Research-Based Art Practices in Southeast Asia

Caroline Ha Thuc

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The Artist as Producer of Knowledge

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Caroline Ha Thuc
Department of Visual Studies
Lingnan University
Tuen Mun, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Nguyen Trinh Thi, *Letters from Panduranga*. Single-channel video, colour and b&w, sound, 35' (2015). Courtesy of the artist

Panduranga is the former name of a Vietnamese province, once a territory of the vast Hindu Champa Kingdom that dominated the region for more than a thousand years.[1] Today, only a small community of Cham people remains there, estranged both from their own cultural heritage and from the dominant Vietnamese culture. For her 2015 video *Letters from Panduranga*, Vietnamese artist Nguyen Trinh Thi spent two years visiting this ethnic minority, enquiring about its traditions and customs against the backdrop of a nuclear plant construction project on their territory. The video takes the form of an exchange of letters between the narrator, who studies the Cham minority, and a man who is traveling north on his

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[1] See in particular Maspéro Georges, *Le Royaume du Champa* (Paris : Les Editions Van Oest, 1928); Hubert Jean-François, *L'Art du Champa (Art of Champa)* (ParkstonePress International, 2005) and the works by Cham historian and activist Po Dharma, in particular Po Dharma, *Le Pāṇḍuraṅga (Campā), 1802–1835: Ses rapports avec le Vietnam* (Paris: Publication de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1987).

motorbike, looking for archaeological sites of the Cham culture. Both share their feelings and reflexive doubts about their own investigations. The narrator/artist conducts interviews of the local people as an ethnographer would do but is portrayed as constantly searching for the right lens and for the right angle to photograph her subject. Although she seems, at first, to get well acquainted with the people she studies, she then confesses to being an "outsider," and eventually turns to the landscape as a photographic subject and as an alternative mode of representation. Suddenly, she asks herself: "I am not a researcher, I am not an ethnographer nor a journalist, so why am I doing this?" Why would an artist study an ethnic community from her own country with an ethnographic perspective? Why would the artistic field intermingle with an academic discipline?

Nguyen's video, indirectly at least, gives this community a voice, and implicitly criticizes Vietnam's current policies towards this ethnic minority, whose rights are often ignored and whose culture has been mythicized and locked up in museums. Simultaneously, the artwork raises the significance, and highlights the complexities, of engaging in an artistic practice that uses ethnographic methodologies as a means to reflect upon the treatment of ethnic minorities, especially in a country where scholarly work on social sciences is still heavily controlled by the government.[2] In this case, the combination of art and research succeeds in offering a critical perspective on Cham culture and history, embodying an original mode of knowledge production.

Nguyen works here at the edge of ethnography. Similarly, an increasing number of artists in Southeast Asia are engaged in academic research processes. They work as historians, archivists, archaeologists or sociologists in order to produce knowledge and/or to challenge the current established systems of knowledge production, whether those knowledge systems consist of Western academic frameworks or of the local official narratives modelled on authoritarian ideologies. As artists, they are in a position where they can freely draw on academic research methodologies and, at the same time, question or divert them for their own artistic purpose. The outcome of their research findings is exhibited as an artwork and is not published or presented in an academic format.

These artistic forays into the academic world originate in the artists' desire to learn, transmit and participate in a local, thus reflexive, production of knowledge. Research appears here as a strategy to convey legitimacy to

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[2] More on this artwork, see Ha Thuc Caroline, "Nguyen Trinh Thi: Letters from Panduranga," *Arts of Southeast Asia*, Vol 1(4) (Sept.–Oct. 2020): 85–90.

their enterprise and notably to confer value to their critical counter-narratives about social, cultural, historical and political issues. Simultaneously, the practice of research brings forth new creative possibilities, and a singular language of art is emerging from these cross-disciplinary practices. Research, conceived as a new artistic material, provides a novel perspective from which the artists capture and reflect on an increasingly complex reality.

Like Nguyen Trinh Thi, these artists are engaged in what I will refer to as research-based art practices. These can be broadly defined as artistic practices grounded in a research process that is borrowed from the work methodologies and from the languages of the social scientists, the outcome of which is displayed or transformed into an artwork. The objective of this book is to examine this creative and mutual entanglement of academic and artistic research in Southeast Asia. In short, the Why, When, What and How of research-based art practices in the region.

This investigation originates in my personal interest for these practices as an art writer and curator, and from the difficulties I have encountered in defining their scope and in considering their cross-disciplinary and cognitive specificities. For instance, how to assess these practices and the knowledge they generate, since research is here conducted in an artistic way and not in an academic way, and therefore escapes any existing forms of evaluation? How to critically approach their research material and work methodologies? Here, there is a fundamental distinction to be made between practice-based research that unfolds under the umbrella of the institutions, conforming to the academic conventions and peers review systems, and research-based art practices which develop outside, and actually challenge, these established frameworks. Although the desire of the latter to generate emancipatory and empirical forms of knowledge is clear, whether the artists have achieved indeed their claim in the field of knowledge (i.e. not just in the field of art) remains a difficult question. Besides, research-based practices do not only aim at developing artistic modes of research and knowledge production: they also search for innovative languages of art. As such, they require expanded critical tools able to combine and question their dual cognitive and aesthetic approach.

Above all, this book seeks to demonstrate the important emancipatory dimension of these practices, which arises from two factors. First, with their independent research processes, the artists escape any established system of knowledge and can thus freely question their framework and foundations. Their practice often points to the constructed features of these systems. This allows the artists to better grasp their nature, and, if necessary, to

criticize their legitimacy, which represents a fundamental liberating process. Secondly, by combining artistic and cognitive elements, these practices suggest the possible plurality of modes of knowledge production that can positively coexist and complement each other constructively. Especially, they contribute to value forms of knowledge based on sensitive experiences, intuition and on imagination as means to expand the academic field and our conception of knowledge based on science. This movement can be seen therefore as part of a world-wide trend challenging the central role of science in society. Since the scientific revolution that took place in the seventeenth century in Europe, science has been separated from other forms of knowledge, which became therefore inferior. This model was exported with colonisation. Science subsequently expanded to the high levels we see today, at the top of the ranking of knowledge systems. However, this hierarchical, dominant and exclusive conception of knowledge is increasingly criticised, and knowledge not based on science is revalorised. In Southeast Asia where the academic spheres are mainly under the control of the dominant political ideology, and still often modelled on the colonial heritage, creating original forms of knowledge outside the existing established frameworks appears thus as a liberating social opening, bestowing a new and promising role to the artists within the society.

A word is needed here about Southeast Asia as a region. Donald Emmerson compares Southeast Asia's name to "names that simultaneously describe and invent reality."[3] As we will see with Ho Tzu Nyen's series of work dealing with the definition of Southeast Asia, the notion of Southeast Asia, as a constructed reality, remains controversial and the choice of this regional framework is open to debate.[4] However, a greater number of scholars are using Southeast Asia as a framework, underlining its numerous historical, socio-cultural, religious and even linguistic commonalities that have informed its history beyond today's national boundaries. Anthony Reid and Maria Serena I. Diokno, in particular, trace the

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[3] Emmerson Donald, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 1984): 1 quoted by John Tung In Tung John, "Southeast Asia: The Geographic Question," catalogue of the exhibition (Singapore: Singapore Biennale 2019), 46.

[4] Van Schendel Willem summarises aptly the debate and in particular points out to an essential question: who is defining Southeast Asia? See Van Schendel Willem, "Southeast Asia, An idea whose time is past?" *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Vol. 168 (4) (2012): 497–503. See also Chou Cynthia and Houben Vincent, ed., *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006).

history of the region back to the early ages and recall that the term was first used by an ethnically Southeast Asian scholar, Nguyen Van Hoang, in the 1930s.[5] They highlight how the region was a source of identity and inspiration for anti-colonial nationalists, well before the founding of ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 1967. Following Norman G. Owen, we believe that this framework, although imperfect, remains valid and useful: "we persist in trying to understand our world through arbitrary groupings, flawed as they are. Their validity lies in what they help us to understand, not in their precise conformity to a putative reality." (Chosen, Norman G. Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian History, ed. by Norman G. Owen (New York: Routledge 2014), 3.) In the art field, such a regional and relational approach allows also to emphasise the "intra-Asian interactions and new globalised connectivities,"[6] as well as the artists' affinities across borders and the numerous transnational artistic exchanges.[7] These common specificities and the recent expansion of contemporary practices in the region have deeply influenced local research-based art practices which benefit from this distinctive cross-national context. Moreover, most of the countries involved, in their current state, are relatively young. For Hammad Nasar, these national boundaries are precisely too young to be really relevant in circumscribing an art field:[8] working from the larger perspective of Southeast Asia brings forth enmeshed histories and shared references, offering thus a relevant framework to examine their emergence and development.

For more than four years, I have been traveling across the region, meeting and interviewing artists and local actors of the contemporary art scene as well as scholars. The present study includes what artists themselves think about their own practice together with an attempt to critically analyse this fieldwork data in order to better account for the development

[5] Nguyen Van Hoang, *Introduction à l'étude de l'habitation sur pilotis dans l'Asie du sud-est* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1934), cited in Reid Anthony and Serena I. Diokno Maria, "Completing the Circle: Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia", in *Southeast Asian Studies: Pacific Perspectives*, edited by Anthony Reid (Tempe, AZ: Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 2003): 98.

[6] Antoinette Michelle and Turner Caroline, ed., *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making* (Canberra: ANU Press 2014).

[7] Taylor A. Nora, "Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography," *Art Journal* Vol. 70 (2) (Summer 2011): 7–8.

[8] Nasar Hammad & Zitzewitz Karin, "Art Histories of Excess: Hammad Nasar in Conversation with Karin Zitzewitz," *Art Journal*, 77 (4) (Winter 2018): 109.

processes, motives and specificities of these art practices. It covers the main contemporary domains of art from painting to sculpture, installations, photography, performance or video art.

The book is organised in seven parts: the first part outlines the general framework of research-based art practices and explores the issues at stake, highlighting the specificities of these practices within Southeast Asia. In the second part, I briefly overview the recent history of these practices, identifying the key factors that favoured their development in the region from the 2000s onwards. In the third part, I focus on the artists' research methodologies and, especially, on the field of history, underlining how the artists' dive into science, while challenging critically the academic sphere, also supplements its perspective. Subsequently, the research component of the artworks is examined from the point of view of its creative potential with an emphasis on the great variety of transformations of the artist's research findings. In the last parts, I examine in detail four series of artworks informed by academic research: The *Vietnam Exodus Project* (2009) by Vietnamese artist Tiffany Chung, *The Name* (2009–) by Burmese duo Wah Nu & Tun Win Aung, *Preah Kunlong* (2017) by Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang and *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2003/2012–) by Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen. These four artists are all engaged in very different research-based practices that shed light on the various strategies adopted by artists to challenge the established knowledge frameworks and conventional narratives related to their research topic. Their study nevertheless allows to bring out the common emancipatory and creative drive of these practices and to outline the singular features of the "artistic knowledge" they generate.

Research-based Art Practices: Context and Framework

2.1 Open-ended Definitions and Local Specificities

"The work by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige is especially appealing due to a multidisciplinary approach which here is not ˝convenient.˝ It poetically calls upon sculpture, drawing, photography or even video. It draws on the crisscrossing of knowledge—Archaeology, History, Geology…—while playing with temporalities and scales. The Centre Pompidou is the most appropriate place for these encounters, these collisions, this research. Here is where the sensitive and the intelligible expand our understanding; here the artist-become-researcher attempts to elucidate the present."[1] When Serge Lasvignes, president of the Centre Pompidou, gave the 2017 Marcel Duchamp Prize to the Lebanese duo, he expressed his difficulties to qualify their practice, depicted as being "not convenient." These difficulties come from the artists' engagement in research and their foray into various disciplines that generate a perception of an unusual "crisscrossing of knowledge." While Lasvignes praises this figure of the "artist-become-researcher," his hesitations to define Hadjithomas and Joreige's methods illustrate the general difficulties in grasping research-based art practices.

Located at the interstices between art and academic forms of knowledge, research-based art practices are very diverse both in their research

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[1] Serge Lasvignes' quote comes from the press release covering the 2017 Marcel Duchamp Prize published by ADIAF on October 16, 2017.

methodologies and in their artistic forms. They can be broadly defined as artistic practices grounded in a research process that is itself based on the research methodologies and on the languages of humanities and the social sciences, the outcome of which is displayed or transformed into an artwork. Lucy Cotter believes that one should not distinguish artistic research practices from the general art practices.[2] There is indeed no clear line that could separate them. Artists have always been engaged in various forms of research, and research has always been part of artistic practices. In the nineteenth century, British painter John Constable already stressed the research component of his study of cloud formation, claiming that "painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature."[3] How much research and which kind of research should be thus conducted for an artwork to be considered a research-based artwork? There is no definitive answer to that question, and the boundary keeps moving with the increased use and valorisation of "research" in today's contemporary art discourses on the one hand, and with the professionalisation of the arts through academic recognition and attainment on the other hand. From Cotter's perspective, there would be a continuum or spectrum of degrees where artists are inspired by social sciences research at one end, and fully engage in deeper academic investigations at the other end. Rather than trying to locate them on this line, I suggest focusing on the specificities of the knowledge these practices generate: research-based art practices raise questions that other art practices do not, or at least not so openly; namely, the question of the potential epistemological impact of an artwork, and its ability to challenge the viewers' ways of conceiving knowledge and modes of knowledge production. What might be new, here, is the artists' claim to borrow academic tools to conduct research, their desire to generate knowledge and to actively participate in the system of knowledge production. What could connect Tiffany Chung's desire to make visible the complexity and scale of the history of the Vietnamese refugees, Kusno Anggawan's will to question Indonesian historiography and Arin Rungjang exploration of Thai symbols of power if not their willingness to destabilize conventional

[2] Cotter Lucy, "Reclaiming Artistic Research—First Thoughts…" *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 2(1) no 1 (2017): 1–6.

[3] Constable John, "Lecture notes, May 26 & June 16 1836," cited in Artists on Art, ed. Robert Goldwater & Marco Treves (London: John Murray, 1985), 270–273 in Frayling Christopher, "Research in Art and Design," *Royal College of Art Research Papers* 1(1) (1993/94): 4.

knowledge and the established knowledge framework? To do so, they use research as a way to emancipate themselves from these systems and, potentially,to contribute to building a more open, often plural, form of knowledge. Beyond their diversity, these practices demonstrate some lines of continuity and need to be studied as specific art practices. This book aims to discover their common features and to provide a framework within which they could be better analysed and understood, each one within its particular context. It focuses on the practices of Southeast Asia and on their own specificities.

The increased engagement of contemporary artists in research and their greater inclusion of academic methods in their art practices have been widely documented in Euro-American studies. In particular, the convergence between art and anthropology has been a central focus of study.[4] Considerable attention has also been given to archiving and documenting as part of the process of art making.[5] As to geography, demography and cartography, the creative process of mapmaking, and the multiplication of artists using cartography as a method or as a form of art have been abundantly covered.[6] However, most of this literature is specific to one single academic field (e.g. ethnography, cartography or history) and the transdisciplinary dimension of the artistic research is seldom examined whereas many artists engaged in research practices go seamlessly from one field to another. Typical of this, Thai duo Jiandyin (PornpilaiMeemalai and JiradejMeemalai) develop works based on artistic research and fieldwork referring to the disciplines of anthropology, history, geology and economy, to name a few. On the other hand, some scholarly works investigate

[4] On the subject, see in particular Foster Hal, *The Return of the Real Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (United States: MIT Press Cambridge, 1996); Schneider Arnd and Wright Christopher, *Between Art and Anthropology* (Berg 2010); Rutten Kriss, "Art Ethnography and practice-led research," *Critical Arts* 30 no.3 (2016): 295–306.

[5] See Derrida Jacques, *Archive Fever, a Freudian impression* (The University of Chicago Press Book, 1996); Foster Hal, "An Archive Impulse," *The MIT Journals* 110 (2004): 3–22; EnwezorOkui, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Gottingen, Germany: Steidle 2008). Merewether Charles (ed.), *The Archive* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

[6] See Thomson Nato, *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography and Urbanism* (Brooklyn: Independent Curators International and Melville House, 2008); Watson Ruth, "Mapping and contemporary art," *The cartographic journal* n°4 Art & Cartography special issue vol. 46 (2009): 293–307; Harmon Katharine, *The Map As Art, Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009); Wood Denis, *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (New York London: The Guilford Press, 2010).

the specificities of the empirical knowledge generated by art practices, but, in these cases, the artistic research process is not taken into account.[7] Above all, there is still confusion and a lack of precision regarding the definition of art practices based on research and a scarcity of studies about the original combination of academic and artistic knowledge they generate.

Image: Jiandyin *The Alchemy, 2019*, C10H15N Human urine, Refrigerated cabinet, Jadeite Ø 12.7 cm., Marble sphere water fountain, Immersion sturgeon waterproof contact microphone, USB audio interface, Controller, 6 sound speakers, Water pump. Courtesy of the artists

Many texts referring to research in the context of art making use their own terminology and own definition of the term "research" and consider various kinds of relationships between art practices and research.[8] Clive Cazeaux, who has recently synthesised most of the existing theoretical

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[7] See for example Sutherland and Acord's analysis of the production of "experiential knowledge" in the practice of composer Gayle Young and visual artist Tino Sehgal. Sutherland Ian and Acord Sophia Krzys, "Thinking with art: From situated knowledge to experiential knowing," *Journal of Visual Art Practices* 6(2) (October 2007): 125–140.
[8] MäkeläMaarit, NimkulratNithikul et al., "On reflecting and making in artistic research,"*Journal of Research Practice*, Vol. 7 Issue1 Article E1, (2011): chap. 2.

approaches of artistic research, acknowledges the numerous and thus confusing terms referring to "artistic research," and points to the difficulty in defining such a term.[9] However, artistic research or any similar term such as practice-led research or art-led research cannot be assimilated to research-based art practices where research is the base and not the outcome of the practice. Christopher Frayling distinguishes three types of practices involving art and research: "research *into* art" and "research *through* art," which are the two most common kinds of practices and which are fully part of university programs because research remains their main objective; and "research *for* art," which is the category involved when it comes to research-based art practices, "where the thinking is, so to speak, *embodied in the artefact*, and where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication."[10] This case, as Frayling points out, has seldom been explored in-depth. It has been characterised as a "thorny" issue because it involves at the same time the expressive and the cognitive traditions in fine art. This is probably what Lasvignes means when saying these approaches are not "convenient," mixing as they do the sensible and the intelligible.

For Frayling, however, "the goal here is the art rather than the knowledge and understanding."[11] I suggest thus introducing a fourth category where art and knowledge equally matter and mutually interact. Cazeaux, after Frayling, expands this conception of "research *for* art" and emphasises its cognitive dimension, while reminding that a theoretical epistemological framework is still missing to define these practices. In particular, he underlines art's capacity "to challenge categorization or other forms of knowledge production,"[12] a feature that will be examined here in the case of Southeast Asian research-based art practices. Consequently, I am going to use the term research-based art practices to refer to this specific case of artistic research where the expressive and cognitive tradition in fine arts collide, and where the research and the artistic processes of work cannot be clearly distinguished.

[9] Cazeaux Clive, *Art, Research, Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge 2017).
[10] Frayling Christopher, "Research in art and design," *Royal College of Art Research Papers* 1(1) 1993:5.
[11] Frayling, "Research in art and design," ibid., 5.
[12] Cazeaux *Art, Research, Philosophy*, ibid., 34.

These general discussions have taken place within the specific framework of Western institutions and typically deal with the degree of acceptance of art in the academic field following the "Bologna Process," a series of conferences and meetings focusing on European higher education.[13] For Cazeaux, the origins of artistic research lie in the growth of an audit culture in university research, from the 1980s onwards, that led to an increase of research student numbers, and in a "marketization of higher education" resulting in the rise of the prestige, and thus of the funding, of research departments.[14] This academic debate is thus very much centred on Western practices and concerns, and mainly deals with PhD programmes offering space and recognition for artists to conduct their research.[15] It questions artistic research as a potential discipline, thus as a potentially normalised and regulated realm of research. The stress is put on artistic forms of research which develop under the umbrella of the academic institutions. As we will see, this is not the case of the research-based art practices this book is dealing with: while they aim at filling gaps in knowledge, they precisely escape any institutional frameworks and rather resist, and challenge, established systems of knowledge production.

In fact, the history of research-based art practices could begin long before this debate, with the first documentary films and photographs, as soon as an aesthetic displacement or a transformation of the subject of study operated and when the documentary involved research and not only captured spontaneously the surrounding reality: this approach already combines art and cognition. Especially, ethnographic films that introduced fictional elements, such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), could be conceived as pioneers for research-based art practices. Flaherty was inspired by the research methodology described by anthropologist

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[13] See in particular Bush, "Artistic research and the poetics of knowledge," ibid.; Borgdorff Henk, "The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia," (PhD diss., Amsterdam: Leiden University Press 2012).

[14] Cazeaux, *Art, Research, Philosophy*, ibid., 1.

[15] The debate is currently expanding the framework of Europe: in China, the first artists researchers received their PhD in 2015, "signaling official recognition by the art academy system in China of research-based practice as a form of knowledge production." See the seminar *Between Knowing and Unknowing: Research in-and-through Art* organized at the Guangdong Times Museum in China in 2015, curated by Nikita Yingqian Cai. In their presentation, the curator notes that nevertheless, "discussions of "artistic research" and "research-based practice" are still rare" in China.

Bronisław Malinowski, while defining himself as an artist. [16]Furthermore, Hito Steyerl connects artistic research with a genealogy of practices linked to the emancipatory struggles of the twentieth century such as anti-fascist resistance.[17] She also mentions "the circles of Soviet factographers,[18] cinematographers and artists" who, in the 1920s, debated about the epistemological significance of art and experimented new languages such as "the cine-eye, the cine-truth, the biography of the object or photomontage."[19] These movements influenced the later development of the form of the film essay.[20] On stage, documentary theatre or drama has been exploring the interweaving of the language of performance with research, evidence and documentation from the 1920s.[21] A genealogy of artistic research could be thus traced back from these earlier attempts to conceive artistic practice as a form of cognition, including artist-researchers whose theoretical and artistic practices intermingle.[22]

In contrast, in Southeast Asia, research-based art practices are relatively new and seldom addressed by scholars. In the region, artists are increasingly compared to historians, ethnographers or archaeologists, but the research component of their work and their research methodologies are rarely examined. The corelative issue of knowledge production is rarely addressed either. Overall, the notion of research-based art practices is still

[16] See in particular Marks Dan, "Ethnography and Ethnographic Film: From Flaherty to Asch and after," *American Anthropologist* 97(2) (Jun. 1995): 339–347.

[17] Steyerl cites Peter Weiss 1975 novel that examines these movements, *Aesthetics of Resistance*, and observes the German writer's use of the term "artistic research"to depict them. Steyerl Hito, "Aesthetics of Resistance? Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict," *MaHKUzine 8*, (winter 2010): 31–37. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0311/steyerl/en. Weiss Peter, *Aesthetics of Resistance,* trans. Joachim Neugrosschel (Duke University Press, 2005).

[18] Factography is an aesthetic genre created in Russia in the 1920 which consisted in creating storytelling based partially on truth (facts). See in particular Fore Devin, "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography" *October* The MIT Press Journals N°118 (2006):95–131.

[19] Steyerl Hito, "Aesthetics of Resistance? Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict," *MaHKUzine 8*, (winter 2010): 31–37. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0311/steyerl/en.

[20] See for instance Chris Marker's films. More on the essay film see in particular Corrigan Timothy, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, after Marker (*Oxford University Press, 2011).

[21] A history of documentary theatre and its evolution towards contemporary forms can be found in: Magris Erica and Picon-Vallin Béatrice, ed., *Les Théâtresdocumentaires*, (Montpellier: Deuxième époque, 2019).

[22] See for example American photographer Allan Sekula, Cuban American feminist theorist and artist Coco Fusco, American conceptual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper or German artist and theorist Hito Steyerl.

absent from the literature dealing with the region. In his seminal study *Modern Asian Art*, John Clark mentions what he calls historical amnesia on the part of political regimes that try to suppress events of the past for their population to forget what happened. Against such an amnesia, and for decades, many artists have engaged in practices of remembering, either at a personal or collective level. Especially, some artists have introduced historical subjects into modernist art discourses, bringing back denied parts of the past or contesting the allowable public narratives. Yet the research component of their works has not been emphasised and while they could be seen as precursors of research-based art practices, their practices have rarely been analysed from this perspective.[23]

Today, the terms of historians, ethnographers or archaeologists are usually used very broadly as general comparisons or used metaphorically, for instance when the artists are compared with archaeologists who "excavate the past."[24] Art historian ThanaviChotpradit notes that, in Thailand, "to fill the gap left by art historians, artists sometimes play the role of art critics by writing on modern and contemporary art history and art criticism. However, these writings are schematic or written from the perspective of art appreciation."[25] For her, these artistic forays into the field of art history remain thus limited and questionable. In Singapore, though, Woo already mentions the figure of the artist-researcher that emerged as a form of resistance against today's public art policies that favour decorative and non-disruptive forms of art.[26] Analysing the work of Dinh Q. Lê, Nora Taylor

[23] Clark John, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, United States: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 283–289.

[24] Ashley Thompson, for example, introduces the idea of an "ethnographic impulse" in Cambodian contemporary practices but she includes in the trend all practices involved with traditional material (for instance working with rattan as does SopheapPich), which considerably enlarges this social science field. See Thompson, Ashley, "Emergenc(i)es: the Auto-ethnographic Impulse in Contemporary Cambodian Art," in *Essays on Art in Southeast Asia: Charting Thoughts*, ed. Low Sze Wee and Patrick Flores (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 293–303; Erin Gleeson observes that Cambodian artists are "assuming the role of rescue archaeologists" in Gleeson Erin, *Connect:Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology: Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia. (*Berlin, Germany: The Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, 2013), 12.

[25] ChotpraditThanavi, "A Dark Spot on a Royal Space: The Art of the People's Party and the Politics of Thai (Art) History," *Southeast of Now*, Vol.1 No.1 (March 2017):135.

