strategy and episodic structure in *Errata*, as a means to glimpse the rhetoric and narrative of his archive as

⁴⁰⁰ Matthew Garrett, *Episodic Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2. Garrett refers solely to literary history in his examination of the episode as a rhetorical device. However, if we understand literary history as the material evidence of stories or narratives, the construction of an episode according to Garrett's notion should be applicable in considering Koh's narrative strategy. Furthermore, it highlights Koh's archival practice as a method not limited to genres and forms specific to art history but other disciplines as well.

a whole. Garrett argues that the compositional value of the episode involves it being simultaneously part of the whole narrative yet also having the ability to independently serve as an excerpt for discourse without an absolute referent.⁴⁰¹ For Garette, the episode represents a subgenre of a microstructural “complex of cultural production” that has been largely overlooked to serve the dominant plot of a given storyline. Focus on this subgenre may illuminate hidden stories as well as the broader social conditions.⁴⁰² This in turn can help us reflect on the methodological and communicative possibilities of Koh’s choreography in *SAAP*, not solely literary in the form of his texts, but also in imagery and embodied cues such as the oral, tactile and psychological dimensions of his arrangements.

In terms of conceptualizing *SAAP*, Koh has always maintained from the beginning that a central impetus of its creation was to reflect the conditions of artistic practice in Singapore. As he states “I have thought this issue since my museum days, about real working conditions of artists”.⁴⁰³ Read through this frame, we can see that the error, as manifested in the *Errata* series, is only a pretext to illuminate a larger systemic condition of the challenges faced by artists in Singapore, such as censorship and autonomy, which have yet to receive adequate discussion.⁴⁰⁴ It is also a cunning rhetorical device framed through his arrangements. By segmenting the situation into five groups, the error reverberates across all, yet magnifies when read against any category individually. Within this representation, time is an artificial construct, simultaneously referring to the past, present and future with very real implications.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁰² Ibid, 4.

⁴⁰³ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 9 May 2019.

⁴⁰⁴ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 27 February 2019. See appendix, 36-37.

Fig 63 - Installation view, *Errata@p-10*; *Errata*:page 71, plate 47.image caption. *Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

At the exhibition, Koh divided the materials into five groups (see Figure 63):

i) Publications related to the painting *National language Class* (1959), highlighting the discrepancies in the date of the painting, as well as the broader socio-political conditions in Singapore related to the painting that had been rarely spoken about until then.⁴⁰⁵

ii) Publications related to the artist Chua Mia Tee (aka Chai Ming Tze). According to Koh, many of the pioneer artists in Singapore were Chinese educated and thus often go by their given names, rather than those of their adopted country, Singapore. Hence, the autograph on *National language Class* is signed Chai Ming Tze, giving one pause to further reflect upon nation and identity.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁵ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 26 May 2019.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

iii) Publications related to the art group Equator Art Society, its formation in 1956 in Singapore and its abrupt dissolution in 1974.⁴⁰⁷

iv) Publications related to woodcut artists and movements in Singapore tied to the broader Socialist Realist Movement.⁴⁰⁸

v) Publications related to the artistic, social, political and literary history of Singapore.⁴⁰⁹

According to Koh, these categories were not marked individually in exhibition but dispersed and indexed within various articles, such as Koh's mind map drawn on a chalkboard or post-it markers in publications, adding layers to an already elusive story. Koh maintains that the categories were only addressed vaguely in discussion and documented in video format, which was then realized as a component of the exhibition.⁴¹⁰ Following Garette, we see that Koh's erratum, which would normally be confined to the margins of a publication, is not only the central premise for the work but immediately introduces five subplots or episodes. Koh maintains that he "hoped to assist visitors to navigate the show with (such) evidence/proof" (see Figure 63).⁴¹¹ By demarcating these five groups, Koh has essentially reframed a situation into five episodes, on the one hand 'facilitating' perusal of information independently, where one could get "lost" in each episode, whilst on the other, guaranteeing a reliance on his framework of the larger back story and further episodes.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 26 May 2019.

⁴¹² Garrett, *Episodic Poetics*, 4.

Worksheet designed by p-10 for the visitors to act as art researcher

Fig 64 - Installation view, *Errata@p-10; Errata:page 71, plate 47.image caption. Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How (2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.*

By this curatorial and artistic approach of delimiting his exhibition display into episodic forms, Koh paradoxically opens up his archive to infinite readings, correlating to Garrett's notion of the episode being experientially both "open" yet "closed" at the same time, in the sense that it "both keeps us reading and allows us to stop".⁴¹³ Furthermore, the groupings demarcate the unsaid, or 'unaired episodes', hovering in between the different categories on display.

Koh's curatorial methods open up a site for political and social engagement with history. In a conversation with Koh, he asserts that many of the original members of the Equator Arts Society (EAS), including Chua Mia Tee, had been for various reasons reluctant to speak about

⁴¹³ Ibid.

their art practice or their association with the group.⁴¹⁴ This point was also underscored by Woon in his essay, where he interprets their ambivalence regarding the defunct EAS to a fear of political persecution.⁴¹⁵ Seng similarly described that the EAS members finally had the “confidence” to “come out” and speak of their experiences in the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s at the *Errata@NUS* installation, despite EAS having emerged in the ‘50s, during a socially and politically “contentious” period in the history of Singapore.⁴¹⁶ According to Koh, several members of EAS did attend select iterations, including Lim Yew Kuan and Koeh Sia Yong, the first and last presidents of EAS respectively, at *Errata@NUS*, encouraged by the success of *Errata@p-10*.⁴¹⁷ Furthermore, the authors of *Channels and Confluences*, Kwok Kian Chow and Chua Mia Tee, were in attendance at *Errata@SHM* (see Figure 65). Koh further stated that Ho Ho Ying, the co-founder of the Modern Art Society (MAS) also attended *Errata@NUS*.⁴¹⁸ Seng states that the collegial setting in *Errata@NUS*, of which he was part of the curatorial team, prompted members of the EAS to participate in the symposium and, as a result, created not only critical but also commercial interest in their artworks.⁴¹⁹ Following Garette, one can say it is precisely due to the extreme tension between the institutional “unity” (official art history) and the “multiplicity” of meanings in Koh’s open-ended archival arrangement that *Errata* succeeds.⁴²⁰ From a methodological perspective, one can further argue that Koh presents an “episodic poesis”.⁴²¹ A poesis that encompasses both the said and the unsaid, relating therefore to Foucault’s notion of the archive “which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration... Between tradition and oblivion, it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular

⁴¹⁴ Koh Nguang How, conversation with the author, 21 April 2019.

⁴¹⁵ Woon, ‘Still Here Somehow’.

⁴¹⁶ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 94-96.

⁴¹⁷ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 23 February 2019. See appendix, 37.

⁴¹⁸ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 19 April 2019.

⁴¹⁹ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 15 May 2019. See appendix, 93-94.

⁴²⁰ Garette, *Episodic Poetics*, 9.

⁴²¹ *Ibid*, 2.

modification.”⁴²² Seng went on to describe that one of the most fundamental outcomes of the *Errata@NUS* installation was that discourse was not just limited to EAS members sharing their experience. More significantly, members of other art societies in Singapore, namely the Modern Art Society (MAS), who differed “ideologically” to EAS, showed up in support for the event.⁴²³ According to Seng, some of these members had not spoken to each other for three decades.⁴²⁴ Glissant’s proposition of simultaneously one and multiple, where identity can be related to both the individual and collective memory, becomes significant as read through Koh’s exhibition practice. In this moment, Koh’s project became a vehicle for collective memory, not through an institutional, impersonal archive, but through real bodies regrouping. His archive is thus porous, not for the collective by means of representation, but by its malleability.

Fig 65 - Kwok Kian Chow (L) and Chua Mia Tee at *Errata@SHM*; *Errata*:page 71, plate 47.image caption. *Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

⁴²² Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 60.

⁴²³ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 93.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

Garette further argues that “cultural forms are not tied aprioristically to socio-historical epochs” but instead lay in dormancy and can be re-activated even though they may have been displaced by prevailing forms, hence “unrealized”.⁴²⁵ This corresponds to Huang’s concept of the migrant archive in a perpetual state of reconstituting or, as Garette asserts, as “structurational (rather than structural)”.⁴²⁶ Thus for both these authors, the concepts of the unfinished, the “unrealized” and the “structurational” provide a platform for novelty, expansion and (re)discovery. This corresponds with Koh’s continued gesturing towards indefiniteness, that there is more to be done or more to come. It is in this tone that Koh would later state that the video documentation of *Errata@p-10* to be lost, according to maker John Ng, but some copies may still exist pending a search by co-curator of *Errata* at p-10, Woon Tien Wei.⁴²⁷ In addition, Koh furnished evidence that as of 24 May 2019, the erroneous date of *National Language Class* is still being circulated online, specifically from “the old University Scholars Programme Project” website.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁵ Garrett, *Episodic Poetics*, 2-7.

⁴²⁶ Ibid, 4.

⁴²⁷ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 26 May 2019.

⁴²⁸ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 24 May 2019. In his correspondence, Koh attached this link as evidence of his claim <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/singapore/arts/painters/chuamiatee/1.html>.

Fig 66 - Koh Nguang How, Pre-production view of *Errata@SHM*; *Errata*:page 71, plate 47.image caption. *Change Year:1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2005), Multimedia, Dimension: variable, Collection of Koh Nguang How. Image: Koh Nguang How.

Through Koh's choreography and episodic structure, static literary material both published and unpublished, in combination with the live body, is shaped into a performative rhetorical device that is always ready to be activated. What is exhibited is not only physical content but the form of an anti-archivic structure encompassing the visual, oral and tactile dimensions of lived experience - the literary and colloquial, the said and the unsaid, resuscitated through artistic means.

To recapitulate, through a close reading of Koh's methods, we can observe an unfolding of the art historical trajectories, the political, social and cultural "micro histories" that Yap first spoke

of in reference to *Errata*. Methodologically, Koh's practice unveils multiple possibilities in terms of exhibition strategies in producing generative sites for meaning and discourse. They include speculation, encoding, naming, dating, marking, noting, writing, delineating, reproduction, narrative strategy, complication, appropriation of autonomy, mimicking, contradictions, conviviality, marginalia and even organizational principles. Conceptually, the idea of a live relic and document through performative reenactments largely expands the notion of an archive and renders this work unstable and volatile, creating multiple sites of discursivity.

In this chapter we have seen how Koh's production of generative sites is developed through a problematizing of the roles of artist, historian, archivist and curator. He uses absence, erasure, reenactment, veiled meanings, unfinished aspects, the breaking of national and linguistic borders, the development of collective memory and the appropriation of institutional aesthetics. The collapse of formal and informal, the use of inference, of pedagogy, episodic structure, future-oriented strategies, rhetoric, and ambiguity, together produce a highly complex work that defies categorization. The result is a collapse of subject and object relations, where each iteration of *SAAP* stages possibilities for new meaning.

7. Conclusion

“One way ashore, a thousand channels”

- *Edouard Glissant* ⁴²⁹

“I challenge the idea of what ...an archive [is]”

- *Koh Nguang How* ⁴³⁰

My inquiry started with a proposal to understand Koh’s archive as artistic practice through a more holistic lens and an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. This inquiry is prompted in part by a lack of documentation on art practices in Singapore as well as the hope to gain a better understanding of the archive in art practice as a malleable construct to engender further forms of knowledge production theoretically, methodologically and historically.

Based on the existing literature on *SAAP*, alongside new research generated through extensive interviews, this study makes an original contribution through a critical examination of the archive as artistic practice via Koh’s work, considering *SAAP* in both its exhibited and unexhibited iterations, which is yet to be done to this extent. Through this lens, *SAAP* straddles both archive and artwork, with the archive operating as his artistic practice. Current literature and art institutions appear to divide his artistic practice from his archive, with some encountering difficulty in categorizing or responding to the work. Is it art? Is it an archive? Can it be purchased? Where does his work end and the historical material begin? This research

⁴²⁹ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 3.

⁴³⁰ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 7.

assumes a position that embraces his entire practice as his art. His artwork is the archive and the archive constitutes his artistic practice. It is imperative that Koh's practice is not merely valued for its contents, materials and information, but also for its artistic modalities. It is only from this vantage point that the true depth of Koh's contribution can be glimpsed.

This research assumes a more holistic way of looking at Koh's archive through various approaches, such as those of Foucault, Huang and Glissant, to examine how Koh utilises the archive as an artistic medium. Narrative inquiry was selected with the assumption that the different stories of Koh and the other participants, as well as existing literature and objects, will provide a rich resource towards our understanding of contemporary artistic uses of the archive. Clandinin and Connelly's framework of a research methodology provided a template for approaching Koh's practice, which is centred on the stories. While other qualitative methods assume the units of analysis are independent from each other, this approach recognises the meshing of a network of narratives. Their framework relinquishes fixed conclusions in favour of recognising stories and story-telling as a legitimate form of knowledge, meaning and discourse.

This study proposed three main research questions that drove the analysis and inquiry throughout the process. The first asked, *what does Koh's work do and how does it do it?* Secondly, by structuring the project around individual iterations of *SAAP* in exhibition, there was a focus on exploring how each of these iterations evoked the project as a whole, whilst also using specific materials and aesthetic strategies to create space for networks of meaning. Framed as a question, I asked, *how can we understand the multiple iterations of SAAP as generative sites for discourse and meaning?* Finally, the third question aimed to direct the inquiry beyond the workings of *SAAP* towards a broader theoretical understanding of the

archive as artistic practice with implications that stretch beyond Koh's *SAAP*. Koh's work reveals to us, *how can the archive as artistic practice inform us of a different modality towards our understanding of the archive?*

Chapter four of this study outlines the evolution of Koh's work and practice. He started his project as a personal collection and through his interactions with others, such as artists, family, friends, the museum and academic professionals, both regional and overseas, his project began to evolve. In relaying the history of this project, Koh mentioned the museum and its library as one of the spaces that helped him develop his craft, such as photography, translations and even meeting Tang Da Wu, whom he named as a major influence on his practice. Based on his account, we can see the gradual transformation of his archive, such as in 1992, when he left the museum to become a full time artist, where the techniques he learned and the accumulation of knowledge saw the delineation of his archive shift towards professionalism. Koh saw the chief reason for developing an archive to be the lack of documentation from the National Archives. However, he also mentioned a small detail that may provide some insight into the evolution of his archive towards institutional validation. He said, "Incidentally in 2000, the establishment of the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong gave me the inspiration..."⁴³¹ Thus we can see how from an early stage Koh saw his archive in relation to its institutional cousins. In 2005, shortly after the success of the *Errata* project, he officially named his archive the *Singapore Art Archive Project*. In a subsequent conversation Koh mentioned that he was also inspired by the travelling exhibition *50 Years of Documenta* (1955-2005), when he had the opportunity to engage with the work during an iteration in Singapore. Koh had been engaged by the National Museum Singapore to present a timeline of fifty years of Singapore art as part of the collaborative programming in 2005. He says, "their exhibition allow me ...to have some idea of how I could

⁴³¹ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 14 November 2018.

do my archive in the future.”⁴³² In Koh’s early works such as *4 Days in August*, both 1987 and 1992, Koh’s materials and the construction were assembled in a more improvisational and ad-hoc way, with his dissemination more direct. These earlier iterations were no less experimental or meaningful, just less ‘professional’ in archival style. They represent the beginning of the slow process of *SAAP*’s institutionalization.

In this opening chapter, the aim was to sketch out some of the attributes of the archive as artistic practice. This exploration of Koh’s life and practice saw many elements of his work present in his experience and training at art institutions and collectives. Significantly, *SAAP* can be seen to have its roots in Koh’s early collecting, much earlier than the archive’s formalization, which has received almost no academic attention. His training at the National Museum Art Gallery Singapore developed his skills in curation, accession, storage and translation. His own photography practice enhanced his ability and interest to document. Koh’s membership to The Artists Village allowed him to explore experimental and alternative techniques while also building a network outside the institution. Travels overseas developed his practice further and expanded his already increasing network. All of this occurred before the formal delineation of his work and practice by the *Errata* exhibition (2004/2005), signalling a key attribute of the archive as artistic practice, which is its durational quality, without beginning or end, unbound to the restraints of historical time. In *Archiving the Archivist/SAAP@PpongPpong* (2016), various other qualities of the archive as artistic practice could be explored. They include an emphasis on the personal, the idiosyncratic, the minute details and fragments. Koh’s presence in the gallery signalled a performative quality, while his storytelling displayed a blurring of boundaries between historical categories, foregrounding untold stories, including what Yap

⁴³² Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 15 February 2019. See Appendix, 51.

may call “micro histories”.⁴³³ There was a lack of medium specificity, working across the genres of form in an inter-disciplinary practice. At the same time, Koh performed a complex relationship with institutionalized methods and practices, one where the work is partly subsumed yet retains a kind of distancing, personal histories were alternately conflated and contrasted with the institutionalized historical narrative.

Then, in *Browsing Copy* (2019), there is a practice of collecting and disseminating outside the institution. *SAAP* here can be seen to embrace a fragmentary structure, where the archival ephemera that may not achieve significance in the normative archive can achieve a greater social significance in Koh’s practice. In this act, there is a side-stepping of many Western empirical aspects of archival practices, such as the homogenization of historical knowledge and the conceptual foundations of property. With these two examples, the archive as artistic practice can be seen to exemplify a proliferation of interpretation and an acceptance of the importance of subjectivity and multiplicity. Throughout, Koh’s work can be seen to engage with the blurring of the distinction between art and archive. His collection follows a non-hierarchical trajectory while remaining deeply personal. Theoretically, Koh expands the limits of the archive as we see a system of moving parts, a living system, a work in progress that includes unfinished work, pirated text, art history from unofficial resources, oral histories, all of which can challenge and draw from the archival form. Again, borrowing from Huang’s formulation, it is a migrant archive. It is collecting as archipelago.

In chapter five, having outlined the attributes of the archive as artistic practice, it was possible to explore how Koh further expands the possibilities of this form, medium and phenomena. In

⁴³³ Yap, *Retrospective*, 82.

When Photographs Become Drawings (2009), utilizing auteur theory, it was possible to examine the formal expansion of photography as document. Serial photography was able to take shape in the form of compositional work that merged aesthetic compositional strategies with the composure of a psychological archival memory. Mnemonic devices were reconstructed and encoded into visual artistic works. For Koh, photography was reworked as land art, while sculpture and drawing are straddled, thus merging genres of art practices. In *SAAP@8QSAM/Artists in the News* (2011), Koh's archive as artistic practice was enacted in rituals capturing the ephemeral, representations of reportage, future-oriented practices, as well as unexhibited work, unopened works, improvisation, storage space and domicile as exhibition space. His own performative presence in the gallery enabled the use of such boundary pushing elements including deconstruction and failure. *SAAP* is revealed to be a process that encompasses transformation in each exhibition, non-systematic or even on the fly thinking, repression, and even self-destruction. The archive as artistic practice is expanded to take on significant durational and self-referential qualities that continuously challenge the static archive. Koh leads us into a complex set of rituals and ceremonies, inviting a constellation of language and play within his anti-archival structure. It further unveils the paradoxical nature of the archive in artistic practice as the artist struggles to install his utopian structure for validity amidst the backdrop of institutional criterion. In this way, history is retold to encompass the marginalized or previously overlooked. *SAAP* thus continues to breach normative canons of art historical genres.

In Koh's flexing of the limits of the archive as artistic practice, it was possible to see how his work began to dissolve and problematize the roles of artist, curator, historian and archivist. Chapter six saw how Koh's production of generative sites is developed through a problematizing of these institutional roles. In *4 Days in August* (1992), it was possible to see

Koh's use of erasure, unfinished aspects and re-enactment. Conceptually, the idea of a live relic and live document, through performative re-enactment, largely expands the notion of an archive and renders this work unstable and volatile, creating multiple sites of discursivity. Koh's deployment of this strategy blurs his position as a historian and archivist for his peers works, as a curator in their selection and display, as well as an artist in his re-performance of them. Using Schneider's notion of a live relic, the document through performance and re-enactment appears to correspond to the idea of artistic intervention from the 'remains' of archivization, questioning both archival and artistic categories of presentation, which was evident throughout the works analysed in this chapter. *The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in the Singapore Art Archive Project* (2018) allowed for the exploration of PowerPoint as an artistic medium. This created a platform for Koh to rework works – to curate, archive and collage images in the production of new iterations. It was a recycling of material that presented an aestheticization of his thinking. Fundamentally it was revealed to be a Duchampian gesture where the institutional positions of artist and archivist were blurred. Finally, in *Errata: page 71, plate 47. image caption. Change Year: 1950 to Year 1959: reported by Koh Nguang How* (2004/2005), Koh deployed a variety of strategies. They include speculation, encoding, naming, dating, marking, noting, writing, delineating, reproduction, narrative strategy, complication, appropriation of autonomy, mimicking, contradictions, conviviality, marginalia and even organizational principles. The use of absence (of the painting itself) created a space for veiled meanings. Koh's positioning outside of the institution, within the vernacular, enabled the discovery of the error itself and the breaking of national and linguistic borders. Koh's curatorial manoeuvres ignited the development of collective memory and utilized the appropriation of institutional aesthetics. The collapse of formal and informal, the use of inference, of pedagogy, episodic structure, future-oriented strategies, rhetoric, and ambiguity, together produce a highly complex work that defies categorization.

Not only is Koh revealed to disorder the categorization of artists, curators, historians and archivists, but the work itself appears to disorder order in its re-articulation of meaning and knowledge. Through all three of the *Errata* exhibitions, Koh's practice unveils multiple possibilities in terms of exhibition strategies for producing generative sites for meaning and discourse.

It is important to note here that time was a limitation in this research, as an extensive amount of information needed to be collected to gain an in-depth understanding. Making sense of Koh's experiences requires identification of source material and accurate transcribing.⁴³⁴ Interviews and note-taking are a highly time consuming method of research. Another challenge was in the process of interpreting my field notes accurately, as multiple other questions surfaced which needed further clarification. Additionally, cross relating various interpretations of Koh's, other participants', as well as existing texts and my own notes of the same events, required further time in order to extrapolate factual accuracy for gaining greater insight into Koh's experience. Consequently, as Koh's practice is comprised of thirty years of material, this research is limited to the analysis of specific iterations. Works were selected across various moments to chart the evolution of *SAAP* and may not represent the scope of his entire practice. However, selecting specific works allowed for close analysis and qualitative assessment, exploring the research question of how these iterations each presented generative sites. Therefore, these sites represent a beginning. Not even close to encompassing his entire output, my hope is to allow other researchers to understand his work and practice. It is important for me to recognise the subjectivity of my research, which may impact the value of this work. However, via the approaches explored in the Methodology chapter, narrative inquiry actively seeks the subjective position of the researcher. For this approach the specific has implications across the

⁴³⁴ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 76.

broader story, a subjective perspective can allow for a more nuanced interpretation where my own reading can contribute to the overall development of multiple narratives and understandings.

7.1. Reflections, Stories, Futures

Beginning as a lone collector's hobby, an amateur's obsession, *SAAP* shared similarities with 'naive' or "outsider art".⁴³⁵ However, its slow increase in formality occurred in tandem with the gradual increase of institutional recognition of the work, with the mounting pressures of institutional demand for clearer delineations in order to categorize the work. This is evident in the evolution of *Errata@p-10*, where Seng deems the 2004 iteration as more "makeshift" than its other institutional reworkings in 2005.⁴³⁶ After *Errata@p-10*, the archive gets a name, becomes an archive and a work. It becomes a sellable object, as evidenced by the attempted, yet stalled, negotiations in the acquisition of his project. However, Koh, at the same time, resists these institutional forces. One recalls his words "...I do not want to be an institution. I am *forced* to make and archive."⁴³⁷ The forces that shaped it into a work of art, from being a heap of rubbish, that being ephemera and hoardings in a cupboard, to a bonafide source of Singapore history and potential museum acquisition, are the same forces that restrict and constrain his practice. Thus, Koh's collecting, storage and display methods reveal an embrace of both archival and art practices, while at the same time interrogating them. Koh's work thus

⁴³⁵ Oxford English Dictionary Online, 3rd ed., s.v. 'outsider art, *n.*,' accessed 28 May 2019, <http://www.oed.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/view/Entry/133984?redirectedFrom=outsider+art#eid32807369>. Outsider art is defined by the dictionary as "art produced by untrained artists (esp. social misfits) who are not part of the mainstream tradition".

⁴³⁶ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 92.

⁴³⁷ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. See appendix, 16.

reveals these tensions, contradictions and frictions in all his installations. Observing his practices prompts some fundamental questions. A major art institution is interested in acquiring a private collection of ephemera that started as a hobby; would such an acquisition be purchasing the collection as archival material or as an artwork? Under the specific socio-political context of *SAAP*'s development, does the failure of these acquisition attempts represent the result of this contradiction between archive and art? Seng describes the museum's processes, saying "the way we [NGS] archive is much more systematic", and referring to SAM most likely following suit, he described it as "...toward a certain institutionalisation of the art archive," but does conclude that "it's too early to say" regarding its impact, though he does assert that it is very different from how artists view the archive; in his eyes, museum curators and historians need greater self-awareness in regards to the process of canonization.⁴³⁸ Low's comments regarding Koh's aspirations similarly reveal the different values of the archive, as viewed by the museum and the artist. Low says "I could never ...know ...and I don't think at that point he knew that one day the archive would gain in value to the extent that its being valued now".⁴³⁹ Thus, we can see a prevailing pattern or trend in the disjuncture between the institutional perception and Koh's perception of the work. Koh's practice contradicts the institution's perception of his work by constantly evading and transcending categorisation, revealing a complex practice.

Koh ceaselessly ruminates on the accessibility of his work. Low described the lack of documentation of Singaporean art practices as "critical" for the role of the archive⁴⁴⁰, whereas Seng⁴⁴¹ and Yap⁴⁴² both frequently challenged the accessibility of art archives during my

⁴³⁸ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 102.

⁴³⁹ Low Eng Teong, interview with the author, 21 April 2019. See appendix, 85.

⁴⁴⁰ Low Eng Teong, interview with the author, 23 April 2019. See appendix, 76.

⁴⁴¹ Seng Yu Jin, interview with the author, 16 May 2019. See appendix, 96.

⁴⁴² June Yap, conversation with the author, 16 May 2019. Yap describes "access" as the role of the archive in Singapore.

conversations with them. Koh himself has described how his work pertains to the lack of accessibility in a normative archive. Koh says “I took [a] risk that some of the materials might be damaged, lost, but if I consider like how many people have come into close contact with my archive materials, through my exhibitions, versus the materials hidden somewhere in the institutions, until they are ready to open to the public..? So, I have met many student[s], many people especially, they have [a] problem accessing materials...”⁴⁴³ At SAAP@CCA (2014-15), Art After Dark, an international contemporary art event at Gillman Barracks jointly organized by the Nanyang Technological Institute Center for Contemporary Art Singapore (NTUCCA) and NAC, Koh asserts that over 1000 people attended one of the iterations Six decades of Art Ephemera (2015).⁴⁴⁴ While Natalie Tan, creative director at the NAC, shared that the total number in attendance was 3000.⁴⁴⁵ In an artistic climate lacking in archival materials, Koh certainly begins to replenish the history that is lost. However, rather than adopting the formalized archival architecture found throughout museums and institutions, he resists. He instead maintains the materials as part of a subjective, personal and artistic practice. Even when parroting, appropriating or accommodating the archival vocabulary of the institution, his techniques of archivization increase the idiosyncrasy between each iteration and preserve the apparent instability of his practice. We can now see that this is in fact a strategy.

Koh’s unique approach therefore can be seen as forging a path for future artists. His work models a new kind of institutional practice. The work and collection will continue to provide materials, histories and stories for dissemination, discourse and re-telling. By reworking the archival form in this way, by appropriating institutional methods yet introducing instability, he creates a project possessing both archival value and artistic value. Rich, diverse and specialist

⁴⁴³ Koh Nguang How, interview with the author, 10 April 2019. appendix, 11.

⁴⁴⁴ Koh Nguang How, correspondence with the author, 19 Jun 2019.

⁴⁴⁵ Natalie Tan, correspondence with the author, 19 Jun 2019.

information is combined with a shapeshifting, nuanced and devoted artistry. Museums, curators, historians, and visitors gain knowledge as well as poetry, insight and feeling. Thus, Koh not only, in his own way, challenges the categories of 'archive' and 'art', but offers a critique of the very forces that maintain a distinction between the two. When we say Koh presents 'a new mode of knowledge production', it is that Koh reveals the authority of the institutional archive over artistic practices to be not only unfounded but also, for contemporary Singapore, out of date.

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Appendix: Interviews

CONTENTS:

Recorded interviews with **Mr. Koh Nguang How** (transcripts attached):

10 April 2019

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1:03:58, Kaki Bukit, Singapore

23 February 2019

Page 23

55:01, Yishun, Singapore

15 February 2019

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1:05:20, 6B Kim Tian Road, Kai Fook Mansion, Singapore 169246 at 2.pm.

Additional (unrecorded, marked as ‘conversations with the author’) interviews conducted with Koh Nguang How:

15 October 2017

2-5pm, Kaki Bukit, Singapore

15 July 2018

2-5pm, Kaki Bukit, Singapore

21 April 2019

3-6pm, Yishun, Singapore

Where information has been cited ‘correspondence with the author’, this is referring to extensive emails between myself and Koh Nguang How, between 15 October 2017 and 18 July 2019.

Additional Interviews:

See questionnaire on *page 68*.

Mr. Low Eng Teong

Assistant Chief Executive, Sector Development (Arts) at National Arts Council:

23 April 2019

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41:59, Goodman Arts Center, Singapore, Recorded, transcript attached.

8 April 2019

5-6pm, Goodman Arts Center, Singapore

Mr. Seng Yu Jin

curator at National Art Gallery, Singapore:

16 May 2019

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44:03, National Gallery, Singapore, Recorded, Transcript attached.

25 April 2019

12.30-1.30pm, National Gallery, Singapore

Dr. June Yap

Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum:

16 May 2019

5-6pm, Singapore Art Museum

Interview with Koh Nguang How

10 April 2019 : [1:03:58], Kaki Bukit, Singapore

Suzi (marked as S): Okay, so, today is April 10, 2019, and thanks a lot Koh, again, for interviewing, agreeing to interview with me. So, I have some questions for you. The last time we talked, we generally kind of talked more about your artistic practice and actually I want to come back again and ask you some general questions and wonder if we can chat a little about it because I am trying to understand um, your worldview. So, what do you think of Singapore?

Koh Nguang How (Marked as K): (laughs).. ur.. you mean my thinking now?

S: Yeah, now, then, later, as you see it, you know...

K: Well, I mean, ur... sometimes I tell friends, overseas friends, ur, Singapore could be a para...paradise if the temperature is lower..(Laughs)(All laugh)...ur, yeah but of course as an artist and an art archivist there are frustrations, you know, ur, like we chatted a little bit about space, rentals, right?.....ur, yah..... We also mentioned some people in our conversations, Low Eng Teong, Tang Da Wu and all these, ur, older artists like Chng Siok Tin, Tsui Tit Sing, ur...so... It makes my work more interesting yah? It's challenging, financially challenging, so ur art historically it's very challenging, to uncover the hidden works, important works, important

artists, so therefore as an artist working with archive. Ur, I suppose there is no better place working, as in Singapore, yah, because of the content, alright?

S: What do you think the archive means? Like in your ...how do you see it ?

K: Um. of course, my working experience with the museum. The museum library acts like a, ur, kind of resource place for art..ur, art materials... first, the librarian at the National Museum would have press cuttings, alright? press releases, er, of exhibitions... they may have speeches, by VIP at exhibitions, ur..exhibitions, publications, right, and ur photographs of let's say exhibitions, usually at the openings (laughs)..and the VIPs, yah. So this, these are the materials we can find in the museum collection, alright? So, as a museum staff, these are things that we could or I could make reference to. But, the more I work in the system, or the museum or the art world, I realise its er, such archives by the museum is quite er... it's limited alright? Limited, as... ur, yah, it's only the events that happens in the museum, right? Or officiated by a government official, right? So I would visit exhibitions, in galleries, private galleries, artist run space, er in the late 80'ser... and so I start to experience and document those events, outside as well, yah, and er, being the museum staff but not museum photographer, I was able to, to document so including like field trips to artist homes or collectors. So, let's say we need to borrow works or do research for exhibitions. Yah.

S: Do you switch hats? In other words, like when you are photographing outside, is there any kind of tension that exists having to switch hats between documenting your own stuff? I'm talking about not a surface tension but like you know, er, how do you actually feel?

K: Actually, er, there's no pressure for me, because photography wasn't part of my job scope, alright? I remember (laughs) my curator Constance Sheares was always, er, happy that I have a camera with me, alright? Because in the end, we, we are just a small team of three, yah?

S: And who was the other member?

K: Em, assistant curator was Susie Koay from Penang, so um, she actually specialized in Renaissance art, alright, she studied in Canada so, er, that makes Constance Sheares the expert on Singapore, Malayan art, er, then I, you know, me being their assistant, learn from the job, and then I, I could read the Chinese material so, er, and also I speak the Chinese language, so in the field trips or studio visit, I, I became the interpreter sometimes for my curators, so um, ur, the idea of archive of course, the National Archive was established '67, '68, ur and then ur, 1968 or '67. Anyway, they had only some interviews of selected artists, alright? Henry Chen, Georgette Chan and er Lim er, Lim Tze Peng, these were the few that I remember, and then, I was subsequently asked by the Oral History Department if I could become one of their researcher to interview some of their artists... er, it's based on my museum work and... I did not fill out the application form, yah.

S: What year was that?

K: This would be er, late Nineties, after I left the National Museum. That's why I could er... er... Possibly be a researcher for the National Archives Oral History Department. I, I couldn't do that if I am still the museum staff. So, that means, only the Oral History Department had a, sort of a project to interview artists. And of course, we know over the course of the years they had been interviewing people.

S: Was that the beginning of the time that they started?

K: Er, I think it started with you know, a series of pioneer artists from early '80s and subsequently Cultural Medallion and er, er, also started in Seventy Nine, er so... But, the few artists I mentioned Henry Chan or Lim Tze Ping they were not winners of any award, right, so, er, so of course when I started research work for Fukuoka Art Museum in '96, er National Archives had no artists that er, that, er, were..er, part of the project by Fukuoka, which was *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*.. So we look at pre-war, until er, until like Independence, yah, '65? Something like that, this period, so ...er, I, I sourced my research materials outside the institutions, yah, ur, um, bookshops, Chinese Language book shops at Bras Basah Complex er, meeting old artists themselves and getting some of the old materials through the artists yah, we visited, and, so that building out of old materials led eventually to the *Errata* exhibition with p-10. Er... So, and then a year after *Errata*, 2005, I named my project (raps on table), Singapore(rap), Art (rap) Archive (rap) Project, so the *SAAP*

(rap) was meant to be a, a, art archive without a permanent space, alright, so... it became a sort of a series of exhibitions at different places, different themes, alright, and , so the archive project versus the official archive, National Archives, and then subsequently, the Singapore Art Museum and then now the National Gallery alright... and the NUS Museum, um, so my archive is mobile, alright, and... well, in a way it's to challenge the idea of what, what is an archive, what roles, what functions should archive serve, alright?

S: Is it specifically towards Singapore archives or institutions in general?

K: Well, in terms of the content of my archive project, I sort of announce through my writing, it's art in Singapore, alright with its international connections, alright? So, it's very broad, so um ur, art in Singapore, that would include non-Singaporean artists, yah, the fact that we have many travelling exhibitions, er, in Singapore, alright? Before the museum, before the National Museum Art Gallery, mainly before 1976, er, there were already exhibitions, alright, held at let's see, Victoria Memorial Hall, the British Council, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, etcetera, yah? And of course, not to forget some commercial galleries that came later, yah? So, er, I think art in Singapore is not just about Singaporean artists, yah. From my own experience, there are many foreigners who live in Singapore and exhibited in Singapore that, you know, er, er, they make exhibitions that were interesting, that were impactful, alright? They make networks with the local artists alright, um, therefore my archive, even though it's called the *Singapore Art Archive Project*, in terms of the content, it's not restricted to just Singaporean artists.

S: Can you name a couple of the International artists that you were just... A couple of artists that comes to your mind?

K: well... Er from my own work working experience at the National Museum, er... ok, let's say I am going to Taiwan soon, Li Lu Yao, Ju Ming, er Ju Ming's son even came.. Er, we have group shows from America, group shows like American fiber, American jewelry, American ceramics, er, we also had er... er... some, I think we also had one exhibition celebrating American Bicentennial, alright? Er, and some, ur, some, yah, Roy DeCarava, who is an American Jazz photographer, er...

S: So, in other words, you photograph, or you document this stuff that happens in Singapore regardless of where...

K: Well, it started with er, it started with newspapers from high school, or Junior College, the 1980s. So, whatever arts that were featured in our newspapers, the Zaobao plus, the er, I mean this is before the Zaoboa, the Nanyang Shangbao, the Sinchew Jitbao and then the Straits Times, and then subsequently, then we have the Zaoboa. Um, whatever they feature in the newspapers alright, were mainly based on exhibitions held in Singapore, right? And then when I started working in the museum, then of course, those exhibitions that the museum hosted, I had the chance to be part of the team that presented the exhibitions, alright? So, I would, I would document the working process as well, not just the working talks and workshops, so that means

the newspaper will do the job, yah, my archive, my documentation would enrich, yah, will add to what the newspaper quote, or document. And of course overtime, er, I would realize there is so much limitation in what the newspaper can do, alright? And during my Singapore Biennale work, 20... 11, I make the journalist admit that there's so much they can do. In terms of featuring and documenting art, ok? So, I prove my point, right? I show thirty years of newspapers, but I also make them admit, it's not enough. That means, archive needs to have other sources, right? Not just the, the, so called established press, right? And also, the National Archive er, which only document or photograph the art event that has a minister. So, if there are exhibitions that have no government minister, er, usually they don't, the so-called Cultural Ministry or Communication Ministry will not send someone to document. So, so after some time if you go to the National Ministry to look for art event, then you will realize that there is so many events they don't have documentation of.