[26] Woon Tien Wei, "Still, Here Somehow: Artists and Cultural Activism in Singapore's Renaissance," *On Curating* Issue 35, (2017):16.

also aptly questions "the role of the artist as historian,"[27] and shared her doubts about the reception of his installation *Light and Belief* when exhibited at Documenta 13. However, she focuses here on the question of the authorships, since the artist exhibited mostly his collection of archives, and not on what it means for an artist to work as a historian. Together with Karin Zitzewitz, though, Taylor underpins how history has recently become a "figure of thought" in Southeast Asian art, with the artists engaged in a reconstruction of "the manner in which the present is understood," through different approaches to the past—"archives, epistolary narratives, re-enactments, or para-fiction."[28] Similarly, and to reflect on this trend in Singapore and Malaysia, June Yap coined the term "historiographical aesthetic," a framework that encompasses historiographical artworks whose subjects are an "event from the past or its narrative."[29] The present study lies in continuity with these analyses but aims at examining more directly, and in a more systematic way, how academic research can be freely used and diverted by artists in order to challenge the established epistemological frameworks.

Artists themselves are now increasingly defining their own practices by referring to history, social sciences or by emphasising the research part of their work. They seem willing to recover agency as producers of local and independent knowledge but are also seeking a form of legitimacy that would give some value to their artistic projects. For instance, Vietnamese artist Tiffany Chung and Singaporean artist Koh Nguang How, who both challenge a specific local historical narrative (the existence of the "boat people," denied by the Vietnamese authorities for Chung; the date of a painting displayed at the Singapore National Museum and printed in their catalogue for Koh) are working as both artists and researchers. The research component of their projects allows them to give credibility to the counter-narratives they propose. Ho Tzu Nyen, who questions the existing systems of knowledge from a more general perspective, prefers to be perceived as an artist interested in research. Some artists have also a background in humanities or social sciences. Indonesian artist Anggawan

[27] Taylor Nora A. "Re-authorizing images of the Vietnam War: Dinh Q Lê's "Light and Belief" installation at dOCUMENTA (13) and the role of the artist as historian," *Southeast Asia Research* SOAS University London Vol 25(1) (2017):47–61.

[28] Taylor Nora A. & Zitzewitz Karin, "History as Figure of Thought in Contemporary Art in South and Southeast Asia," *Art Journal*, 77:4, (2018):46.

[29] Yap June, *RETROSPECTIVE: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 12.

Kusno presents himself as an artist drawn by his academic background who works with "ethnographic methods and institutional approaches,"[30] and Zarina Muhammad, who has been working as an ethnographer for years, calls herself willingly an ethnographer and an artist.[31]Likewise, the titles of the works are inspired by the language of social science fields, from Debbie Ding's *Ethnographic Fragments of Central Singapore* (2012) to Tiffany Chung 's *An archaeology project for a future remembrance* (2013). Yet most of the artists I interviewed prefer to define themselves first and foremost as artists. Many say, for instance, that they are not historians, even though they have been deeply investigating some hidden parts of history. Malaysian artist Au Sow Yee sees rather herself as a story collector,[32] and Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto confirms: "Ido research, but I am not a scientist. My methods are not scientifically rigorous. Every artisthas to do research in one way or another. I'm not a good researcher."[33] Singaporean artist Jack Tan confesses that it took him time to negotiate between what is art and what is research in his practice, and how to walk a fine line between the two fields.[34]Other artists like Vietnamese artist Phan Thao Nguyen reject any attempts to classify their work or practice.[35]Above all, these pluri-disciplinary artists escape anyform of categorisation and jump easily from one field to another. However, all of them recognise, and often claim, the research component of their work, and include in their statements their research processes and research background.

[30] From the artist's website Available at: http://www.takusno.com/bio/ Accessed Sep. 16, 2019.

[31] Interview with the artist over the phone, 4 September 2019.

[32] E-mail interview with the artist, 30 September 2019.

[33] McNay Anna, "Jompet Kuswidananto: "I am dealing with a culture that is never really fixed," *Studio International*, Dec. 12, 2015. https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/jompet-kuswidananto-interview-order-and-after-sonica-2015.

[34] Interview with the artist over the phone, 28 May 2019.

[35] "I question the obligation to classify and denominate genres, segregating poetry, fictions, history, documents, and visual arts. Mulling over these terminological divisions, I wish to construe a realm of works that are interconnected and diverse in styles and materials, by means of which genres can coexist in a dreamlike, democratic utopia." Nguyen Phan Thao, *Poetic Amnesia*, catalogue of the exhibition (Ho Chi Minh City: The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, 2017), 17.

2.2 Challenging Established Systems of Knowledge

It is usually admitted that knowledge is mainly produced by academic disciplines through professional scientific research, accredited according to specific rules and institutions. For the last decades, the positivism and universality of this system of knowledge production, originating in Europe, has been deeply and radically challenged. From post-structuralist and post-modern critiques to post-colonial and feminist theories, the idea that a true and single form of knowledge could only be produced through a scientific, rational and systematic methodology of work collides with the recognition of plural forms of knowledge on the one hand, and of the plurality of modes of knowledge production on the other hand.[36] Today, the academic system is not perceived anymore as the sole legitimate site for knowledge production: identifying a shift in the way knowledge is produced, Professor Helga Nowotny introduced for instance a second mode of knowledge production, called Mode 2 or socially distributed knowledge, that refers to knowledge produced outside the academic institutions.[37] Developed from the mid twentieth century onwards, it is notably characterised by its trans-disciplinary, collaborative, dialogical and application-oriented features.[38] In Southeast Asia, critical epistemologies have also emerged, notably in the framework of post-colonial studies. Local scholars have been developing more localised systems of knowledge, searching for new paradigms disconnected from any

[36] See for instance Foucault Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972 [1969]), Said Edward W., *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Group, 2003[1978]); Haraway Donna, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14(3)1988: 575–599; Bhabha Homi K., *The Location of culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994); Mignolo Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience," *Theory, Culture & Society* SAGE 26(7–8) 2009. For a history of postcolonialism and notably of the formation of post-colonial theory see for instance Young Robert, *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction* (Oxford: Wiley- Blackwell, 2001).

[37] Gibbons Michael, Limoges Camille, Nowotny Helga, Schwartzman Simon, Scott Peter and Trow Martin, *The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies.* London: Sage, 1994).

[38] This thesis has been much debated among scholars and remains controversial. From the perspective of research-based art practices, though, it highlights the possibility for new research practices and modes of knowledge production to be recognised, including artistic ones.

Euro-American-centric visions in order to better account for today's realities of the region. At the same time, an expanded conception of research practices is arising, outside the framework of academic and other knowledge-based institutions. Discussing the education system of his native country India, Arjun Appadurai suggests for instance that research practices could be conducted on, by, and for everyone.[39] Such notion, as we will see, is relevant to the artists' praxis of research. In turn, research-based art practices participate in this expansion and democratisation of the conception of research.

Research-based art practices derive from the artists' desire to learn, generate and disseminate knowledge. As such, they develop against the backdrop of and contribute to this larger debate that questions the paradigms of today's systems of knowledge. In Southeast Asia, though, the epistemological issue is at the same time more complex and more urgent: the Western system of knowledge production is not only challenged for what it is but also for what it has been and for its persistent legacy that still shape the current regional institutional frameworks. This influence is juxtaposed to a traditional and local system of knowledge that has long been neglected, and to local authoritarian systems that continuously reconfigure these previous models according to their political agenda. Although it seems caricatural because these systems overlap and permeate each other, it is thus useful to distinguish between these four different frameworks that are variously questioned by Southeast Asian research-based art practices, leading to different categories of works and critiques.

"Whether or not their countries had been colonized, the emergence of Western science and scientific rationality as prime markers of European superiority (thus) became a key issue for native political and intellectual elites of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century."[40] In Southeast Asia, modernity was mainly shaped according to this universalist and hegemonic project, imposed in the name of progress.[41] Academic knowledge and the development of university education reproduced and disseminated a colonial form of knowledge with the Western approach and

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[39] Appadurai Arjun, "The Right to Research," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4(2) (2006):176.

[40] Endres Kirsten W. and Lauser Andrea, ed., *Engaging the spirit world: popular beliefs and practices in modern Southeast Asi*a (New York: Bergahn Books, 2012), 2.

[41] This was also the case in countries that have not been colonised. John Clark, for instance, notes that in Thailand, "modernization was based on an autocratic colonial model." In Clark John, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, United States: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 161.

disciplines conceived as both superior and universal.[42] In Cambodia, the system developed under French orientalism, mainly through the state institution École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and its affiliated schools. The first national library was opened under its auspice. Its state-sponsored and top-down enterprise of knowledge production and institutionalisation's model prevailed during the post-independence regimes, with the exception of the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), and most schools taught in French language.[43] In the British colonies, Wang Gungwu, who recounts his "pre-social science experience" as a student in the late 40s and early 50's at the new University of Malaya in Singapore, remembers that the same textbooks were used in most schools throughout the empire. Even at the eve of independence and among the turmoil of the end of the 1940s and early 1950s, the historian recalls that students were taught European concepts and research methodologies as if the Western canons were universal and would live on after the end of the colonial empires.[44] Against such a cultural hegemony, Chaitanya Sambrani identifies the emergence of local Asian art discourses in the first decades of the twentieth century with the pan-Asianist movement from Japan, which found some resonance up to India.[45] With the rise of anti-colonial movements and the building of post-colonial states, or, as in the case of Thailand, when countries have overcome the colonial threats, an increased interest in traditions and local forms of knowledge has continually grown, along with the development of sophisticated local scholarship. The turn of the century is

[42] See in particular Patel Sujata, "Beyond divisions and towards internationalism: Social sciences in the twenty-first century, in *The Social Sciences in the Asian Century*, ed by Carol Johnson, Vera Mackie and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 51–63. ANU Press 2015.

[43] In fact, the EFEO aimed at controlling the production of academic knowledge in the whole French Indochina. For an history of the modern mode of academic knowledge production in Cambodia since the colonial period see Peycam, Philippe M.F. Sketching an Institutional History of Academic Knowledge Production in Cambodia (1863–2009) Part I, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Oct. 2010): 153–177 and Peycam, Philippe M.F. Sketching an Institutional History of Academic Knowledge Production in Cambodia (1863–2009) Part II, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 2011): 16–35.

[44] Wang Gungwu, "Post-imperial Knowledge and Pre-Social Science in Southeast Asia". In Goh Beng-Lan (Editor). *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region*. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 60–80.

[45] Sambrani Chaitanya, "An Experiment in Connectivity: From the 'West Heavens' to the 'Middle Kingdom', in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making* ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Australia: Australian National University Press, 2014), 89–90.

marked by a historical geopolitical shift from Euramerica to Asia, with scholars and artists developing what Oscar Ho referred to as "languages outside of a Western-dominated art world."[46] Yet, even though an increasing number of local Southeast Asian scholars are producing academic studies that are locally and internationally recognised, the dependence on Western scholarship in the region lives on.[47] The Western academic framework continues to be a silent referent in the production of knowledge,[48] while local knowledge tends to be neglected to fit international and English-language publications.[49]

Some artists directly challenge this colonial legacy, and their research process aims for instance at unveiling evidence against the colonial historical narratives that still dominate the local literature. After the two Anglo-Burmese wars, Myanmar, formerly Burma, was proclaimed a British colony and a province of India. According to Maurice Collis, who served in Burma as a British officer, the British, including him, "had done two things, which we ought not to have done. In spite of declarations to the contrary we have placed English interests first, and we had treated the Burmans not as fellow creatures, but as inferior beings."[50] In particular, in their records, the colonisers tend to name as thieves or "dacoits" the rebels who fought for independence and accused them of banditry. Many of these rebels were jailed or hanged for these reasons. Since much of what has been written about the colonial time has been scribed in English, and

[46] Oscar Ho quoted by Turner Caroline and Webb Jen in Turner Caroline and Webb Jen, *Art and human rights* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 2.

[47] Gerke Solvay and Evers Hans-Dieter, Globalizing Local Knowledge: Social Science Research on Southeast-Asia, 1970–2000 *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* Vol.21, No1 (2006): 1–2.

[48] In the field of history, for instance, Indian historian Dipeash Chakrabarty suggests that "insofar as the academic discourse of history—that is, "history" as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university—is concerned, "Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories." As such, Cambodian or Indonesian history would only be a variation of the European master narrative. In Chakrabarty Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 27.

[49] Mackie Vera, Johnson Carol and Morris-Suzuki Tessa, "Australia, the Asia-Pacific and the social sciences," in *The Social Sciences in the Asian Century*, ed by Carol Johnson, Vera Mackie and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 1–28. ANU Press 2015, 12–13.

[50] Collis Maurice, *Trials in Burma* (London: Faber Finds, 1938), 216.

from a British perspective, this is also how they have been remembered.[51] For *The Name* (2008–ongoing), a series analysed in detail in Chap. 6, Burmese duo Wah Nu & Tun Win Aung have delved into this colonial past and searched for all these forgotten "heroes" who fought against the British and whose memory has been either erased or sullied by the British account of history. By modifying existing archival images—old reproductions from British history books—they aim at reclaiming history from a Burmese perspective, giving back dignity to these figures. In doing so, they also express their willingness to re-appropriate history and the collective memory of their country, sill imbued with a British legacy.

For Ann Laura Stoler, these colonial traces or colonial spectres are among those that are easily recognisable. The professor of anthropology and historical studies argues that there are deeper, tenacious and durable manifestations of colonialism that are "ineffably threaded through the fabric of contemporary life forms" and, as such, tend to evade recognition.[52] Some artists address this opaque heritage and persistent colonial remnants which continue to pervade the current society and shape many regional institutions and scholarship. In Indonesia, for example, scholars have pointed to the institutional continuity that links the colony to the independent state, from the centralisation of the power in Java to the current law and legal system.[53] The research-based art practice of Indonesian artist Timoteus Anggawan Kusno precisely deals with the reified legacy of this colonial past and its tenacious presence that not only looms over institutions but permeates people's mindset. Today, according to the artist, these spectres still haunt every level of society: "we may find them hiding behind what we take for granted in our daily lives, in things that are institutionalized and that construct us, in the mystification of the single version of history, in how a memorial makes us remember this and not that, in how

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[51] See in particular Myint Ni Ni, *Burma's Struggle against British Imperialism (1885–1895)* (Rangoon: Universities Press, 1983) and Holliday Ian, *Burma Redux* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011). There have been, though, some Burmese chronicles and Burmese books dealing with the colonial era. See Chap. 6 of this present book.

[52] Stoler Ann Laura, *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in our Times* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

[53] See in particular Anderson Benedict, "Old State, New Society: Indonesia's New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective," *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 42, No. 3 (May, 1983):477–496.

"us" and "them" are defined, in what we can and cannot talk about."[54] In 2013, the artist created the Centre for Tanah Runcuk Studies (CTRS), an imaginary research institution that focuses on Tanah Runcuk, a fictional territory located in the East Indies that makes explicit reference to the Dutch colonisation of Indonesia. The CTRS gathers artistic—but also actual—archival material from the colonial period (drawings, paintings, photographs, artefacts etc.) as well as documents and texts written by real and fictional scholars.[55] Most of the artist's artworks develop within this institution which appropriates and questions the current state of Indonesia. For him, Suharto's dictatorship (1966–1998) only mimicked and further nurtured the colonial model, especially through the writing of history, transformed into another instrument of power and repression. Especially, Kusno investigated the *Rampok Macan* rituals (*macan* means tiger in Javanese language), state-sponsored ceremonies that took place mostly in Java from 1605 to 1906 and in which a tiger was publicly killed.[56] During the colonial time,[57] the Dutch re-appropriated the rituals to boost their own authority. These rituals, which were particularly cruel, disappeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, but, according to Kusno, their legacy brought up a form of institutionalised legitimation of violence. Kusno's documentary film entitled *Others or 'Rust enorde'* (2017) underlines how violence tends to be justified by the state in the name of peace and harmony. His research practice allows him to address the different layers of the current Indonesian system of power and social organisation where former forms of feudalism and colonialism collide and cumulate. Unlike Wah Nu and Aung, he does not oppose a colonial to a national perspective but seeks to shed light on the entanglement of these systems of knowledge and on how they are leveraged by the ruling party. A large part of his research is presented under the form of an ethnographic museum display with the archives and fake archives pertaining to the imaginary territory of Tanah Runcuk labelled and exhibited in showcases. As such, he is also subverting the language of ethnography and the Western

[54] Artist's statement for "The Death of a Tiger and Other Empty Seats," courtesy of the artist.

[55] A large part of the collection and publications, fictional and real, are available on the CTRS website created by the artist: https://www.tanahruncuk.org

[56] More on the ritual, see especiallyBoomgaard Peter, "Tiger and Leopard Rituals at the Javanese Courts 1605–1906," inBoomgaard Peter,*Frontiers of Fear: Tigers and People in the Malay World, 1600–1950* (Yale University Press, 2001), 145–166.

[57] The Dutch founded the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1602.

framework it refers to: trained as an ethnographer, he constantly plays with academic references and ethnographic methods of work in order to question them.

Image: Timoteus Anggawan Kusno, *The Untold Stories of Archipelago*, 2017. View of the exhibition *Power and Other Things: Indonesia & Art (1835–now)* curated by Charles Esche and RiksaAfiaty. Centre for Fine Arts Brussels (Bozar), Belgium. 2017. Courtesy of Centre for Tanah Runcuk Studies and the artist

Although they challenge the Western system of knowledge production, artists like Kusno borrow their research tools from the fields of humanities and the social sciences, originating in this same system. This could seem paradoxical. Indonesian artist Antariksa studied history at the Sanata Dharma University and philosophy at the Gadjah Mada University, both in Yogyakarta. He acknowledges his research methodology follows the methodology of work of historians according to the Western academic modes of knowledge production. This is how he learnt to work as a historian, and how he was taught to. So far, these tools are the only ones he has. However, by creating artworks in addition to writing academic articles, he aims at subverting them in order to point to their limits and to expand the

field of knowledge production.[58] Since 2000, he has been working on the Japanese occupation of Indonesia during World War II, identifying and analysing the links between the local community of artists and the occupants. He notably travelled to Japan and in the Netherland's to uncover and study the archives that were dispatched after the war. For the installation *Co-Prosperity #4* (2019), he gathered the biographies of Japanese and Indonesian intellectuals who worked for the Japanese propaganda during that time which he found in military archives, formerly classified. Rather than displaying the archives with some contextual and didactic background, he printed copies of these biographies using an Ultraviolet sensitive ink and displayed them on a long table in a dark room so that the text glows in this obscurity. It is unlikely that the viewers read them all since the text is dense and the biographies numerous. Instead, viewers are invited to take with them as many copies as they wish. However, as soon as they got out of the room, the pieces of information disappear, and the copy becomes a plain A4 paper. What we can grab from this past are thus only traces that constantly need to be re-evaluated and can never be taken for granted. This apparatus recalls historian Marc Bloch's conception of history as "the reconstructing of knowledge from traces."[59] For the artist, who prefers to define himself as "an historian-artist," this artistic experimental language aims above all at converting the archives into sensible forms able to move the audience. For him, the concept of "conversion" means "to be born again" and he wishes to give a new life to these archives, hitherto neglected and unknown by most of the people. He acknowledges that most professional historians do not approve his process of work and do not take his work seriously. He nevertheless believes that his artwork is generating a form of knowledge, albeit different from an academic one. He precisely seeks to challenge "the stubbornness of today's academic model of knowledge production" and its normative, elitist dimension. For him, different modes of knowledge can co-exist without competing against each other.

[58] Interview with the artist in Taichung, Taiwan, Oct. 4th, 2019.
[59] Bloch Marc, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou le métier d'historien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1960), 21. Quoted by Prost Antoine, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire (Twelve lessons on history)*. (Paris: Seuil 2010), 70.

In the present book, the term knowledge will be used as it has been defined by Western philosophy—a true, justified belief,[60] yet this definition is by no means exclusive. Alongside the Euro-American system of knowledge, a more traditional system of knowledge remains indeed in place, based on the specific local culture, customs, beliefs, religious and social organisations. However, both under communist and non-communist rules, the modernisation of the emerging Southeast Asian nation-states was accompanied by a marginalization of such indigenous belief systems, and the traditional modes of knowledge production were regularly banned or deemed as backward.[61] Today, there is a revival of these popular beliefs, rituals and traditional folklore in the region with the call for re-integrating them within the general system of knowledge production. Some artists are investigating how these systems survived and how they adapt to the changing contemporary environment. Their research processes aim in part at making them visible and at including them back within the regional history. Emblematic of this tendency is Zarina Muhammad's practice. The Singaporean artist collects stories about magic, mysticism and various rituals such as exorcism that she re-interprets during polyphonic performances. She often includes symbolical objects and collaborates with musicians and dancers. Her chosen medium emphasises the power and possibility of a performative and empirical form knowledge, inspired by the rituals that she studies. She wishes to show that, contrarily to the common opinion, myths and magical beliefs belong to a very complex system that is still alive today, even in places such as Singapore, which present itself as the city of technology and rationality.

The binary vision that would oppose a modern Western-based system of knowledge production to an indigenous pre-colonial or pre-modern system has proved irrelevant in today's plural modernities that embrace them both. In fact, with "a process of epistemic confrontation and adjustment between Europeans and indigenous knowledge systems," the two

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[60] There is no clear definition of knowledge and theories of knowledge are multiple and diverse. This short definition is general enough to include the main ideas of truth and justification. On theories of knowledge, see in particular Russell Bertrand, *On Our Knowledge of the External World* (London and New York: Routledge Classics (1914), 2009).

[61] Endres Kirsten W. and Lauser Andrea, ed., *Engaging the spirit world: popular beliefs and practices in modern Southeast Asia* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2012), 3.

systems have probably permeated each other.[62] In their post-colonial critiques of modernity, a great number of scholars have explored the possibilities to include non-secular modes of thinking into validated forms of knowledge.[63]The plurality of the term modernities, reflect these endeavours. Anthropologist Bruce Knauft locates them in a "multivocal arena that is delimited and framed by local cultural and subjective dispositions on one side, and by global political economies (and their possibilities and limitations) on the other."[64]Echoing this plurality, Wang Gungwu suggests using critically all possible tools to invent new theories able to account for today's realties of Southeast Asia. This includes mastering the social sciences as they are taught from the Western perspective but also mastering the Asian traditional values and culture, in order to combine critically these forms of knowledge.[65]A great number of scholars, including him, share Beng-Lan Goh's vision of a "polycentric" project of knowledge production.[66] Similarly, some research-based art practices from Southeast Asia aim at expanding the existing frameworks of knowledge production, not by opposing a colonial system to a more traditional one, but by combining them, thus challenging them both. Ho Tzu Nyen's ongoing project *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia,* analysed in Chap. 8, offers a relevant example of this endeavour. This series of works questions the realities and conceptions of Southeast Asia from a multiple,

[62] This controversial idea has been aptly summarised by Phillip B. Wagoner. The debate opposes the idea that colonial knowledge was imposed on passive local colonisers and, on the other hand, the idea that, in reality, there have been convergences and mutual influences between the colonial system of knowledge production and the colonised. Wagoner Phillip B., "Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45(4) (Oct. 2003): 783.

[63] Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, questions the field of history and the possibility to include non-secular activities in its field. See Chakrabarty Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000).

[64] Knauft Bruce M. "Critically Modern: An Introduction," in Critically Modern. Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies, ed. B.M. Knauft. (Bloomington: Indiana UniversityPress, 2002), 5–6.

[65] Wang Gungwu, "Post-imperial Knowledge and Pre-Social Science in Southeast Asia". In Goh Beng-Lan (Editor). *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011, 72.

[66] Goh Beng-Lan, "Disciplines and Areas Studies in the Global Age. Southeast Asian Reflections," In Goh Beng-Lan (Editor). *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 3. See also, Chua BengHuat, "Inter-Asia referencing and shifting frames of comparison," in *The Social Sciences in the Asian Century*, ed. Johnson et al. 67–80 (ANU Press, 2015).

dynamic, experimental and rhizomatic perspectives in order to break from any of the existing representations of the region. In the video *R for Rhombicuboctahedron Vol. 8* (2019),[67] random footage from the Internet is combined with quotes dealing with communism, political corruption or animist cosmology, read or chanted by an ever-changing voice-over. In a flow of data with no link of causality, images of historical events and important political figures, heroes, colonisers or spies are juxtaposed side by side with bacteria or family souvenirs, abolishing all hierarchies between them. Moving away from any form of dualism, the work includes autonomous singularities without absorbing or diluting them. Furthermore, the video creates a hypnotic feeling that transforms all the artist's scholarly references into an elusive whirlwind. In fact, Ho never answers his initial and theoretical question "What is Southeast Asia?" but leaves it to the audience to physically experience and perceive what such a notion could be like. As such, the series explores empirical and artistic modes of knowledge production that originally combine erudition and affects, beliefs and facts, imagination and rationality. It challenges disembodied, normative or authoritative academic forms of knowledge yet without rejecting their legacy.

Not all artists engaged in research practices question the legacy of the Western system of knowledge production. Its framework, and above all its legitimacy, can also be used to challenge the local system of knowledge established by authoritarian governments. In her ongoing series *The Vietnam Exodus Project* (2009–) dealing with the Vietnamese refugee crisis in Hong Kong and the arrival of the Vietnamese "boat people" in the territory from 1975 onwards, Tiffany Chung valorises her academic research engagement as a means by which to resist the Vietnamese single official narrative, according to which the "boat people" did not exist. Hergrowing body of work is mainly constituted by the artist's cartographic artworks and by archival material (photographs and letters from former refugees, videos records, newspaper clippings, United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)' reports, law and academic studies etc.) that offers a compelling historical and social viewpoint on the topic. The number of documents and their multiple sources operate as evidence,

[67] This title is purposely absurd and difficult to pronounce. It is a geometrical figure featuring eight triangular and eighteen square faces. It might refer at the same time to a rhombe at once a music instrument and a diamond, to a cube and to the geometrical figure of the octahedron.

supporting her effort to make visible the complexity of the history of the Vietnamese refugees seen from a plurality of perspectives. The umbrella of an institution such as the UNHCR, where Chung conducted a large part of her research, increases the credibility of her project. At the same time, as we will see in detail in Chap. 5, Chung does not seek for such a legitimacy. She borrows freely her research tools from the historians and social scientists and does not aim at replacing the work of these scholars. First and foremost a visual artist, she injects affect into her a cartographic work, purposely omits pieces of information and diverts the conventional language of maps. Her ongoing series, and its diverse iterations, reflect the artist's constant negotiation between her academic findings and their aesthetic, material embodiment, as she operates in-between systems and disciplines.

In Southeast Asia, research practices are often used as strategies to contest fake or biased historical narratives, misinformation from the state-controlled media or as ways to reveal neglected and hidden events or facts. Besides the legacy of the Western system and the traditional modes of knowledge production, the local knowledge production systems are indeed dominated and controlled by authoritative governments that tend to model them.[68] Most countries in the region, after short or long periods of civil war and struggles to establish democratic governments following their independence, have been ruled by authoritarian regimes characterised by limited civil liberties and controlled education systems.[69] In his analysis of the history of Southeast Asia, James C. Scott underscores the historical mystification generated by independent nations, when new states start to write their own account of history in line with their own nationalist interests, creating "historical fables."[70] The construction of a

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[68] The political situation of these countries makes these biases more salient but partial and socially constructed historical narratives are found everywhere. In the state of Texas, for instance, there is a debate over teaching American children that the United States was created with the intention of being a "Christian Nation," and that all life on earth originates in God creation. Lynch Michael P., *In Praise of Reason* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 6.

[69] See for example a recent analysis of today's rise of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia in Cabasset Christine and Tran Thi Lien Claire, "Les défis d'un développement durable enAsie du Sud-Est (The challenges of a sustainable development in Southeast Asia)," in *L'Asie du Sud-Est 2019—Bilan, enjeux et perspectives*, ed. IRASEC (Paris: Les IndesSavantes 2019), 13–22.

[70] Scott James C., *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 35.

single historical narrative is not indeed an exclusive colonial prerogative. The writing of history seems to have remained an instrument for legitimating the power of the successive rulers in their post-colonial processes of nation-building.[71] The education system, school text books and social sciences usually serve the state's political agenda as well, with teachers required to support the ruling party.[72] According to Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul, the entire production of knowledge in Thai history has been for instance dominated by royalist nationalism.[73] Since the second world war, local political activists have resisted the rise of authoritarianism, though, and civil society organisations have increasingly developed in the margins of the state, playing an active role in every level of the society, including education.[74] However, and despite the recent political widening of political and civil rights in the region, the local systems of knowledge production remain mostly controlled by the state, with a high level of media control. Scholars note the "stalling" processes of democratisation in Southeast Asia, although these political analyses need to be nuanced in light of the specific norms and values of each country as well as different conceptions of political legitimacy.[75] For Paul Chambers and

[71] In Vietnam, for instance, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam asked scholars to write what was called the New History in order to produce a consensus view of Vietnamese history. See Pelley Patricia *Writing revolution: the new history in postcolonial Vietnam* (PhD book Cornell University 1993).On the Indonesian New Order regime and history, see in particular Wood Michael, *Official History in Modern Indonesia: New Order Perceptions and Counterviews* (Brill, 2005).

[72] Gerke Solvay and Evers Hans-Dieter, "Globalizing Local Knowledge: Social Science Research on Southeast-Asia, 1970–2000," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* Vol.21, No1 (2006): 2. For Myanmar, see for example Salem-Gervais Nicolas, and Metro Rosalie, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 27–78. For Indonesia, see SuwignyoAgus, "Indonesian National History Textbooks after the New Order: What's New under the Sun?" *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- enVolkenkunde*, Vol. 170, No. 1 (2014):114–115.

[73] ChotpraditThanavi, "A Dark Spot on a Royal Space: The Art of the People's Party and the Politics of Thai (Art) History," *Southeast of Now*, Vol.1 (1) (March 2017): 134.

[74] AlagappaMuthiah. "The Nonstate Public Sphere in Asia: Dynamic, Growth, Institutionalisation Lag." In *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* edited by Alapagga, 455–477 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 457–8.

[75] There is no unique model of political system, and the normative Western conception of democracy is obviously debatable. Similarly, the universality of human rights is now debatable, as the 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration has shown.

NapisaWaitoolkiat, Thailand's democracy resembles a fig-leaf that hides its succession of authoritarian regimes, with Thai society having been monopolised by authoritarian institutions, namely the king and the military.[76] Despite recent reforms and a contested transition towards a more democratic society, the Burmese military has also remained in power in Myanmar and seized back control in a coup in 2021.[77] Singapore, which is ruled by the same party since 1965, is said to represent "a huge anomaly for scholars of democracy" because of the gaps between its political and economic development.[78] In Cambodia, the country has been governed since 1985 by prime minister Hun Sen who abolished the main opposition in 2017. Today, and despite an "open face" presented to the outside world, most of the Cambodian media are owned or controlled by the government or the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party.[79] Overall, in the region, "the rule of law and the regulatory capacity of state institutions remain weak."[80] Ultimately, such a generalisation of corruption, authoritarianism and the prevailing state control of the media tend to corrode public trust and create a general feeling of mistrust regarding any institutional knowledge.[81]

In this context, the research engagement of the artists takes a more fundamental meaning as they seek to emancipate themselves from this institutional system and to generate "independent" knowledge. A society built on propaganda and liesis a society built on fiction. Observation and empirical research appear to be powerful responses to this bias. In Cambodia, none of the artists I have met trust the media and Khvay Samnang, whose work is analysed in Chap. 7, constantly highlights the

[76] Chambers Paul and WaitoolkiatNapisa, "Thailand's Thwarted Democratization," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 47 (2020): 164.

[77] Simpson Adam, Holliday Ian, Farrelly Nicholas (ed.). *Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar* (Routledge, 2017). The military took back power during a coup in Feb. 2021.

[78] Reilly Benjamin, "Southeast Asia: in the shadow of China," *Journal of Democracy*, Baltimore Vol.24 Iss.1 (Jan 2013): 156–164.

[79] Strangio Sebastian, "The Media in Cambodia," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia* ed. Brickell Katherine and Springer Simon (Routledge, 2017), 76.

[80] BerenschotWard, Schulte NordholtHenk and Bakker Laurens, *Citizenship and Democratization in Southeast Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 12.

[81] See for example, in Myanmar Aung-ThwinMaitrii, "The State" in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson et al., 15–24 (London: Routledge, 2017); for Cambodia, Strangio Sebastian, "The Media in Cambodia," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*, ed. Brickell Katherine and Springer Simon, 76–86 (London & New York Routledge, 2017). For Vietnam: MacLean Ken, *The Government of Mistrust: Illegibility and Bureaucratic Power in Socialist Vietnam* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

impossibility to believe either the press or the discourse of the government. For *Preah Kunlong* (2017), the starting point of the artist's research was the mediatised controversy that took place in the Koh Kong Province, in Cambodia, about the construction of a hydropower dam, which would have caused the displacement of about 1,300 persons and flooded a 9,500-hectare area.[82] The territory is home to an indigenous community and there were many divergent views about the project: the media and the government promoted its modernity while environmental activists warned about the destruction of the pristine ecosystem of the place. These controversies were fuelled by the local indigenous community protesting for their rights against land grabbing and illegal deforestation. Khvay's decision to go there was thus motivated by his desire to learn by himself what was really happening, and to engage with the local people to get a better understanding of the situation. *Preah Kunlong* embodies his attempt to emancipate from a single, simplified official narrative in order to grasp and convey the complexity of reality, in this case through a poetical ode to nature.

Beyond the complex interplay of these different systems of knowledge production, the practice of research, conducted freely and independently, allows the artist to conceive and experiment alternative epistemic models based on their creativity and personal research findings. Whilst they borrow their methodological tools from the humanities and the social sciences that arose from the Western system of knowledge, they keep their distance from this academic framework and inject their creative input to destabilise and question all established system of knowledge production and the knowledge they generate. As artists, they also explore the creative possibilities of a plurality of modes of knowledge production and the artistic potential of research, transformed into innovative artforms.

2.3   A SINGULAR FORM OF KNOWLEDGE

Epistemology comes from the Greek term *episteme*, which means science. For centuries, in the Western tradition, scientific knowledge, linked to the truth or verified beliefs, has been opposed to the creative, elusive and performative knowledge produced by art. Thinkers and artists (the mind and the hand) have sometimes be described as rivals in this regard. However,

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[82] The Cambodian Daily, Feb. 4, 2015 (https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/hun-sen-defends-proposed-areng-valley-dam-77352/).

the cognitive power of art and its ability to produce knowledge was already identified by Aristotle: in his *Poetics*, the philosopher suggests that the pleasure taken to art allows us to increase our knowledge of the object represented because it shows it in its essential form.[83] In Greek antiquity, knowledge and visual perceptions were actually directly connected and "aesthesis" meant both perception and knowledge.[84] An early pluri-disciplinary artist, Leonard Da Vinci used art as a medium for his research in sciences and architecture.[85] Later, empiricist thinkers have valued forms of sensual or sensuous knowledge, recognizing the epistemological possibilities of art. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, for instance, conceived art as an instrument to reveal the essence of nature and emphasized its epistemological dimension.[86] Such examples could be easily multiplied. In the early twenty-first century, a convergence between our conceptions of art and science is taking shape. While the ability of art to invent sensual and creative forms that allow us to better perceive the complexity of the world has been increasingly accepted, the figure of scientists has changed, and the creativity of their process of work has been recognized.[87] Research-based art practices, alike, propose original conceptions of art and knowledge that bring forth a more complex and relational perspective beyond the simplistic binary opposition art/science. The question is thus not to elucidate if these practices produce knowledge, which refers to a philosophical issue, but to examine the relationships that art and knowledge mutually entertain and the specificities of the knowledge these art practices generate. For instance, does research-based art produce its own distinctive kind of knowledge, and to which extent could it complement academic knowledge?

[83] Chateau Dominique, *Épistémologie de l'esthétique* (Epistemology of Aesthetics) (Paris:L'Harmattan, 2000), 140.

[84] Pöppel Ernest and Bao Yan, "Three Modes of Knowledge as Basis for Intercultural Cognition and Communication: A Theoretical Perspective," *Culture and Neural Frames of Cognition and Communication*, On Thinking 3 (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, Jan. 2011), 222.

[85] Fagnart Laure, *Leonard De Vinci à la Cour de France* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires Rennes, 2019).

[86] Chateau, *Épistémologie de l'esthétique*, ibid., 141.

[87] Bruno Latour, for example, insists on the role of imagination in any scientific discovery and laboratory experiences, contributing to an expanded notion of scientific knowledge. Latour Bruno, "A Textbook Case Revisited—Knowledge as a mode of existence,"in Hackett, Edward J., Lynch Michael, Wajcman, Judy, Amsterdamska, Olga. *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies.* (Third Edition, MIT Press2, 2007), 83–112.

In the 1940s, Robert Ezra Park, a former journalist and sociologist of knowledge, analysed the knowledge produced by journalistic news and located it in the middle of a line that connects two opposite kinds of knowledge, namely "acquaintance with" and "knowledge about." These forms of knowledge, defined by American philosopher William James, are not fixed categories but could rather be "conceived as constituting together a continuum—a continuum within which all kinds and sorts of knowledge find a place."[88] On the one hand, the "acquaintance with" form of knowledge is intuitive, informal and empirical. It is not easily articulated or communicable and derives from adaptability, habits, common sense and accumulated experiences. On the other hand, the "knowledge about" form of knowledge is "formal, rational and systematic. It is based on observation and fact but on fact that has been checked, tagged, regimented and finally ranged in this and that perspective, according to the purpose and point of view of the investigator."[89] By locating journalistic news between these two poles, Park seeks to enhance the role of journalistic news and to demonstrate that news can be considered as a valid source of knowledge, albeit in their own way. Similarly, it would be tempting to locate the knowledge generated by research-based art practices along this line, as a way toembrace their intuitive, emotional and empirical features on the one hand, and their systematic, methodological and rational characteristic on the other hand. However, this perspective brings back the binary conception of knowledge since the graduation happens between two opposite poles. It does not include the possibility for a form of knowledge to emerge that would be at the same time rational and empirical, or at the same time systematic and emotional. *The Vietnam Exodus Project* by Tiffany Chung, for example, combines these two forms of knowledge: the work is based on the artist's systematic research about the Vietnamese refugees who transit or settle in Hong Kong from 1975 to 1997.As such, it generates a "knowledge about" form of knowledge, but it is also based on the artist's personal and artistic understanding of these research findings, and thus generates an "acquaintance with" form of knowledge.

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[88] Park Robert Ezra, "News as a Form of Knowledge: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (Mar. 1940):675. Park follows William James's definition of knowledge in James William, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1896), I, 221–222.

[89] Park, "News as a Form of Knowledge: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge," ibid., 672.

Besides this simultaneity, the concept of a line does not allow for another form of knowledge to unfold, that would not only combine the forms defined by James but exceed them. The human mind has always been fascinated by situations where the whole might be greater than its parts. The mythology is full of hybrid creatures composed of two real parts that develop their own singularities, beyond the mere combination of these two real elements. Likewise, research-based art practices combine art and knowledge, and their cognitive power lie in their capacity to create worlds from these combinations, opening new spaces for art and knowledge to operate originally and transform mutually.

Therefore, we can imagine the various forms of knowledge not like points on a line but like different modes that can overlap, combine and juxtapose, forming a dynamic network of a plurality of modes of knowledge production that echoes Beng-Lan Goh's vision of a "polycentric" project.[90] It would also reflect recent works by neurologists who distinguish complementary and interdependent modes of knowledge in neuronal processes.[91] The knowledge generated by research-based art practices could be one possible mode, among others, offering its own distinctive perspective on reality.

In *Return to the Postcolony. Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art,* T.J. Demos analyses the photography and film work of a few artists whose practice focuses on postcolonial Africa.[92] Mainly based on historical investigations and on archival material, these practices could be defined as research-based practices, even though Demos does not define them as such. The art historian focuses on the artworks' combination of aesthetics, affect and historical development they produce, and suggests that they participate "toward a different set of documentary possibilities that bring

[90] Goh Beng-Lan, "Disciplines and Areas Studies in the Global Age. Southeast Asian Reflections," In Goh Beng-Lan (Editor). *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 3.

[91] Neurologists Pöppel and Bao distinguish three modes of knowledge that form a universal framework from which every culture can express and communicate: "explicit or verbal (saying, calling), implicit or action-oriented (creating, doing) and pictorial (seeing, recognizing)." See Pöppel and Bao, "Three Modes of Knowledge as Basis for Intercultural Cognition and Communication: A Theoretical Perspective," ibid., 216.

[92] These artists are Sven Augustijnen, Vincent Meessens, Zarina Bhimji, Renzo Martens and Pieter Hugo.

affect, imagination, and truth into a new experimental configuration."[93] Based on Jacques Derrida's "poetics of the spectral," he examines how these works "typically escape the grasp of the art history of iconographical identification as much as the positivist typologies of scientific knowledge."[94] In short, for him, these artworks offer a spectral vision of history that allows them to challenge the existing narratives of a controversial past from a singular and original perspective. Research-based artworks, here, bring forth a form of knowledge that exposes history in a novel manner, that academic modes of knowledge production might not be able to reveal. Similarly, in his 4-channel video installation *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming* (2019), Vietnamese artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen delves into the French colonial past and the engagement of Senegalese soldiers during the Indochina war in Vietnam (1946–1954). His research fieldwork led him to Dakar in Senegal where he met the descendants of these soldiers who often married Vietnamese women and came back home with their children.[95] The film is based on fictional narratives imagined by some of these children, who try to reconstruct history and their personal past. It borrows its cinematographic language from the process of memory and unfolds in a non-linear way, including repetitions, archival images and fictional conversations. Unlike a formal form of knowledge, the knowledge it generates about the past, and how this past can be remembered, is thus induced by its poetic form yet structured by its realistic and documentary dimension. The viewers not only understand how much these Vietnamese women have suffered, the difficulties for their *métis* children to grow up in Dakar and, beyond, the French ambiguous politics towards the Senegalese soldiers, but they can also feel the presence of the colonial ghosts, the weight of the untold stories and the distress of these women who were cut off from their native country where they never went back. Silences, confusion, contradictions and imagination are not excluded from this artistic and research-based interpretation of history. It leaves space for singular narratives that have been neglected by the established historical knowledge. In France, *métissage* and *métis* communities were notably perceived

[93] Demos T. J., *Return to the Postcolony. Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 9.

[94] Demos, *Return to the Postcolony. Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*, ibid., 8.

[95] Senegal has been a French colony since the nineteenth century. It gained its independence in 1960.

as a threat to the colonial order,[96] and the involvement of African soldiers in colonial wars has until recently been largely absent from the national narratives. In Vietnam, this community has been forgotten. The film creates thus a critical space for a an emotional, aesthetic yet rational knowledge to arise about this particular period of history that differs from the knowledge produced by the academic historian, a point which will be further analysed in the fourth chapter of this book.

Through the detailed study of specific research-based artworks from Southeast Asia, we will identify some of the main features of this singular form of knowledge, namely its fragmented, non-authoritative, open-ended, trans-disciplinary, multi-sensorial, partial, autonomous, and equally rational and empirical dimensions. This artistic knowledge also derives from, or is accompanied by, verbal discourses: most of the time, the artwork is indeed introduced by an artist's statement, or by a note from the curator, that depicts the artist's process of work and contextualizes it. The verbal discourse is also present under the form of subtitles in videos, voice-over or written documents that can be exhibited as part of an installation. Its status is sometimes ambiguous since it functions both as an intermediary between the visual artwork and the audience, and as an extension of the work itself. Ultimately, it produces its own mode of knowledge that supports, converges or sometimes purposely collides with the knowledge generated by the artwork.

As we have seen, the Centre for Tanah Runcuk Studies (CTRS) created by Timoteus Anggawan Kusno is based on the artist's on-going collection of archive materials dealing with the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia. It also includes fictional archives and fictional essays written by Kusno or his collaborators in the form of scholarly essays analysing the history, customs and beliefs of the Tanah Runcuk territory. In this case, the verbal discourse fully belongs to the artwork. Kusno leverages the confusion they might generate since these essays are juxtaposed with authentic ones, just like he juxtaposes true and fake archival materials in his exhibitions. For the public, these texts might be misleading: what to believe? Is Tanah Runcuk a real place forgotten by history, denied by the Dutch and by the following governments? Since the knowledge they generate is not easily categorised, many artworks based on research trigger perplexity and

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[96] See in particular Stoler Ann, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusions in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 34 issue 3, July 1992: 514–551.

doubt. Kusno himself adds a disclaimer on his website and in his catalogue: for those who read it, it says that the Centre for Tanah Runcuk Studies is a fictional centre created by an artist who uses institutional forms in order to interfere with the process of knowledge production. For the artist, this disclaimer comes from an ethical necessity,[97] but many artists purposely leave the doubt open as a way to destabilise the viewers and their modes of thinking. Thai artist Arin Rungjang relates that an art historian, who attended to the opening of his exhibition *Mongkut* in Bangkok in 2018, reproached him for the inaccuracy of his replica of the Chakri Royal Crown of Siam, which the artist had reproduced in collaboration with a master craftswoman specialised in theatre crowns.[98] Rungjang replied he was not a historian but an artist doing research on history. This anecdote reflects the difficulties for the audience to receive the knowledge generated by research-based artworks and the ambiguity they produce.

What is at stake here is the validity of the knowledge generated by research-based artworks. James Young underlines that, although they contribute differently to knowledge, "both scientific theories and the perspectives provided by the arts are in need of justification."[99] Although they do not convey scientific arguments, and cannot be qualified as true or false, artworks can provide what the philosopher calls a right perspective on reality. For him, "a perspective is right when it aids people who adopt it in the acquisition of knowledge."[100]

Some artists do not search for any legitimacy: suffice it, for them, to raise the awareness of the public by addressing a specific issue usually hidden or neglected, by proposing their own alternative narratives or to upend the established system of knowledge by distilling uncertainty and confusion. Arin Rungjang's replica of the crown, and the historical investigation that led him to the Chateau of Fontainebleau in France to scan its copy given by Rama IV to Napoleon III in 1861, introduces already a

[97] E-mail exchanges with the artist, Sept. 2019.

[98] From a phone conversation with the artist, Sept. 14, 2020.

[99] Young James O., *Art and Knowledge* (London, New York: Routledge 2001), 67. The Professor of philosophy does not consider research-based art practices butanalyses the cognitive value and functions of art in its larger definition, including music and literature.

[100] Young, *Art and Knowledge*, ibid., 69.

doubt about today's symbols of power in Thailand.[101] However, when they directly contest existing narratives legitimated by the established system of knowledge, artists like Wah Nu & Tun Win Aung or Koh NguangHow may seek for a form of legitimacy. Academic knowledge is accredited according to very specific rules and validated by the academic institutions, including for instance a system of peer reviews. As we have seen, research-based art practicesas they develop in Southeast Asia mainly grow outside governmental institutional and academic frameworks, which they often challenge. If not the institution, which authority could be conferred upon this mode of knowledge and how could it have the same impact or even contradict the established legitimate knowledge?

Errata (2004) by Singaporean artist Koh Nguang Howprovides a relevant example of this problem. In this research-based installation, which full title is *Errata: Page 71, Plate 47. Image caption. Change Year: 1950 to Year 1959; Reported September 2004 by Koh Nguang How*, Koh highlights an error made by the Singapore Art Museum in 1996 about the date of a painting by Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class* which was dated 1950 instead of 1959. According to Nora Taylor, "*Errata* undermined the authority of the Museum and its ability to write an authoritative art."[102] *Errata* challenges indeed directly the institution's authority, to which the artist opposes his own research and set of evidence. Instead of inviting Chua Mia Tee to testify, Koh gathered pieces of evidence from his personal archives and exhibited them with his handwriting notes and documentation as part of the installation. He described the contextual background of the painting and invited the viewers to undertake their own research among the display of archives. Anyone could thus become a researcher and be in the position of uncovering the error. According to the Oxford dictionary, legitimacy means "conformity to the laws or to the rules", that is to say conformity to an authority, but it also means the "ability to be defended with logic or justification." In this case, the set of evidence activated by the audience confers enough validity and logic to

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[101] The original crown cannot be seen by the public and is allegedly kept in the room where King Rama VIII was found dead in 1946. After his mysterious death, a new crown was probably made for the new King, yet, according to the artist, there is no evidence for this allegation. Rungjang plays with the rumors that surround this part of Thai history and implicitly questions the legitimacy of the crown as a symbol of power, that was once given to the French.

[102] Taylor Nora A., "The Singapore Art Archive Project and the Institutions of Memory in Southeast Asia," In *Southeast Asia Spaces of the Curatorial* ed. Ute Meta Bauer and Brigitte Oetker (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016),131.

oppose the knowledge produced by the authority, here the museum. Max Weber defined three categories that can legitimate authority: charism, tradition and reason (the rational-legal system).[103] In 2004, Koh was already known by the public for his systematic engagement in art archives and had for him this reputation: from the mid 1980s, he used to attend all art events and take photographs in order to witness and record what was happening in Singapore, collecting all kind of documentations pertaining to the works (leaflets, posters, invitation cards etc.). These archives became what is now known as *The Singapore Art Archive Project* and the pieces gathered for *Errata* came from this collection. Koh was locally known as the "One-Man Museum,"[104] but he was also backed by foreign institutions who supported his project: from 1996 he collaborated with the team of the Fukuoka Art Museum and exhibited some of his archives at the 1999 Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial. In 2005 he was invited in Hong Kong by the non-profit organization Asia Art Archive and it is on this occasion that what was hitherto a personal and not official project became *The Singapore Art Archive Project.* Koh remembers how much these supports mattered to him and helped him pursue and better organize his collection.[105] Furthermore, Nora Taylor underpinned how the perception of his archival collection has changed over the time: "Koh's profile has shifted in definition from that of a researcher to an artist and vice-versa."[106] She later recalls that "although Koh was at times dismissed for his obsession for documentation or, worse, described as a hoarder, his collection began to be taken seriously in 1999 when he was invited to take part in the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial."[107] This remark reflects the role played by the art institution in the shift that occurred towards archival research, and more generally the shift in the mindset that allows for research-based practices

[103] Weber Max, "The Three Types of Legitimate Rule" *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions* 4, no. 1 (1958): 1–11.

[104] Kuan Yung Teng, "Keeper of Singapore's Heritage," *M News online magazine* (Feb. 1 2017). Available at: https://mustsharenews.com/koh-nguang-how/ (Accessed Apr. 22, 2020).

[105] Interview with the artist in Singapore, May 16 2019.

[106] Taylor Nora A. "The Singapore Art Archive Project and the Institutions of Memory in Southeast Asia" In: *Southeast Asia Spaces of the Curatorial* ed. Ute Meta Bauer and Brigitte Oetker (Berlin: Sternberg Press 2016), 128.

[107] Taylor Nora A. & Zitzewitz Karin "History as Figure of Thought in Contemporary Art in South and Southeast Asia", *Art Journal*, 77:4, 2018 p.46.

to be recognized. Therefore, both charism (this reputation) and reason would operate in this process of legitimation.

Above all, research-based artworks are produced for, and exhibited in, art spaces, galleries, museums, art institutions and art fairs where members of the general public can see or experiment them. The knowledge they generate might then reach the general public beyond the art sphere and variously disseminate in the society. However, like in a laboratory, it is developed in the specific milieu of art where its validity cannot be assessed according to scientific and normative criteria, which would reduce it to a lower academic knowledge. Research-based art practices do not produce new sets of dogma, but initiate dialogues rendered even more necessary by the indeterminacy they create. This larger and more open framework leaves to the viewer the responsibility to re-appropriate and consolidate the new forms of knowledge they generate. This singular mode of knowledge also requires art historians and scholars, as well as the general public, to build a new set of tools and to consider other forms of authority in order to approach them critically.

The role of foreign and international institutions in the strengthening of these practices' legitimacy is here paramount. *The Vietnam Exodus Project* by Tiffany Chung was first presented in Hong Kong during Art Basel 2016, a commercial fair, but Chung had featured in the Venice Biennale with drawings pertaining to the war in Syria just one year earlier.[108] The international exposure of her map drawings and the renown of this Biennale gave credit to her new project and, during the fair, the Hong Kong Museum M+ purchased two works from her series, for their collection.[109] However, Chung never exhibited *The Vietnam Exodus Project* in Vietnam because of the local censorship on this topic. Despite its foreign institutional backup, and the sources of her research, mainly from the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees, it is not certain that the Vietnamese public would give credibility to her collection of archives that challenges the Vietnamese government's authority. The final decision

[108] Chung featured in the exhibition *All the World's Futures* at the Arsenale curated by OkwuiEnwezor in the 2015 Venice Biennale.