S: Has it changed today?

K: No. No change. So... that means the real art scene is not just through like the newspapers, or the museum's publicity or the gallery's publicity. It's actually more dynamic, more varied than er, the usual so-called sources, alright? Then of course I encounter er, er, er, students writing academic papers based on of course referencing these published materials, then I also, er, purposely as part of my archive project, er, test some of these issues or problems. Er... I mean for example *Errata* is to point out that a book, a publication by the established art museum, can have... mistakes, and serious mistakes, yah? So... overtime of course, er, there are many

exhibitions that I make under the *Singapore Art Archive Project*, alright? So, as an artist, I challenge myself, to make the, er, the experience or the presentation of the archive differently. For example in *Sunshower*, I introduce AR, er, where more things can be seen through the mobile device, so that will solve the problem of space in the exhibitions, or, sometimes we can't, we can't er borrow certain things, certain things are too fragile to be transported to other countries. So, the technology like AR, er can help this kind of problem, yah? and um... Then of course in terms of featuring different collection for my archive project, I have been able to, er, for example, *Errata* is more on catalogues, then *Singapore Art Archive...* the *Artists in the News* for Singapore Biennale is newspaper, and then *Art Places* is photography, so there are sort of sort of ..different exhibition... sort of design, if you want, right? But I'm also dealing with different audience, alright? So... er... er... some of my archive is shown in Singapore, Korea, Japan, now going to Taiwan. Because the audience will be different, with his, er, some cultural or historic difference or similarity, so, so for example, for Taiwan, the strange thing is that they did not even ask for translation. So, I assume they will use the same text I wrote for Tokyo, in English, alright, and, at this point of time it's three weeks from exhibition. The Taiwanese haven't ask me if there is anything to add to the Tokyo version. But, I am conscious that there will be a new place, a new audience, Chinese speaking audience in Taiwan, yah, um so that I, I'm keeping in mind, but without making huge alteration to content or, you know, or display method as...as there is no budget. So... I don't want to take the risk...yah, so yah, the idea of archive as my *Singapore Art Archive Project* is an imagined, it's an imagined place... and, it happen in the different place where I presented... my er, er selections of the archive, so, I think in the long run, um ur, the , my archive project would have appeared in different configurations, yah.. er... In

different places... er, but I think it's er...yah I mean, er... (tone drops before picking back up)... that reminds me! that I still have a space problem, yah (soft laugh), so, er, it's a strategy of exhibiting, so that my collection is not in some storage, so that they are also seen, er.. used by people, alright? So, I think the main purpose is not just to store, which happened to some institution, er institutional archive, alright? They are stored cause they are yah, they have certain policies.... For example, certain publications let's say before er, the '80s, they are not on the shelf, they are considered rare books, they cannot be touched by researcher, right? but, my exhibitions under the *Singapore Art Archive Project*, I allow the audience to come close to (laughs) come close to the materials. So... in a way, it's it's er...it's quite unlike the..., I mean not what the archive should be doing... but I did, as my archive project. I took risk, alright? I took risk that some of the materials might be damaged, lost (laughs), but if I consider like how many people have come into close contact with my archive materials, through my exhibitions, versus the materials hidden somewhere in the institutions, until they are ready to open to the public, yah? So, I have met many student, many people especially, they have problem accessing materials through the so-called institutional archive.

S: Um, you've mentioned some of these things about *Singapore Art Archive* and I guess that's kind of a good lead into the next question, just, what do you think art can do? Not what it should do, but what it can do?

K: For who? (all laugh)

S: In your opinion, a little broader question (laughs).

K: Well, I mean, as a student in Junior College right, who found commerce in the first year, and repeat, repeat pre-u one and I took art as a subject, right? So, art became my best subject, and ...I do not care if I flunk economics or accountancy, which I actually dropped, yah, er... yah, I think it gives me... art, the art lessons in Junior College give me, I don't know, the confidence? To be a fellow student in the Junior College, alright? Er... and then working in the National Museum? I deal with artist, who were really professional, experienced, and represented their works, alright? And of course, the stuff I learned from their work, and their experience and as a museum, we present to the ...public. We share, yah. Um, so art obviously(laughs) is important...it's important to me... yah? And after leaving the museum, working as part time art researcher... yah? It sustains my life.

S: What do you think, what can museums do? In your opinion?

K: Well I, I used to have a, a sort of statement...that a museum is not a place. It's not a building, yah. And I stuck it next to my desk, and I also share it on my *Facebook* sometimes...er, when I hear news about new museums being built or places being renovated, you know, then I will go back to that, to that.. er... statement again. A museum is not a building. Um, and of course when I was working, there was only the National Museum. We have no NUS Museum, we had no ACM etcetera, yah, right? So, I suppose subsequently there are all these different museums, yah, serving different purposes, alright? Um... Of course, they are great. Er... So... yah, I mean er...

museum as I started my museum work, correspondence, museum studies with Canadian institutions? I had to write some paper about museums in Singapore, so... I found out that the oldest museum was the Botanical Garden, yah? Of course, the museum defined by the ICOM, ur I can't remember what ICOM means, okay, we come back to that, it's um, define, a museum is... should have a collection. With the collection, the... the staff, the keeper or the curatorial staff, ur... we... by the way the zoo is also a museum so we have zoo keepers, alright? So, the museum curators used to be known as keepers as well, right? So they look after, let's say a collection, so... the collection need to be accessed, identified, registered, retrieva... retrievable ah... Stored and researched, and then make exhibitions, right? And publications, yah? So there's er what museum should be doing right? And whatever building they are in, (laughs) it's not so important. In Singapore we, we, the National Museum was a library plus museum, the Raffles library and museum, then eventually became the National Museum, alright? Then subsequently newer museums ACM, SAM, they all use the former school, alright, so I mean, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum was in a shopping complex, yah so... ur, I think ur, ur, so I still that yes... is not a building. It's the program, it's the collections yah? and how er, how all these programmes and collections relate to the, the visitors, alright? If our museum is the tourist space museum, then of course it serve the tourist. Right? If your museum is a educational museum, then the student population is your target audience, yah? But I think NUS has a different purpose versus the er Asian Civilization Museum or SAM, um...

S: So, what would you like your work to do in the future? (all laugh)

K: What work? The *SAAP*? *SAAP* is ur, an ongoing work, which I have already made in my statement, right? er, it's a strategy... It's to also to, the, ur, relieve my space problem, alright? But at the same time, the more I exhibit, the more I have to research, alright? The more I do that, the more I could sort of ur, file these materials, alright? As you can see in my computer, the different folders from different exhibitions, alright? But you may see that some materials appear in different exhibitions, alright? So, er, if, if, my collection is based on inventory... then its one-maybe er, ten thousand, it's a round number right? But, my exhibition allow exhibition number one to appear in five exhibitions, five different contexts, so it's an active use of so called archival materials, rather than just sitting in the, in, in the archive or storage (laughs) as item one (laughs). Of course, they will wait for the user to give them meaning, alright? So, my exhibition is more active, alright? In the sense that I make ...I give meaning to the items, the collections, rather than waiting for people to come, yah? So, in a way its er, er, my, my, interpretation of this material, under certain themes or certain story lines... yah? People don't have to agree with me (all laugh). So, I think your question is... yah, I will continue... exhibiting under the *SAAP*, the next one will be in, in, ah , Kaohsiung, and then, we will see what's next, ...um, let's see if there is anything else I'm working on...

S: Is there something that you wish you want to work on but not realized yet? um, you know that you have these things that you organised and then you go like: aw, I have a notion of something...

K: I think the Social Realists stuff and the political stuff that are still quite problematic. Ur, first it's to have access to them, ur, I don't have many, you know, in my collection... The fact that er... er, they were active before the war and post-war until, until I think the '70s, of course they.... I just got a publication from, um, I just got this in my letterbox... called Singapore Chronicles. It's by Seng Yu Jin and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, and um, the envelop, the Institute of Policy Studies, alright? The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS, Okay? Um, I got this, because I shared my pictures... (laughs) without a fee, alright? So, ur ...ur, the introduction, *Something Now Must... New*, ur... *Must Turn Up* (reading book). So, is... I think I mentioned... about the, yah, because in this book there is also a chapter on the Equator Social Realism, Contesting Ideologies, the 1963 Modern Art... then Site of Alterity, Between the Farm and the Shopping Mall. So, this one has the Artists Village subject... ur, yah I provided some of the images, ur... yah. So, anyway, they are curators from the institutions that are doing such writing now, alright... But, of course I would be interested to read and then...see if they are different from my idea, (Laughs), alright? So, if they are different, then er, er, I may have the urge to do, yah, something different from, from, from, from what people have been writing about.

S: Interesting book... and finally... just ur, couple more questions, we have chatted a little bit... Um, is there something that you might want to talk about the *Singapore Art Archive*, something that you would like to point out, um, that ur, has not been addressed?

K: I think ur, the recent demise of Lee Wen right? and the possible ur, I mean, ur, the problem faced by the *Independent Archive*. Of course, now we know, a sponsor was going to sponsor

them to continue for a year and then back out, you know, ur... They could manage only one month of rental and then they move to the original space, in 67 Aliwal Street and then they have a new team ur, that will look into the survival and continuation of the art archive, ur... also the disfunction.. Ur, then of course I, I could not spare time helping them move, pack, alright, I only follow them through the social media because I have my own problem... right? With space and funding, alright? Er, I would try to imagine if (exasperated laugh), what happen if I am like them? Having a board, having a rented space, you know, having to employ staff, er, versus I continue what I do, as a solo, as a artist, an archivist and present this archive under my name or under the *SAAP*. I think, the answer is I will continue ...(laugh) what I do... by myself... yah? Of course, if, if there are ways to collaborate between me and *IA*, of course, there will be a possibility.

S: In other words, are you saying continue to be independent?

K: Because I do not want to a institution (Emphatic tone) ...I am forced to make an archive, alright? (laughs). So, the archive project, *Singapore Art Archive Project* became sort of, of... an ongoing experiment ...to be an archive... (laughs), in the different situations, alright? Er... yah, I mean, ur... but I have no wish to... the fact that I call it a project, is, is... er, it can... well... I can stop it anytime I want.

S: I saw Lee Wen's archive, er... at Asia Art Archive... er, beautiful drawings...

K: The fact that he parted his personal works, right? An archive, to the Asia Art Archive is also indicative of the lack, or the problem with the IA, alright? So, if the *IA* could house Lee Wen's personal collection, then it shouldn't go to Hong Kong, right? Lee Wen must have made the conscious decision to work with CCA, right, Ute, and then, of course CCA couldn't, ur, couldn't work on his archive. So, I think they work, er, introduce the Asia Art Archive, so, I think it's the three party collaboration, alright? So ur... yah, so that is a situation that happened with Lee Wen's own, his own archive and then the *IA* will be settled with the, new board members, committee, the artistic director, right? And ur... yah, I think being my own archive, archive project (laughs), I am not answerable to, to, any sponsor or board members or donors of the collections, yah? Although some of my materials were donated, but I have no obligation to er, to house them permanently in archive, yah? But I would want to find good homes, yah, for the good materials in my archive project...yah eventually because I will die. I will die too. The fact that I have encountered artists whose children cannot handle, cannot manage, what their parent artists left behind, er... some are wasted as junk... alright? So, er, I make an archive project, so some of these issues may come to light. It's not just a private affair of the artists' family but when I host the collection, let's say Chng Siok Tin or Tsui Tit Sing, alright? Er, through my exhibitions, people is going to find out, who are these people, why their archive is under my, my project, yah? They are not my property but under this archive project, ur, the fact that I could generate knowledge, interest, right? curiosity, through all these exhibitions and project yah? Er, instead of they hiding some place, right? Just for example, ceramic artist Lim Hua Choon died, from cancer, about a year ago, and then his children announce on Facebook, his studio open for two days, and then people interested in his ceramics, materials, equipment, books can go, and take...

So, I knew the artist but not well, so I went on the last hour of the second day(laughs). The book shelf was still full, so I took them to this archive. So, I took them to this archive. And I took them because I could remember... This artist, he's interested in ceramics and also calligraphy and, and his collection also enrich my collection in terms of ceramics and sculptures and calligraphy, alright? So ur, that's how I expand my collection. Things that I don't have, and things that I want to have, without budget, and things that people are throwing away. I, first I have to identify that they are useful before I take them, alright? But, usually I take them.

S: And how do you identify it?

K: Well, look at the covers like most people do, alright? But of course, sometimes we cannot just look at the covers. We have to browse through a little bit, right? But, I mean, if they are books belonging to an established artists say ceramics, sculptures, printmaking, right? You are sure to find valuable, interesting books, isn't it? In their collection, from experience, you know they are really good. So, I've been saying that. Actually, many artists have collections, it's just that some are a bit narrow, they only, for example, the newspaper in the *Ten Men* exhibition, but, one artist only cut his own artwork, or the paragraph that has his name, yes? I actually presented this in Sharjah Art Book Fair, as an example of how artist collect, so yes, I may find something from an artist archive, but the artist archive may not be that broad, or complete, ur then let's say, I mean compared to my collection approach, so my collection approach some time is even broader (laughs), broader than institution, yah? Er, that's why I end up running out of space, ur... I show you something... (looks for PowerPoint) Just show you something I presented in Sharjah,

courtesy of Asia Art Archive, and ..I look at periodicals in Singapore, and my title is *The Periodical Presence of the Art Periodicals in Singapore Art Archive Project* (laughs).

S: Interesting (laughs)... a story within a story

K: Story within a story, yah, and of course, I start with newspaper as the oldest surviving art periodicals, or periodicals with art, alright? Until today, alright? And then look at artists who are also publisher, writer, artists whose work appear in periodicals, alright? And then institutions that publish, er, museum, and then art collectives, some publish some don't. And then, the first, probably the first er, sort of a art periodicals would be the *Singapore Art*, this one.

S: In the pictures where there is a picture of the stairway... where's that from?

K: That's Loke Yew Street. Opposite the ACM, no, opposite the Peranakan Museum, use to be ACM, okay (laughs). Ah, if you know that the area around Stanford Road, not just many schools, not just the National Museum, the library, but many bookshops and printing companies, yah? So, when buildings are being renovated en bloc, vacation, alright? There are chances you find books as well, alright?

S: And, how do you hear of this?

K: This particular one, I was just walking past Loke Yew street one day, and then, you can see... suitcase that came from... most likely that came from... belong to the early immigrants, leather suitcase... were placed among the trash bags, alright? And workers were seen pushing down the books from the upper stories, yah? And then, I found this Webster dictionary, and then, one is on the Batik and one is ur, ur I think Batik design, I can't remember, I think I took three books, because I was passing by only..this is around 2001, 2000 or 2001.

S: Do you still come across this kind of stuff?

K: We have less of this because, you see for example the schools...you see this one... empty cupboards, see the books on the floor? It's Hokkien Huay Kuan, at Telok Ayer street, right? The school were in this building, until they move out to different places. Ai Tong School, Tao Nan, the Ai Tong school and the Chong Hock school. These are all the very old school. Pre-war school, alright? That have very good collections, alright? And this is the early 2000, that, you know, buildings are being torn down and old books and magazines were abandoned as well, so I picked them. And then, this presentation at Sharjah, I highlight on the art publications, and then book shops, Chinese language bookshops that lasted fifty years had to shut down too in recent years, because there is no demand for Chinese language yah, reading materials, yah? So yes, I also find some interesting books now, then of course this is leading to *Errata* (going over his computer) so...

S: Do you mind sharing the slides?

K: Yes, I can share you all these... and then, ur, art periodicals I focus on the Chinese language periodicals and then, subsequently there are English language art periodicals that also become short lived. (laughs) right? And so, is it because of the internet?

S: Is it? Do you think?

K: Ur, it's hard to say... It's hard to say... Ur, the fact that there are still art periodicals that is still published by Arts Council or sponsored by Arts Council. *A-list* for example, *A-list* is the printed version plus online version, right? But, the arts magazine by the Esplanade was a printed version, and then, it, it stopped, ur, apparently after the issue on censorship. There was an issue on censorship. Apparently, that was the last issue...

S: Wow... thank you so much for all the information and um, um, that's very insightful, thank you.

Interview with Koh Nguang How

23 February 2019 : [55:01], Yishun, Singapore

Suzi (marked as S): Um ok so we are here on February the 23rd with Koh Nguang How again, thank you, and I'm Suzi Teo

Koh Nguang How (marked as K): Mmm...

S: So, at the last time, at some of our several chats um you have mentioned before, just in passing, one of the conversations we had, um, ur, that, ur, that Lee Wen had asked you about the archive and that ur, to merge, suggested that maybe. And then, you didn't think that, that was ur, kind of, you wanted to preserve the autonomy. So, what do you think is... My question is not whether you agree to merge or intend to merge... my question is what do you think, the difference is um, of the two functions of the archive between, not just yourself, not just Lee Wen, perhaps the museum, perhaps ...like that...

K: I think I started my archive er, project name, *Singapore Art Archive Project*... that was in 2005. Er, this is before Lee Wen set up his *Independent Archive*, alright? Um, but we probably have mooted the idea, similar, er, period I think because of the lifting of the period of no funding for performance. I think was lifted 2003, right? I think he, eventually he got the Cultural Medallion in '05. So, I think with the Cultural Medallion funding, er, or grants that he could use,

he could make an exhibition. But, I think he make, he make an archive, in his exhibition at SAM, alright?

S: Yes...

K: And, I think subsequently the furniture and the collection went to Aliwa, yah?

S: I see.

K: Yup, yah, then I think they registered the name.

S: I see, so the archive was actually the installation that he made with the Cultural Medallion funds. Okay...

K: Yup, I think the idea was that but I think eventually he was offered a solo show by SAM. So, I think ur, the archive component was presented in his exhibition as his work, of his more recent work, yah? Then SAM, of course, there was the er, he set up the space of Aliwa.

S: What was the, er, what year was this exhibition in?

K: Er, I just can't remember it. Er...

S: Do you know what the exhibition is called?

K: One moment, just have to go online (all laugh).

S: I could look it up.

K: No, I use to remember people see me quite... well ... but over the... I think um... I realize in recent years...three or four years, my memory of recent events are pretty bad.

S: Okay.

K: Yah, things that happen a few... minutes, ur, ago, yah?

S: Yes...

K: Um, it just slip my mind... So, of course you know I worry about dementia or all these... (laughs) (all laugh).

S: No... (laugh) your memory is still very very good...

K: No! I mean the memory of the past is very good... that's the typical dementia situations (all laugh), alright?

S: Yes, but let's not get paranoid (all laugh).

K: No, but it's still good because... deal with an archive project and the archive project I need to have my memory... of course, of the old days, which is still good (laughs) ...not too bad, yah? Okay, Lee Wen's exhibition, let's see (checks computer) ...Yah, his er, er, what is this? Why is it not updated? His exhibition at SAM, why is it not even updated in Wikipedia, and he produced, there was a book he produced in conjunction, er... Where is it? I'm sorry...

S: It's ok, I can always look it up... I was just curious.