[109] M+ acquired the 2016 map *HKSAR statistics on yearly arrivals and departures of V-refugees from 1975–1997* and 28 works on paper from the series *flotsam and jetsam* (2015–2016). See the press release published online: https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/the-authority/newsroom/m-of-west-kowloon-cultural-district-acquires-new-work-by-tiffany-chung-with-the-brown-family-annual-acquisition-fund/page/26.

always belongs to the viewers, and it takes time for a new knowledge to be accepted and assimilated.

Ultimately, by favouring their exposure, these institutions participate in the recognition of research-based art practices as valuable artistic endeavours and contribute to give credit to their innovativeness and to the knowledge they generate, as in the case of Koh's archives during the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial. In particular, the 2002 edition of Documenta (11), curated by OkwuiEnwezor played a vital role in emphasizing archive-based projects and the figure of the artist as a producer of knowledge with the premise that "Art Is the Production of Knowledge."[110] With postcolonialism and globalization as its two main directions, one of the exhibition's objective was to open up the Western framework of knowledge and to highlight the role of the artists from the global south in contributing to this expansion.[111] Many of the works exhibited were documentary-based and the Documenta Halle was notably devoted to archive-based projects. Singaporean artist Charles Lim exhibited *Alpha 3.4* in collaboration with Woon Tien Wei, a performance based on the collective's investigation of underwater Internet cables that link different territories, in this case Kassel in Germany with Singapore, and embody a tangible representation of the cyberspace. For Lim, this work marks also a shift in his perception of the sea and the beginning of his long-term research about Singapore's underwater world that led him to the SEA STATE series, exhibited at the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2015.[112] While only a few of the featured artists were from Southeast Asia,[113] this seminal exhibition paved the way for the future editions that welcomed and fostered research-based art practices from the region: Antariksa participated in the magazine project of Documenta (12) in 2007, the *Bomb Ponds series* (2009) by Cambodian artist VandyRattana was exhibited at dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012 with Dinh Q. Lê's installation *Light and Belief* (2012), while Arin Rungjang and Khvay Samnang showed their research-based artworks respectively *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none?* and *Preah Kunlong*

[110] Presentation of the exhibition on the documenta website: https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta11. (Accessed June 25, 2020).

[111] See in particular Gardner Anthony and Green Charles, "Post-North? Documenta11 and the Challenges of the "Global" Exhibition," *On Curating* 33 (June2017): 109–121.

[112] Phone interview with the artist, October 10, 2019.

[113] Besides Charles Lim, the exhibition featured Vietnamese filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha and Indonesian artist Fiona Tan among 117 artists who both left their country of origin and live respectively in the United States and in the Netherlands.

at Documenta 14 (2017). For Khvay, this multimedia installation represents his first long-term research project, and he relates how much he was encouraged by the team of Documenta to delve into the ecosystem of the ArengValley.[114] Through the discussions he had with Hendrik Folkerts, the co-curator of Documenta 14, the process of research, which was hitherto natural for him, became an identified methodology that he was keen on exploring further.[115] Besides, Khvay's entire research and production costs were for instance covered by Documenta. Hence, progressively, and through the multiple effects of influential exhibitions and their related discourses, the notion of research-based art practices arose as a singular category of work and, with it, the recognition of the specific form of knowledge it generates. In addition to this shift of perception, the financial support of such institutions, as we will see, fosters the development of research-based art practices from the region, allowing the artists to spend more time in the field or to devote more to their various research investigations.

[114] See Chap. 7 the case study dedicated to this work.
[115] Interview with the artist during our fieldtrip in the Areng Valley, October 2018.

Birth of a New Art Language

Research-based art practices in Southeast Asia have emerged from the 2000s onwards. Their development stems from a set of causes that overlap, but mainly follows the flourishing of contemporary art practices in the region. These practices opened the field of art and allowed for cross-disciplinary languages as well as original research methodologies to arise, and for new materials to be included in the artistic practices. Simultaneously, the artists' conditions and contexts of work have changed, notably with easier access to research resources and education. Besides, a strong interest in the realities of today's society, a concern for the past as seen from the perspective of the present, and for issues of identity, have nurtured the tendency towards research-based processes. There are obviously differences between countries, but a common feature to all is the desire to learn, to generate and transmit knowledge, with the aim to emancipate oneself from the established systems of knowledge. These motivations are not new and can already be identified in art practices informed by traditional values from the end of the nineteenth century and, later, in the emergence of regional documentary art forms. For instance, the "realist" movements that thrived in the region, and especially the genre of social realism, involved a scrupulous depiction and study of reality, which is close to the ambition of today's research-based practices. However, these former artworks pursued a didactic goal and were mostly developed to serve propaganda agendas and not as a means to challenge the official ideologies and institutional frameworks.

3.1   Heritage and Early Developments

Research and Traditions

Theravada Buddhism has deeply informed the culture of Southeast Asia, especially in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand where it is the dominant religion. Buddhist art, notably with the importance of its narrative dimension, has always had a cognitive feature.[1] However, the artists committed to this form of art were not doing any investigation: they were mainly trained to make copies of existing and canonical patterns. In Myanmar, for instance, traditional and pre-colonial styles involved the depiction of religious events or the representation of legendary figures. The artists did not sign their work, in line with the Buddhist idea that individuality is a mere illusion. Later, colonisation and European influences brought new forms of art, and in particular the genres of portraiture and realist painting, depicting rural life and landscapes. The ethnographic gaze of English painter Robert Talbot Kelly (1861–1934) was especially highly influential for the local artists. In his wake, U M.T. Hla (1874–1946) was probably the first Burmese artist to do ethnic portraits in the 1920s and 1930s and, according to Andrew Ranard, he was "the first Burmese painter to train an anthropologist's eye on his own country,"[2] opening the path towards future ethnography-based art practices. For the painter, the hill people were perceived as objects of curiosity and his investigation was not driven by any anti-colonial purpose but by a desire to get acquainted with these communities.

In contrast, many practices engaged in what art historian John Clark calls the genre of "neo-traditional art" have taken the form of resistance against "Euramerican" discourses and the Western style. From the Renaissance onwards, and more systematically between the 1850s and the 1930s with the process of colonisation, "Euramerican" academic styles of paintings were transferred to different Asian art cultures where they combined with existing local art discourses. This transfer mainly concerned academy realism and realist oil painting that shaped modern art discourses in Asia, even though it did not constitute the sole element of this

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[1] See for instance Galloway Charlotte, "Buddhist narrative imagery during the eleven century at Pagan, Burma," in *Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia* edited by Green Alexandra (Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 159.

[2] Ranard Andrew, *Burmese Painting* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2009), 60.

modernity.[3] After the independence of these countries, or, as in the case of Thailand, when the country had overcome the colonial threats, the genre of "neo-traditional art" emerged "as the essential repository of the past values" of the Asian cultures, combined with modern aspirations: "Neotraditional art is often simply the re-location of the transferred styles into the symbolic and technical discourse of one among a very broad range of pre-transfer local discourses," or, expressed differently and more simply, "the re-articulation of earlier local discourses (…) under the name of a 'new' version of what is 'ours.'"[4] Many artists have been engaged in practices of remembering, either at a personal or collective level, emphasising the artistic styles and aesthetics values of the past. In particular, some artists introduced historical subjects into modernist art discourses, bringing back parts of the past long denied or contesting the authorised public narratives. Indonesian painter Raden Saleh (1807–1880), for instance, expressed perfectly, and much earlier, a national drive toward an emancipation from the colonial account of the past. In his revised historical painting *The Arrest of Diponegoro* (1857), Saleh challenged the Dutch historical account of the arrest of the prince who rebelled against the colonisers. In an 1830 painting by Dutch painter NicolaasPineman, Diponegoro, who is a national hero in Indonesia, was indeed depicted in a humiliated position.[5] By giving him back his dignity, Saleh resisted the Dutch hegemonic historiography, and expressed his own vision of history. Similarly, art historian Patrick Flores highlighted how Filipino art from the nineteenth century challenged colonial historiography, especially by representing the conflicts between colonial Spanish and local rebels.[6]

This trend often implied uncovering values and tradition that had been lost or overlaid during the process of colonisation. It is important to highlight here the ambiguity of the term "tradition" and, consequently, of any

[3] Clark John, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, United States: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 15–24. John Clark is using the term Euramerica instead of "the West," for example, in order not to assimilate this geographic entity with any specific dominant civilisation.

[4] Clark, *Modern Asian Art* Ibid., 24.

[5] Flores Patrick D., "Post-colonial perils: art and national impossibilities," *World Art* Vol. 1 No1 (Feb. 2011): 75–76. For John Clark, the work of the Indonesian painter represents "a kind of victory over the imperium," challenging its cultural dominance with subversion of the models. In Clark John, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, United States: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 24.

[6] Flores Patrick D., *Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Colonial Art* (Quezon City and Manila: UP Office of Research Coordination and National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 1998).

research practices involved with traditions. For John Clark, the field of tradition is not a synonym of some culturally authentic and invariant precolonial customs that would have resisted Euramerican cultural transfer, because traditions are socially and ideologically constructed. The art historian notably refers to Eric Hobsbawm's notion of "invented traditions," a set of "invented, constructed and formally instituted"[7] practices that seek to establish a continuity with the past, but which can, in fact, be recent.[8] Besides, as Clark reminds us, the ideological motivation for such inventions may be questioned and tradition can be used by a specific social group in order "to legitimize their own stereotyping of the past."[9] As such, it is important to remain cautious when it comes to the idea of reviving traditions, an operation which does not necessarily bring back precolonial values, norms or knowhow but which, rather, coincides with a projected view of these values, norms and knowhow.

In Cambodia, the revived interest for local traditions coincides with post-colonial decades and the building of a new Cambodian identity. There were practically no full-time artists until the beginning of the twentieth century: most of the artists who decorated the temples were farmers who only worked temporarily as artists. There was only a small group of full-time artists working within the Royal Palace in the Royal Palace Workshop, devoted to making royal objects and to decoration.[10] In 1917, French civil servant George Groslier transformed this Workshop into the School of Cambodian Arts, establishing what will later become the National Museum of Cambodia. However, as Pamela Corey recalls, art students were trained to remain confined in their studio.[11] Modern art was not so much encouraged but even though some traditions were preserved and nurtured, it was always done under the umbrella of the French institutions. One of the objectives of the colonisers was indeed to save Cambodia from its perceived decline. The French focused especially on the ruins of

[7] Hobsbawm Eric and Ranger Terence, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

[8] Clark John, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, United States: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998),73.

[9] Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Ibid., 71.

[10] Daravuth Ly and Muan Ingrid, *Cultures of Independence* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Reyum Publishing 2001), 243.

[11] Corey Pamela N., "Urban Imaginaries in Cambodian Contemporary Art," in *Connect: Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology: Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia* (Berlin, Germany: The Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, 2013), 117.

Angkor.[12] However, ethnography and more generally social sciences relating to the indigenous society and its contemporary culture were for a long time neglected as they were not the focus of interest of the École Française d'Extrême Orient. When he became the first rector of the Cambodian University of Fine Arts in 1965, Vann Molyvann[13] established a Research Institute focusing on the study of traditional arts and techniques.[14] Research was strongly promoted during these first post-independence decades, in step with the national drive to preserve the traditional heritage and to rebuild national identity after almost one hundred years of colonialism: "Research teams are at present being sent into the provinces for the purpose of taking photographs, films and tape-recordings of everything of artistic interest, with priority according to that part of the Khmer artistic heritage which is in danger of being lost."[15] Some artists were sent to the countryside to visit the hill tribes in order to collect and learn traditional dances, music, certain arts and crafts threatened with extinction, mural paintings, and traditional stories or legends. Most of this research material, as well as the paintings from that time, was lost during the Khmer Rouge era,[16] but it is worth noting that among a few of the painters involved, such as Sam Yuan, there was already "a desire to reflect the contemporary social issues and to incorporate these elements into painting."[17]

Documenting Reality

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, realist art forms already opened the path to the possible combination of art and documentation, connecting today's research-based art practices with a longer tradition of art rooted in reality and fieldwork. Scholar and curator Kian Chow Kwok distinguishes three types of art realism: mimetic realism, materiality and

[12] Peycam, Philippe M.F. Sketching an Institutional History of Academic Knowledge Production in Cambodia (1863–2009) Part I, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Oct. 2010):163.

[13] Vann Molyvann (1926–2017) is the Cambodian architect who shaped Phnom Penh in the 1960s and who created a style known as the New Khmer architecture, mixing Angkor traditions with a modernist style. His influence is still very strong on the art scene.

[14] Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, Ibid., 332.

[15] Daravuthand Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, Ibid., 332.

[16] "A Conversation with ChhengPon," October 2001. In Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, Ibid., 111.

[17] Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, Ibid., 290.

societal references.[18] Research-based art practices informed by the social sciences drew rather from the last type, with art conceived as a social commentary, for instance with nineteenth century Filipino artists Simon Flores (1839–1904) or painter and political activist Juan Luna (1857–1899). Social realism, under the form which arose in China in the late 1910s, also revived realist and cognitive art forms in the region as vehicles for political and social transformations. In Singapore, where the British did not establish any art schools, artistic modernity was mainly imported by Chinese-educated artists who introduced a culture of realist art, woodblock prints and social activism.[19] Under their influence, a social realist art style developed, notably with the Equator Art Society that promoted social realism as a means to impart nationalist and anti-colonialist ideas.[20] The culture of fieldwork was not so much developed, however, with the famous exception of a group of four painters from the Singapore Art Society who went to Bali in 1952 to depict the local, rural, culture of the Malays and the life of Balinese women. However, Terence Chong notes a focus on ethnicity and folk culture that had arisen by the mid-1970s in response to Western and postcolonial influences.[21] In Vietnam, the culture of fieldwork developed early: at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Hanoi, established in 1925, the students were encouraged to sustain their traditional roots while embracing visions and methods of modern art from Europe. Outdoor trips were organised, and students were asked to depict the rural life surrounding them.[22] From 1945 onwards, French influence was rejected, and art was redefined to serve patriotic values through a realistic style. As in Singapore, artists immersed themselves the daily lives of the people, with a view to address social issues and fuel patriotic sentiments. The figure of the farmer or the worker was for instance magnified, recalling also the Chinese woodcut prints from the early twentieth century. An important movement of

[18] Kwok Kian Chow, "Looks Real, For Real, As Real," in *Realism in Asia* ed. Weiwei Yeo, 10–15 (Singapore: The National Art Gallery, 2010), 11.

[19] Wee C. J. Wan-Ling, "Shortlist Singapore," *Art Asia Archive online*. Available at: https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/shortlist-singapore/type/collection-spotlight.

[20] See for instance Kwok, Kian Chow, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996).

[21] Chong Terence (ed.), *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2018), xxiv.

[22] Joyce Fan, "Social Realism in Vietnamese Art," in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, ed. Sarah Lee and NhuHuy Nguyen, 53–61 (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009), 55.

revolutionary and guerrilla documentaries as well as a genre of "documentary paintings," spread across the country, playing an important role in binding together different and remote localities under a new communist Vietnamese nationalism. Filmmakers were described as those who "brought revolution and resistance to the people through newsreels [that] went deep into the national liberation revolution by fostering an awareness of social events."[23] During the Vietnamese War, from the communist side, artists were sent to the front to document the war, mostly to support the moral of the Viet Minh.[24] They were soldiers working for the Communist Party and their mission had been clearly defined by Ho Chi Minh from 1951: "art is also a battlefield; you are soldiers in that battlefield."[25] Even though they reflected artistically on the soldiers' daily life, there was no space for personal and critical research processes of work in this political agenda.

Documentary photography could also be seen as a precursor of investigative art practices, although this practice, as with social realism, was often linked to a specific political agenda that stripped it from its critical dimension. Wubin Zhuang recalls that photography, even though it originates in Europe, reached Southeast Asia very early, traveling with itinerant studios and quickly becoming an object of fascination for the local elites. In its wake, documentary photography expanded rapidly. Ken Foo Wong (1916–1988), for example, documented the indigenous peoples from his native birthplace in Sarawak before World War II, and, in Malaya, the sultan of Terengganu, Tuanku Ismail Nasiruddin Shah (1907–1979) developed from the 1950s a practice very close to the social documentary.[26] In the Philippines, the self-taught photographer Eduardo Masferré (1909–1995) documented artistically the life and customs of indigenous

[23] Nguyen Duc Duong, "Methods of social realism in Vietnamese movies," in *Vietnamese Cinematography: A Research Journey*, ed. VũDũng Phạm et al. (Hanoi: ThếGiới Publishers, 2008), 466 cited In Win Thong, "Screening the Revolution in Rural Vietnam: Guerrilla Cinema Across the Mekong Delta," in *The Colonial Documentary Film in South and South-East Asia*, ed. Aitken Ian and Deprez Camille (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 174.

[24] See Dinh Q. Lê's installation work *Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War* (2012) that addresses the issue and gathers the artist-soldiers' drawings.

[25] Jones Adrian, "Documenting the War…or Telling a Different Story? Examining the Purpose of War Art by Artists of the People's Army of Vietnam from 1946 to 1979," in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, ed. Sarah Lee and NhuHuy Nguyen, 37–48 (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009), 45.

[26] Zhuang Wubin, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (NUS Press 2016), 18–19.

people from the Cordillera (in Luzon).[27] Tommy Hafalla (b.1957) pursued this work and settled in Sagada among the indigenous people from Gran Cordillera Central to reflect better on their way of life.[28] In Indonesia, some filmmakers from the Jakarta Institute of the Arts produced ethnographic documentaries but most of the documentaries from the New Order period were funded by the state and conceived to promote its political ideology.[29] Similarly, Cambodian documentary films that featured local indigenous populations in the 1960s were often didactic and aimed politically at showing the unity of the country.[30] Vietnamese photographers who were called "history photographers" during the Indochina war were also supposed to record history as a way to support the building of the young communist nation.[31] Earlier, Võ An Ninh (1907–2009) documented the 1945 famine that killed between 400,000 and 2 million people in North Vietnam, fuelling anti-colonial sentiments: during WWII, the Japanese encouraged farmers to uproot rice to plant jute instead, the French used the rice for military purposes while the American bombings cut off the supply routes, worsening a famine already caused by natural disasters.[32] In her research-based three-channel film *Mute Grain* (2019), Vietnamese artist Phan Thao-Nguyen draws on Võ's archival photographs to explore the long-lasting impact of the famine, the responsibility of which continue to be controversial. She points to the taboo that still surrounds this part of Vietnamese history and proposes her personal interpretation of the event, moving away from the related constructed narrative that served communist propaganda in the aftermath of World War II. As such, she carries on the Vietnamese culture of investigative practices, while questioning its heritage.

[27] See for instance Labrador Anna P., "Eduardo Masferre: Photographs of the Philippine Cordillera," *Art Asia Pacific Magazine* Issue 13 (1997):74–79.

[28] Zhuang, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, Ibid., 335.

[29] Hanan David, "Observational Documentary Comes to Indonesia: Aryo Danusiri's Lukass' Moment, in *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 107.

[30] Daravuthand Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, Ibid., 147.

[31] Zhuang, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, Ibid., 274.

[32] See in particular Gunn Geoffrey, "The Great Vietnamese Famine of 1944–45 Revisited," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9(5) n°4 (January 31, 2011).

A Fresh Wave Within Contemporary Practices

Linear approaches to art history tend to oversimplify complex and entwined movements.[33] In Cambodia, Corey underlines how difficult it is to date the birth of contemporary art, different generations of artists having embraced it over the last twenty years.[34] There have been precursors, and earlier contemporary art experiences as well. T.K. Sabapathy, for instance, emphasises the importance of *Mystical Reality*, a conceptual exhibition by Malaysian artists RedzaPiyadasa and SulaimanEsa that took place in 1974. Along with a few pioneer events, it marks a shift toward contemporary languages in Southeast Asia.[35] From a broader perspective, Iola Lenzi proposes "the late-1980s-early 1990s as the emergence period of the contemporary" in the region, noting that the distinction between modern and contemporary is "an often fraught issue of labelling rather than chronology."[36] The term "contemporary" remains indeed divisive. It has been broadly and globally discussed in art history, resulting in a diversity of definitions.[37] In Southeast Asia, Roger Nelson underlined that the term refers to different expression or translations according to the different local linguistic terminologies, identifying it as a mobile concept.[38] Therefore, I use the term "contemporary art" in an open temporal framework mostly to refer to a critical stance and to the new, expanded, independent and experimental artistic languages that emerged from the 1970 onwards in the region as challenges to traditional modes of visual expressions. As

[33] Ahmad Mashadi has aptly shown how art practices and styles overlap, making any linear attempts of art history invalid. In: Mashadi Ahmad, *Telah Terbit (Out of Now) Southeast Asian Art Practices during the 1970s* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum 2007), 23.

[34] Corey Pamela N. "Urban Imaginaries in Cambodian Contemporary Art," in *Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia* (Berlin, Germany: The Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, 2013),114.

[35] Sabapathy T.K. *Intersecting Histories: contemporary turns in Southeast Asian art* (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2012), 39–40.

[36] Lenzi Iola, "Conceptual strategies in Southeast Asian Art, a local narrative," in *Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre Foundation 2014), 10.

[37] See for example Smith Terry, *What Is Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[38] See in particular the series of articles: Chotpradit Thanavi, Jacobo J. Pilapil et al., "Terminologies of "Modern" and "Contemporary" "Art" in Southeast Asia's Vernacular Languages: Indonesian, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Myanmar/Burmese, Tagalog/Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, Volume 2, Number 2 (October 2018): 65–95.

everywhere, these languages have taken many forms and have constantly evolved. In Southeast Asia, and broadly speaking, though, the first wave of contemporary practices was mainly dedicated to the exploration of performative modes of expression on the one hand, and to the development of conceptual or abstract art forms on the other hand. The artists' concern of that time was above all to free themselves from all the existing frameworks that hitherto had defined artistic practices. Research-based art practices, with their investigative features informed by humanities and social sciences developed in a later step from the 2000s onwards.

In Singapore, what is known as the first contemporary artwork is a conceptual installation by Cheo Chai-Hiang entitled *5' x 5' (Singapore River)* (1972), an imaginary and provocative river that breaks away with the usual national representations of this emblematic Singaporean landscape.[39] Novelty was the impulse and motto of the 1980s and 1990s,[40] with "a rush of unprecedented experiments in conceptual art, performance, installation sculpture, figurative painting, pop art, and happenings."[41] The trend, though, might have exhausted itself at the turn of the millennium, leaving some space for longer experimental and investigative processes of work such as research-based practices. A relevant example is ZaiKuning, who was one of the founders of the Artist Village in Singapore and a pioneer in performance art: at the end of the 1990s, he moved away from these practices and engaged in a still ongoing research process about Riau Islands and the Orang Laut (Sea People) community in the Malaysia archipelago. *Riau*, a thirty-minute film depicting his journey and first encounters with this ethnic community, was screened in 2005 for the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. Since then, his research has extended and deepened, leading to its major presentation during the 2017 Venice

[39] More on this work see especially Ching Isabel, "Tracing (un)certain legacies: conceptualism in Singapore and the Philippines," *Art Asia Archives Essay online*, 2011. https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/tracing-uncertain-legacies-conceptualism-in-singapore-and-the-philippines; Iola Lenzi, "Conceptual strategies in Southeast Asian Art, a local narrative," in *Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre Foundation 2014), 13.

[40] Weng-Choy Lee, "The Substation: Artistic Practice and Cultural Policy," in *The State and the Arts in Singapore,* ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2018), 208.

[41] Wee Wan-Ling C.J., "Shortlist Singapore," *Art Asia Archive online* https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/shortlist-singapore/type/collection-spotlight (Accessed Sept. 2019).

Biennale.[42] As to Ho Tzu Nyen, his first artwork *Utama: Every Name in History is I*, a video installation that explores the foundation of Singapore, was created in 2003, shortly followed by his docudrama *4x4—Episodes of Singapore Art*, an investigation about four important Singaporean artists. Charles Lim initiated his *Sea State* series in 2005 about his research on the sea and its biosphere, which was presented at the 2015 Venice Biennale. Jason Wee produced his first important research installation entitled *1987* about the 1987 "Marxist conspiracies" for the 2006 Singapore Biennale and it was only in 2008 that Robert Zhao Renhui founded his artistic interdisciplinary platform of research and archival collection under the name of the Institute of Critical Zoologists, a fictional yet creative scientific Institute officially established in 1996.

In Vietnam, pioneer artists such as Vũ DânTân explored and transformed the art of performance, experimented with collages, installations and conceptual art,[43] while others such as the Group of Ten were positioning themselves against the mainstream by developing abstract art,[44] but none of these artists were engaged in any research processes informed by social sciences. Their main impulse was a need to express themselves freely and to get rid of the past in order to start something new. A typical example is the performance *The Past and the Future* (1996) by Nguyen Van Cuong and Truong Tan where Nguyen Van Cuong swept with a broom the body of Truong Tan, representing the past, who himself writhed in a puddle of red paint. For the artists, "to start something new, one has to clean up and get rid of what's old."[45] Research, with its investigative feature, was therefore not on the agenda and developed mainly by the end of the 2000s. Dinh Q. Lê, himself a *vietkieu* who returned to Vietnam in 1997 after growing up in the United States,[46] brought a different mindset that critically influenced the local art scene. Driven by the desire to build

[42] Zai Kuning, "Transmission of Knowledge: they get up from their knees and walk," in *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* (Singapore: National Arts Council, Singapore 2017).

[43] See in particular Kraevskaia Natasha, *From Nostalgia Towards exploration: Essays on contemporary art in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Kim Dong Publishing, 2005).

[44] Very active from 1986 to 1996, the Group of Ten paved the way for the recognition of abstract art in the country, a form of art that used to be banned by the government.

[45] Huong Bui Nhu and Trung Pham, *Vietnamese Contemporary Art 1990–2010* (Hanoi, Vietnam: Knowledge Publishing House, 2012), 17.