K: Yah, why don't we just skip the year.

S: Yes, we skip it first.

K: Yes skip the year first then we will come back to that.

S: And, do you see any structural differences?

K: Yah, his archive was registered as a company, alright? My archive is an art project, which don't require a registration, alright? Ur, but initially when I name the *Singapore Art Archive Project*... And subsequently, when I, subsequently, it became, sort of, ur... ur... I continue to

exhibit under this project, um, there was time I consider... Should I register as a com... a sole proprietor? Then I thought, no. If, if this is an artwork... once I exhibit it, it is mine, yah? I don't have to register at all and the copyright... The copyright law... There is no need for me to copyright, I mean, to register. I mean, as long as I continue to exhibit, the more I own it, alright?

S: Yes, yes... Um, is there any difference between the material you exhibit and you don't exhibit? for you, as an artist?

K: For me?

S: Yes.

K: Ur...

S: Stuff that was chosen and then stuff that was not, in terms of your... um...

K: Sure.

S: How do you see it?

K: The, the first exhibition of archival materials was not *Errata* but *Performance Week* right? So, and then, the photographic documentation that I documented since 1987 to '92... ur, at the Hong

Bee warehouse and um, I also exhibited a few relics, yah? Er, from the performance and, ur, yah... Of course, the idea of what, what not to display for the performance art history. Er, as I was part of the early Artists Village, er, event and so... I think I did, I did include myself in that situation, and I also did a performance and a reenactment for the last day of the *Performance Week*, reacting to the, um, ...the performance of the other artists in the first six days of the week, alright?

S: Yes.

K: Then with *Errata*, is, of course it was based specifically on the error in the, Kwok Kian Chow's book, *Channels and Confluences* right? And, also the chapter, the chapter in, er, that covers the painting by Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class*, so the chapter deal with the Social Realists, the wood cut?

S: Yes.

K: ur....

S: Who first brought up the idea of ur *Errata*?

K: um, p-10 offered me a solo exhibition... they also offered Lee Wen a solo exhibition. I think mine was after Lee Wen. So, ur... I... I realise that p-10... was... consist of new graduates from

the UK. They were also similar ...similar groups of artists sharing studio space, around, in that same block of building, in the neighboring block yah? so they call themselves the *Parumel Studio*.

S: Yes...

K: So, I realise, that who was there, sharing the studios. They were young, grad, newly graduates from the UK and some of them were going to be art teachers. So, I decided to have ur, er, a more educational content...

S: And, you thought of this idea to have your research...

K: First, it's to show, the ...collection, the archival materials right?

S: Yes...

K: And then, the, ur, after, after, um, thinking about what theme (laughs), what title, we end up with ur *Errata* (laughs)

S: So, it's a co-collaboration...

K: they, well, p-10 were the curators and I was the artist, alright? Officially, I was the artist. p-10 were the curators.

S: Yes.

K: Okay, but, of course, me being the artist, I offer the content, alright? The emphasis on the particular mistake of course came from me. Because I knew the mistake. I knew the mistakes way in '96.

S: Had you brought it up at any point?

K: I brought it up to, to the organiser in Japan... (soft laugh). Okay, um, my own practice of photography, of making photography and making sculptures and installations, sort of, continued until '94, '95... Then, I was engaged by the Fukuoka Art Museum to be a researcher, coordinator.

S: Right...

K: More precisely, a coordinator for ...Their (emphasis) exhibition, called *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*, right? So... that Make Me Stop Making (three raps on the table) my own work (laughs) but went into more collecting, right? Collecting materials related to our early art history. Then, um ...ur, one of the work Fukuoka was going to borrow was

from the SAM's collection, yah? That painting by Chua Mia Tee, which was donated to the to the museum, yah? Er, in the early times, ok? so, SAM inherited the painting from the National Museum and the National Museum is the parent. So, the works were passed on to new institutions, right? So, for example now, NGS, the painting was under the NGS collection, not SAM.

S: Why is that so?

K: Because historically, it's under the scope of the collection. So, the... I realize that the (rap on table) date (rap) given (rap) for (rap) painting was wrong. Ur, I mean, given by the SAM was wrong. in, er, '96, alright? As 1950, alright? And um... ur, the fact that we have exhibited the same work, when I was working in the National Museum... Art Gallery, alright... in '88, alright? Um, the fact that, ur, the painting was exhibited in the Chua Mia Tee retrospective...

S: And, at that time it had a different date on it, the old date?

K: It was correct. It was correct as 1959, alright?

S: Okay...

K: So, it means the catalogue that we published has the right date. Then, I also refer to Chua Mia Tee's own, er, ur publications (rap), and it was also correct (rap).

S: Okay, so because of the exhibitions in 1988, you knew that it was...

K: It was. I have seen the actual work (inflection).

S: And so, when you were arranging the work for Fukuoka, then, you noticed...

K: The date given by the museum was wrong.

S: The date by SAM was wrong...

K: That's right. Then, I inform my boss Han Min er, the Fukuoka Art Museum which engaged me as a, a coordinator, right? I was not obligated to inform SAM, alright? I inform the organizer of the exhibition and then they did a errata, after, after the show was open.

S: They did or you did?

K: They did. They did a errata only after the show opens and the catalogue was produced based on the data given by SAM.

S: Okay.

K: It was too late. Too late for them to change the mistake in the first print of the catalogue.
But they did print a errata.

S: Yes...

K: So, um, '96 and '97, which was an exhibition in, in Tokyo and Fukuoka, alright? Until '04 I initiated the, this exhibition, ur... *Errata*... there... was... no... errata... for SAM... That means, SAM did not know there was a mistake.

S: No, no, I'm just looking curious that's all.

K: Even... Fukuoka had already done a errata... a two page... you know... Er, errata with other mistakes lah... Not just Singapore but other Southeast Asian mistakes... So, the reason... because when p-10 offered me a solo show, the idea was to share my collection, but what will be the starting point... or the focus... alright?

S: (Nod) hmm...

K: This... this mistake, this unchanged mistake by SAM, make me choose this particular, er, mistake as the theme, and even the title, alright? But p-10 did not make the title completely clear... which publication (soft laugh) he's, er, they're referring to... alright?. Keep it a bit

vague... But I think they were also a little bit concerned... pointing out a mistake by an important art institution.

S: Was there any fallout from that?

K: Ur... I think our exhibitions were well received. And then, from p-10 we travel the exhibitions to NUS to a library er, er, hosted by the Scholar program... Seng Yu Jin, Wang Zineng and, and Ong Zhen Min and, eventually, the two of them became museum curators.

S: (Nod) mm... umm

K: Er, before that, the 3rd show of the *Errata* was at the National mu... No, the Singapore History Museum... so it trav... It happened three times... So, eventually it, ur, eventually, ur, the author Kwok Kian Chow, the artist Chua Mia Tee, they came... They came to the last event at the History Museum and they acknowledge the mistake, yah. But subsequently, I heard the museum will not do errata... They will not do a ...reprint. Anyway, the publication is already out of stock, alright? But they will not reprint that particular exhibition catalogue, *Channels and Confluences*, alright? But they only amended the digital data and the subsequent captions, alright? Er, when they feature this particular painting, yah? But, if one was to read this original publication, the mistake is still there.

S: Yes, I've seen the publication at Nanyang library.

K: Ur, one of the, ur, one of the reason why I also want to do this particular work on this particular mistake is the NUS Scholar Program wholesale from the, ur... Okay, almost wholesale. They edited... they selected from this book, *Channels and Confluences*, right... for the Scholar Program and make them online... So, the mistake went online... so the date went from 1959 became 1950 in the book form, as well as online. So, I thought, oh... with the online, ur, resource, this mistake is going to spread even more. That's why I thought that is... that is, the, er, ultimate, ur, you know... My consideration... I should not give face... yah, to my former.. .museum colleague. We just have to be professional about it. So, in the end, it was proven that we did a professional exhibition and they were professional enough to admit the mistake. But... you know... they would not do the errata... on the original publication.

S: This is very interesting, thank you very much...

K: Yah, so I, I display as many publications as possible related to the chapter, alright? They include a little bit of political history that we include the Malayan Communist history... Er... why is that important? Because you can find artists in the Communist party as well, and the artist in the Communist party would also use cartoons or in the woodcuts for example, in the more Social Realist, er, manner. Um, so, I think they are relevant. So, I offer this, this, ur, selection of publications, put them in a different groupings, and allow the audience to be the researcher... Yah, so we have worksheets with simple questions that the visitors can use and browse... handle the publications with gloves, white gloves, and imagine to be like me, right? And, for the *Errata*

collections, I put Post-it stickers with my hand written notes on the pages where the audience can find... er... clues or evidence related to the mistake... to the errata... So, I was.. or we were sharing my working process... my thought process... Yah. There was a man mipe... er, mind map on ...the black board written with chalk, white chalk, simulating the painting where Malay teacher was teaching Malay language to Chinese students. Yah, so we simulate what the ...the painting was about Chinese people learning Malay so, er, in the installation the exhibition installation we had a blackboard. And then I, I wrote my, ur, ur, sort of mind map, so the audience could also follow how I use my mind map to connect the different er, materials yah... in, in the collections ...So it was basically to share in this case an artist who is also a researcher and an archivist, how he deal with the different materials, yah? And, we actually invited the artists from the Equator Society, not the artist of the *National Language Class*, because I assumed he is dead, that's my assumption... That's a scenario I... I make for... that exhibition. The fact that many artists would die when the time is up. Then, what they leave behind will be archival materials or artwork for museum or you know collected by collectors... or left behind ur, with the family, right? But future researchers, curators, students, they mostly would rely on published material, yah? If they have no chance to see the works in public collections, yah, right? So, the *Errata* is also questioning all these published material... that most students and scholars rely on ...yah? So, there is also this intention on my part... yah... for the very fact that *Errata* has, the *Channels and Confluences* had a mistake, and not only one mistake... so I use a very recent publication... So, so the scenario is assuming that artist is gone, the artist won't be around to answer your questions, alright? So most common materials will be to use publications, catalogues right? Press cuttings, someone's thesis, yah? This is most common... And so I make

that kind of scenario for *Errata* exhibition. But we, we did invite two artists from the same group, Equator Art Society, and they were leaders of, of the society, Lim Yew Kuah and Koeh Sia Yong. One was from the '50s, one was from early '70s, alright? They were leaders from different time of the collective, Equator Art Society. Equator was formed in '56 and, er, officially they were deregistered in January Seventy Four. So, we invite them to talk about their time as artists and also members of the collective to give the context to, or even to give some stories to the painting *National language Class*, alright? So, we have no artist to, imagine that he is gone. And then, there is no artist to explain his work, but we have fellow artists from the same group, even the same setting, in the same classroom where they did the painting, you know? To tell us the story. So, I also introduce the element of the audience, who had experienced the work. When it was first exhibited in 1960, alright, to our understanding of the work. Not just relying on published material. We know, we know the problem with, with... Censorship, from time to time, right? And, even typo sometimes... Right? But I want to introduce the audience memory, yah? The experience, their respond to certain artwork, so yah... ur... Subsequent exhibitions right, after *Errata*, I deal with different elements of ur, archive, alright? It's not just you have material put in ur a specific place, and then you just wait for people to come to use. No, it's too too, it's too passive. So, if I was to make my archive active, yah, engaging the audience, I have to start to introduce all possible sce... elements and scenarios yah? So... interestingly for the *Errata@p-10*, we have someone who had actually seen the painting, and another painting of Chua Mia Tee, the *Epic Poem of Malaya*, er, and this man, who, who is a poet, remember seeing a painting of the *Epic Poem of Malaya*, right ah... In the painting there was a housefly, on the shoulder of one of the the male figure... Okay, so this audience, this poet remind us at p-10 what they, what they...

felt when they saw the housefly ...on the painting, so realistic ur, he said... They even make fun lah ...say of *hao lian* (meaning a showoff in the Hokkien dialect) lah, showing off his skill. Ah, that is from the audience perspective. The artist would say that the idea is to portray that this boy, this man was so attentive, listening to the one holding the book, alright? So attentive that the fly could rest on his shoulder, right? So, the artist intention, the artist idea of making certain work, there's also the audience side of it. But normally it's the press, the critic, the historian who write... Their opinion. Usually the audience don't have a say... unless they are being quoted. With, usually it's very... ur.. limited, right? So, there may be one hundred audience, but how many can be quoted? One or two. That doesn't represent, that shouldn't represent the rest, yah? If you really study, you know the, the writings of art. Sometimes its very problematic. They are not truthful enough (laughs) but the fact that there is also censorship. If someone is to write too critically, too honestly, first they don't get published, right?

S: Um, okay.

K: So, these are issues that *Errata* I mean, personally try to raise.

S: Is that your, um, you've mentioned a very kind of concise and kind of process to what you're thinking. Can you say that this is pretty much the approach towards every exhibition that you take? Or do you sometimes go like ...well.

K: Yah, sometimes, yah, I may be less critical... keep the exhibition a bit more open... a bit more ...general. Er, if they are general it means that there is something political I don't want to show (laughs), to be honest about it. Taking cues from what happen to other historians and activists, there are things that are still sensi... so called sensitive.

S: From 1982 to 2004, this is the last question from today, and then 2004 to 2011 to 2018, you mentioned, first...

K: Lee Wen, this is the one... *Lucid Dreams*

S: Oh, okay. I just saw another one at CCA.

K: The archive, yes, he is concerned about his archive. And then, CCA came in and then, ur, sort of, offer AAA, Asian Art Archive, this collection, so that AAA could take up part of his archive as a collaboration. So that's why they featured Lee Wen's archive, rather than the *Independent Art Archive*, yah? So they deal with Lee Wen first, the fact that he is really not well, yah, he's running out of time...

S: I just want to ask you, um, do you see any... Um, how has the archive evolved, from your beginning to 2004? Then it moved on to Errata and so on. Do you see it more formalised, 'cause it started off with a function right? And then, it evolved into something ...This is not where I am saying you are thinking, I'm just asking a question; what's the archive in 2018?

K; Now that you have seen my flat... The origin was to have a, a resource, ur, where I can, ur, provide some of the resource materials for visiting artists, then for the student or researcher, then of course ...the... My... the collection became too huge (laughs) that there is no space... To continue that ...that function... It lasted until I think..it lasted about two years... then subsequently the *Errata*, the *Errata* give me the idea that, that I can have a mobile archive, right? Ur, with my space problem, I can have the archive outside my HDB space. Of course that, with a different space... With the different institutions that hosted me, the different themes of the exhibitions um, I try to have each of the presentation having some new elements. Er, after *Errata*, *Errata* was mostly the catalogues, books and *Artists in the News* for Biennale is mostly newspaper clippings... Um, then the CCA residency is everything... every kind of archival materials including sound... sound recordings, photographs,yah, posters. Of course, then when if it's narrowed down to for example, The Artists Village archive for the *Sunshower* exhibition, then it's just The Artists Village, alright? In terms of the content. But for the *Sunshower* in Japan, in Tokyo, I introduce the AR, so I work with Lim Shengen, a fellow artist, so the archive is seen through the mobile app. Of course, because of the limited space, it's also a new, new way of engaging archives. Okay, so I did the, ur, mobile phone application twice already, one was in Gwangju, during my residency in PpongPpong Art Space, then the second time was in *Sunshower*. So, I worked with the same artist Lim Shengen yah, and, *Sunshower* is travelling now to Kaohsiung Fine Art Museum. So, it's the third venue... and it's a new audience, it's a new space, but I will still work with Shengen, alright? But how it will be presented is all depending on the new condition, okay? Maybe some of the things will be in Chinese... So, I

wanted the recent artists to give me their Chinese names, in a recent, ur, because maybe journalists want to ask about their names, you know? We write their names in Chinese so... these are the things I have to start preparing, yah? Some of the historical materials that only has English may need to have some kind of Chinese, so I am preparing for the curator already yah? And er, er, yah, the most recent display of my archive is at CCA residency with ur, John Low's studio space. He is researching on the contemporary and the Chinese ink in Singapore. So I have provided um, around a hundred publications related to art education and Chinese ink in Singapore, cause we can't, we can't not mention about China, prewar, cause that's where our, our master artists and teachers came from, that's why the selections started from 1920s and ends this year. That's why we have the most recent exhibition that we went to NAFA (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts) that we went to see, and got their publication to show a quote in their publication. *What is Chinese Ink* today? It's the most recent ur, publication and a quote that we use and then the rest was more historical, yah. So, this is one, ur, of course the way I present, it depends on the theme and the host, the audience, and as an artist I want to challenge myself too. I don't want to end up people saying: oh Koh always doing the same thing. Ur, showing archive is readymades. Archive are readymade then present differently with technology or very old methods in showcases right? But in *Errata* I allow audience to touch my things, right? So the idea is if I have an archive project that is no different from the official archive, that people cannot touch, then what is the point of me doing that? And some more as my artwork, alright? So there are some challenges I have to think about... And also as an artwork, there is no definite endpoint, alright? So even if the *Sunshower* coming to the third venue, Taiwan this time, I have to think about how to make it different from Fukuoka and Taiwan, then I can expand. I can

expand my art, my practice vocab isn't it? If I become lazy, I just transport the same thing lor. I don't... Personally, I don't like. Because I have seen in the museum, artists and groups that come and then they almost produce similar things, alright? Also, to have the way things are documented alright? I talk about how I, I have a new approach to document things, because many people documenting from the same perspective. So why should I be one of... become one of them, alright? If I offer a different perspective, that's also, I learn from it. I learn from my (inflection) perspective. Then, if I generate enough material over the years, that become useful resource isn't it?

S: Are you a collector?

K: Um, I think the earlier question between the *IA* and my archive, is the *IA* has initially focus on performance and sound collection. Right? Then, now they are expanding to... to be like me (laughs), yah, everything. But mine is everything... ur concerns the visual arts alright? and also the time span, I think mine is, er, in terms of painting, sculpture, ceramics, I think my starts from 1020s, my collection. So, I don't think *IA* has that collection. As, whether I'm a collector, yes I think I collect and borderline hoarder, (laughs) borderline hoarder. I collect I think, like my mom. She collects her, her cooking stuff, her baking stuff, alright? Er, her plants, um I collect, but ur, without spending money... salvaged... Salvaged from abandoned schools, clan associations... Er, artists who died, er family giving away after artists who just died, yah, and also managed for artists who are living but incapable of managing their archives er, for example Chng Seok Tin, who is visually impaired since 1988. So, this one example on where I, I got to

work on her archive, for 30 years, without owning them, alright? There's also another artist who lost her limb, Mdm Lee Soo Chee, who lost her limb in '2004. Then, I was requested to help her, then, I learn through her archive... But I don't own her archive...