[46] The Vietnamese term *vietkieu* refers to Vietnamese people who left their homeland to leave abroad. Many of them have then returned to Vietnam.

and preserve a collective memory in Vietnam, he delved into investigative processes, collected and reactivated archives as a material for his artworks. His 1999 installation *Mot Coi Di Ve* (*Spending one's life trying to find one's way home*) might be the first research-based artwork from the country.[47] It consists of a twenty feet long quilt, weaving anonymous photographs, letters and various souvenirs of the Vietnamese war, as seen from the Vietnamese and the American sides, together with excerpts from *The Tale of Kieu*, a classical Vietnamese novel where the main female character expresses her hope and dream to return home. When the artist escaped the country together with his family at the age of 10, they were forced to leave all their personal belongings behind, including photographs. When he came back, he searched for family photographs and started buying them in second-hand shops, hoping to find some of his own family. He never did, but through the memorabilia of others, he felt closer to his own family. For him, this collection of archives was a way "to reclaim what was lost"[48] and the research process amounted to an attempt to bring back his history and identity. Besides, for him, who grew up abroad and who only knew one side of the story—the American take on the Vietnam war, there was an urgency to excavate the other side, and to shed light on the Vietnamese perspective of the war. Although his work could not be exhibited a lot in Vietnam, because it addressed politically sensitive issues, his influence crystallised with the foundation of San Art in 2007, a non-profit independent art space defined as an "art organization committed to the exchange and excavation of cultural knowledge within an interdisciplinary community."[49] Co-founded with Tiffany Chung, who also returned to Vietnam from the United States, and the artists from the Propeller group, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Matt Lucero and Phunam Ha Thuc, it was directed by Australian curator Zoe Butt from 2009 to 2016 and became the most important independent art space of the country, fostering research

[47] Interview with the artist, Hong Kong March 2018.

[48] Chiu Melissa, *Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium, The Art of Dinh Q. Lê* (New York: Asia Society, 2005), 23.

[49] Statement from the former website of the art platform, accessed in Sept. 2018, that has been modified since then. In 2020, San Art defines itself as "an artist-initiated, non-profit art platform, has since become a leading art organisation dedicated to nurturing and challenging common modes of viewing and thinking about visual art through exhibition, critical discourse, educational initiatives and residency programs." https://san-art.org/info/about/ (Accessed Sept. 25, 2020).

practices and critical knowledge. It is also in 2007 that Chung developed in a more systematic way her map drawings based on research.

Dinh Q. Lê, *Mot Coi Di Ve* (*Spending one's life trying to find one's way home*), 1999. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist

We can trace a similar evolution in Myanmar with pioneer artists like the last modernist painter Aung Myint,[50] whose abstract paintings broke up with Burmese traditions and defied censorship (as in Vietnam, the genre was banned by the government), Po Po,[51] and Aye Ko who perfectly embodies the transition towards contemporary practices as a painter turned performer.[52] After years of isolationism and dictatorship, the

[50] More on the artist see in particular Lenzi Iola, *Citizen of the world: recent works by Aung Myint*, (Singapore: Yavuz Fine Art, 2010).

[51] See for instance the catalogue of Po Po's 2015 solo exhibition curated by Nathalie Johnston: *Out of Myth, Onto_Logical: Po Po/ 1982–1997*, ed. by Yavuz Gallery (Singapore, 2015).

[52] See the artist's monograph *Aye Ko* (Yangon: New Wave Media, 2015).

priority was to liberate forms of artistic expression and later to engage in social and community-oriented projects rather than to investigate a challenging present and conflicted past. Burmese artists Wah Nu and Aung remain to this day relatively isolated with their research-based and archival practices, and their artistic expression is perceived by local people as difficult to decipher.[53] The art market does not push the artists to develop research either, as it tends to encourage artists to stick to such commercial works as paintings representing monks, traditional scenes of daily life or exotic landscapes, because they are easier to sell.[54] However, at the margin, there is an increased interest for historical documents and archives in the country, especially with the creation of the Myanmar Art Resource Center and Archive (MARCA) in 2013 and the preservation and restoration of the Burmese Film Archives.

In Cambodia, artists were not engaged in research practices either before the mid 2000s. While they discussed their role in the new Cambodian society, they tried to support each other, exploring new artistic languages, favouring exchanges and filling the educational gaps left by the Khmer Rouge regime: they felt that everything remained to be done given the climate of ignorance and mistrust after the fall of the regime.[55] As an installation based on archival material that critically questions the production of knowledge, *Messenger*s (2000) by Ly Daravuth might have paved the way for Cambodian research-based artworks. The installation is composed of some thirty black and white photographs representing portraits of young boys and girls, slightly blurry and formatted as mug shots with a numbering at the bottom. For most of the viewers, they are automatically read as portraits of the victims of the Khmer Rouge Regime and, especially, victims from the S-21 prison in Phnom Penh. This former school is sadly well-known for having been the location of the killing of about 14,000 Cambodians who were all first photographed in the same and now infamous way. In 1980, S-21 was transformed into the Museum for Genocidal Crimes with the display of the portraits of some former inmates, initially for people to recognise relatives, and then, more

[53] Interview with gallery director Pyay Way, Hong Kong, September 2018.

[54] Carlson Melissa, "Art versus Artifice: Contemplating Burmese Contemporary Art," *Orientations* 46(4), (2015).

[55] Phone interview with Linda Saphan, January 2019.

controversially, for anyone wishing to remember, or for tourists.[56] Despite this first and instinctive reading of the work, *Messengers* does not actually include portraits of the victims. Ly Daravuth conducted research at the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)[57] and selected 24 portraits of children who were working as messengers for the Pol Pot Regime. In order to call for a renewed perception of the images, he took 6 portraits of present-day children, that he edited in such a way that the images resemble the other ones. In the background, Khmer Rouge songs are playing.[58] The critical way the artist questions archives and processes of documentation is paramount for the artists' future research engagement in the country. Exhibited internationally as early as 1997 and largely reproduced, the S-21 mug shots have quickly become "the icon of the Cambodian Genocide" and broadly of the Khmer Rouge, without people really delving deeper into what they reflect on.[59] *Messengers* thus challenges our preconceived views on archives when history and remembrance have become automatised and overly mediatised. Ly is more well-known as the founder of the Reyum Institute, and a curator, writer and lecturer of art history than as an artist, and he did not continue to produce artworks. Somehow, his work remains isolated even if other Cambodian photographers have also used the mug shots as a departing point for their work. Heng Sinith, for instance, collaborated with researchers from the DC-Cam in order to rediscover some cadres and to photograph them again in their daily life, as fathers or villagers. Yet the work does not have the critical power and complexity of Ly's.[60] For VandyRattana, "doing

[56] Artist LeangSeckon, for instance, sees in the Tuol Sleng Museum a spectacle for tourists useless for the local people. Quoted in Corey Pamela, "The 'First' Cambodian Contemporary Artist," *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* (2014): 67.

[57] The DC-Cam in Phnom Penh is an independent institute created in 1995 in order to document the genocide, first initiated by the United States and thanks to a grant from the Yale University.

[58] More on the work see for instance Benzaquen Stéphanie "Remediating genocidal images into artworks: the case of the Tuol Sleng mug shots," in *Killer Images. Documentary Film, Memory, and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram ten Brink, Joshua Oppenheimer (Wallflower Press, Columbia University Press, 2013), 206–223.

[59] Benzaquen Stéphanie, Ibid., 206–223.

[60] Quoted in Zhuang Wubin "Mekong Spring: Cambodian Photography in the last decade," Asia Art Archive Essay 2012. https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/mekong-spring-cambodian-photography-in-the-last-decade/type/essays; See Heng Sinith's testimonies, Heng Sinith *My Heart and Soul*, DC-Cam 2003. http://d.dccam.org/Archives/Photographs/Former_Khmer_Rouge/Sinith.htm (Accessed Sep. 2019).

research can be an empty word if it is not done with critical thinking."[61] The artist combined Ly Daravuth's critical approach with on-site investigations, definitively opening the path towards the development of research-based art practices in the country, in particular with his *Bomb Pond* (2009) series of photographs exhibited at dOCUMENTA (13) focusing on the American bombing in Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Earlier, in 2007, after a photography workshop organized by Stephane Janin, Rattana co-founded the artists' collective StievSelapak with a group of artists including Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina and VuthLyno who are still working for what has become Sa Sa Art Projects in Phnom Penh. Rattana had an important influence on the group and more generally on the local art scene. According to VuthLyno, "documentary photography and capturing local reality were critical in our practice from the start, inspired by Rattana whose passion was to create visual archives of present-day Cambodia."[62]

In contrast, in Indonesia where the contemporary art scene has a longer history,[63] some artists immediately responded to the end of the New Order era in 1998 by engaging in research practices and cross-disciplinary collectives.[64] After decades of strong repression and the domination of "decorative" and apolitical forms of art, the post-military years saw a boom in political art and an urgency to resist political oppression, mainly through performances and installations.[65] Moving away from this straightforward political trend, yet inspired by the students' movements of the 1990s, a few artists who lost their trust in traditional disciplines and in the Indonesian institutions that enforced them, tried to oppose actively the

[61] Interview with the artist, Phnom Penh March 2019.

[62] Vuth Lyno, "Knowledge sharing and learning together: alternative art engagement from StievSelapak and Sa Sa Art Projects," *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies* Issue 12 (2014): 258.

[63] According to Indonesian curator and art critic Jim Supangkat, it emerged in 1975 with the New Art Movement. See Ingham Susan, "Indonesian Art, Entering the Global," in *Contemporaneity: Contemporary art in Indonesia*, ed. Ciric Biljana (Beijing, China: Timezone 8, 2010), 80–89. More on the development of the Indonesian contemporary art scene see especially Spielmann Yvonne, *Contemporary Indonesian Art: artists, art spaces, and collectors* (Singapore: NUS Press 2017).

[64] New Order is the term used to refer to President Suharto dictatorship and military regime (1965–1998).

[65] See in particular Supangkat Jim, "Art and Politics in Indonesia," in *Art and social change; Contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific* ed. Caroline Turner (Canberra: The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2005), 218–228.

existing system of knowledge by creating their own independent modes of knowledge production. In Yogyakarta, Antariksa co-founded the KUNCI research collective in 1999 as an independent platform aiming at facilitating cross-disciplinary interactions, educational programs and artistic research. These artists and researchers were in part inspired by British cultural studies but also by previous Indonesian movements from the 1950s where artists already pushed the boundaries of art and invented new, transdisciplinary artistic languages.[66] They therefore revived earlier artistic local experiences, including educational practices, such as the attempt by the first Indonesian school to combine modern education, family life, art and nationalism.[67] In 2000, in Jakarta, the collective Ruangrupa was also established, involving artists but also social scientists, writers and architects.

The rise of various contemporary art forms cannot explain by itself the emergence of research-based art practices in the region, yet it paved the way for it. Expanding the field of art, contemporary practices favour cross-disciplinary, collaborative and multi-media practices. Inclusive as they are, they also tend to integrate new kinds of mediums and materials. In particular, in the region, the use of archival material became increasingly widespread and fully recognized as an art practice. Artists have collected, appropriated, invented and contested archives since the beginning of the twentieth century but the beginning of the use of archives in Asian artistic expression dates from the 1980s.[68] Sometimes, it took time for the artists who collected or transformed archives to recognise that they were engaged in creative practices. Cambodian artist Leang Seckon recalls that he only realized in 1997 that his own collages made from old magazines, photographs or found images had an artistic potential when American mix-media artist Chris Lawson told him so.[69] As we have seen, the external

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[66] Interview with the artist in Taichung, Taiwan, October 2019. On these movements, see Antariksa, *Between Revolutionary Stronghold and Laboratory of the West: Political Positions in Indonesian Fine Arts in the 50's* in *Contemporaneity: Contemporary art in Indonesia*, ed. Ciric Biljana (Beijing, China: Timezone 8, 2010), 56–66.

[67] Taman Siswa was the first Indonesian school and was created in 1922 by SuwardiSuryaningrat. See Antarika's lecture: "Brief Introduction to Taman Siswa," Asian Culture Research Institute of Asian Cultural Complex, Gwangju, South Korea, August 25, 2014.

[68] Huang Chien-Hung, "Archiving as an Asian Art Practice," Shortlists, *Asia Art Archive essay online* https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/shortlist-archiving-as-an-asian-art-practice (Accessed May 2019). For a general introduction to art and the archive, see in particular Merewether Charles (ed.), *The Archive* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).

[69] Interview with the artist in his studio in Phnom Penh, February 2019.

gaze from the team of the Fukuoka Museum, and later from the Art Asia Archive in Hong Kong, transformed the way Singaporean archivist Koh Nguang How considered his collection of archives, provoking him to shift toward its artistic dimension.[70] Koh's engagement with archives is a personal drive, but his practice has greatly influenced the local art scene and many artists conducted research from his collection. Ho Tzu Nyen, for instance, approached him when he was working on his documentary *4x4: Episodes of Singapore Art* (2005), a series of television episodes discussing significant artworks of Singapore. Ascribing value to the archives as a form of historical knowledge and reactivating them in a creative practice, Koh might have contributed to nourishing what Kevin Chua called the Singaporean "archive fever" that arose from the 2000s onwards.[71] As we will see, a great number of research-based artworks from Southeast Asia rely on archival material and the practices of collecting, questioning or creating archives. Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê, for instance, began his investigations on the US-Vietnam war by weaving found images, movie posters or representations of the conflict. For their part, Wah Nu and Aung have been collecting a wide variety of things from their daily life since 2009 as a way to portray their life and encapsulate the memory of their times. Entitled *1000 Pieces (of White)*, this ongoing series consists of artefacts that range from pages of comic books, newspaper clippings, a soccer ball and a portrait of General Aung San, all whitewashed with paint, a gesture that evokes the passage of time, censorship, but also the ephemeral quality of memory.

From the 2000s onwards, photojournalism and photography re-emerged as well as important mediums for investigative processes of creation in the region.[72] In Indonesia, Swan Ti Ng and Purnomo Edy created the PannaFoto Institute in 2006, a non-profit organisation based in Jakarta aiming at teaching photography and photo stories through classes, exhibitions, grants and workshops.[73] Three important festivals with a regional scope were created: in Cambodia, Angkor Photo Festival founded

[70] Interview with the artist in Singapore, May 2019. See Chap. 2.

[71] Chua Kevin, "Archive as Figure in Singapore Contemporary Art," *Art Journal*, 77:4 (2008).

[72] Photography had for instance already a long history in Cambodia. See especially Zhuang Wubin, "Mekong Spring: Cambodian Photography in the last decade," Asia Art Archive Essay, 2012. https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/mekong-spring-cambodian-photography-in-the-last-decade/type/essays.

[73] Zhuang Wubin, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (NUS Press 2016), 66.

in 2005,[74] and Photo Phnom Penh in 2008,[75] followed by the founding of Photo Yangon in Myanmar. Even though these events were mainly organised by foreigners, they had an impact on the development of local photography, especially through the numerous workshops initiated within the framework of these festivals in countries where photography classes are still rare.[76] Often free, they push the artists to engage in investigative fieldwork in their surroundings and contribute greatly to the development of photography as a medium for research, even though many of the participants are engaged in journalism rather than in artistic practices.[77] The impact of photojournalism during the Saffron Revolution in 2007 in Myanmar also pushed young people to embrace photography as a means to testify to the reality of their country.[78] This renaissance of photography in the late 2000s operated a "shift in aesthetic practice towards the documentary and archival,"[79] probably influenced as well in Cambodia by RithyPanh's documentary cinema, which is based on witness and re-enactment.[80] Today, many of the young Cambodian artists whose practices are research-based are working with photography or moving images.

[74] Angkor Photo Festival is the longest-running international photo festival of Southeast Asia. It is run by a non-profit association and was established by a committee of diverse photographers eager to promote the language of photography in the region.

[75] Photo Phnom Penh was created by Christian Caujolle and is supported by the French Institute.

[76] In Cambodia, for example, there is still no specific department for photography at the Royal University of Fine Arts. Mark Remissa, who is a photographer and who is among the first Cambodian artists to teach photography there, teaches it in the department of communication with a stress on photojournalism and not on art. Interview with the artist, Phnom Penh, 27 February 2019.

[77] Since 2008, the Yangon Photo Festival created by Christophe Loviny is giving awards to photo documentaries created during free workshops that are taking place in many regions of the country. It aims at training young photojournalist eager to document the political, social and economic transition of their country.

[78] For the first time, citizen-journalists and photojournalists managed to get over censorship and send to international press agencies images of the demonstration and its violent governmental repression. See in particular the documentary film *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country*, 2008.

[79] Corey Pamela N. "Urban Imaginaries in Cambodian Contemporary Art," in *Connect: Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology: Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia* (Berlin, Germany: The Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, 2013), 118.

[80] Hamilton Annette, "Witness and Recuperation: Cambodia's New Documentary Cinema," *Concentric: Literacy and Cultural Studies* 39.1 (March 2013): 7–30.

3.2 Generative Possibilities

At the core of the development of research-based art practices is the desire to learn, to produce and transmit knowledge. What is important here is therefore to look at the possibilities and conditions for such a motivation to materialise, namely a relative freedom, access to resources and education, time (meaning funding or supporting structures), and the ability to communicate about these processes of work. Globalisation and international institutions foster these kinds of practices as well.

A Relative Freedom

Despite the persistence of various forms of censorship, and the globally poor rating of Southeast Asian countries in the Freedom Index,[81] artists in Southeast Asia have seen their freedom increase with time, and the development of contemporary practices reflects such freedom and independence. However, this freedom remains fragile and relative withblurry rules of the game. Emblematic of this ambiguity, in Thailand, all topics related to the royal family are still taboo due to the laws of *lese-majeste* that protect the kings.[82] Arin Rungjang has nevertheless created a research-based art installation dealing with the royal crown of Siam, *Mongkut* (2014), without any interference from the authorities.[83] Artworks based on research might also better escape the control of censorship: their multi-layered and complex features make them more difficult to understand by the board of censorship. As we will see, this is why research-based practices can lead to a new form of cultural activism. Tada Hengsapkul's *The Shards Would Shatter at Touch* (2017) which directly addresses freedom of expression in Thailand was for instance censored in Bangkok,[84] while *You lead me down,*

[81] See in particular the website of Reporters without borders, which is rating all countries according to their freedom of information (World Press Freedom Index). It clearly shows how much civil rights and freedom of expression remain a concern in all the countries of Southeast Asia. https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2019 (Accessed April 2019).

[82] Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code "criminalizes any comments or behaviour that is determined by the state to insult the Thai king, the heir-apparent or the regent (if there is one). Violators can be imprisoned for up to 15 years for each violation." Chambers Paul and Waitoolkiat Napisa, "Thailand's Thwarted Democratization," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 47, 2020: 164.

[83] Interview with the artist, January 19, 2018.

[84] See Chotpradit Thanavi, "Of Art and Absurdity: Military, Censorship, and Contemporary Art in Thailand," *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture*, 3(1) (2018): 5–25.

to the ocean (2018), the artist's multi-layered installation based on research, was not, even though it is very critical towards Thailand's army and the violence of the military. However, some taboos remain, especially when the works directly challenge local narratives: in Vietnam, for example, artworks dealing with the issue of the "boat people" are still strictly censored and Tiffany Chung's series of work has never been exhibited there. This ban did not stop many local artists from undertaking research about the topic and to address the issue, though, but they cannot do it publicly. Zoe Butt points to the artists' anxiety to speak out freely when they meet foreign collectors, curators or journalists.[85] Like in Myanmar, art galleries still need to send ahead the list of the exhibited artworks for approval.

In Myanmar, censorship officially ended in 2012, but the Censorship Board, created in 1962 and dedicated to selecting the "appropriate" artworks, still exists. Moreover, there is a new and ambiguous censorship, harder to define and harder to predict. The artists do not know where to fix the limits of their freedom, and thus tend to apply self-censorship to their work.[86] Since the 2021 coup, this tendency has increased. The military is occupying most of the positions in Government and is also at the head of every public institution including universities. Under these circumstances, the artists remain cautious. Many of them, from the older generation, have experienced prison, and the general feeling is to avoid confrontation.

Censorship in Singapore has been largely publicised in the famous case of Joseph Ng, whose 1994 censored performance resulted in a 10-year ban of performance art in the country.[87] From 2000 onwards, the policy seems to have eased, especially with the official and massive support of contemporary art by the government in the framework of its various strategies to become the regional hub of creative industries.[88] Because of this

[85] Butt Zoe Talk M+ Matters *Reorient: conversations on south and southeast Asia*, 30 November-2 December 2017, Hong Kong.

[86] Carlson Melissa, "Art versus Artifice: Contemplating Burmese Contemporary Art," *Orientations* Volume 46 number 4 (2015):100–102.

[87] Lingham Susie, "Art and Censorship in Singapore: Catch 22?" *Art Asia Pacific magazine* Issue 76 Nov/Dec 2011. http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/76/ArtAndCensorship InSingaporeCatch22.

[88] For example, through the 2000 Renaissance City Plan and 2003 Singapore's Creative Industries Development Strategy. See for instance Turner Caroline and St John Barclay Glen, "Singapore: A case study," in *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner, (Pandanus Books, 2005), 267–277.

support, self-censorship might be the major concern today: up to 85% of the art scene is funded by the government, an amount which might jeopardise the independence of the artist with the State.[89] However, according to the artists I met in Singapore, self-censorship does not prevent them for doing research freely. The research activity can be perceived as an independent practice that is less sensitive to any form of censorship. Academic books, for example, are numerous in Singapore and easily accessible at the National Library. Artist and researcher Ho Rui An, who praises the large and accessible digital archives and literature resources of the country, believes that the government does not feel threatened by academic literature because it does not reach a large audience.[90] Censorship can be insidious, though. When Koh Nguang How exhibited *Errata* at the National University of Singapore in 2006, the artist was asked to present the archives within closed showcases so that people could not touch them. This display undermined greatly the power of the installation which depended on directly engaging the public's participation in the material in finding the error.[91]

The Question of Funding and Support

As far as public funding or support is concerned, which is an essential feature for often time-absorbing research processes, countries are far from equal. At one extreme is the substantive yet controversial support from the government in Singapore, at the other a total absence of support in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar or Vietnam. In a country like Laos, where contemporary artistic languages still struggle to be recognised and are not supported by the government, there are no research-based artworks yet.[92] In Myanmar, those practices remain scarce, due in part to the absence of structures and financial support for artists, and to a still limited art market

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[89] A figure extracted from Harmon Steph, "Art v government in Singapore," *The Guardian* Sep.9 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/09/art-v-government-at-singapore-festival-i-fear-once-i-leave-they-will-punish-me.

[90] Interview with the artist over the phone, May 2019.

[91] Interview with the artist in Singapore, May 16, 2019.

[92] Lao artist Bounpaul Phothyzan, for example, confesses how isolated he is now that he turned towards more contemporary languages, being at once rejected by the art community and censored by the government. He explores socially-engaged forms of art to promote dialogues and to open people to contemporary art practices, but he still needs to paint in a traditional way to make a living. Interview with the artist, Vientiane November 2018.

where these artworks are not commercially valorised.[93] There are obvious potential conflicts between government support for contemporary art and the development of research-based art practices: would a government support practices that aim at challenging its authority, or the system on which its authority is based?

The first answer is that this is why critical contemporary practices such as research-based art practices are not financially nor structurally supported in most countries in the region: public funding is generally dedicated to traditional forms of art that are deemed less critical. Antariksa's research about the connections between artists and the Japanese during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia during WWII is for instance not supported by any public funding.[94] In Indonesia, although the nationalists initially supported the Japanese in the hope of gaining independence against the Dutch, the Japanese occupation is remembered as a difficult time because of the cruelty of the Japanese.[95] Antariksa does not directly challenge this perception but aims at further examining the implication of the Japanese on the art world. While the Dutch did not encourage local artistic output, the Japanese, for instance, fostered Indonesian art, funding venues, workshops and materials. According to the artist, this narrative is deemed too positive to fit the official narratives and is notably extremely unpopular because it points to the involvement of Indonesian artists in Japanese propaganda. However, in Thailand, the authorities financed Arin Rungjang's *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none* (2017) although the installation revives the debate over the origin of Thai democracy, bringing back the 1932 coup that led to the first constitutional monarchy, against the royalist and dominant views that see Prajadhipok (King Rama VII) as the father of Thai democracy.[96]

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[93] Most of the works attracting foreign tourists and collectors today in Myanmar are paintings representing monks, traditional scenes of daily life, portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi or exotic landscapes. See Carlson Melissa, "Art versus Artifice: Contemplating Burmese Contemporary Art," *Orientations* Volume 46 number 4 (2015): 100–102.

[94] Interview with the artist in Taichung, Taiwan, Oct. 4th, 2019.

[95] Tim Hannigan, for instance, summarises this perception of history when he writes: "the three-and-a-half-years during which Japan controlled Indonesia were far more brutal and oppressive than the three-and-a-half centuries that the Dutch had spent in the archipelago." Hannigan Tim, *A Brief History of Indonesia* (Tokyo, Vermont, Singapore: Tuttle, 2015).

[96] Chotpradit Thanavi, "A Dark Spot on a Royal Space: The Art of the People's Party and the Politics of Thai (Art) History," *Southeast of Now*, Vol.1 No.1 (March 2017):131–157.

The second answer is more ambiguous: when they do not challenge directly a sensitive piece of knowledge but participate in a flourishing cultural ecosystem, artists are encouraged to explore historical, social or environmental issues through their research practices. In Singapore, where research-based art practices are especially numerous, the development of art has become a public priority since the 1990s with the creation of museums and, from the 2000s with the "Renaissance city" initiative.[97] In its wake, many projects have favoured the development of research practices in the country, including the stress put on art education, residency programs, access to resources and the stimulation of art criticism. None of the artists I interviewed expressed any constraint while working in the framework of a public supported research project. One of the first research-based artworks by Ho Tzu Nyen, *4x4: Episodes of Singapore Art* (2005), a series of television episodes discussing significant artworks of Singapore, was commissioned and broadcast by the local television. The films clearly have a didactic objective, yet the artist managed to produce the pieces in his own creative way. When she exhibited at the National Museum Singapore, though, Zarina Muhammad confesses she had to downplay certain queer elements of her installation *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold* (2018), a limitation she circumvents by inviting guest lecturers addressing the subject.[98]

Paradoxically, some critical research projects about Singapore history are also supported by the government as part of a public effort undertaken to reformulate Singapore's history, especially through the *Singapore Story*, a National Education initiative launched in 1997. For Singaporean historian LohKah Seng, this initiative marks a rupture in the government's attitude towards history, considered after the independence in 1965 as an obstacle to nation-building. At that time, priority was given to modernisation, implying a rejection of the past and of traditions.[99] The founding date of Singapore was officially fixed in 1819 with the arrival of the

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[97] In 1993, the Singapore History Museum, Asian Civilization Museum, Singapore Art Museumwere established while the National Gallery Singapore opened in 2015. See for instance Chong Terence, ed., *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2018).