S: Right

K: So, there are collections that I own, there are collections that I put under the *Singapore Art Archive Project*, when I make exhibition, alright? As an Artwork, but they are components from maybe different parties. So, it means, it's hard to sell, this collection without getting the permission of the different parties. But as an exhibition it's not difficult, just get permission or pay a fee you know, to get the permission to exhibit. So, um, ur, yah, I'm a, a collector until the digital age. What it means is I will collect physical material, I will take pictures of the event until the arrival of the digital cameras around 1999. By 1999, there is also the internet already in Singapore so officially, I tell people that I stop active collecting after 2000. And, after the *AIM* project, *Artists Investigating Monuments* of the Artists Village in 2000. So, that is some kind of like a, er, sort of official date I give to say that that is a reduction of collection, a reduction of going anytime, you know, with younger artists and actually spending more time with older artists and materials of dead artists. So, in terms of time spent outside my home, it's actually ur, not much better than the past, it's just where I spend my time. I also spend time digitising my, my physical material. When my dad fall ill early 2000s, right? So, I spend time at home digitising the material and of course this digitising allow me in the future projects, to show them in the AR or the digital video, yah? So there are... the situation where I have to deal with the material in

the collection, and then if I have to do a collection in the future, what will I do? 'Cause the future will be more digital, right? So, I have to learn how to do my own slideshow, cut my own video in the computer software, you know? Yah, so this I learn, but there are some like AR, I can't. I can't cope. So, I work with other artists who needs the content but has the technology.

S: Okay, so we will end this session today and thank you so very, very much.

K: Thank you.

Interview with Koh Nguang How

at Grey Project Space, 15 February 2019: [1:05:20], 6B Kim Tian Road, Kai Fook Mansion Singapore 169246 at 2.pm.

S: Okay so, we are here today with Koh Nguang How on the fifteenth of February and I am Suzi Teo from NTUADM. So, I uh, have some, few questions for you ...Regarding actually your artistic practice. I know there are some writings on your archive and what sort of, or what kind of ways we can rethink the history like that. But what I'm interested in, is not the object or the actual talking about the art but rather talking about your practice.

K: mmm

S: So, the first question I ask... Were there any artists that inspired you, just off the top of your head?

K: Well, as I work in a museum, there are many artists who inspired me (laughs), from time to time, alright? But first, one particular artist would be Tang Da Wu, alright, whom I met in 1986, alright? I read about him and found out that he did earth works er, in '79 and '80 and, he was one artist who was quite different than other artists I have encountered in my work at the museum and so I think er, his philosophy of his work dealing with nature and the cycle of nature um, I think affect me ur, a little bit in my earliest sculpture making and installation work um but as for my early photographic work dealing with nature. I was sort of, I make reference to British artist

Hamish Fulton who present pictures and text from walking, yah, walking in nature. So, my earliest sort of reference or inspiration showing my pictures of nature have been influenced by Hamish Fulton and then subsequently through the artist Village and Tang Da Wu. Yes, my sculpture work was influenced by that sort of artist collective.

S: Ok um, what's your, now I want to ask you about the *Singapore Art Archive Project* this almost thirty- year long piece of work, so um, um I understand the exhibitions you had were actually a very small part of, actually the entire archive, so what I'm trying to understand is um, what is your criteria er, for selection of materials into your archive. I know you've mentioned once before in your text that you were inspired because you wanted to run a sort of different approach of looking at history because just for the lack of, we did not necessarily have a lot of material covering that. But what is your criteria for selection into your archive?

K: Well, my first collection would be newspaper clippings, alright? When I was in Junior College. This would be er '80, '82 yeah? Er, and... I did A-level art so the clippings were focused on art news, alright? So that was the initial criteria. Subsequently, I started to work at the NMAG from '85. So, I would collect the publications related to the exhibitions that the museum presented, or exhibitions held at the museum at the space for rental exhibitions, so from my work experience, I started to collect things related to my working life alright? And, the exhibitions er, the work that we have to put in to make an exhibition. So, there are things I collect, like notes, er research notes for the ...Of course, when the work is up I would start to make my own photographic documentation of the, the event, like openings workshops or talks yah? So, the

kind of materials sort of increased overtime and photographic materials would be er, I have copyright, compared to newspaper clippings or someone else's catalogues, alright? Sometimes we don't get to see images in the press, right? So, under this there is a difference between what the press would show to the reader and what we artists and museum workers would experience. So, er, my focus would be those things that are not shown (inflection), or revealed to the general public. So ur, that become a new focus out of creating my own documentation instead of relying on published material. Um... and then, when I started to exhibit and er, sometimes there are things that I don't have so I need to... search for these materials so I can have them in my collection and they are available in the exhibition, alright? So, there are times that are things items I would not have in my collection but because they are in the exhibition they are projects that I was going to do. So there are times I have to purposely seek for those missing items, so that they can be complete, alright? So, overtime the more events I have, the more cleaning up, the gaps, the more sort of complete the collection become. So, overtime I do try to fill in the gaps, materials I do not have. Er, I purposely try to ur, search for them and of course whatever... published by the press, they are just daily affair of collecting, there is no special focus. The whole section two for example of Zaoboa or Straits Times, I just keep the whole section. So... Compare to my earlier days, I cut certain news from the paper but over time, I do not cut anything. I just keep the whole thing.

S: And why is that?

K: It's more complete.

S: I see.

K: We also have news about what's happening in the music scene, what's happening in the literature scene er, what's happening in the social perimeters. So, overtime, it becomes like a messy collection of newspaper especially, yah?

S: Um... in some of your exhibitions and material you sent over, *Errata* seemed to be a lightning rod. Um, maybe appear to be more, um, sort of um, maybe it evolved, as an aftermath, sort of socially significant kind of exhibition. Are there any installations besides *SAAP* that sort of, that you would consider, just two or three examples, as something um, that sort of has this kind of um, equal importance, if not more? I just mean, in the course of thirty years, what were the er, couple of exhibitions that you thought might be important?

K: Before *Errata*, in 2004, um, my archive had no name. Or rather, before *Errata*, before *SAAP*, *Singapore Art Archive Project*, that was created in 2005, the name. It was created after *Errata*, so before I created the name *Singapore Art Archive Project*, I exhibited (Change of tone, without hesitation) part of the archive, in 1992, in an event called... *Performance Week*.

S: Can you say that again?

K: *Performance Week*.

S: Okay.

K: Yah (voice happy)? A week of performance, er, er, young artists that I knew (laughs), young artists related to the artists village and we, it was at a place called Gallery 21, at Riverwalk Galleria and the gallery curator er, manager, curator was Mien Tan, who completed her sculpture studies in the UK. And so she, she came back and she worked for this Gallery 21 and she felt, she felt, she saw the *Hong Bee Warehouse* exhibition in the *Singapore Fringe Festival* in June '92. So, she proposed that we do a *Performance Week* in August 1992. So, we being the first exhibition of *Performance*, ur, in Singapore. I thought I could offer a selection of performance from my archive, so I exhibited performance, images of performance from 87 to 92 and then, I also had a few relics from that. From the history of the performance art. Of course it was Tang Da Wu's performance in the National Museum in 1987, I kept, er part of his rice paper, with ink, er, which he, yah, it was part of his performance in '87, August 1987, Yah? So, that was, I think was my first exhibition of archival materials, pictures and objects, of course when I did *Errata* in 2004 and then the question of um after *Errata*, right? I think after *Errata*, I was asked by National Museum Singapore to present fifty years of Singapore art history, ur, in the form of timeline and um, selected ephemerals ur, to go with the travelling exhibition of *Documenta*. So *Documenta* had a travelling show of their fifty years' history and it came to Singapore and then the National Museum as the host of the exhibition, decided that they should also present fifty years of Singapore Art history, with some social political context. So, I was asked to present *50 Years of Singapore Art* timeline, through the selected ur events and then the publications.

S: And what issue of *Documenta* was that?

K: Sorry, no, it was the fifty years of the *Documenta*.

S: Okay.

K: Which is the famous exhibition in Germany... Kassel... After fifty years they decided to make an exhibition of the archive.

S: Okay, so it wasn't an edition of *Documenta*.

K: It was their fifty years, so they make their archive into an exhibition and tour.

S: Okay, so it was a special edition of *Documenta* and not part of the *Documenta* series.

K: it was not part of the *Documenta* series but *50 years of Documenta*, with their archive on tour, yah. It should be 2007.

S: That's interesting...

K: Yah, so the exhibition was interesting cause *Documenta* happened for fifty years and then they were putting up their own archive. And then, their exhibition allow me who was an artist who was also exhibiting archive to have some idea of how I could also do my archive in the future. So, the exhibition in National Museum allowed me to have some idea of possible way of showing my future archives, so that led to the exhibition the next one in 2011. I was invited er, and I decided to showcase my thirty years of newspaper at *SAM@8Q*. I named it *Artists in the News* (change of tone, slowed down). I highlighted one particular one in Straits Times by Tang Da Wu um, with the heading, *Art for Learning More than Appreciation*. So um, the, in choosing this particular news, I, ur, of course, first acknowledge Tang Da Wu as my influence and also the work he did in 1980, '79. The work he presented in the museum 1980, having that focus interest of sharing and educating through his artwork, other than promoting sales of his artwork and appreciation of monetary value. That to me as a former museum worker, ur I felt yah, I felt more in tune with that approach rather than the more commercial approach to art, yah? Then, of course, my collection of over thirty years of newspaper would be displayed in different categories... on artist, on art spaces, on art funding on art controversy (laughs) - all seen through the newspaper, the two main newspaper the Straits Times and the Lianhe Zaobao. Er, of course, I also make objects within the space, using the newspaper er, yah?

S: This kind of ur, exhibition... You have very different kinds of configuration, one thing I noticed in the *2011 Biennale* was the er, very meticulous display. Um, can you talk a little bit about the ways that you display things and some of your methodologies for display?

K: Yes. The *Biennale* work *Artists in the News* was my own work, compared to the earlier one in *Documenta* show at the National Museum and the *Performance week*. This time I control. I have the whole space of 8Q to myself and er, so I design my space in such a way that the visitors got to see ur, piles of raw newspaper in stacks. And then, I would also create a sorting room, where selected newspaper would also be pinned onto the wall, alright, and also, I wanted to have a scanner, which was promised to me by the National Gallery but they did not supply me with (laughs). And if I had a scanner there, I would physically do the scanning of my selected newspaper in that space, so that became like my studio of my, my working space. Of course, it was totally different than my real space, which is of course my HDB flat. So, of course in the gallery, the *Biennale*, 8Q, ur, I wanted to create a kind of flow or sequence that the audience can understand. How I sort the things, the, the news and besides, a smaller sorting room, I also had 2 display rooms. Yah, one had er, framed newspapers. So, selected news would be framed, put in frames and then hung on the wall. And then, I would provide chairs and the tables. It's almost like a reading room, and then er, ur, a video and the TV that showed how I collect my archives. So, it's selected content so it's almost like a reading room of an archive, and then you go in and borrow things and put on the table and read, yah? So, the third space is a bigger space... It's the biggest space like a gallery, where the newspapers are pinned on the wall by different categories. And then, sculptures made from newspapers and some furniture will be dispersed in the space. So, it's almost like a gallery space where you see artworks related to the newspaper. So, it's not just of an archive where materials are kept in shelf, yah, or cabinets. And then, there is a catalogue system where you search for material. So ur, my presentation is ur, ur not quite like the archive because it's an open access exhibition, right? So, I make it like a gallery where there are

newspapers on the wall, already selected and then there are piles on the floor that are not selected, alright? And then, there are works on pedestal, newspaper, and some of the furniture I use to present the news, newspapers as objects. Then, of course the newspaper Tang Da Wu *Earth Works* will be on a metal rack, which was formerly part of the National Museum Gallery system. I salvaged one of these metal racks and then presented the news of Tang Da wu.

Right, so it's almost like the center of the big gallery, alright? So, the idea is *Earth Works* happened in 1980 with the heading that you know? *Art for Learning More than Appreciation* but the fact that the exhibition was shut down after 3 days... so there are times that people only read the news and they only get one side of the exhibition. There are. So, I was trying to present thirty years after earthworks, in relation to the hype, of the, er, so called *Biennale*, hopefully to allow people to access through *Earth Works* - in terms of art funding, in terms of controversy, art education, art places, have we er, have we have we... er...

S: So, it seems like from what you are telling me, it's not a neutral thing. It's quite a political act and performative act, in the sense of the social, cultural and art historical?

K: Yes. So, the captions by the *Biennale* curators, ur, had included, had mentioned that ur, this work is also to question the writing, the art writing by the press, alright? Having a title in the news, I hope to also present the other side, artists not in the news, alright? So, it's also a work that question the quality of the writings, the integrity of the journalists, alright? And of course, the er, um, also the freedom of the press, if you want to go into that. So there are times, when things are distorted by the media, ummm, so some people read it as a work that is a bit

subversive? It questions the er, er authenticity of some of the writings, of some of the reports. Ur, yah, I actually for two months, I ur, my work in the three different space, ur, were static in a sense. Then, on the last week of my exhibition, I announced on a notice board that I would turn the space into a forest. So, I started to, yes, I cut leaves out of unused newspapers (tone dropped, barely audible) and ur, so slowly, slowly, I changed the lighting to be dimmer, and then leaves will be scattered. Sometimes I allow the audience to scatter the leaves, to throw them and slowly the place turn into a messy, not tidy like a gallery, I mean, turn it into a forest. With what? With leaves and branches that are all made from newspaper. So I make them, and allow the audience to scatter the leaves. I also introduce at the back of the wall where the end of the wall where I showed Tang Da Wu's *Earth Works*. Um, initially that back wall, behind the metal rack where I presented Tang Da Wu's *Earth Works*, I actually showed black. Um, I showed photocopies of ur, quotes from various news articles on the *Earth Works*. So it's in Chinese and English, so it's white against white, it's almost like, er, its black and white articles but it's glued onto the white floor of the gallery, so it's in, er, the two months, it's almost white, with the metal rack in the middle, right? So only when the audience get closer, you can actually see: oh, there are some printings in photocopies. Um, then, in the last week, together with leaves around, I would add um, cuttings from newspapers in the shape of water drops droplets, right? So, I introduce water, rain or tears, so it depends on how you see it. So, it's the end of my exhibition, it could be tears, it could be the rain that will, will help the ur... piece of forest. Um, I document this process yah? And its ur, ur, so, the end of it, the last day you had the droplets on the whole wall. And then, the place full of leaves and some branches. And, the lighting is much dimmer. And then, when it's completely over, de-installation right? De-installation I had the helpers to help me pack my box

and ur, ur, in fact, the carton boxes was actually purchased by the National Gallery. Ur they actually wanted to borrow my newspaper after the *Biennale*, ur, for their own... purpose, alright? That's why I thought they were gonna support me with a scanner, duh duh duh, never happened. But they bought the carton boxes so I put my newspaper from my flat in the in the carton and then... (sign) brought to 8Q. In the beginning of my installation, there's a stack of carton boxes and some furniture that I brought.

S: Was there pictures? I thought I saw some pictures...

K: The audience didn't see it.

S: Okay.

K: The audience did not see this process, but I documented.

S: It was a great show.

K: I showed random pictures in my documentation. I think it was slightly more than a week that we had to prepare the gallery. So, the beginning is to lay out the cartons in the bigger gallery, right? So, they look like, they look like... tombstone (laughs jokingly).

S: So it took a week to...

K: No. Only two days to bring them from my house to the gallery. But, but (emphasis) before that I had to pre-select my items.

S: Right, and how long did that take? the pre-selection to the gallery?

K: Er, I think from the invitation to the shipment, ur... a few months.

S: Yes...

K: Because I have to go through the piles. So, the unwanted newspaper as, like the raw material. Selected ones would be like in some boxes, that, that, I can retrieve more immediately.

S: Why did you choose to document, ur, the moment? Um, I know you're naturally...

K: I'm a natural. Yes.

S: Yes. You actually specifically mentioned the undocumented boxes and even arranged them...

K: Because that is my work. That's part of my practice, if you want to use the term. That's how I work, the process to me. Of course, my process is important for me, but of course it may not be

visible in the exhibition. But, it may be visible in the exhibition in the future, so, through documentation as archival material.

S: Were the boxes, the way you arranged them, I don't know some kind of...

K: it's it's quite um

S: 'Cause they looked closed. Those photos look...

K: So, as you mentioned, before they are opened, so, each process, many of my process I would document. Um, some of this documentation is actually my work. I am creating a new work, yah? but through, through the picture.

S: Yes, it's very interesting, you were very specific. There was the before, the plan, and to spend this amount of time.. And also, I mean I see here a system, or category...

K: I do, I do select some so that I have an easier time when going to the gallery. Because the, the, the time spent at the gallery will be limited compared to the time I have in my own flat. I pre-selected them so I could put them in the boxes. There was actually two hundred and fifty boxes (laughs).

S: Do you consider then the entire process of the exhibition, from what you tell me, the exhibition is only one part of the process?

K: Yah. What the audience see is only what is in the gallery.

S: Yes, you were clearly showing it's actually the entire thing.

K: Yes. from my home to, and I mentioned just now that I document even the de-installation. So, what happened was ur, there was no more audience and most of the things are placed and the newspaper into the boxes, alright? So, what is left behind was the water drops, and I sweep. I did a performance or a ritual of sweeping up the whole space, photograph myself sweeping up all the the leaves in the gallery and then, with just the water droplets. And then, the droplets became tears rather than rain.

S: mmm, quite symbolic.

K: Yes. Symbolic. And of course, the last thing I remove all the tears.

S: Do you use... ur, besides this, 2011 exhibition, other de-installations?

K: I do. Yes. So, the installation and shipping back to my flat, was also documented.

S: Yes, I saw some photos, it's very interesting that it's so specific as to... um... which really brings me to the next question of um... storage.

K: Yes. laughs. The scope.

S: Clearly this is very ...it kinds of show where your expression. It also helps us to, with all this overwhelming information. The storage, how do you deal with it? You talk about it often, yah? So how do you deal with it?

K: Yes. The storage. It's a messy problem (laughs). Yah. being our apartment. Our living space. First, with my family, and then my parents. I still, with my mother, and then, I got my own 3-room flat. Ur, the documents of the materials er... It's, it's, it's a very serious problem. I mean, storage is not really a problem as long as everything fits in the space, right? Retrieving, selecting alright? If there is a request, from a student, from the museum, from a curator... Where I was going to prepare for an exhibition, then, it's really headache, headache. Ur, as I do not mark my boxes, I do not clearly ur, clearly label my boxes, ur, like museum and archive should be doing. I do not fix my archives in a certain way that is categorize by museums, and by archives. They are very fluid.

S: Do you have a system, or do you kinda have an idea?

K: Well I, ur, for physical storage, we can put things in a particular corner, or, or, ur if you stack, you can put things where the ones you want is on top? So, these are physical sorting out, you know, physically allocating alright? Of course, I mention I don't label them (laughs). So, sometimes it's um, when you are going back to find something, then you are like, oh... (sigh) But generally, I can sort them out quite easily. Because generally, my system is whatever that is important is always, more easily accessible- which is, of course, it's always within my reach and it will not be stuck right in the end of my flat. So, I make that kind of decision where I should place my things, yah? Just for example, every new year I have to move my things and then, this new year is not over yet. Just because this new year I have some event at Grey Project, I have some event at CCA. So, ur, so I will make sure that these are the things I can access, immediately.

S: Um, is, ur, this big problem you are talking about, this very material and physical boxes. The kind of, um ...does it follow you from place to place?