[98] Interview with the artist over the phone, Sept. 6, 2019.

[99] Loh Kah Seng, "Within The Singapore Story. The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 12(2) (1998):2–3.

British,[100] in order to avoid any racial unrest.[101] In 1984, some archaeological search revealed that there had been a flourishing civilisation in the place of Singapore as early as the fourteenth century and the myth of Utama re-emerged. This story, with its rich cultural lineage, is now taught at school, and a statue of Utama has been erected in 2019 along the Singapore river, not far from Stamford Raffles' one. Ho's very first artwork, *Utama: Every Name in History is I* (2003), probably contributed to this shift. Based on the *Malay Annals*, Ho's research traces back the lineage of the Prince Utama, who might have been a descendent of Alexander the Great. The work gave Ho the opportunity to give talks and lectures about Utama's story since, at that time, only a few people knew about him. As such, he participates in questioning the established history of the foundation of Singapore, hitherto starting with the arrival of Raffles, yet the work was later purchased by the National Gallery Singapore, reflecting public support for such a practice. Likely, the Thai government supported Arin Rungjang installation's *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none* (2017) exhibited at Documenta 13: although the artist does not challenge directly the Thai symbol of democracy and the country's historiography, he nevertheless links the building of the Democracy Monument in Bangkok with the military power and Thai collaboration with the Nazis during WWII. As such, he disrupts established knowledge and points to events that are absent from Thai school textbooks and especially sensitive.[102] However, the artist's point of departure is a personal story—the death of his father beaten by neo-Nazis, and the work, even though based on historical archival material, remains inside this individual framework. Rungjang conceives it as a poetic artwork and this non-political reading might have allowed him to benefit from public funding.[103]

[100] Thomas Stamford Raffles first landed in Singapore on 28th January 1819. Under his statue along the river, it is said that he "changed the destiny of Singapore from an obscure fishing village to a great seaport and modern metropolis." (From a site visit, May 2019).

[101] Loh, "Within The Singapore Story. The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," Ibid., 13–14.

[102] Art historian Thanavi Chotpradit emphasises how much recently "the debate over the origin of democracy and the possession of sovereign power has resurfaced as a war between royalist and electoral democracies." Chotpradit Thanavi, "A Dark Spot on a Royal Space: The Art of the People's Party and the Politics of Thai (Art) History," *Southeast of Now*, Vol.1 No.1 (March 2017):136.

[103] Phone interview with the artist, Sept. 14, 2020.

With the establishment of the Singapore Biennale in 2006, the country is also fostering regional research-based practices. *The Name*, by Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung, and *Memory of the Blind Elephant* (2016), a research project about the colonial history of rubber plantations in Vietnam by Phuong Linh Nguyen featured for instance in the 2016 edition.[104] However, many scholars and art practitioners are more critical towards Singapore's art public art funding and the increased dependence of the artists on the government.[105] To guarantee their independence, there are numerous non-public initiatives that favour research-based practices outside the framework of public institutions. Founded in 2007 precisely as a response to the public program Renaissance and "for the art world to disentangle from institutions," Post-Museum an independent open platform which fosters research and transdisciplinary collaborations among a wide range of collective activities.[106] Private institutions such as the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICA) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) contribute as well to create a dynamic and independent cultural ecosystem. The latter opened its research centre in 2013, the Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, which proposes residency programs and officially engages in "knowledge production and dissemination." Singapore artist Jason Wee, for instance, developed there in 2016–2017 a part of his larger research project *The City That Eats Itself, Lives*, focusing on urban development and cycles of demolition and erasure in the Asian urban landscapes.[107] Ho Tzu Nyen spent 7 months there in 2019–2020 delving into Southeast Asian political histories and systems.

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[104] Singapore Biennale 2016, *An Atlas of Mirrors*, Oct.2016–Feb.2017.

[105] Woon notes for example that this government-led cultural development tends to confine art to a "market-driven, decorative and non-disruptive" role in Woon Tien Wei Still, "Here Somehow: Artists and Cultural Activism in Singapore's Renaissance," *On Curating* Issue 35, (2017):12. Patricia Chen underpins the increased dependence of the artists on the government: "the local arts community either works for the government or relies on it for project funding or acquisitions" In Chen Patricia, "Double Hatting", *Art Asia Pacific Magazine* Issue 114 (Jul/Aug 2019): 48). Terence Chong observes that bureaucrats are today the "de facto connoisseur and patron of art in Singapore." in Chong Terence, ed., *State and the Arts in Singapore, the: Policies and Institutions* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing 2018), xx.

[106] Post-Museum was founded by activists-artists Jennifer Teo and Woon Tien Wei. See Sanchez Carolina, "Interview with the Founders of POST-MUSEUM: Jennifer Teo and Woon Tien Wei," *On Curating* 41 (June 2019): 104.

[107] Interview with the artist over the phone, May 2019.

In Singapore, public and private local support of contemporary art, even though controversial, is thus clearly a factor that contributes to the artists' growing interest in academic research and fieldwork which offers them the possibilities to engage in such processes. On the other hand, independent artists from other countries in the region rely mainly on private, international or non-governmental funding to engage in research processes. In Vietnam, for example, the state supports exclusively traditional art made in keeping with socialist realist canons, or with modernism, and overarchingly rejects contemporary art. There are thus very few exhibitions organised by public institutions dedicated to contemporary art and no specific funding available for any research practice. For Vietnamese artist and curator Tran Luong, there are currently three groups of artists in the country: the artists who are dependent on the state and whose works reflect the desires of the Communist Party, a thriving and relatively autonomous group of commercial artists, and a small group of creative, experimental and independent artists who are struggling to survive.[108] The artists engaged in research belong to this last group. They mainly find support in collectives and community-led art spaces or in foreign local institutions, such as the French Institute or the Goethe Institute, which also play an essential role in Cambodia and Myanmar, facilitating networking and providing space and logistic for exhibitions and workshops. The first edition of *The Name* by Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung was exhibited at the Goethe Institute in Yangon in 2015.[109]

The artists also rely on international institutions that collect, exhibit, support and research about art from the region such as the ASEAN Cultural Fund, the Fukuoka Art Museum, Brisbane Queensland's Art Gallery, the Asia Society New York and the Japan Foundation.[110] Dinh Q. Lê's installation *Mot Coi Di Ve* (*Spending One's Life Trying to Find One's Way Home*) (1999) was exhibited in 2005 at the Asia Society in

[108] Tran Luong, "Interactive-Art in Development Projects for Everyday Life." Conference text from the 2015 Asian Art and Curators Forum organised by the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. Courtesy of the artist, 2015.

[109] *Building Histories*, a group exhibition curated by Iola Lenzi at the Goethe Institut, Feb.-March 2015.

[110] More on the institutions that support Asian contemporary art see for instance Turner Caroline and Antoinette Michelle, Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making (Australia: ANU Press, 2014).

New York.[111] Biennales, triennials, and Documenta, as mentioned before, also play a critical role for supporting Asian contemporary practices in general and research-based art practices in particular.[112] *Preah Kunlong* (2017) by Khvay Samnang was entirely financed by Documenta, including the artist's fieldtrips in the Areng Valley, in the Koh Kong Province. Khvay recalls that he never received any funding from the Cambodian government for his projects. Without such funding, artists are not able to afford to engage in long investigation processes.

Some foreign funding sources have been controversial, though, as they tend to serve too obviously the interests of the donors. This is especially the case in Cambodia where non-governmental organisations are numerous. While their support has been critical to promote artistic creation from 1992 when the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established to restore peace in the country after the Khmer rouge regime, they tend to dictate their claims and to finance exclusively artistic projects dealing with the Khmer Rouge genocide.[113] However, many of the artists did not wish to address such a painfully recent traumatic experience and viewed this financial support as a means of pressure.[114] Some revolted against what they saw as their independence loss: "with over 3,000 registered NGOs here, a culture of dependency leaves Cambodians with no sense of ownership. We want to see Cambodian people own their creativity, narratives, and ultimately their destinies."[115] Most of the artists engaged in research today explore more contemporary issues such as the living conditions of Cambodian migrant workers, the disappearance of the local indigenous population or the growing urbanisation

[111] "Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium, The Art of Dinh Q. Lê," curated by Melissa Chiu, Asia Society New York Sept. 2005 to Jan. 2006.

[112] On the impact of biennale, triennials and documenta on the development of Asian contemporary art see Gardner Anthony and Green Charles, *Biennale, Triennials and Documenta: the exhibitions that created Contemporary Art* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

[113] Corey Pamela, The 'First' Cambodian Contemporary Artist, *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* (2014):64.

[114] LinDaSaphan remembers how these NGO "dictated their claims," and put the pressure on the artists to investigate about the Khmer rouge period and their trauma, a stance she strongly disagreed with: "we should face history when we are ready to do so, and not when we are asked to do so." Phone interview with the artist, Jan. 24, 2019.

[115] Statement of Studio Revolt, an independent artist-run collective founded in 2011 by AnidaYoeu Ali and Masahiro Sugano. http://studio-revolt.com/?page_id=5 (Accessed Nov. 14, 2019).

of the country and its ecological impact. Their engagement in research allows them to delve into those topics in their own way and, potentially, to produce and disseminate their own artistic form of knowledge.

Beyond national borders, the local communities and independent art spaces are strongly interconnected and support each other. Artists are often staying for a residency or coming along for sharing sessions, festivals or workshops at Nha San Collective in Hanoi (founded in 1998 as an artist studio), San Art in Ho Chi Minh City (created in 2007), Sa Sa Art Projects in Phnom Penh (established in 2010) or at Tentacle in Bangkok (opened in 2014). This interconnection favours art exchanges, mentorships and stimulates research engagement. During her residency time spent at Sa Sa Art Projects, for instance, Vietnamese artist Mai Nguyen Thi Tank discovered and met the stateless Vietnamese community living along the frontier in Cambodia. Her fieldwork resulted in *Day By Day* (2014), a multi-media installation that addresses the issue of migration and identity in the country. Other important regional spaces are notably Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, ARCUS and Tokyo Wonder Site (TWS) in Japan which launched their residency programs in respectively 1994 and 2006. Cambodian artists Khvay Samnang (in 2010) and Lim Sokchanlina (in 2018) developed research-based works while in residency in the latter. Artists also share information about existing grants and private funding. Founded in 1998 by genocide survivor and musician ArnChorn-Pond, Dam Dos ('Plant and Grow'), for example, funded Cambodian artist Sao Sreymao for her fieldwork about the populations living along the Mekong River in the Kratie province, in the northeast of the country. Her 2018 exhibition, *Under The Water*, held at Sa Sa Arts Project, was also supported by the Rei Foundation Limited, a private and environmental-driven foundation from New Zealand. Some of these independent art spaces and communities have created special links with international residency programmes where research is promoted. Thao PhanNguyen was one of the artists in residency in 2013 who benefited from the exchange programme created between San Art and Béton Salon, a French non-profit organisation dedicated to projects involving both artistic and academic practices. She then developed a research-based multi-media art practices mainly based on archives and historical research, such as *Tropical Siesta* series (2015–2017) based on the manuscripts of Alexander de Rhodes. From the same generation, Tran Minh Duc developed a work and research about Vietnamese eighteenth century Prince Canh during his residency at Béton Salon in 2016. As for Antariksa, he expanded there in 2017 his investigations on

the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia and conducted research on Japanese painters involved in Japanese propaganda who previously lived in Paris, such as Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita.

Education and Artists' Discourse

The current quality of national tertiary education is still weak in most countries of Southeast Asia, with poor funding in higher education and research. "Most knowledge about the developing world and the transition societies is still produced outside the region to which it pertains. (…) Research on Indonesia, for example, may be extensively done by foreign scholars, affiliated to universities or research institutions around the globe, rather than Indonesian nationals or scholars attached to its local institutions."[116] During colonial times and except in the Philippines where they developed earlier, social sciences were not taught in local universities with the exception of economics, probably judged more useful to the region by the colonisers.[117] Today, these fields, including humanities, are particularly under-developed. They "occupy the lowest place in terms of status and career opportunities in the hierarchy of disciplines," and the field of history is probably the least popular discipline due to its limited career opportunities.[118] Local governments' funding remains weak and research is thus mostly financed by foreign funding bodies, favouring a type of research and research areas that respond to the donors' interests (sociology, for instance, is encouraged by NGO-sponsor research, but seldom history or political sciences).[119] In Myanmar, where education is based on a rote learning system, the good students are encouraged to

[116] Gerke Solvay and Evers Hans-Dieter, "Globalizing Local Knowledge: Social Science Research on Southeast-Asia, 1970–2000" *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* Vol.21, No1 (2006): 4.

[117] Gungwu Wang, "Post-imperial Knowledge and Pre-Social Science in Southeast Asia". In Goh Beng-Lan (Editor). *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region.* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 71.

[118] Krishna Usha and Krishna Venni V., "2010 World Social Science Report: Knowledge Divides. Social Sciences in South Asia," *International Social Science Council, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, 2010:12.

[119] Here some nuances need to be added since not all these international bodies are exclusively European or American, for instance the Asian Development Bank. See Krishna Usha and Krishna Venni V., "2010 World Social Science Report: Knowledge Divides. Social Sciences in South Asia," *International Social Science Council, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, 2010:3.

study medicine and engineering while history is perceived as a discipline for the bad students.[120] Some scholars compare the country to a society that would have become "intellectually blind,"[121] and Jacques Leider acknowledges that teaching has not much evolved since 1948, in particular, as far as history is concerned.[122] Most of the people I interviewed confessed that they had left school without knowing anything about history. Similarly, in Cambodia, "activities deemed economically" unprofitable "—like quality literary academic publishing, public libraries, creative arts, and research teaching in the humanities—are marginalised, resulting in increased dependency on outside funding."[123] During French rule, Cambodian education was not developed and, in 1945, there were still no schools outside the capital.[124] The Khmer Rouge period worsened the situation with the systematic destruction of intellectual and cultural life. Even if schools started to re-open nine months after the end of the regime, the consequences of such a trauma and eradication are still deeply felt.[125] Today, the education system is only slowly recovering and a vast endeavour is still needed: according to scholar Philippe Peycam, "generic definitions associated with "academia" and "scholarship" have taken on more fundamental meanings in post-conflict Cambodia: scholars and artists must now be "educators," "transmitters," and "institution builders."[126]

[120] From interviews with former doctor and now photographer MinzayarOo and artist Maung Day, Yangon, February 2018.

[121] Ma Thida, a Burmese writer, interviewed in Education in Myanmar No questions asked, *The Economist* December 2, 2017.

[122] Jacques Leider, head of the Bangkok-based *Ecole Française de l'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) and a well-known advisor to the Myanmar military's Armed Forces Historical Museum in Naypyidaw, E-mail interview with the author, Mar. 21, 2018.

[123] Peycam, Philippe M.F. Sketching an Institutional History of Academic Knowledge Production in Cambodia (1863–2009). *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 2011): 29.

[124] In his memoirs, Sam Rainsy recalls that "Prior to the 1930s, the French spent virtually nothing on building a Cambodian education system. The first Khmer language newspaper was not published until 1936, compared with 1864 in Thailand, 1901 in Vietnam and 1911 in Burma. Very few avenues were open to the small number of educated Khmer: commerce was dominated by the Chinese, the civil service by the Vietnamese." Rainsy Sam, *We Didn't Start The Fire, My Struggle for Democracy in Cambodia* (Silkworm Books 2013), 12.

[125] Sokhom Hean, "Education in Cambodia: highland minorities in the present context of development," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5:1 (2004): 141–2.

[126] Peycam, Philippe M.F. Sketching an Institutional History of Academic Knowledge Production in Cambodia (1863–2009). *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 2011): 30.

Most research-based artworks respond to these gaps with the artists' desire to become these "transmitters," to learn what they were not taught, to discover what has been neglected or forgotten, and to contribute to produce, in their own way, local and autonomous forms of knowledge.

Hence, in many of the local non-profit art spaces, education is emphasised. Beyond some teaching of English, with the English language still being the "de facto lingua franca" for the scholars of the region,[127] priority is also given to the development of the ability of the artists to express verbally and critically their intentions and their concept of work. Until now, and with the exception of Singapore, artists' discourses might be perceived as a weak point in the regional art scene. In Myanmar, Isabel Ching argues that because of the lack of education and critical thinking, even if the open door policy resulted in a flow of new ideas, many artists do not know how to articulate their process of work, and do not have a clear idea of what they pursue.[128] Jay Koh notes that one cannot compare the situations of all the countries in Southeast Asia, save in respect to their common lack of critical discourse "due partly to the unwillingness of individuals to theorise their practice, the inability to initiate an open examination of power relationships, and the lack of command of a discursive language to combine theory and experience into a form of translatable knowledge."[129] These observations are rather blunt and the situation is changing, yet it is true that local cultures do not encourage theorisation. Many artists from the region confess that they seldom read books and are often reluctant to write. Decades of colonisation and low access to culture and education have limited the development of writing and reading skills. In Cambodia, the founding of the Reyum Institute in late 1998 promoted both traditional and contemporary languages but above all favoured education and research. The founders, Ingrid Muan and Daravuth Ly, published books in the Khmer language in order to encourage people and artists to read,[130]

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[127] Victor Savage analyses the impact of the domination of English language on the development of local scholarly work in Savage Victor R. Problems of tertiary education and regional academic journals: A view from Southeast Asia, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol.52, No2 (August 2011): 219–227.

[128] Ching Isabel, "Art from Myanmar," *Third Text*, 25:4 (2011): 436–437.

[129] Koh Jay in conversation with Kester Grant H. and Chu Yuan In Ly Boreth and Taylor Nora, ed., *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: an anthology* (Ithaca, United States: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 242.

[130] Thompson Ashley, Forgetting to Remember, Again, *DIACRITICS* Volume 41.2 The Johns Hopkins University Press (2013): 84.

since most of the books hitherto were in French,[131] or had been destroyed. Besides, in cultures based on apprenticeship, like in Cambodia, knowledge is traditionally transmitted orally and from master to student.[132] Cambodian artists, for example, tend to value lived experience and exchanges with people as a way to learn.[133]

Developing an artist's discourse is today indispensable in order to reach international institutions but it is also essential for research-based practices which often require a contextualisation and a verbal description of the artist's process of work. It also encourages artists to define their research topic and approach it from a critical perspective. This priority has now been identified, together with the general weakness of the education system of these countries. A great number of collective libraries are opening, such as the Rumah Attap Library in Kuala Lumpur,[134] Dambaul in Phnom Penh,[135] and non-profit art spaces also provide books and workshops for developing art discourses. At Sa Sa Art Projects, for example, artist Khvay Samnang teaches his students to conceptualise their thoughts and asks them to present their works in English, while his wife helps them to fill in application forms for residency programs or grants.[136] At San Art in Ho Chi Minh City, Australian curator and director Zoe Butt stimulated critical thinking through many workshops, exhibitions, artists in residency and educational programs, stressing on education, political and research-based artworks. In particular, she promoted the development and articulation of

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[131] Interview with Cambodian anthropologist Ang Choulean, Siem Reap March 2019. See also Peycam Philippe M.F. "Sketching an Institutional History of Academic Knowledge Production in Cambodia (1863–2009)" *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 2011):16–35.

[132] Interview with ethnographer Ang Choulean, Siem Reap Feb. 2019. See also, for Myanmar, Chu Yuan in conversation with Kester Grant H. and Jay Koh In Ly Boreth and Taylor Nora, ed., *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: an anthology* (Ithaca, United States: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 246.

[133] Interview with Erin Gleeson, Phnom Penh October 2016.

[134] This library space was opened in 2007 by Malaysian artist Au Sow-Yee who considers that there is still a lack of space for critical debates and exchanges in Malaysia and a need for education about historiography, anthropology and cultural studies. From an e-mail interview with the artist, September 2019.

[135] This independent reading room opened in 2019 in order to encourage artists to read and make research. It originates from the private initiative of Meta Moeng, who is also the assistant of artist Sopheap Pich.

[136] I spent one day with his students who alternatively presented me their projects in English, in September 2018.I was struck by his emphasis on the articulation of their statement.

artists' discourses as an essential step to conceptualize and present any research outcome.[137] The dialogue between artists, curators and writers, historians or scientists has been constantly nurtured to open multi-disciplinary perspectives, which is a key element for research-based practices. One of the most important projects was San Art Laboratory (2012–2016), the first locally and independently driven artist-in-residency program in Vietnam. In total, 24 resident artists stayed in Ho Chi Minh for 6 months, and each session was closed by a public exhibition. Ngoc Nau, after a disappointing Masters in art history and theory at the University of Fine Arts in Hanoi took part in the 2013 San Art Laboratory session that radically changed her art practice towards more research-based processes.[138]

In Myanmar, there is no such space as San Art where artists can learn to conduct research and articulate their own process of work. There are some non-profit spaces, though, but they focus rather on socially engaged art and do not specifically favour research.[139] Besides, despite the development of the Internet, there is still a scarcity of information and books. Even though universities are now improving, both in Yangon and in Mandalay, the notion of scholarship is still alien to most of the students. The library of the history department at the Yangon University is very small, and some books are under lock and key.[140] While research-based practices imply the ability to pursue a consistent and long-term research agenda, an access to sources and knowledge about how to retrieve and read information, as well as a culture of critical thinking, these three features and conditions are therefore still underdeveloped in the country.

In Indonesia, under the rule of Suharto, the education system was highly centralised and mainly oriented towards the state ideology, Pancasila.[141] Furthermore, a tendency towards corruption contributed to fuel a defiance towards any institutionalised knowledge. It is in this context that artist-historian Antariksa founded KUNCI in 1999 in Yogyakarta conceived as an open and critical educational and multi-disciplinary platform. "The idea behind establishing an independent platform away from

[137] Interview with Zoe Butt, Ho Chi Minh City, November 2017.
[138] Interview with the artist, Hanoi, November 2017.
[139] See for instance *New Zero Art Space* founded in 2008 by performance artist Aye Ko.
[140] Interview with Ian Holliday, March 2018 at Hong Kong University.
[141] See in particular the report on education written by the Lowy Institute, an independent Australian think tank: Rosser Andrew, "Beyond access: Making Indonesia's education system work," Lowy Institute (Feb. 2018).

the official academia was mainly because at that time our trust in the art university was very limited. Mainly due to the fact that all the education institutions back then, especially those related to the arts and culture, were mostly supported and strictly controlled by the military regime."[142] Despite recent efforts to improve the education system after the fall of the New Order in 1998, in particular with increased budgets, the quality of the education and the learning outcomes for students remain poor. Although the banning of books is now forbidden in the country, Antariksa notes that there are still many ways to thwart research.[143] Against these limitations, the KUNCI Cultural Studies Center keeps experimenting news modes of learning, welcoming research residencies, fostering networking and transdisciplinary collaborations between artists and scholars from various fields and countries.[144] In particular, in 2016, KUNCI launched the School of Improper Education, a project of a school that constantly questions the process of learning and experiments other means towards knowledge, outside any normative forms.[145] Inspired by the Taman Siswa system (which means "Garden of Students"), an educational system created in the 1920s as a counter-system to the Dutch mode of education, perceived as infantilising, it draws also from Jacques Rancière's concept of the ignorant master, according to which an ignorant master can teach his student something he does not know.[146] The mindset of this experimental and collective form of research, which embraces all disciplines and addresses also non-artists participants, is thus different from other independent spaces such as Sa Sa Art Projects: artists are not

[142] Fernandez David, "In conversation with Antariksa," *Culture360 online magazine*, 15 Feb. 2019. https://culture360.asef.org/magazine/in-conversation-with-antariksa-i-co-founder-of-kunci-cultural-studies-centre-yogyakarta-indonesia/ (Accessed Nov. 23, 2019).

[143] Interview with the artist in Taichung, Taiwan, Oct. 4, 2019.

[144] In 2021, for instance, KUNCI co-organizes with the LASALLE College of the Arts from Singapore and the International Institute for Asian Studies from the Netherlands a 6-days research and symposiums with scholars on the theme of "Cultural Precarities: Reading Independent Art Collectives and Cultural Networks in Asia," in Yogyakarta. A pamphlet was also published by the collective: *Letters: The classroom is burning, let's dream about a School of Improper Education* (UK: Inpress Book, 2020).

[145] More on this project, see the article written by Ferdiansyah Thajib, a member of KUNCI: Thajib Ferdiansyah, "Lessons in Impropriety," C& Print (7) (12 June 2017). https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/lessons-in-impropriety/ (Accessed Sept. 3, 2020).

[146] Rancière Jacques, *The ignorant schoolmaster* (Stanford University Press, 1991 (French original version 1987).

supported to integrate international art circuits, for instance by articulating a statement in English to present their artworks, but are encouraged to develop their own relationships with knowledge and their own mode of knowledge production.

As far as academic education is concerned, Singapore stands out with its high level of education, promoted by the state willingness to take the lead in art scholarship development in the region, especially since 1995 when the government initiated an ambitious project called Singapore Global City of the Arts.[147] Contrary to pioneer Koh Nguang How, who did not go to university and stopped his studies at high school,[148] and whose practice is based on his own collection of archives and sense of observation, most of the artists engaged in research-based art practices have a strong academic background. This is the case of Ho Tzu Nyen whose artistic practice stems from his passion for academic research, but also of Jack Tan, who is a former lawyer and holds a PhD, and Erika Tan, who studied social anthropology and archaeology and who presents herself as an artist and a researcher. Among the younger generation, Zarina Muhammad spent ten years studying shamanism in Southeast Asia and Ho Rui An, who graduated in anthropological studies, is also a writer.[149]

The Building of Memory: Zeitgeist, Archives and Historiography Fever

More generally, research-based art practices are nurtured by an increased interest in history and historiography, social or environmental issues as well as in traditions, popular beliefs, and local folklore that responds to the current need to challenge the existing state of things and recover precolonial cultures and identities but also pre-capitalistic forms of societies against the backdrop of the rapid and radical social and economic transformations of the last decades. Besides the civil wars, military coups or

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[147] Wardani Farah, "Finding a place for art archives" *Wacana* Vol.20 No2 (2019): 220.