K: Well, besides the *Artists in the News*, the *Biennale*, my next work will be, ur, I want to talk about will be *SAAP@ CCA*. Ur, so I was invited to be the first of the residency programme at CCA, NTUCCA at Gillman Barracks, and I decided to, and I decided to, ur, have a work of the whole- my whole archive to be shown during my residency of three months, right? So, the way I arrange the material during my residency and it happens to be ur, three different spaces eventually from three months my residency was extended to seven months, from one space to three spaces. So, some of the arrangement is almost like my flat, cause the stacking.

S: You have free range?

K: Yes, yah.

S: So, you have space to really... like the newspapers

K: It's up to me. Yes, yah, so I do like clothes... hanging... Of course I have to deal with physical constraint. I mean, you know of um... the wall and the floor space of Gillman Barracks which we have to take care of... not to break, ur, break the antique windows for example. So but I, but I improvise, and modify, you know, especially, um, like Ikea, some of the things I bought from Ikea, that I can, ur, I can ur, use, to present my archive in a different way, ur in a different ...in the three spaces, within the budget...(laughs) right? So yes, it started with three months. So, one configuration, and, I introduce this ur, video, slide show; even my slides on the slide box, on the slide box, where audience who never seen slides can actually physically view the slides through a, a viewer, yah? Then, of course my residency was extended, so... I introduce the archive of the artist from Singapore Tsui Tit Sing, ur, so that exhibition focus on just one artist, archive of one artist,yah? He was born in China and arrive in Singapore in 1940, then died in 1997... Then, and, I help the family with his archive. And it happened that when I was in the residency, he would be one hundred years old? So, I took the opportunity to present his works through his archive in honor of him, to remember his hundredth birthday, you know? I actually enlarged one of the pictures I took of him at the National Museum in 1990, ur, at, at the door of my space, ur,

symbolising he came. Yah, he came... pause to see his exhibition. So, the use of the exhibition space in Block 38 in particular, I could, I could change the way archive, the archive materials can be presented, and accessed by the visitors. Ur, and we know Gillman Barracks has the, ur, *Art after Dark*? And the ur, on one night, you had a few thousand visitors and um, um... I actually counted. Ur, I have one thousand plus visitors on one of those nights. So, with that numbers coming into my space, I have to make it in a way that, that, it allow more people to come in but things are not stolen, damaged, alright? So I, I...

S: So how do you feel about it?

K: No, so I make it a little bit more friendly, er to the walk-in visitors, so I... For example, I did one exhibition, *Six Decades*, er, *Six Decades of Art Ephemerals* right? So, it's, I arranged the items in six decades. So, it's almost like the museum way of presentation. These one thousand more or so people just walk in particular route, and then they will encounter this material. Of course, they are allowed to stop and read or handle, cause sometimes I provide, I provide gloves, so, yah. So, but of course in a situation like many people coming in or out, but they automatically don't spend much time of handling the articles, so it, it helps (laughs). So, it helps in a way that I don't have to be so worried, yah?

S: Ur, in, ur, when people often talk about you, you seem to have a photographic memory. Um, in terms of remembering events or so like this, so I want to ask you about, um, the idea of memory or loss; not in the sense that, we sort of understood some of that power of are the

aesthetic of ur, some of your exhibitions such as *Errata*, works like that. But often times, you are often... In other words, it's very hard to separate the man from the work...

K: Well, yes, the object.

S: Sorry, if you can just bare with me, um, is there a compunction to archive, um, a very kind of, personal...?

K: Ok, the archival materials in, in my archive project, they mostly acquired by myself, alright? So, you of course, we talk about the criteria. Of course, ur, I have reason to collect them, alright? But there are times when they are given to me, alright, by people. Of course, if they are given to me I have to find them a place in my archive, alright? So, I um, I make, I find meaning, a system for my archive.

S: Uhum...

K: So of course, if I understood that, if I can find a place for them, they will be part of my archive, ok? So generally, especially for photography, I took pictures of the events, so I, I, I took er, pictures of the event so I, I experience the event and then the experience remain in the photographic records so in dealing with the slides ur negatives or photo print so it becomes digital work alright? So, the photographic records for the past er, event, um, of course, naturally, I could narrate something, I could speak about them, alright? Um, I suppose if I am not next to

these images, then its open to the, the audience interpretation right? Ah ha, but ur... so... so... if I am present, there will be more stories right? So, if people are sick of my stories, right, then of course, then of course it will be less in terms of captions or the description, there will be less. Because in exhibition there is always limitation not using the text, alright? But because I knew a lot more (laughs) then could be presented, I will, ur, ur so that when the times are available, there will be a bit more stories. And, some people like this. And then they will say this...oh! a living dictionary or something like that. To the people who, at, you know, or having a, a memory. But the fact that I experienced the event, I took the pictures of the events, I should have a better memory. Compared to the people who did not experience the event, who saw the pictures for the first time. Right, so I think it's very natural, that we who make, who produce these images, all these archives, we will have a little bit more information, right? Um, but if these materials become part of the form archive, they might be in the form of annotation, alright, but if the people have all these big archive who do not have any annotation, then what is the value of the material? Alright?

S: Which is the next question I want to ask you (Koh laughs). If your archive comes alive with these various exhibitions, in between those times, there are many materials which I myself personally saw when I visited your place... When you make selections, that is going to be non neutral, 'cause simply for the fact that there are reasons, which I myself understood...

K: Yes.

S: So, my question to you is, ur, finally, is there some unrealized, not finally, it's still ongoing... Last question today, ongoing project (laughs) because when you tell me that you have full autonomy, for me as a participant looking at you, it's a different kind of perspective, you know, full autonomy. I can hear the different change in voice, you know... unrealized projects and also, what does that make the in-between material to you?

K: Yes.

S: Or is it a kind of an ongoing thing? Ur, the use of the material, say all these materials... there's obviously things that's not explored than those in exhibition. Um, are there any of those projects we can talk about? And also, um, do they carry the same kind of weight as your exhibited materials in your exhibition?

K: Yes. Well in fact I have exhibited my archive in different places, different countries. Ur, so they are, ur, a bit different in each of it's... ur, exhibition, yah? So, in, ur, if I'm not invited for the next one, then I would still be thinking yah. I would still be thinking. If the next one comes along, I would make it differently from what I did previously. That's why in the performance, archive in the little gallery to *Errata*, er, publications, catalogues, well introduced and then examined. And then, the newspaper comes out in the *Biennale*. And then, I had my first solo exhibition. My photographs, at, about my photographs, *Art Places* at the Jendela 2015 as part of the *SG Fifty*. So, I had exhibited photographs, newspapers catalogues. I have also added a little bit of the sound, the audio recordings of art events and performance in an exhibition, curated by

Gille Massot. At the, the, er, at the LaSALLE. So that I introduce a bit of the audio from my archive. But of course, I would want to digitize more of the recordings to save them. Because if I don't digitize them, they, er, get damaged over time, right? Er, I have some video, ur, of performances and art installations, but they are not done by me. Er, I present them to museum curators for their use, but they couldn't help me digitize them, right? So..er...then I thought okay, they are not mine anyway...Why should I be the one preserving them? If the maker themselves, the museum don't treasure them, why should I, why should I have this obligation of keeping someone else footage, alright? I should spend more time creating the pictures or footage of the recordings that I have created myself, alright? So, probably, yah, if there is opportunity to show, I will try to deal with the audio recordings. I mean, um, for example like the Sunshower exhibition which I exhibited the archive of the Artists Village? I had two versions, one is the exhibition at the National Art Center in Tokyo, second different version in Fukuoka Art Museum. So... and the show is now going to the Kaohsiung Art Museum, being less budget, less space. So, I'm waiting for, for their ur, floor plan to do the third version of my artist archive, alright? Okay, so the third one is of course going to be: what is the space, the timing, the budget, then of course, the one that is coming up happen to clash with a symposium which I am going to in Taipei. I think, er something related to Singapore Taiwan artistic relation. So I, I'll be presenting something from '50s onwards until now and but the timing seemed to clash a little bit. That I can't present that I can't set up my work in the *Sunshower*. So, symposium will come first in Taipei, and the set up will be later in Kaohsiung. So, but fortunately, the symposium curator is talking to the people in the Kaohsiung Museum how to solve this problem for me. And for them I can be in two places.

S: That's a good problem(smiles).

K: So, finger cross (laughs), they can figure out how I can be in two places. Especially yesterday morning, I... the *Sunshower* will affect how, what I can present. I will probably work with the National Art Center using AR. So, using the application that will solve the problem of space. And of course, the using of this technology... um, might be suitable for a particular audience that are also into technology. So, like in the, Taiwanese audience probably will also embrace this new mobile device, right? So, that is possible likely way to present the TAV archive in Kaohsiung. So, all these I have to start thinking about (laughs), yah.

S: Cool! Thank you so much for today's session.

K: laughs...

Additional Interviews

Questionnaire

- 1)How is Koh's practice unique in the field of historicism/curatorial practice?
- 2)How have you encountered Koh's work?
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- 4)Do you understand a distinction between an archive and an art archive?
- 5)Which archives are important for your work?
- 6)Do you see a difference in archival practice in Singapore as to other nations, particularly the West
- 7)What is the significance of Koh's work?
- 8)What do you think Koh might be trying to achieve?
- 9)What do you see as being historical precedents to Koh's work?

Interview with Mr. Low Eng Teong, Assistant Chief Executive, Sector Development (Arts) at National Arts Council

23 April 2019 : [41:59], Goodman Arts Center, Singapore

Suzi (marked as S): Okay, I am Suzi. How are you, Mr. Low Eng Teong? Today is, um, the 23rd of April, I just want to follow up with our last interview. Um, and there are some questions to follow. I know you have the sheet here I gave you in advance... Um, so I want to ask you... um, how is Koh's practice unique in the field of, um, let's say.. historicism and curatorial practice?

Low Eng Teong (marked as L): Um, I... so... I just... maybe I just say... so, yah, I am Low Eng Teong. I work at the National Arts Council. I look after the sector development. I would like to respond to how I see Koh's practice that is unique in historicism, and let's say curatorial practice, from, um, from the standpoint, um, the context of how I encountered Koh's work.

S: ummm...

L: I encountered, I first encountered Koh's work way back in 1988. When I was actually a second year Junior College student. Ur, at that point, at that time, Koh was working at the National Museum Art Gallery, that was the main visual art space. It was actually, er, an annex space of the current National Museum Singapore. The wing was actually used as an art gallery. This was the time before that even before the founding of the Singapore Art Museum, and of course National Art Gallery. There was two key spaces. Ur, one being the National Art Museum

Gallery, and subsequently in 1990, the Substation. So, in those days the National Museum Art Gallery was the place for anyone who wants to see visual art exhibition. And, and the National Museum Art Gallery is whereby... it is accessible, it was accessible by different... practices, different groups of people, different constituents in the arts community. So, in the National Museum you could have shows such as the, ur... um... *Annual Art Society* exhibition, the *National Day Art Exhibition* was also held there. Or it could be... hosting very important exhibitions such as the... Say in 1991, the *Sculpture in Singapore* exhibition, curated by T.K. Sabapathy, or, it was also the space, when, that when Tang Da Wu, came back in... around that time, in 1988, and started to do many of his performances and installations there. For example, Tang Da Wu's *Rhino* work, his various performances to do with the ecological issues of the time, okay. So, as a eighteen year old Junior College student, I, that was the place where I visited, often.

S: It's that hangout place (all laugh).

L: Yes.

S: You didn't hang out in Far East Plaza or something (all laugh)?

L: No (laughs). So, Koh... Koh at that time was working. I don't know what was the title, but at that time it was something like the museum assistant. And, the first time I saw him, I already noticed that he was, you know, always had a camera with him. And remember that this was the

time whereby we still didn't have the advent, the advent of digital technology, so we don't have digital camera, so everything was recorded on 35mm film. So, at every single exhibition, I would see, um Koh there... taking pictures of, whether is it an opening ceremony, or is it a performance, or is it just an exhibition. And of course, at that age, I do not know whether he's just taking it because it's part of his job. it was much later I realised that it was not really the work that he had to do, it was really his own personal investment in documenting the um, event.

S: Umm...

L: And that's where I, then when, of course when he saw me often enough, he started, I started to interact with him. And he started to then introduce me to the artists. And in fact, that was when, the first time that I got introduced to people like Tang Da Wu and The Artists Village. And it was also at his invitation that I first visited Tang Da Wu, um, together after one of Da Wu's performance... that... we visited the Artists Village that Da Wu has set up in Jalan Ulu Sembawang; in the very rural Kampong area, in the old zinc house and the chicken coop and, um. I mean, this seems very anecdotal, but it's good to mention that it was those days whereby after the exhibition, all of us will still hang around after Da Wu finish his performance. I remember, it was one of the *Rhino* performance that he did and, um, and Koh said that, ur... do you want to go and, shall we go and visit them? Then it's like, early in the evening. And of course, it's Jalan Ulu Sembawang, far from city center...

S: Yes (laughs).

L: And at that time, there was another artist who was involved with the, with, er, The Artists Village. The artist is still practicing, his name is Tang Man Kit. Man Kit that time was not a full time artist, he was still working as an engineer or something and he has a very old beat up pick-up truck. And there was like ten, fifteen of us. There was Vincent, myself, and maybe even Amanda. I can't remember all... We all just pile onto the back of the pick-up truck.

S: Were you an artist?

L: I was a art... a JC student.

S: Okay, just a student?

L: No, I was doing art for my A level.

S: Okay. Did Koh ever have his camera, even off the museum?

L: All the time (emphatic), all the time. So, you will see Koh always taking pictures. Um, ur, to me, the camera and him is like an extension of his body. His... eye... and he would... always... even if he is participating in the group conversation, or during the meal, er, we will taking together, um, he will step off and take a picture... And, and somehow, I do not know if he intuitively know that all these things would someday become important for ur, ur, how shall we

say? It's important, but, that these are perhaps something of value in terms of documenting who met who, at what occasion. And of course, the photography then it's a still image right? And a still image is unlike a video recording. You don't have the, the... So here, as an archival or as the one taking the picture, he will be... he will be something that his mind, his memory... I don't recall him taking notes but him, as a person... his memory ...will be in the sense provide the context of the still image. So, it's almost like the image itself is, is an image of the past, of the moment, that is over. But if you have the image and Koh's memory together, then the whole thing becomes, um, contextualized. And, the most important thing is it has a life, it has a soul... I'm going to pause, lemme grab some water...

S: Yes, no problem...(offers mint)

L: I'm fine yah, thanks... Let's continue... So to me... ummmm, I think this is very important and the reason I shared is because there are a number of points that, that, in terms of how I see it, that... in terms of his practice to me is not so much... to me it's not meaningful of pigeonhole his practice as archival practice, or as a research practice or as a curatorial practice. I think I, and that is because it was much years later when I, when we are able to see the extent of what he has recorded. Firstly, through all the pictures that he has taken, and all the materials that he has collected: newspapers, posters, catalogues, um, cassette recordings... and maybe even some small artefacts, objects, and all this are, in a sense materials to him, for his practice and his memory; and him being the witness to all these events, become holistically part of it, as a work, as a unified practice. At least, that is how I see it and so there is a few parts to it right? So to me,

I am most fascinated with the part that the pictures that he has taken, and because... those pictures that he took, how he chose to see it, um, to capture that moment. Whether is it two person, two artists talking, or pictures of a performance event, um, is very much um, him, like a... an artist or a film maker that is tried to document a moment to make sense, and how he sees the event through his own eyes.

S: That's very interesting, the film maker comment.

L: And, much in terms of my several conversations with him, and, because I am... I also started to take pictures of independent art; particular of performance art and, and.. In the period of 1988 till 1992, there's where Da Wu really was doing a lot of performance art; where it got a whole generation of young artists that was involved with him, whether through the Artists Village or otherwise. We were all experimenting with, with the medium of performance. And Koh rarely participate in the actual performance, but he will be documenting as, almost at every single performance there is. And, I've once asked him how does he decide when to shoot, and when and then, the, the image. Because as I said, this was before the time of digital camera where you can, you can't frequently just snap as thousands of pictures in one... or even video... You know a roll of film has only thirty six shots, and even in the interval when you have to change the roll of film, he told... excuse me... he told me that it was something you have. He has actually try to anticipate... So when he could capture the entire performance, the duration, in the moment where how he anticipates and how he sees it. So, this, this whole thinking through of anticipation and framing and he... For example, he will always have a stool or a ladder, where he can take

certain, er, as high an aerial view as he could in couple with the decision when to do the close up. And, and all these and the anticipation, he's very much thinking to me like a filmmaker, and like an artist. To me, he is not just like a documentor, he is more like a collaborator, yah. And that's why whatever he has accumulated, to me, it is the artistic practice itself. Because if you see a thirty six still image of Tang Da Wu half an hour performance, you see from thirty-six angles but there could be another thousands of angles where you could see... You will see these thirty-six angles, perspective of the performance, of which is then through the eyes of Koh Nguang How, and how he sees it, and your understanding of the work is definitely kind of influenced, by how he sees it. And then, we get a deeper understanding of that work and then, 'cause of him, his own artistic lens. So, it's very hard for me to say it's just a historical... and I think because it's more than just historical. And, and he is almost, as he anticipate and take the shot, almost curating it as he goes. So, I think for that, that is extremely unique. Yah so... but generally we have come to acknowledge that what his work, what he shows, er, is generally accepted as archival materials but I personally feel that it's a lot more, more value in there; particularly his, his photo-documentation. I've never actually... come to think of it, I've never actually ask whether Koh sees himself an artist. I mean, he just, I've assumed that so much that I never bothered to, maybe it's a no brainer but... yah, maybe the next time I'll ask him... (laughs). But even when he display as installation, I guess his decision of what he chooses to put there. Even when he is trying to all the history of Singapore art development for example, so people say oh! it's archival, installation. To me, he's also functioning more like a curator. He sees connection in-between er, exhibition by an art society versus another exhibition by another individual artist.

He sees certain connection that may not be apparent to us. But that again is because he has lived through every of those single moments.

He saw the connection in some of these things, either implicitly or explicitly. And I think, if one day we can have a better understanding of... with works that are like the research that you are doing thus, bring a perspective of it. Yah, that is valuable.

S: Thank you. I guess, so you have answered how you encountered Koh's work, that was all in one. So, ah, and so, let's switch up for a little bit. What is the role of the archive in Singapore, ur, in your opinion?

L: (pause) It is extremely critical, the role of archive.

S: Uhmm...

L: And it's critical because we have not been very systematic about it. Um, we have not been systematic about it because... we only have art institutions that come on board really really late, right? We have the Singapore Art Museum, which started in 1995 officially and then National Gallery, 2015. That's almost... twenty years later.

S: So, you mean critical in the sense that is urgent...

L: It is critical because of, because of the lack of...

S: Okay...

K: So, we may have... for two reasons. Because... one, I've already mentioned, our art institutions were set up very late... and our art institutions has never... possibly... devoted enough resources to document. I mean, they would have done exhibitions, so that exhibitions of the development of Singapore art... could become... The... so-called... the knowledge and instrument of art. So, you have a, SAM started, one book by Kwok Kian Chow, called *Channels and Confluences*. And then, you have the exhibition that tell the story of Singapore art development. But, we have very... ur, indepth or very specific tra... trajectories of the main narratives, so to speak. And a lot of this... small narratives; that actually provide the richness of the story of how... how art has been for the last fifty... beyond the last fifty years, let's see... Way back from... 1938, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts was founded to the pre-war years... and earlier, has not been very well... er, captured, and captured from the individual point or perspective of the importance of, the subtle perspective. So that, that is critical. Secondly because, we, we have never had a art history department in the tertiary, so we don't have researchers looking into what we have. So we lost um... I would say a good few decades. And then, there is nothing very systematic... I mean, we have T.K., who continues to write about shows... but we don't have the practice of, of archiving as much of what goes on. Er, other than major catalogues of major... for some key exhibitions, some society, even the art societies; whether they have kept proper records or not. And that's why you have a work like what Cheo Chai Hiang made, when he enlarged the letter between him and Ho Ho Ying...

S: Yah...

L: It becomes so critical, raises so many questions right? We probably have a, a very critical and historical moment then. Had he not kept the letter... had he not then brought it up in a piece of work... that would have been something that is er, com... lost...

S: Yah...

L: So, a lot of this individual, and there's probably a lot or many, many stories that have yet to be told...

S: Do you know of any stories?

L: Er...

S: Just offhand...

L: Yes. One of the things that I, I wish that there was someone... or if, if I have more time myself is to understand why many of our Socialist Realists artists, in the sixties, we look at their woodcuts, and their...some of their paintings, that, having gone through that period... why suddenly in the '70s they just all veered off into abstraction or... works that ...they just veer off

...and the whole... what was the whole discourse then... um, many of their works were part of the Equator Art Society but they just, ...um... move on.

S: Uhmm...

L: So, I'm quite sure that many of these individuals ...whom ...probably be able to... to shed light on it. Why did context change or why did they find something hopeful, or not, or hopelessness in.. in some of this very prob... woven into their practice... Or is it just part of the whole larger Western influence and movement towards Modern art, art for art's sake? ...So there are many of these, I think, that is part of Koh's archive that he hit on, or allude to some of these issues.

S: Uhmm...

L: So, so there I still, many more... I say... I call them tributaries of the, the whole development that... that, I think are important and interesting to tell yet. We just, we just don't have people...

S: Right...

L: And many of our, our art critics, historians, obviously are educated overseas right? And when they go overseas you are likely to choose a topic that is very local sometimes. So I, I think I

personally believe that our art history has a lot more, richer... Ur... far richer than what we are able to see now.

S: Or that we know of...

L: And... many artists and many artists stories that yet... that we have yet to discover and tell. So I think on that note, then er, the historical research and the off... archive, archival materials are so critical as part of... if you are doing this type of research. That makes archive is so important... And, you think about it, if you want to look at archival materials of Singapore art history where do you go? You just can't go to the National Archive because they don't have a dedicated ...you know ...you can't go to SAM right? They have a library but... You can't go to the National Gal... Well, so that's quite serious...

S: Mhmm... So... ur, do you understand a distinction between an archive and an art archive? Is there a difference or do you think the archive informs art or... I'm just curious...

L: I also was fascinated by this question..Is it (all laugh), is it something that the current method in the... to do this research thing?

S: Ummm...

L: I never thought about it...

S: Yeah, I was writing about it and just thinking well, you know, what is that difference? And I thought... to open it up as a chat... Well, then we might probably provide some hints towards how artistic practice goes...

L: So, and the fundamental that, that goes... one is the subset of the other... So, when does an archive become more art archive... Is it from the content perspective, or a philosophical perspective... I was wondering that. So, so back to Koh's practice. Then do you just call, is it equally... To call, let's say whatever he put on display at *Sunshower*, is it an archive? Or is it a art archive because what he is doing is related to art? Or is it because of the way that he structured the archival material in the exhibition, art (all laugh)...

S: It's a paradox...(laughs)

L: Yah, it's a paradox...(all laugh). I, I, okay, then in that case, to just call his stuff archive I think it's undervalued... and... but to call his stuff an art archive, is it important to do so? Is it um, um what do you call, no brainer, yah so... so it's very interesting. They invited him as an artist, who happen to work, whose art practice is collecting materials and re-presenting them or they just invited him because he has a story to tell (all laugh)?

S: It's a conundrum, right?

L: Yah, so, but yah...

S: Okay, so the next question is... Which archives um, you know, um... [are important to your work]? (Participant has a copy of questionnaire)

L: I think that archives are all important in the work at the NAC. Because many times when we want to look back, we realize that we have very little to fall back on, except some catalogues and some ...right? So take a ...for example, if we still continue to find of... art society, the exhibitions, but we don't really have good archival materials to understand where they've come from, and where they have gone. But to me, an archive will be more valuable when it's not just a list. If that archive material have been written about, verified and debated and analysed and accessed by researchers, historians, by critics, then I think a bit far more valuable.

S: Um, so like, do you see a difference in archival practice in Singapore as to other nations?

L: I want to be quite frank. I do not know. I really do not know enough.

S: Okay, fair enough.

L: ...But I recently saw.. when I went to visit the Green Papaya space in um, in... er... Norberto, Norberto, he is sharing to me all his whole wall of ur, plastic containers... basins and he said

“that’s all the archive, twenty years of Green Papaya...” It’s almost like what Koh does... seems like so. I don’t know whether it’s...

S: Yeah? It triggered something?

L: I don’t know whether it’s sounds interesting, but not so much framing by academia, institution... We just have our own way of framing it.

S: Yah, I mean... I suppose I was just thinking about this. And I thought ur, not so much of a difference between these two... but really to, to kind of understand more of, you know... I was curious to hear your opinion.

L: No, it’s fascinating. What was that? I can’t remember, was it Foucault? Foucault who then first talk about how we classify stuff is a form of power structure... How, how each of the culture group, the type of species of animals to get the... So, I do not know whether what Norberto did in Green Papaya and maybe what Koh did is exercising a different kind of perspective and power structure compared to the West... which... maybe in the traditional sense value certain mediality or maybe... based on the framework of rationality... Descartes thinking kind of rational ...I do not... I’m just, I’m just ...but it’s just when I saw what I saw in Norberto’s in Green Papaya and what I saw in... it seemed...

S: (laughs) Yeah, we are all interesting creatures, right? Um, so, I know you've mentioned earlier or you said something about Koh that was quite interesting... in terms of significance by the way you see it; and it could be a personal significance, is there anything that you feel like want to add to what you feel is significant about his work?

L: Yah, I think... One of the things that I think Koh's work can be more, even more significant for me is if he could then... Is there some way of highlight... that what he sees is actually from his perspective and that frames the things a certain way? And that is only how he has seen it, and how there could be other possibilities and, unseen, and then trigger people to say: Okay, I'd like to challenge that perspective or I want to find whether there's another perspective of seeing that particular event, or that series of events.

S: But do you think that he might have, some sort of implicit notion first? Or do you think the work just comes out... (all laugh).

L: I don't know, it could be just come out (laughs)...

S: Um... okay, so what do you think Koh might be trying to achieve?

L: Yah, I've always ask myself, especially in the early days where he's invested so much of his personal resource and it was a very expensive thing to do, before the digital, digital means... And, and ...I couldn't figure out. I thought, is it just he sees that it's important that he does it,

because there is no one else that's going to do it? And, he felt a certain responsibility of being part of the, the art development that he has to do? I could never know, know, er and I don't think at that point he knew that one day the archive would gain in value to the extent that its being valued now.

Um, well I, I'd like to believe that he saw it as, if it's not him, who else? To do... and if it even means that he... drain most of his resources... he was going to do it. And he has... never stop since he started, when I first knew him since 1988. It's more interesting for me to know, think about, or even ask him: What is he then trying to achieve now with what he has... come so far? In the early years, we just simply say no lah, that's him, let's see how it goes and what is it that you want to do given the current time and circumstances. Um I think now... he tries to... given that he has certain access to certain networks, he's trying to give voice to the event... and I think that's important... as I still said that I believe the history of Singapore art must have multiple perspectives, and he could be one important perspective, besides the institution voice, you know? So I think he's trying to give a voice to that. But, if you imagine if one person... and that's purely his personal way of looking at this, then you get a sense of the importance. I just imagine, you know, in the art circle, in the arts industry, if there can be... how rich that will be... in terms of the understanding... in terms of the stories that... we can have. I do not know whether there are historical precedents to Koh's work but another person comes to my mind that in some ways, he probably archive or he collect materials um, it's um, um someone by the name of ur... He wrote er, prewar art history from 1954, 1955, so I think that is someone who preceded...

S: Yeo Mang Thong (reading what Low wrote on a piece of paper)

L: It's just published by CJ Patrick (inaudible)¹. Of course, collected a lot of letters and he showed a lot of letters and art before, before of... the war... that to me was a clear precedence. But of course the one that's translated... *The History of Malayan Art*, translated by, 瑪戈, translated by Lai Chee Kian...

S: You're referring to Marco Hsu's... Yeah, sometimes they have different names, Chinese names, English names, so sometimes it's a little (laughs). So thank you so much!

L: So, you maybe work with that? If you that's additional questions, you can always email me...

S: Yeah, I'll reach out to you if I have questions, thank you so much, thank you!

¹ The publisher name was inaudible. I emailed Low to verify at the time of this writing but have yet to hear back.

Mr. Seng Yu Jin, Curator at National Art Gallery, Singapore

16 May 2019 : [44:03], National Gallery, Singapore

Suzi (Marked as S): Okay so, here we are. I'm Suzi Teo and I'm here with Mr. Seng Yu Jin at the National Gallery, and we are here to talk about ur The Archive as Artistic Practice, which is Koh Nguang How's *Singapore Art Archive Project* (2005), 1980s till now. So, I was really interested in hearing your insights. Um, so I have some questions but please feel very to veer off if you feel that ur, something is of value. So ur, how is Koh's practice unique in the field of historicism and curatorial practice?

Seng (Marked as Y): Well, I first got to know about Koh, er Koh Nguang How's practice through his *Errata* project, and that was really the Post Museum, that was the first iteration of it. Subsequently he had a few iterations, um, at least three more of which I was personally involved in the third one, in which we brought *Errata* to the National University of Singapore's library, and we had a presentation that, er I'll come back to that later. So, my first encounter really was through the *Errata* project, and its related to how I think about his practice. Curatorially, er, as you mention, historically as well as, as an artist. I think these are three interesting intersections that we can kind of think of Koh's practice. As for being unique, I think that is something we need to unpack? Er, I am usually quite careful about saying something is unique. I think it's more to the Singapore Tourism Board that totally destroyed that word unique, uniquely Singapore and all that, but, nonetheless I know where you are coming from. How is it different,

um, from other kinds of artistic practices that we see in Singapore and elsewhere? Well, I think if you look at the intersection between the curatorial, er, the art historical, and the artistic. I think that's an interesting kind of rubric for us to understand how his practice kind of slips between these three areas. If you look at *Errata* for example, um, it really uses a particular entry point: an artwork by Chua Mia Tee titled *National Language Class*, in which he points out the errata or the mistake in the dating of the work in Kwok Kian Chow's book, *Channels and Confluences*. It has been dated 1955 in the book when it should be dated 1959... and that's a kind of historical entry point er, into the work; art historical in the sense *Errata* also used, in terms of looking at the dating of a particular painting and how that enables a kind of entry point, multiple entry points into um, the Social Realist movement in Singapore... the, the... construction of Malayanisation or the Malayan culture in the '50s and '60s. Um... (beeping sound... Y gets up to get his lunch)

S: I can pause for awhile here... (pause) ...lemme just, okay so we are continuing...

Y: Right, so I was talking about the kind of, art historical entry point, about that use, which is er, a very important contention of art history, which is the dating of the work. Um, and that opens up multiple entry points in the different contexts, of, say the Socialist Realist movement, the Woodcut movement, the Equator Art Society. Um, it also enable us to look at the construction of, the dream, the Malayan dream, the Malayanisation period and it's abrupt end in 1965, when Singapore became independent. Um, and it also looked at other areas such as, which is connected to the process of Malayanisation, about kind of multiculturalism, the issues of language, race, so

these are all matters um, that kind of developed from this project. So it's a very art historical way of working. Um, not all artists work in that way, and that's one of his kind of three, um, entry points; the three ways in which he develops that kind of artistic practice. Now that's the art historical, and then there's the curatorial. So, if you look at again, that *Errata* project, the exhibition that Koh did, it was really an artwork itself. It can be conceived as an exhibition, it can be conceived as an artwork. Um, it actually can be conceived as an archive, right? So, it slips between all these different categories. I think that is really one of the fundamental distinctive aspects of Koh's practice. Is that how it slips between all these very established categories and kind of challenges them but also draws from them at the same time. So, the multiple ways in which we can frame *Errata* is in itself an interesting way of thinking about his practice. Um, so I've forgotten, there's also the archival aspect. So, there's three and there's the archival. So there are actually four, ur, aspects of his practice. Ur, I've touched on the archival and that's also interesting in how he use materials. Ur, um periodicals, magazines, the newspaper articles. So the archival becomes important, in how he almost uses them not just as a subtext to what he is doing, but it's almost like shifting that into the main text: how the archive becomes the work itself, the artwork itself. So, it's an installation that is activated by Koh, and his kind of relational interactions with his audience, or his participants. I prefer to use the word participants, because it's more active, and audience and visitor is kind of more passive. So, throughout this interview, I've used the term participant, because I think that it's more relevant to Koh's practice. And as an archivist, ur, how he activates the archive becomes a form through the materials. So, it's not presented in exhibition format whereby they are in vitrines or showcases and they may have some captions, and it's up to the viewer to read these materials and information and draw their

own conclusions and make their own meaning and connections. But Koh becomes the connector and the maker of meaning. And this is where I think it becomes an artwork, in a very relational way; whereby the participants' interaction with Koh, and his interpretation, his archival materials become part of the work itself. So, he is very relational in that way. I think people don't, or art historians, art critics don't see Koh's practice in a very relational way, but I think that's an important perspective that we should take in order to understand his practice. So in other words, every single relationship that he forges with the participant is different... um, because they have different interests. They come and they look at the materials and if there is a particular area they are interested in and then, through their interactions with Koh, they go deeper into the topic, or it branch out in other topics that initially they were not interested in but became interested. So, it could go into all different directions, but it really very much depends on interaction with the participants and Koh, um, and the kind of commitment that they both give, is also important. Um, Koh demands that commitment, because talking to Koh, you can easily sit an hour, two hours, or even longer than that. So, I think he demands that kind of commitment, which is important part of... of the entire work. So, that's the archival-relational aspect of it. There's also the curatorial ur, presentation of the materials, and Koh is very aware of that. In fact, for the *Errata* for the Post Museum, again I draw back to that exhibition, he also included small little TV screens, whereby he kind of ur, there are little kind of interviews of Koh, and he talks about the materials and the work. So that was another way of experiencing the work, in a now conventional way, how museums might want to do it; um to have these video screens, kind of, you can get information without Koh being there. But it's a very more... I think, to me a more conventional way, of how museums actually do it, present materials and information so... so

there are different ways in which a participant could interact with the work. With Koh, it's a very relational, personal way...also impersonal, which is in the videos and that's another way you can kind of interact with the work. So that's kind of a very curatorial... He thought of it, how to present his materials in different ways. So this is what I mean by curatorial, which is broadly defined as how a curator links different objects and materials together to produce meaning. Um, that's a very general way of understanding how the curatorial works. And, and, of course there's the artistic side. I've briefly mentioned the artistic side, which is the most complicated part because it... it is the aspect that challenges all the other categories. Of being an archivist, being you know, a curator. So, he breaks all that boundaries by I think exerting his subjectivity through his personal stories, his knowledge. Um, each of his individual material, he tries to organize the materials by having little post-its, sticking out of the materials to indicate these are the important pages. That helps, but actually, he has already constructed a particular narrative, using his materials but, as we engage with him. More often than not, he starts to look at different areas that he has never tagged, and then he's like: oh... I know this, in that newspaper. Even though he didn't tag it because this particular person is interested in a particular topic, and he goes to that. Because I think the knowledge that he brings, extends beyond the exhibition itself, it's it's never in the way kind of, framed in a particular theme, or a particular issue, like how many exhibitions do... but like, um it's, it's almost infinite. It's almost drawing on his knowledge, which is immense and so demanding that from the participants, as well. They bring their knowledge and experience into the work, so then the works then activates that way.

S: Was there any kind of difference ur, in terms of, you said you've participated in the last *Errata*... um at NUS, was there sort of a difference between the first *Errata*, second and the third...

Y: Many. I think the second was at the National Museum. Um, they move there... Ur, I went to that one, so it's a bit more like the first *Errata* at the Post Museum. Um... Koh was there, kind of activating and discussing but now in an institution context. So I did go, but I don't think I will be the best person to comment on it, because I was only there once. But my sense was, it was quite similar to *Errata* at Post Museum, but now it's in a museum context, whereby perhaps there's a slightly diff...erent presentation... in a way that institutions have to present the materials; in the proper showcases and all that, while Post Museum was a bit more makeshift. Er, not to say that that's not good, I think that adds a certain vibe or a certain ambience to it... Er, but at the NUS library, then it took on a very different form. Because we, we used an existing showcase of um, at the National, at NUS library itself, where they show their recent books or kind of recommended books. Huge glass showcase, it was about five meters long, at least, and very tall, at least about two meters high? So, we use that kind of showcase to kind of put the materials in at the library; also because we, we thought that it was difficult for Koh to be there all the time cause it was so demanding on his time. Um, the materials were just shown there in the showcase and people couldn't pick it up and read. Ur, so it was quite... it was more limited in that way, but it was also because of the NUS library had certain limitations? And they don't normally do this kind of exhibitions, so it's also very difficult for them to understand what this is; and the risks involved, cause they are very concerned if something gets lost or get taken away, er, there is no

way to really ensure that. Um, so, because of all these kinds of institutional limitations, we though it's safer to put it into the showcase. But what became more important for the NUS er, iteration of *Errata* was really the, the symposium, ur that we organized. Whereby we invited artists from the Equator Art Society, with artists from the Modern Art Society; together, for the first time, in a ...in a public setting in which they talked about Abstraction and Social Realism. And you know it's great because these people are in their sixties, seventies, and some of there were in their eighties. Um, they've never really talked to each other... Um of course, ideologically they were against each other, in the fifties and sixties, but now, after so many years, they are like... they're friends... I mean at least all the angst has dissipated, through the years, over time, and now they can really talk to each other, and talk about what they thought of abstraction and how it's also concerning reality, ur, but in a different way. Social Realism was also concerned with reality, but in a different way; and they started to find some common ground on what's the truth and again, you know about quite philosophical matters like what's the truth? And abstraction is just another way of achieving that, and Social Realism of course had its own way. Um, but was really beautiful was the discussion, because we were in a university setting. And we invited professors, you know, historians and I remember Lily Kong was our guest of honour. She came to support... and we got to play some of the songs, that were written by the communists... then communist party. We had a friend of ours, she was Chinese, very good at the piano, and she played the music out, and we played it. And when we played it, people started to sing, because they all remember. Most of them were from Chinese Middle schools, and of course they learned these songs from the communists, um, like you know, 膠林我們的母親 (the Rubber Plantation is our Mother), um, songs like these were very popular, back then, and they started to

sing. Like, we didn't say anything, um, we just played the music and they started to sing. Um, I think that was really beautiful besides the artists coming to speak. So it was, it was a great moment... And I think it was a moment where the university offered that space, um to... to do this... So I think what was really different was that, that symposium we organized. It was a one-day symposium. And it gave the artists confidence as well, especially the Socialists Artists, because for a long time they were underground, they didn't want to talk about their relations with the Equator Art Society or anything to do with the Equator Art Society. So, I think that gave them confidence to come out.