[148] Interview with the artist in Singapore, May 16, 2019. Interestingly, the artist also confesses he mostly relies on his visual memory and does not trust what is written.

[149] In 2016, for example, a panel was organised at Gillman Barracks in Singapore entitled "Economy of Need: Artist-Writers of Singapore" with Megan Miao, Susie Wong, Ho Rui An and Jason Wee, moderated by Michael Lee. The discussion pointed out to the special relationship that Singapore artists nourish with books and knowledge. Most of the talk is available online at: http://michaellee.sg/type/conversational/2016/1/21/artist-writers-sg (Accessed: 18 August 2019).

political dictatorships that characterised the second half of the twentieth century, the deep social and economic changes brought about by modernity and globalisation are radically transforming countries, calling for a desire to regain control over a reality that has become increasingly complex. Perhaps the 1997 Asian financial crisis has also contributed to the need to re-appropriate and understand a volatile reality. Artists have addressed questions of identity for a long time, especially during the building of new nation-states and early nationalistic movements,[150] but research appears as a new mode of deeper exploration, offering artists the possibility of recovering agency in the building of new societies. "What details make us 'Cambodian'? I want to reveal the internal, to archive Cambodia as much as I can. It's not for me. We have to tell the world who we are."[151] Concerned with the lack of knowledge pertaining to the history of his own country, VandyRattana was one of the first Cambodian artists to engage in research practices, pointing to the urgency of taking back the lead in the development of local knowledge and filling critically the gaps left by a history in which Cambodian people had no voice.[152]

Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the development of research-based art practices coincides with an increased interest in archives and the awareness of their paramount importance in the region since the 2000s. Hitherto, and despite the globalisation of the Internet, it was still hard to find archives and resources materials pertaining to Southeast Asian art. Farah Wardani, the former executive director of Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), underlines the lack of infrastructure dedicated to archives and observes that the existing available archives of that time had been either collected by the colonial powers, and thus located in Europe, or by post-independence governments in order to document the state institutions.[153] Besides, according to Kusno Anggawan, a large part of the

[150] In Indonesia, for instance, modern art emerged against the backdrop of the identarian issue and the nationalistic movements in the latter half of the 1930s, in particular with the Persagi painters. See Lee Joanna, "From National Identity to the Self: Theme in Modern Indonesian Art" In *Modernity and Beyond, ed.* Sabapathy T. K. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 17.

[151] Zhuang Wubin, "Mekong Spring: Cambodian Photography in the last decade," *Asia Art Archive Essay*, 2012. Available online at: https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/mekong-spring-cambodian-photography-in-the-last-decade/type/essays.

[152] Interview with the artist in Phnom Penh, March 1st, 2019. See also chapter VIII of this book.

[153] Wardani Farah, "Finding a place for art archives" *Wacana* Vol.20 No2(2019): 209–232.

existing archival material remains "untouched" by scholars and stored or hidden in depots rather than being publicly accessible. For him, "these archives are 'locked down' and in 'sleep mode'. They need to be awakened, resurrected, reread, and put back into today's context and debates."[154] In 2005, Nora Taylor was still asking the question: "What to make of places like Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam where wars, politics and ethnic conflict destroyed books, censored exhibitions, and where record keeping was seen as potentially dangerous to artists?"[155] The decade saw the multiplication of local structures dedicated to art archives, and in particular Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong in 2000; CAMSTL (Centro Audiovisual Max Stahl Timor-Leste) in 2003; IVAA, formerly the Cemeti Art Foundation, in 2006 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Doclab in Hanoi created in 2009; Thai Art Archives in Bangkok active from 2010 and the Southeast Asian art archives established in 2015 at the National Gallery Singapore. Some private initiatives aimed also at filling such a gap, such as the archival collection from the Burmese Pansodan gallery established in 2008 by Aung Soe Min and Nance Cunningham, and well-known by the local artists, or more recently, the attempt by Myanmar filmmakers Okkar and Chan Thar Kyi Soe, the brother of artist Wah Nu, to restore, preserve and gather Burmese films and thus to revive the Myanmar Film archives.[156]

The building of archives expands the art field and reflects the nations' desire to build a collective memory. In Singapore, this "archive fever" described by Kevin Chua,[157] or the "boom memory"[158] analysed by Kevin Blackburn include different public initiatives. Citizens have been heavily solicited to contribute to the national archives, either through the sharing of their personal memory (with the *Singapore Memory Project* launched in 2011 and aiming at "collecting five million memories of Singapore")[159] or

[154] E-mail conversation with the artist, June 30, 2020.

[155] Taylor A. Nora *Archive Fever in Hong Kong*, review from the workshop Archiving the Contemporary: Documenting Asian Art Today, Yesterday & Tomorrow hold at AAA (Asia Art Archive) in Hong Kong (April 2005).

[156] Film-makers race to preserve endangered film heritage, *Myanmar Times* October 14, 2016. https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/23102-film-makers-race-to-preserve-endangered-film-heritage.html.

[157] Chua Kevin, "Archive as Figure in Singapore Contemporary Art," *Art Journal*, 77:4 (2018): 62–71.

[158] Blackburn Kevin "The 'Democratization' of Memories of Singapore's Past" *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- enVolkenkunde* 169, no. 4 (2013):431–456.

[159] See in particular Blackburn, "The 'Democratization' of Memories of Singapore's Past," Ibid.

through a support to the National Archive (for example with the *Citizen Archivist Project*).[160] Culturally, people might be also influenced by Lee Kuan Yew who wrote his own account of the Singapore Story in 1998.[161] In Cambodia, and from a very different context, archives about the Khmer Rouge have been established, firstly in 1995 with the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), and then through the Bophana Centre, an audio-visual centre for archives opened in 2006 under the initiative of filmmaker RithyPanh. As these resources' centres expand, research is made easier for the artist-researcher. Yet, it is still a work in progress since most of the archives are incomplete or biased, pushing the artists to question them through their own investigations. For Koh Nguang How, who represents today the emblematic figure of the artist archivist in Singapore,[162] there is nothing valuable in the National Archive of Singapore, as the institution, despite its modernity and development, works mainly as a showpiece for the government.[163] The artist points also to its shortcomings: for instance, and according to him, the National Archive of Singapore as well as the National Library do not include in their archives any material that cannot be sourced. However, many art documentation or artists' self-published leaflets are difficult to trace back and, as such, are left aside by these institutions. His practice, on the contrary, is inclusive and, as such, more accurate.

Alongside and in direct connection with this archive fever and memory issue, artists in the region are increasingly engaged with the national narratives. I already mentioned Yap's "historiographical aesthetic"[164] and Taylor and Zitzewitz's study of history as a "figure of thought" in Southeast Asian art.[165] According to the authors, this trend, which develops in various ways and from various perspectives, tends to focus on the recent past and can be explained, in part, by the deep transformations of the society and by the inability of the institutions to produce relevant

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[160] See the official website: http://www.nas.gov.sg/citizenarchivist/About.

[161] Blackburn, "The 'Democratization' of Memories of Singapore's Past" Ibid., 435.

[162] More on the artist see in particular Taylor Nora A., "The Singapore Art Archive Project and the Institutions of Memory in Southeast Asia," In *Southeast Asia Spaces of the Curatorial* ed. Ute Meta Bauer and Brigitte Oetker (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

[163] Interview with the artist, Singapore May 2019.

[164] Yap June, *RETROSPECTIVE: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 12.

[165] Taylor Nora A. & Zitzewitz Karin "History as Figure of Thought in Contemporary Art in South and Southeast Asia," *Art Journal*, 77:4 (2018): 46.

narratives that would account for these complex changes. This tendency is not limited to Southeast Asia. For example, and as another important point of reference for the development of research-based practices, Chinese artist Zhang Dali began his *Second History* in 2003: this research-based series juxtaposes and confronts manipulated archival photographs from Mao Tse-Tung's regime (1949–1976) with their "true" originals before the editing changes have been done. It embodies the artist's desire to grasp and reveal reality in face of ideological-biased history, and to propose another "*Weltanschauung* (world view) of the nation."[166] In India, artists such as Nilima Sheikh, Gulam mohammed Sheikh or the Raqs Media Collective (founded in 1992) have already been involved in research practices dealing with regional histories and traditions, in search of original connections between spatial and temporal territorialities that do not fit the existing national and historical frameworks.

While the interest for national history and historiography nourishes and stimulates research, it does not systematically imply a research practice. In Thailand, for example, many artists are "contesting restrictive official definitions" of history,[167] but their response to the Thai context is more conceptual or directly expressive. VasanSitthiket and ManitSriwanichpoom, for instance, addressed Thailand's 1976 massacre in very expressive ways. Sitthiket's 1996 series of 20 paintings *Tulalai (Blue October)* represent students and policemen in violent positions under captions that contrast with the depicted butchery of Thammasat, such as "This is Buddhism country."[168] Sitthiket offers a critical view of the events, seen twenty years after they happened, but he is not working as an historian nor does he borrow the historian's methodology of work: he only remembers the cruelty and viciousness of the crackdown and questions it in light of the present. Similarly, in his provocative style, ManitSriwanichpoom juxtaposed his famous pink man with a photograph of the massacre, stressing the apathy and the Thai state of oblivion regarding the event. These works are the artistic expressions of personal interpretations of history, and as such they do not focus on how history has been hitherto constructed. Research-based practices, in contrast, root the artworks within a larger, reflexive and critical perspective.

[166] E-mail interview with the artist, Sept. 2013.

[167] Lenzi Iola, *Negotiating Home History and Nation* (Singapore Art Museum, 2011), 21.

[168] More on this work see Lenzi Iola, "The role of text in the visual practice of VasanSitthiket" In *I Am You*, ed. LuckanaKunavichayanont (Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre Foundation, 2018), 21.

A Global Trend

History, historiography and cultural identities are not the only issues addressed by research-based art practices. Environmental concerns are for instance at the core of many investigation processes, in line with the current global ecological crisis. Today's artists respond to global issues as much as to national and regional issues, and their artworks cannot be analysed outside a wider international context. With globalisation and access to the Internet, artists are all connected and well aware of the global trends. Their take on local issues illuminates the global scene since, as Bruno Latour clearly highlighted, the notions of "local" and "global" are in fact interwoven into connected networks and spheres.[169] More artists from the region are studying abroad and come back with new ideas and experiences. In turn, some artists who left their countries of origin come back for research and might influence the local art scene. Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, for instance, left Myanmar as a child, but his work exclusively addresses Burmese issues. As the grandson of the first president of Burma, and son of the founder of the Shan State Army, the artist remains in close contact with his country of origin. *The Myanmar Peace Industrial Complex, Map III* (2018) is a very dense work of research about the political and financial flows that link the government, military power, institutions and various organisations in the country. Through his research practice, Yawnghwe aims at uncovering hidden networks and at demonstrating the permanent hegemony of the military.[170] He personally doubts the potential impact of his work, though, which was largely censored when exhibited in Yangon as part of a 2018 group exhibition.[171] Another important figure from the region is Vietnamese-born artist Danh Vo who grew up in Denmark yet never returned to live in Vietnam. Even though today, with globalisation and the Internet, his work might influence Vietnamese artists, he did not play any direct role locally. His engagement in research, though, is considerable, especially his research on pre-colonial Vietnamese history with his installation *2.02.1861* (2009–) about a nineteenth century Christian missionary who died in Vietnam, or his installations on the Vietnam war that include objects, letters and historical artefacts such as

[169] Latour Bruno, "Spheres and Networks: two ways to reinterpret globalization," *Harvard Design Magazine* 30 (Spring/Summer 2009): 141.

[170] Interview with the artist over the phone, Sept. 17, 2019.

[171] "A Beast, A God, and A Line," curated by Cosmin Costinas, Pyinsa Rasa Art Space at The Secretariat in Myanmar, Yangon 2018.

the chandeliers from the ballroom where the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973. In contrast, and according to the artist herself, Vietnamese-born French artist Thu Van Tran may have contributed to more local investigations about the colonial history of the country.[172] Tran left Vietnam at the age of two and never returned to live there, however she visited Hanoi to shoot images of rubber plantations for *Saigneurs* (2015), a film that questions the French colonial period and how it is remembered.[173] Some local artists such as Nguyen Phuong Linh seem to have followed in her tracks.

As a possible result of the global artistic trend toward research, more practices are including cross-disciplinary investigations, fieldwork or academic studies, especially after the 2010s. With a strong culture of art communities,[174] it can take the form of collective or collaborative work that bring together practitioners from different fields. Art Labor, created in 2012, is a relevant example of this slant. Founded by artists Truong Cong Tung and Phan Thao Nguyen and curator Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần, the collective has been working with many collaborators, from anthropologists and artists to ophthalmologists and their patients, farmers, artisans and entrepreneurs in order to produce alternative non-formal knowledge and to push the boundaries of art.[175] *Drowning Dew* (2017), a video displayed in a tasting bar serving Vietnamese Robusta coffee, was featured in *Cosmopolis #1: Collective Intelligence* in Paris, an international biennial focusing on research-based art practices and collaborative works.[176] Academic research and international artists engaged in research processes of work are indeed today at the forefront of the international art scene, especially in the framework of a few institutions such as

[172] Interview with the artist in Paris, Dec. 2017.

[173] See Ha Thuc Caroline, "The confinement of the past is expanding," in *Thu Van Tran* (Beaux-Arts Editions, May 2019), 5–9.

[174] This feature has been for instance clearly demonstrated for Vietnam in *Spirit of Friendship*, an exhibition curated by Zoe Butt, Bill Nguyễn and Lê ThiênBảo at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Sept.–Nov. 2017. In Indonesia, the collective ruangrupa's moto is "Don't make art, make friends."

[175] Interview with the three collaborators in Ho Chi Minh City, November 2017.

[176] The *Cosmopolis* series of exhibitions focuses on research-based and collaborative art practices and is organised by the Centre Pompidou in Paris, involving many international and institutional collaborations: *Cosmopolis #1*: Collective Intelligence (2017, Paris), *Cosmopolis #1.5*: Enlarged Intelligence (2018, Chengdu) and, so far, *Cosmopolis #2*: rethinking the human (Paris, 2019).

Documenta, as I have already mentioned,[177] or, in this case, the Centre Pompidou, where research-based artworks are supported and exhibited. These artworks, which are perceived as content-driven and spontaneously nurture curatorial discourses, tend also to be readily chosen by curators for art biennales in line with today's increasing reference to the notion of knowledge. The Asian Art Biennial 2019, which featured mostly research-based artworks, aims for instance at "Breaking Existing Knowledge Frameworks"[178] and the 2019 Istanbul Biennial proposes to rediscover "ancient forces or knowledge."[179] For the artists of Southeast Asia, this mode of expression could thus represent a gateway to increased international recognition. While this factor cannot explain the rise of the genre in the region, it certainly contributes to it.

[177] Documenta 11 (2002) curated y OkwuiEnwezor was particularly interesting in the opening up of the field of art and trans-disciplinary collaborations: expanding the usual framework of documenta in Kassel, Enwezor multiplied debates and lectures involving economists, political activists, philosophers, writers, artists, lawyers, scholars etc. that took place across the globe. See Gardner Anthony and Green Charles, "Post-North? Documenta11 and the Challenges of the "Global" Exhibition," *On Curating* 33 (June 2017): 112–13.

[178] Curators' statement extracted from the press release. The exact sentence is "Breaking Existing Knowledge Frameworks Through the 'Stranger' Perspective to Spark Imagination and Discussion." Asian Art Biennial curated by Hsu Chia-Wei and Ho Tzu-Nyen, Taichung, Taiwan Oct.2019–Feb. 2020.For a review of the Biennale and its connection to knowledge production see Ha Thuc Caroline, "Asian Art Biennial 2019: Expanding Existing Knowledge Frameworks," Cobo Social online magazine, Nov. 4 2019. https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/asian-art-biennial-2019/ (Accessed June 6, 2020).

[179] e-flux Sep. 10, 2019 Istanbul Biennial, *The Seventh Continent* curated by Nicolas Bourriaud Sep.-Nov. 2019. https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/259828/16th-istanbul-biennial/.

The Artist-Researcher

4.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES: THE CASE OF THE ARTIST-HISTORIAN

Just like scholars, artists engaged in research-based practices are following two main processes of work that overlap and that are often complementary to each other: fieldwork and scholarly, in-study research. From collecting data on site through the excavation of objects, conducting interviews, to researching on the Internet or consulting the extant literature at any institution preserving archives, these approaches are common to all social sciences. The artists freely draw their inspiration from these techniques and methods, usually developing their own research methodology.

The choice of this methodology is obviously related to the artists' creative intent and topic, but it might also be influenced by their culture and the context they are living in. For instance, and so far, most of the artists engaged in research in Cambodia are doing fieldwork, mainly because of the lack of local scholarly resources and because of a strong oral culture of knowledge transmission.

The artists equally borrow and divert the research tools from the historian, the archaeologist, ethnographer, the sociologist and others. As an example, I will focus here on the discipline of history. Such a study, I suggest, highlights how the artistic methodology, while it challenges critically the academic sphere, also supplements its perspective.

History, for British historian Robin Collingwood, "is a science whose business is to study events not accessible to our observation, and to study these events inferentially, arguing to them from something else which is accessible to our observation, and which the historian calls 'evidence' for the events in which he is interested."[1] In order to write history, historians are thus constructing facts based on evidence. They do so according to a critical methodology of work which has changed over time with the evolution of the field, its concept and definitions but whose foundations remain unchanged. One of these foundations, and the first essential rule of the profession is that any assertion must be justified by a source, a reference or a quote that serves as a piece of evidence to support this assertion. Collingwood describes history as being "inferential" in order to emphasize this necessity to justify any claim.

Artists also base their work on sources but sometimes they do not feel obliged to cite them. While the references of their research might not be directly mentioned under each artwork, the artists who are producing research-based artworks are often willing to share them with the audience. Ho Tzu Nyen, for example, cites his reading sources and references when he is giving talks about his practice. Timoteus Anggawan Kusno has created a comprehensive website featuring all his artworks that also comprises a detailed list of his referential bibliography and all the archives he has been working with. However, some artists, like Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung, do not cite their references and, when asked, struggle to retrieve them because they did not systematically record them. They might seem to be less rigorous or less organized but, in fact, they usually feel that communicating references is not a priority in their research practice. This feeling reflects a deeper characteristic of research-based artworks: unlike historians, artists are not bound to any truth and they actually do not "need" to justify their claims. Some artists do not cite on purpose their references or do so in an unprecise or incomplete way precisely in order to play with this ambiguity. Others, like Kusno and his fictional Centre for Tanah Runcuk Studies, mix up existing sources with imaginary references in order to challenge the authenticity and authority of historical and scientific sources in general, thereby injecting doubt in the viewer's mind.

All these research processes unfold according to various forms of historical investigations. Artists, like historians, notably conduct research from a wide variety of documents and sources. Traditionally, historians

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[1] Collingwood Robin George, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 6.

work from written documents and archives and many artists do alike, in various places. Kusno, for example, has conducted part of his research in historical museums in the Netherlands, looking for colonial archives and artefacts; When delving into the history of the Vietnamese "boat people," Tuan Andrew Nguyen found his archival images on the Internet; Wah Nu & Aung drew them from old books, sometimes on e-bay, while Dinh Q. Lê systematically collects archival photographs and drawings from second-hand shops dealing with artefacts from the Vietnam war. For French historian Lucien Febvre, known in his time for his originality and open-mindedness, historians can actually write from anything such as landscapes, roof tiles, or weeds, as long as they are able to make speak what is mute and to give voice to what these forms of evidence will not reveal by themselves about human beings and society.[2] This definition would suit many artists whose work aims at making visible the invisible.

Since the 1960s, historians have been paying more attention to alternative or grassroots perspectives, a trend that was coined as "history from the bottom-up."[3] With this conception of history, oral testimonies and interviews have become increasingly recognized as sources of evidence. Bottom-up history gives more validity to fieldwork, and above all gives voice to the subalterns and to those whose perspectives had not been considered so far. Similarly, Dinh Q. Lê's *Light and Belief: Sketches of Life from the Vietnam War* (2012) gives voice to the North Vietnamese artists who were sent to the front as soldiers during the Vietnam war. The work consists of a collection of drawings made by these artists and a video featuring interviews with some of those who survived, interspersed with artistic animations of the drawings.[4] The recorded stories are very personal, yet they allow to better understand these artists who were plunged in the battlefield for propaganda reasons, and who nevertheless depicted the daily lives of the soldiers in an almost poetic way. A perspective often overlooked by

[2] Febvre Lucien, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris : Armand Colin, 1953), 428 In: Prost Antoine, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire (Twelve lessons on history)* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 82.

[3] See in particular the work of British historian Edward Palmer Thompson and especially *The Making of the English Working Class*, (United Kingdom Vintage Books, 1963).

[4] More on this work, see in particular Taylor Nora "Re-authorizing images of the Vietnam War: Dinh Q Lê's "Light and Belief" installation at dOCUMENTA (13) and the role of the artist as historian" *Southeast Asia Research* Vol 25(1) 47–61, SOAS University London (2017): 48.

Vietnamese people, and by Vietnamese historians, in a country where all cultural activities are strictly under official control.[5]

For historians, all these primary sources, once identified and unearthed, must be carefully examined by their peers in light of their existing knowledge: there is no isolated fact, and every new source of evidence is always compared to a set of existing facts or sources and understood within a specific context and existing history. This process of comparison and contextualization of sources is essential to assess the authenticity of a document and to analyse how it can bring forth new perspectives on history, while remaining compatible with the existing body of knowledge pertaining to the same subject. Artists are also using this comparative method when they stage a specific document or artefact. For *Errata* (2004), as we have seen,[6] Koh Nguang How displayed his different sources of research around the catalogue of the Singapore Art Museum whose information he was challenging.[7] The printing error occurred with respect to the date of *National Language Class* by Chua Mia Tee, a painting which was not created in 1950, as stated in the catalogue, but in 1959, as the artist found out. Koh exhibited evidence that Malaysian language classes started only in 1955, making it impossible for the painter to paint such a lesson before that date. It is thus the whole context that helped him deduce the institution's error. His art installation re-creates this network of historical comparative connections and exposes his methodology of work, so that viewers could apply it on their own.

[5] According to the 2013 D.113/2013 Decree, which defines the official framework within which cultural activities can develop in Vietnam, the notions of patriotism, family values and national identity remain at the core of the objectives of the development of the national culture. See Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, *The Regulatory Framework for Creative Hubs in Vietnam* (Vietnam National Institute of Arts and Culture Studies (VICAS) British Council Hanoi, 2018). More generally, history in Vietnam tends to follow an official narrative defined by the one-party socialist republic. See for example Pelley Patricia *Writing revolution: the new history in postcolonial Vietnam* (PhD thesis Cornell University, 1993).

[6] See Chap. 2.

[7] Kwok Kian Chow (published by) *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: National Heritage Board and Singapore Art Museum, 1996).

Arin Rungjang, *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none* (2017). Detail of the sculpture, a real-size replica of a panel from the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, cast in brass. Courtesy of the artist

Most of the time, however, the artists do not apply directly this critical method; rather, they divert it through the juxtaposition of historical documents with personal or fictional elements.

Instead of basing their artwork on the existing academic body of knowledge and expertise, they base it on their own system of knowledge and create new networks of connections between separate elements. Especially, they like to include sources from individual and family memories. In doing so, they open up original perspectives on history, even though—and sometimes especially if—they are not compliant with the existing historical discourses. In *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none* (2017), for instance, Arin Rungjang combines archival material from WWII, in the context of Thai collaboration with the Nazis following the fresh foundation of the Thai democracy, with his own childhood memory. In particular, he draws on the death of his father, who was beaten up by Neo-Nazis, and on the involvement of his grandfather in Thailand's 1932 revolution

that overthrew the absolute monarchy.[8] The installation revolves around the Democracy Monument erected in Bangkok to commemorate the revolution, and around the figure of PhrasatChuthin, the Thai ambassador who, allegedly, was the last visitor to Hitler in his Berlin bunker before the suicide of the German Führer. Here, the archival material, mainly the memoirs written by the Thai ambassador, is thus not compared to any existing studies on WWII or on Thai history, but to the personal life of the artist. While it is true that historians also rely on intuition and on their own experience in their working process,[9] they do so with rigour, in order to better understand history and the men and women who made it. With Rungjang's installation, the perspective remains historical, but it has shifted towards the register of the affect. His work may accordingly lose in scientific rigor, but it gains a critical view of Thai recent history, suggesting in particular a persistent link between Nazism, military power and Thai democracy.

Similarly, the use of fictional elements renders more complex the comparative body of knowledge and, especially, introduces imagination as a new element. Imagination is actually not alien to the profession of an historian, and French historian Raymond Aron, for example, clearly shows that an historian, in order to explain what happened, needs first to think about what could have happened.[10] Artists are pushing further those limits by transferring some historical narrative into fictional worlds. Tuan Andrew Nguyen's *The Island* (2017) is a 42-minute video revolving around the island of PulauBidong in the Malaysian archipelago where about 255,000 Vietnamese refugees—known as "boat people"—temporarily set up in the 1970s. The camp closed in 1991 and remained closed to the public until 1999 when a few former refugees began to come back to remember. However, the Malaysian government, at the request of the Vietnamese, destroyed the commemorative monument that had been built by these refugees. Nguyen's video combines archival images of the camp found on the Internet with actual images of the island filmed by the artist himself and acted sequences featuring props and two actors. The film

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[8] On 24 June 1932 KhanaRatsadon or the "People's Party" overthrew Thailand's absolute monarchy and King Prajadhipok's government to install a constitutional monarchy.

[9] See in particular Dilthey Wilhelm "The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences" In: *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works* (Book 3) Trans. Rudolf A. Makkreel and John Scanlon, (Princeton University Press, 2010).

[10] Aron Raymond, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire (Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938).

begins with a voice-over narrating the mythological history of the creation of Vietnam, locating the work in mythical times. Nguyen addresses the question of remembrance and suggests that because of the political choices, and today's denial of the history of the "boat people" by the Vietnamese government, the island, and the events that occurred there, have become a myth.[11] Images of the densely crowded camps alternate with today's empty landscapes and shots of what remains from the commemorative monument, juxtaposed with acted rituals that honour the god of the place and the wanderings of the last survivor of the island who happens to be, in fact, also the last survivor of the world. From this mythical and dystopic perspective, the reality of the camp seems to wane: rather than bringing forth evidence of what happened, the artist, on the contrary, emphasizes the disappearance of the event. "Can the future save the past?" asks the voice-over. The historical facts are here extracted from their academic context and seem to anticipate later research on to how the story of the "boat people" has fallen into oblivion.