S: Did that start to make a space out, where the last time we had spoken ur you were trying to do some research and things like that, more about the Equator Art Society?

Y: Yah, so after the show, I managed to curate *From Words to Pictures*, so it was a kind of build-up from that. Um, having the confidence that they can come out to speak and um, they are not going to get into trouble. And now, its, it's a good time for them to look back at what happened. Er, in the '50s, '60s and '70s. Um, and I think that helped pave the way for a renewed interest in the Equator Art Society... and even in terms of the art market. Ever since then, like over the last two or three years, they were able to sell their works.

S: Right...

Y: Where previously they were not able to. Many of the galleries like Art Commune, started to pick up their works.. Um another one is 海霞, is another one er commercial gallery that began to show their works, and now there is a dedicated group of collectors; who began to collect their works... so and... this group of collectors they are very interesting. So, they've also put a number of interviews of this Equator Art Society on, on YouTube and they want to do a publication... I think it's generated um... kind of gathered momentum from that.

S:..Right... Ur, so now ur, just ur, to kind of to go off a little bit, I ask you a more general question, what is the role of the archive in Singapore?

Y: By the archive, um, do you mean, ur, specifically to art, or archive in general?

S: Any archive... yah

Y: Well, if you were to look at the National Archive, the mission and vision. It would probably be as a repository of the nation's memory? And I think that is probably their kind of core mission... And... of course, the archive is really important because as kind of a repository because all the, you know, government materials by all the different ministries and all that, they are all archived here. And they've also moved into kind of archiving personal memories, as well, of artists, and they have an excellent programme; where they identify important artists and they have done extensive interviews, which are all at the National Archives of Singapore, and so... I mean, so that's important, right? It's not just the history from above but history from below, and

they have archive a lot of personal stories as well, of important artists, cultural producers or politicians and so on, that is archived, so I think that is the important role of the archive in making all these materials accessible... But of course, if you have discussions about the role of the archive, there's also been criticisms about it; by historians themselves ur, also asked the question of sort of access to sensitive, so called more sensitive material. Um... that... that is not made publicly available that historians may want to look at... Er so P.J Thum for example, Oxford historian, has always been talking about the lack of access into his area of study, which has to do with the separation, you know, it has to do with ur the issue of operation Coldstore, you know, and then these are kind of more contentious points in Singapore's history and um, that, that um historians would kind of want to have access to the material to, to study it, right, in an objective way, but of course objectivity is questionable right? Um, if we could ever be objective, but at least to have a broader range of materials that we could draw their interpretations, right? History is not objective and history is not necessarily... at least it aspires to the truth, but you know, it's truth based on what's available in terms of the materials and it's truth based on that particular specifically, specific interpretations of historians, the makers of history.

S: As a curator and, and a historian, can you name a couple of examples in the archive that has helped you, or you felt was limiting, you know there were limitations, as you mentioned before?

Y: So, when I went to the National Archives of Singapore, I started to search on Malayan Emergency... ur, try to find materials, it was pretty limited. In fact, I was quite disappointed. So, I started to look for other archives, of course *Errata* was a great archive, already to draw from

but I found another excellent archive, which is the Singapore Press Holdings. So, the Singapore Press Holdings has er, has a library, it has since shrunk by half. We were there just a few months back, they have lost half their space... Er, I think they are under pressure themselves, um, bottom-line pressures... Yah, but it is still a good ur ur resource center. They call it a library... Um, and that became one of my most important archive... especially about the Malayan Emergency, that I was trying to look at... the... being that... Of course, when you read Francis Seow's book, *The Media Enthrallled*, which is not there, it was at the National Library; I definitely found it at the NUS library. Er, it charts the whole history of the mass media in Singapore, especially the print media was very important and very critical and eventually how that criticality was taken away from them. But, if you look at the '50s, '60s and '70s, they had that criticality... Um so... They had a lot of important materials that were kept in their archive; from photojournalists, who were taking important images of the Maria Hertogh riots, the Malayan Emergency, the Communist Emergency and all that, it's all in the archives. It's not in the National... okay, maybe there's a copy but it's not publicly accessible in the National Archives of Singapore, but it's of semi- public access in the SPH, so you sort of need to make an appointment. They need to know why you are using the materials... so, you need to get that all done before you have access to it... But if you read *The Media Enthrallled* right? I strongly encourage you to read that book by Francis Seow, you will also understand the problematics of the archive, because half of it, at one point it moved to Kuala Lumpur and then after that, it moved back. So, half of it, or some parts got left in Kuala Lumpur, and par... parts of it got moved back to Singapore.

S: Yah, as I understood, some of the art works was like in Kuala Lumpur, right ?

Y: Yah, it's kind of, like, split; because at some point the Straits Times had to like move. So, it's a very complicated history of Singapore's media, print media... and, and the... I think coming back to the role of the archive, it's really to... For me, I'm being idealistic here, but from historian's perspective is to make these materials available, for everyone, not just historians, I mean, everyone. Ur, so I think that's important. Ur... only certain historians have access to it... ur... classified material. We know who they are. So for example, you go to this book written by Lee Ting Hui, and I've cited his book... it's called that, it's, it's a book I can't remember... the title is very long. It's about the communist satellite, the study of communist insurgency or something like that, ur... um... and it studies... it's a book that studies the communist strategies... and proposes ways of countering them.

S: I see...

Y: So...he wrote a book, and it was important to me because in that book, it lists for the first time the communist satellite, he lists the Equator Art Society as a Communist satellite organization.

S: I see...

Y: So it became...

S: This is very interesting...

Y: So for the first time... I was very sure that it was listed as a Communist satellite organization.

S: And when you had mentioned that we all know these historians are, I don't. Do you know who they are?

Y: Yah, if you are in the field you will know who they are...

S: And will you say them, or no (laughs)?

Y: Oh, no, they publish books, yah.

S: Okay...

Y: And, obviously they are the only ones who have access (laughs).

S: Okay... um, so do you understand a distinction between an archive and an art archive?

Y: So, it's a bit kind of blur, in some ways, but of course, an art archive in terms of the perimeter it's already stated in the name, right? It's interested in art, so it archives art related material. So,

what, what is art related? So, you know, many archives do things differently but my understanding by looking at what the Asia Art Archive has done, is really looking at a range of materials, related to art in terms of art periodicals, journals, um artists' letters, photographs of exhibitions and all that kind of materials that are produced by artists, you know, includes you know, some exhibitions as well. So, it's quite broad, but also there are certain perimeters to it, which is art-related material kind of slowly consolidating these categories... So, they started to have invitation card even of exhibitions, they are starting to keep all that 'cause it was very interesting to them. But art archive, I think it's not specific to them but particularly conscious of um, a, a certain focus on the artists and art. Um, so I think these two drives the art archive to be different from the archive, which has more, kind of, areas they can draw from, not just the artist and the artwork.. kind of art or art kind of focus; which is why the Asia Art Archive is quite obsessed about making interviews... with artists... even more than archives... you know, archives do that... er, art archives are more kind of... because I think the artist is so important and central to the art archive that the, er... they ...it kind of works around that... but what, what do artists do? Artists make art work, you know, so artist make photographs... So from there they will start to curate... Er, the term of art archive is imagined around the artist and the archive doesn't do that. And it looks at what the artists do and produce and then... constructs the archive... or structures around it... you know, what artists do, and how they work even... So art archive in that sense, in the way they are working, in the kind of materials that they, they consider as archival, they are all quite different from an archive.

S: Mhmm... and you mentioned the SPH, thank you very much for that insight. I'm going to go look at it... Um, what other archives do you think might be important for your work?

Y: Artists' Archives. I think they are essential... and we kind of forget that artists can keep stuff... and they are great hoarders, you know. Of course in a, really very not systematic way but artists' archive are so important... I mean, Koh's practice in a way is that, right? He's like an artist archive. And he was maybe one of the earliest to realise the importance of the artist archive. Because he went to visit so many different artists, and I knew he was friends with them, so he could have access, so I think the artist's archive is crucial. And that's an area that you know, that we can certainly learn from and try to get access. And that is really what the Asia Art Archive is trying to do. Is really looking at the artist's archive.

S: Mhmm... er do you see a difference in archival practice in Singapore to other nations, particularly to the West, or even regionally?

Y: Mmmm, personally I don't... really think that it's a really big difference in kind of archival practice... It's really very hard to say... Except that of course we have the *Independent Art Archive*... set up by Lee Wen... and in that sense it's a very personal archive, and it seems like in Singapore's case, the art archive has emerged from the artist.. and maybe that's different from like say the Asia Art Archive that didn't emerge from artists, it emerged from Claire Hsu (laughs), who was interested in the art archive, but she's also an artist of course. But... I think then there's some difference... Because Asia Art Archive has, is an institution... But the art

archives here are not an institution. Of course, maybe the closest would be the *Independent Art Archive*, but it's still a very Lee Wen thing but he thinks it's important. And the basis of it is still his own materials... right, ur as the basis from which he grew his art... Ur, so it's interesting in that way... The archive.... But then again, now we have the National Gallery set up a resource center, and I'm sure the Singapore Art Museum will probably be doing the same, to some... So I think that will mark a shift... towards a certain institutionalisation of the art archive.. That can be.. interesting, but it's too early to say, you know, the impact of it... But what we can notice now is like, even the resource center um, the way we archive is much more systematic... and we have a full time staff doing photography, digitization... and a certain vision to it, whereby it's not focused on the archive object, physical object, but we are more interested in digitizing it.

S: As like, a curator... personally, do you ever kind of, kind of, ur, for lack of a better word, fear that something might get canonized? Or you know, in terms of ...if you are curating, do you go like: oh my god, that's so great, I hope... is there that kind of tendency I guess?

Y: I think, um that if one works in a National Gallery, the anxiety of canonization is obviously overrated. Because of what the institution stands for... It's a national institution... And what national institutions do is to canonize, whether or not we accept that. I mean, it happens with every museum, not just with this museum; the Louvre, The Pompidou, they all do that... But to be reflexive about canonization, now that's a different thing. So that is where you have to be very aware of this process of the canonization, and also to be aware of, also the need to question that canonization; the need to look at what has been marginalised; the need to look at certain

gaps that we've overlooked; so I think that's important, and I would like to think that the National Gallery has that; at least, my colleagues and myself have that awareness, that I can assure you because I know that so... That's how I will say.

S: Okay, so... what do you think is the significance of Koh's work?

Y: Significance? ...mm, um, I think he has opened the door to a completely... I think I won't say completely, but a very particular way of working, you know through the archive. So I think the artist as archivist... um, but I think that's simplifying it, because you look at the four ways... the archival, the curatorial, um urm, the artistic and the historical, the four areas. I think it's his ...um, what I think he has done is to find, developed a method, a way of working that has influenced um, other artists as well, like Zihan for example, um...

S: Yes, Loo Zihan you mean...

Y: Loo Zihan... Remember his work that he did at PYT? It was a sort of library/archive thing so any kind of archival, kind of ur... And we've gone into some kind of archive fever... isn't it? Many artists working with the archive.

S: Yes, ur... Mr Ho Tzu Nyen...

Y: Ho Tzu Nyen...

S: Do you know if he might have been influenced by it... or...

Y: Influence is a very problematic word...

S: Yes, of course all work inform one another..I was just asking if you might have knowledge...

Y: Hard to say. They definitely knew of each other and each other's work but the way they use the archive is very different... because Tzu Nyen is about, you know, fictional; a kind of imagination of it that's not so much tied to the material... So if you ask Koh... the date is important, you need to get the date correct (all laugh). I don't think that is particularly important to other artists who use the archive so... it's um; nonetheless, I think he has um, opened up this possibility, the possibility of using the archive... in different ways. And I think many artists, whether or not they were influenced by him, I think that idea, was something that became interesting. And, and if you look at *Errata* onwards, actually before *Errata* I don't think there were any, if not, you know...

S: Yah, I read the catalogue for the exhibition after *Errata* that you curated. So it's very, very interesting, with how much information is packed with, and I um, I think the earlier conceptual work, probably... maybe for a lack of information there was less documentation. So that was quite inspiring... Um, what do you think that Koh might be trying to achieve? Is there any kind of thoughts um, implicitly or explicitly?

Y: I think Koh is in some ways offering an alternative um version of art history. So alternative to what? Alternative to the official version. So, if you think of *Channels and Confluences*, why did he target *Channels and Confluences*, because that is the official you know, art historical narrative, produced by the Singapore Art Museum, written by Kwok Kian Chow as the director. So, it's not just because there was a kind of *Errata*. So, I think he was in a way, kind of challenging the canon, if you want. You could say that: Hey, there's a mistake here, but from this mistake here, we were able to open up so many different things that were not included here in *Channels and Confluences*. That's not to take away from *Channels and Confluences*, 'cause it was an important... it's still the first and there is no second... No one else has written another kind of, different version of Singapore art history. That is still one version of Singapore art history. Um, but I think Koh has inserted a lot of micro-narratives that challenges that, micro-narratives, which is great, because it is exactly what we want right? Cause we need to have the the meta-narrative in order to de-construct it. Can't deconstruct something from nothing...

S: (laughs).

Y: One may even say that without *Channels and Confluences* there will be no *Errata*. So, I think it comes down to we need to have some form of meta-narrative kind of re- constructed and *Channels and Confluences*... we musn't kind of undermine that whole purpose of that book. But Koh was really interesting... I think he was really the first, you know, to kind of challenge it,

you know, in a very er objective way... cause dating, I mean there is really no argument right? It was already dated wrongly because the painting's date is on the painting... 1959 is on the painting. It's not written somewhere else, it's written on the painting so there's no, kind of argument that it was dated wrongly. But, I think that's not the point. The point is that it really opened up so many things so... But, he challenged it in a very objective way so, which is, which is probably the strongest way that he could start his question... ur, in a factual, so called factual way. But, of course, um, if you read E.H. Carr's book *What is History*, you know that a fact is not objective. But never mind, that aside, um, the question about the objectivity of so-called facts, um, the date is still nonetheless still a fact that we can ascertain because it's written on the painting and um, so that's interesting. Ur, and by that he constructs micro narrative that challenge the grand, the bigger narrative. I think it's very important because in Singapore, we are very small. You may not feel it but I feel it a lot because there is very little distance between us and the artists. There is very little distance between us and art history. Like, in Singapore, there is no countryside. You know, If I'm in Australia in Melbourne, I can go to Sydney, I can go to Brisbane, I can go to Perth. In Singapore, where can I go? So in Singapore, it's so small and there is no distance between us and the artist, us and art history, and that's a... it creates a very interesting ...situation.

S: Yah, I was just gonna say, perhaps, that's in a way, um, kind of interesting... ur... another way of looking at stuff.

Y: It is, yes, it is. And Koh, within this very small space, has managed to construct kind of, the challenge to the whole art history which is great. Because, because of Singapore's kind of smallness, kind of, criticality is also kind of difficult, 'cause we are all so close to each other.

S: (laughs).

Y: Physically, right? And, of course, culturally, one might say generally we don't like to criticize each other but, the distance doesn't help. This close distance doesn't help. In Thailand, you know, you don't like the artist in Bangkok, you move to Chiangmai. So, that's why, you know, you have that distance that you can be critical. Here we don't have that, so I think Koh, Koh's achievement was being able to do that, that criticality. So, I think it's very smart of him to start off with something that is unquestionable, like the dating. And then going from there, going to different aspects that are about interpretations, different interpretations and all that and alternative views. So, so I think the significance of his work really is to open up this, this discursive criticality ...and that's really, I think important and significant achievement of his work, besides opening up a new way of art making, a new way of thinking about and making art; which is, through the archive, historical and curatorial, and how one can collapse this together... ur and develop a practice from there, that is very very important... So I think your question seven and eight, significance and trying to achieve are quite interrelated, in that way. Of course, this is my interpretation of Mr Koh. He probably might have a maybe different one. But if you look at Tsui Tit Sing for example, there's a, he's one artist that the museum hasn't looked at in such detail, of course we have his works in our collection. So, he's also looking at an artist that

we have in a way, overlooked. Um that's his again, another way of constructing alternative narrative.

S: Has it made you take a closer look now?

Y: It has, of course, after, we went down to visit the family, and we try to understand more...

S: And finally, we talked about it a little bit but what do you see as being a historical precedence? Earlier, you said that you didn't think there might be or... is there somebody... that you can think of in Singapore?

Y: Mmm, so we did discuss this previously about, not in Singapore but in Southeast Asia where Patrick Flores wrote about *Past Peripheral, Past Periphery or Peripheral*... I can't remember... about the artist-curator, Jim Supangkat, Reza Piyadasa, Ray Albano... er... these were artists who were also curators and I think they were active in the seventies and eighties. So I think these were kind of, precedence to, to Koh's practice as an artist, curator, archivist, historian, right? It's kind of hyphen, hyphen, hyphen...

S: (laughs).

Y: It's all in one... which is so interesting, you know. So... so I think um, there, there were historical precedence but not in that particular combination, right? Like the way Koh is, because

they were not necessarily archivist. I think that aspect was really quite different. Um, they were artist/curators, but not necessarily working in an archival mode. Er, yah, so historical yes, I think more or less they were quite historical but I think the archival is really what stands out for Koh. Um... if you ask me if there were similar kind of artists... I think nowadays there are, but again slightly different like, like Navin Rawanchaikul for example. But, but, he uses archive and materials in a way that tell stories, but I think that is similar to Koh. I think stories are really important. For Navin it's about his family, his father, he has a shop er selling textiles, you know, and how they were immigrants and they integrate into quite a kind of monoculture in Thailand... Um... but it was quite different... His stories are based on that, but it's quite archival in that way... But Koh I think it's... his work brings in the historian part of him much more than other artists. Um and um, but on the other hand, I think what is interesting is the presentation is still very different. I think this is where Koh also stands out, you know... Because his work... It needs him to be there to activate it. Like Navin, he don't have to be there. But still, the house that is constructed, you can go in and all that... or you see the materials, you see the video, you know, ur but, but Koh, he doesn't do it always, but it always works when he is there. For me. When he is not there of course there is an alternative way of presenting it, which he has thought of curatorially, but I think it's very different. Um, when he is there to activate it, I think that again is that relational aspect of his work. One can consider it a performance, which I don't think it's exactly a performance. Um, for lack of a better word, relational. So I think that, that also kind of differentiates him from other artists who work in somewhat similar ways, yah.

S: Well, thank you so very much for these insights.