Tuan Andrew Nguyen, *The Island* (2017). Single-channel video, 42 min. 2048 × 1080p, colour, 5.1 surround sound. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

[11] Interview with the artist in his studio, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, Nov. 6, 2017.

It is not uncommon to think that artists have the ability to revive the past as they reflect on the interconnectedness between the past, the present and the future. During Greek ancient times, oracles and poets were often reported to be blind: they were able to see the invisible worlds instead of the real one. According to this tradition, it was not the historian who knew the past but the poet, who had the power to be present to the past.[12] However, as shown by Jean-Pierre Vernant, this power of the poets was actually based on a long apprenticeship and on the use of specific rules and techniques to train their memory. In the works by Homer and Hesiod, for instance, long lists of names known as Catalogues would systematically introduce the poems.[13] Thus, in a time when there were no written traditions, these poets were the ones who kept alive a collective knowledge, which they classified and transmitted in an almost ritualist way. German philosopher Hannah Arendt even saw Homer as the embodiment of the impartiality of the historian and argued that his objectivity and freedom from self-interest inspired Herodotus, the founding father of history in the West.[14] These storytellers respected what the philosopher and political theorist define as the essential dividing line that separates facts, opinions and interpretations, a line that should not be crossed by historians.

However, artists do not claim to be objective, as historians should be. They might cross this line, especially when their research is guided by a claim to re-write history in order to emphasize their own local perspective against the dominant narratives. For example, in their statement, Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung assert their willingness to correct the way Burmese history has been hitherto written. They make clear their desire to see those who were described as thieves or bandits recovering their dignity as national heroes. By modifying archival photographs, and magnifying their subjects, the artists express their personal vision of history.

Opposing one vision of history to another one, though, might not be enough to prove one's point. This is the point of a dialogue staged in Erika Tan's video *Apa-Jika, The Mis-Placed Comma (3)* (2017) that takes place in the National Gallery, Singapore, around the figure of Halimah Binti Abdullah. This Malayan textile weaver was sent to Britain as part of

[12] Vernant Jean-Pierre, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris: La Découverte Poche, 1996 (1965), 111.

[13] Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*. Ibid., 113.

[14] Arendt Hannah, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker* (Feb. 25, 1967). Available online: https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/truth-and-politics-by-hannah-arendt/6693.

the 1924 British Empire Exhibition and she died there from pneumonia. Some of her unfinished works can be seen in London at the Victoria & Albert Museum where she might still incarnate the work and figure of the colonized Malayan woman, but her history has been largely forgotten. Specifically, in Singapore, there is no trace of her existence. In Tan's video, four girls dressed in uniforms discuss how they could reclaim this neglected part of history and restore the life and name of Halimah. While they all agree to challenge dominant narratives, and especially colonial discourses, they are wary to impose their own system of values and underline that any form of historical reclamation is always an intensely political project. Through their voices and this almost didactic and academic debate, the artist expresses her willingness to favour critical discussions as a means to question established narratives and the persistence of the colonial heritage.

By multiplying points of view, the artists actually evade the issue of neutrality. Indeed, another approach consists of juxtaposing the diversity of the existing points of view without taking side. In *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming* (2019), for instance, Tuan Andrew Nguyen asked the descendants of the Senegalese "tirailleurs" who took part in the Indochina War alongside the French colonial forces to write and stage their own personal stories. The film features fictional narratives derived from the memory of these descendants who try to reconstruct the past according to the present and to their own emotions. Mixed with archival images, the four-channel video installation appears thus as a constellation of individual stories that nevertheless reflects a part of this specific period of Senegal's history and its consequences on today's Vietnamese community living in Dakar. Nguyen's style is far from being neutral and is, in fact and purposely, loaded with compassion and affect. However, it allows the viewers to feel some of the deep effects French colonization has had on Senegalese society. Just like the modified archival photographs by Wah Nu and Aung,[15] which, according to the artists, better transcribe the "true" essence of their subjects, the visual and emotive representation of history transmitted by Nguyen's video is able to convey efficiently a form of historical knowledge.

What the artists have well understood is that, since it is impossible to directly observe what is already past, history is based on an indirect process of knowledge. French historian Marc Bloch summarized this feature by

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[15] See Chap. 6 for the analysis of their on-going series *The Name*.

stating that "history is the reconstructing of knowledge from traces."[16] Yet there is an infinity of traces and "everything in the world is potential evidence for any subject whatever."[17] This conception of history leads to two important consequences: firstly, there cannot be any unique or normative history and history is a work in progress, with new traces constantly appearing and challenging the earliest ones;[18] secondly, what matters the most for history to move forward is not necessarily to find new traces, which are infinite, but to raise new questions about existing traces in order to bring forth new historical perspectives. It is "the questioning activity, which is the dominant factor in history, as it is in all scientific work."[19]

This critical and open-ended approach fits contemporary art very well. For a long time, in France, people lived among numerous forms of stone debris without paying attention to these prehistorical artefacts. It is only when Boucher de Perthes asked himself about these specific stones that the whole field of prehistory opened up. Prost, who borrows this story from Marc Bloch, emphasizes here the curiosity of the historian when it comes to questioning a trace, and thus to trigger a new understanding of history.[20] Indeed, Collingwood compares the historian to a detective.[21] Artists engaged in research share this curiosity and investigative spirit. Most of the research-based artworks by Arin Rungjang, for example, have as departure point an object that the artist is questioning from a contemporary perspective. For *Mongkut* (2015), the starting point of Rungjang's research was a French painting showing the Thai ambassador offering a copy of the Thai King's crown to Napoleon III.[22] Rama IV, at that time, was manoeuvring between the French and British colonial empires in order to try to remain independent, and this gesture is fundamental to understand Thailand's history. Yet the artist realised that not so much was known about this crown. The original is supposed to be inside the Thai

[16] Bloch Marc, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou le métier d'historien* Paris Armand Colin 1960 p. 21 Cited by Prost Antoine, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire (Twelve lessons on history)* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 70.

[17] Collingwood Robin George, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 280.

[18] "This is why every age must write history afresh." Collingwood Robin George, "The Philosophy of History," *Historical Association Leaflet* n°70, London, 1930 quoted In: Prost Antoine, *Douzeleçons sur l'histoire (Twelve lessons on history)* (Paris:Seuil, 2010), 85.

[19] Collingwood Robin George, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 29.

[20] Prost Antoine, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire (Twelve lessons on history)* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 81.

[21] Collingwood Robin George, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 38.

[22] Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Réception des Ambassadeurs du Siam par Napoléon III et l'impératrice Eugénie* (1864).

Royal Palace, but nobody ever saw it, as it is kept secret. Perhaps, suggests the artist, it does not exist.[23] The artist nevertheless managed to meet a royal descendant turned artisan who knew how the crown had been made and who collaborated with him to create a replica. Hence, from the traces left by a nineteenth century French painting, Rungjang questions this symbol of the Thai monarchy and its current manifestation. Similarly, the point of departure of *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none* (2017) was the book published by the Thai ambassador whose memoirs had hitherto not attracted the attention of any Thai scholar.

Rungjang's account of Thailand's history remains disjointed, though. Leaving aside the fact that it is expressed artistically through the form of a multimedia installation, it gives a fragmented vision of patchy elements that the artist does not link together: *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none* features the portraits of the Ambassador and his wife, a wood and brass replica of the Bangkok Democracy Monument, the memoirs of the Ambassador displayed with the last page of Hitler's guest book found in his bunker, and one video. Historian Antoine Cournot underlined that history cannot be a sequence of isolated figures that would not impact each other in some way or another. He rather compares history to a chess game in which each move is creating a causality chain that will, in the end, bring forth the history of the game.[24] The elements of *246247596248914102516 … And then there were none* are not chronologically linked, but what the artist suggests is that they might have influenced each other, and that a new narrative might emerge from this original and implicit network of confrontation.

The artists engaged in research are indeed often active in breaking up the given chain of causality, temporally, spatially or by substituting or omitting elements. They thus propose their own causal, and usually fragmented, sequencing that is left purposely open for the audience to create his, or her, own narrative. This is particularly apparent in videos where the editing process allows an artist to re-organize existing sequences into new patterns disconnected from any chronological and geographical order, as we have seen for example with *The Island*. Adrian Danks aptly emphasises the critical potential of this use of film footage that allows to "corrupt,

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[23] Interview with the artist, Hong Kong January 19, 2018.
[24] Cournot Antoine quoted in: Prost Antoine, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire (Twelve lessons on history)* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 154.

prostheticise and forge particular meanings" within the frameworks of history and memory.[25]

Collingwood warns against what he calls the "copy and paste" method consisting of constructing history "by excerpting and combining the testimonies of different authorities"[26] without questioning the credibility of these authorities. While some artists scrupulously cite their sources in order to inscribe their work under their authority, others may well choose to draw on very diverse sources without, on purpose, checking them. This is especially the case when it comes to collages from the Internet. In Ho Tzu Nyen's video *R for Rhombicuboctahedron*, the history of Southeast Asia is represented by Internet footage featuring Viet Minh people running in the jungle, molluscs, tigers roaming in forests, Ferdinand Marco's discourses, rice fields and Balinese dances. The point is precisely here to blur the boundaries between all kinds of authorities, to flatten sources of knowledge and accept them all without judging their value and credibility. Ho deliberately crosses the line of objectivity as defined by Hannah Arendt and mixes facts with opinions and interpretations.[27] While such an approach emphasizes the importance of breaking away from any dominant and dogmatic forms of narratives, this homogenisation of historical perspectives might lead to a relativist conception of history. If all points of view on history are equal, if no authority prevails, then there would be as many historical accounts of the past as there are individual representations on it. This conception of history has been variously developed by historians and philosophers in the twentieth century and has been for instance formulated by French historian Marc Ferro when he stated that "Universal history is dead."[28]

There is no point here to enter this philosophical and theoretical debate since the artists, even when they borrow their research tools from the historians, are not academic historians. In fact, they can bypass any form of authority and freely propose diverse interpretations of history that include hidden, individual or marginal perspectives. The historical knowledge generated by their practices, and the pluralism they suggest, are nevertheless not an invitation to relativism: with their artworks, they challenge the

[25] Danks Adrian "The Global Art of Found Footage Cinema" In: *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. by Linda Badley, et al., (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 244.

[26] Collingwood Robin George, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 13.

[27] See Chap. 8.

[28] Ferro Marc, *The Use and Abuse of History, or, How the Past is Taught after the Great Fire* (London: Routledge, 2003), 356.

established forms of knowledge but not necessarily point to the impossibility to reach any kind of common historical knowledge. They rather express the possibility of transcending the entanglement of academic and empirical forms of knowledge thanks to affect and imagination. What is at stake here is an expanded conception of history and, beyond, of a more inclusive conception of knowledge production.

4.2   RESEARCH AS MATERIAL

When analysing the convergence between Western art practices and ethnography, Claire Fagnart suggested that the artists act like mediators when they turn the findings of their research into artworks.[29] This role of mediator would appear too restrictive, though, because it does not include the creative part of the work. The research component of the work could be, rather, compared to a material from which the artists create, just like painters use pigments for their work. However, they do not merely model this material: they also learn from it, in what appears to be a mutual relationship. Each artist uses his or her own terminology to refer to this relationship, from "transformation" to "conversion," "translation" or "crystallisation," with a wide scope of possible artistic interpretations and expressions but, in any case a "convergence" operates between the artist and the research material.[30]

As we have seen, references of the sources and of the research methodologies of work are not always disclosed, but they can also constitute a part of the work, woven into its fabric. In *Cambodia Remembrance (Ratanakiri)* (2017) by Arin Rungjang, the story collected by the artist during his research in Ratanakiri province has been, for example, transcribed into a book, which has become the work of art. The complete artwork, thus, consists of a recording of the personal story of VekTounh, an indigenous Tampoeun weaver living in this region in northern Cambodia, and of the book itself, presented on a blanket, which reproduces some patterns of her weaving, her personal memory and the history of her community. Subtitles and voice-over are another way to introduce into the artwork references,

[29] Fagnart Claire, "Art et ethnographie" (Art and Ethnography), *Marges [online]* 2007, Available at: http://marges.revues.org/829.

[30] I borrow this idea of convergence from French philosopher, Etienne Souriau who describes the creative act as a convergence between the artist and the material, implying the existence of a dialogue between them. Souriau Etienne, *Les différents modes d'existence* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1943): 42.

often decontextualized as we will see in the case of Ho Tzu Nyen: in his video animation *R for Rhombicuboctahedron* (2019), for instance, quotations from academic books are repeated and sung in various ways so that they become like fragmented echoes of the past. In many of his works, words are transformed, whispered, stretched, chanted to the point that their meaning is blurred. Academic sources are thus also metamorphosing and subject to a transformation into artistic material.

Exhibiting the research material, or part of it, is another of the possible forms chosen by the artists who, somehow, become the curators of their own findings. Antariksa, Koh Nguang How or Tiffany Chung display archival material or artefacts which often dialogue with their personal creations. Collages or montages allow artists also to decontextualize the research material, as in the case of Ho Tzu Nyenvideos, or, on the contrary, to contextualize fictional narratives like in Nguyen's *The Island*. As for Wah Nu and Aung, they directly operate on the archives, diverting and even "correcting" them as we will see in the case study of *The Name*.

The research material can also be performed, and this is especially the case with lecture-performances where the peculiar format of the academic lecture is more or less diverted and disrupted. At the one end of the scope, Ho Hui An's performances such as *Asia the Unmiraculous* (2018) remains very close to the format of standard lectures: the artist addresses directly the public and reads some extracts of the books he had gathered on a low table in front of him. Behind him, a large screen shows moving images related to his topic: an ambitious exploration of the "unmiraculous" side of Asia against its miraculous economic history in the context of globalization, capitalism and post-colonial ideologies. The performance lasts 75 minutes and mainly consists in a very dense and monotonous discourse, which Ho does not try to lighten up by acting, as if he wished to remain all the time exterior to what he is saying, strictly sticking to his role as a lecturer. For him, the exercise should be perceived as "an extension of the cinema,"[31] allowing him to explore the visual representation of the Asian crisis.

Performing knowledge can be livelier, especially when fiction is involved. For *The Nature Museum* (2017), Robert Zhao Renhui invented a fictional naturalist who tours the public inside his exhibition as if it was a natural museum. Following a play script, he addresses real topics about

[31] Phone interview with the artist, May 29, 2019.

bats, durians, reservoirs or flooding in Singapore. These narratives stem from the artist actual and extensive research about the city's natural environment, which he has developed since 2008 under the umbrella of the fictional Institute for Critical Zoologists. According to the artist, this theatrical format of storytelling allows him to create enough drama to push the viewers over the edge so that they feel concerned about environmental issues.[32] Another instance of this fictional type of performances is provided by FyeroolDarma and Jack Tan, who explore modes of singing their research findings with the participation of musicians. *After Ballade series* (2018) by Darma comprises oratory performances, and in *Hearings* (2016), by Tan, a choir is singing court proceedings. The work follows on the artist's research residency at the Singapore Community Justice Center. Tan, a former lawyer, tries here to explore a possible kinesthetic approach to the law, where court cases would be perceived through their emotional and even ontological dimensions.[33] Music is approached by these visual artists as a new playground where affect and meaning can merge in innovative ways. For Jason Wee, who used lyrics for the first time in *Quora Fora: A Rehearsal* (2019), music represents a kind of virgin territory where meaning has not been too much codified yet, but it is also a way to escape censorship thanks to its level of abstraction.[34]

The problem faced by these artists is how to represent the complexity and density of their research outcome, which, itself, reflects what they feel is a multi-layered, inexhaustible and often opaque reality. Some artists are creating sculptural artworks that would condense and transcend their research findings. *Untitled (Heads)* (2013), for instance, embodies Phan Thao Nguyen's research on the Japanese occupation of Vietnam during World War II and the Great Famine that occurs in the North of the country. Inspired by FurataMotoo's academic report,[35] and by the artist's fieldwork, it consists of a high totemic tree made of jute stalks on the branches of which Nguyen has hung the heads of the farmers she interviewed, cast in bronze. The jute material refers to the injunction "Uproot Rice, Grow

[32] Interview with the artist, Singapore May 18, 2019.

[33] Phone interview with the artist, May 28, 2019.

[34] Interview with the artist, Singapore Nov. 19, 2019.

[35] FurutaMotoo, Tìnhhìnhnghiêncứu ở NhậtBảnvềtộiácchiếntranhcủaPhátxítNhậttạiV Nam [The state of research in Japan on Japanese Fascist war crimes in Vietnam]. TậpChí Khoa Học—Khoa HọcXãHội (May) 1988.

Jute," a Vietnamese saying that triggered the artist's curiosity and her investigations.[36] The famine, which is said has caused the death of approximately two million people, remainsa partially taboo episode of Vietnamese history.[37] Another example is Zai Kuning's *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* made for the Venice Biennale in 2017. It features the skeleton of a ship made only of rattan, strings and wax, using the techniques of the Malay people of the seventh century. Together with some photographs and videos, this boat, as mentioned in the work's title, embodies more than 20 years of research on Malay history, the Riau Archipelago and its inhabitants. According to the artist, most of the people from the Malay peninsula think their history began with the arrival of Islam in the region in the fourteenth century. Dapunta Hyang, on the contrary, was the first Buddhist king of the kingdom of Śrīvijaya, many centuries beforehand. By researching this ancient Malay empire, and by immersing himself among the local sea people such as the Orang Laut, the artist aims at emphasizing the diversity of ethnicities and religions that are deeply rooted in the "Malay world,"understood in the wider sense as the area that links together today's Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The ship could stand for the ghost of the forgotten empire, the forgotten part of history that emerges again as a powerful and resistant structure. It becomes the embodiment of the artist's research findings and the metaphorical vessel of a possible artistic transmission of knowledge.[38]

Polyphony is another important feature of a few research-based artworks. Against a unique and dominant narrative, and a specific mode of knowledge production, the artistsexplore the possible multiplicity of viewpoints on their topic and open their practices tocollective modes of expression. Zarina Muhammad, for example, always collaborates with other artists from various fields such as music, dance and poetry. She feels that knowledge might be better generated through movements and sounds. She also often invites viewers to engage with her work through workshops, dialogues and participative apparatus, reviving an oral and

[36] Interview with the artist, Ho Chi Minh City Nov. 7, 2017.

[37] See for instance Maclean Ken, "History Reformatted: Vietnam's Great Famine (1944–1945) in Archival Form,"*Southeast Asian Studies* Vol.5(2) (August 2016).

[38] More on this work see the catalogue of the exhibition ZaiKuning, "Transmission of Knowledge: they get up from their knees and walk," In: *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*, Exhibition catalogue for the Venice Biennale National Arts Council (Singapore, 2017).

transversal mode of knowledge transmission. Most of her lecture-performances open with an artefact such as a talisman or an effigy she has created, and close with offerings and rituals. Through this pluri-disciplinary mode of expression, she introduces myths and magical beliefs into what is usually conceived as a pragmatic and scientific mode of knowledge transmission.[39] Ultimately, the final form of her artwork exceeds her personal interpretation of her scholarly research to embrace a collective, unpredictable and dynamic perspective.

In some cases, the artist's research findings completely dissolve into the artwork. In Khvay Samnang's *Preah Kunlong* (2017), the work seems inhabited by the artist's research while it transcends it absolutely. It only remains verbally expressed in the artist's statement and curator's notes. In particular, the video, which we will examined in detail in Chap. 7, opens up a world of poetry which goes past the artist's research findings and unfolds even beyond words and beyond consciousness. It conveys a form of knowledge based on intuition, affect and sensuous perception that cannot be taught but only experienced.

For more than a decade now, Ho Tzu Nyen has been precisely exploring these empirical modes of knowledge production, transforming, twisting, multiplying and condensing his research findings into multisensorial art installations. In order to break away from any conventional form of knowledge, he has notably developed a complex language in which written text, voice-over, visual images and music coalesce. In most of his artworks, as we will see in Chap. 8, Ho integrates so many academic references, quotations and archival material that this excess of data makes them difficult to understand. From what he calls an "excessive verbiage," Ho wishes in fact to create a sense of emptiness as if this density could collapse into a form of nothingness, like stellar matter into black holes. Hence, for the artist, the point is not to convey the knowledge he has gathered through his research process, but to deconstruct it in order to find a path towards another conception of knowledge, based on the artistic experience he proposes, and on a primary void he wishes to create. Void, here, should not be understood as the opposite of "full" but as a living space open for creativity. From there, viewers can critically reach other forms of knowledge, having been disengaged from any established form of language and guidance.

[39] Interview with the artist over the phone, Sept. 6, 2019.

Sometimes, artists recognize and express the difficulties or even the impossibility to represent their research findings. After weeks of interviews and fieldwork among the Cambodian migrants working as fishermen in Thailand, and years of research on the topic, Lim Sokchanlina did not know how to transform his experience and research outcome without over-simplifying its complex scope.[40] For his performative work *Letter to the Sea* (2019), he finally decided to express his personal understanding of the situation under the form of a letter addressed to the fishermen from under the sea: as he reads it, the words are inaudible and the ink washes away, reflecting his inability to address the topic and to overcome his emotional response to it. Pratchaya Phinthong made a more radical choice. For *Suasana* (2015), the artist conducted research at the border of Thailand and Malaysia about a group of Muslim widows who lost their husbands in the violent ethno-religious conflicts that have been devastating the area. These women have organised themselves into an association. They produce different kinds of chilli paste which, according to the artist, convey their own, metaphorical, form of violence. During his fieldwork, the artist took many photographs, yet, after conducting interviews with these women, he asked them to expose his photographic films under the sun light, so that they turn black. In the end, the work consists in the display of these 16 exposed films, aligned horizontally as if on a canvas and hung between two plates of plexiglass. Nothing can be deciphered from these mute and dark stripes that only reflect the light of the gallery: the artist's research findings cannot be told nor visualized, and the artwork expresses his own rejection to express the indescribable.[41]

Research-based art practices are still work in progress. Many artists continue to search for the right language that would embody, challenge and surpass the outcome of their research processes. They often produce series of works rather than single creation, precisely perhaps in order to explore different modes of artistic transformations. Cazeaux notes a general concern about the quality of research-based artworks and worries that the artists might be "restricted by the requirements of research."[42] Following that view, there would be an inversely proportional relationship between the quality of the research and the quality of the artwork: huge in-depth investigations would lead to poor visual expressions while original, more

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[40] Interview with the artist over the phone, Feb. 25, 2019.

[41] E-mail conversation with the artist, June 26, 2017.

[42] Cazeaux Clive. *Art, Research, Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 7.

aesthetic art forms would be synonym of superficial research. However, we can assume that artists have always worked with constraints, even those imposed upon themselves by themselves, and that it is often the source of great creativity. ZaiKuning's powerful ship is a perfect example that contradicts Cazeaux's opposition between the quality of research and the aesthetic quality of an artwork: the artist's long-term research is deep, yet his artwork is visually stunning. The four case studies that follow will attempt to strengthen this view and show, precisely, the various and complex strategies that support research-based art practices and their outstanding creativity and potentials.

The Artist as a Producer of Knowledge: Cultural Activism in Tiffany Chung's *The Vietnam Exodus Project* (2009–)

Following the unification of Vietnam by the Communists in 1975, about 1 million Vietnamese refugees, known popularly as the "boat people," fled their country and settled in camps throughout East and Southeast Asia. It is estimated that probably half a million refugees died from drowning, starvation, or illness before reaching any of those camps. In Hong Kong, about 200,000 refugees arrived between 1975 and 1997.[1] The Hong Kong government, at first, organised their resettlement but soon became overwhelmed by their number and the refugees were then just sent to camps, closed by barbed wires fences. Among them were single women, unaccompanied minors, babies, all of them parked in inhuman conditions for years: the last camp closed in 2000 and some children were born and raised there. For many reasons, the majority of the Hong Kong people did not, or did not wish to, pay attention to this marginalised population, and when they did, it was mainly to emphasise its violent component. For its part, and until today, the Vietnamese government is merely denying its existence.

The Vietnam Exodus Project (2009–) by Vietnamese artist Tiffany Chung is an on-going project, with a chapter dealing with the Vietnamese

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[1] Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) available online at: http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/persons_of_concern

refugee "boat people"[2] crisis that took place in Hong Kong from 1975 onwards. The series is an assemblage of cartographic works, archival materials, collaborative watercolour paintings, videos and texts based on the artist's extensive research on the issue. It also includes panel discussions with former refugees and lawyers specialized in refugee cases.[3]

Chung defines herself first and foremost as a visual artist, yet she recognizes working like a researcher within her interdisciplinary practice: "working as a researcher as much as an artist, I conduct my research through archival records, scholars' essays, statistical data collection and analysis; fieldwork includes interviews, participant observation and documentation of sites."[4] For Chung, research is an integral part of her art-making process, and it is what inspires her.[5] She is also driven by personal motivations from her own journey as a refugee since her family emigrated to the United States after the Vietnam War.

The origins of this project dates back to 2009 with the work entitled *Scratching the Walls of Memory* (2009–2010), a survey of notable conflicts on the twentieth century, including the issue of the Vietnamese refugees. Chung, then, left it aside, and resumed her research in 2014 after visiting the former Vietnamese refugee camps in Singapore and Indonesia.[6] In-between, she engaged in her *Syrian Project* (2012–ongoing), another vast endeavour dealing with massive population migrations that enabled her to work at some distance from her own story as a former refugee. She explained she had to make this "detour" to be able to really delve into the story of the Vietnamese refugees. Between 2015 and 2018, she made

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[2] Due to what she feels conveys a dehumanizing and reductive connotation, Tiffany Chung never uses the term "boat people" but the term "Vietnamese refugees" instead. When used in the book, it is to be conceived as a generic term that must be carefully considered, therefore it is always used with quotation marks.

[3] "PERMANENT IN-TRANSIT" on Nov. 5, 2017 at Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Participants: Mark Daly, Son Hoang, Gladys Li, Đức Hong Nguyen, Que Nguyen, and Carol Tong Thi Xuan. "Art in Times of Crisis" and "Refugee Experience and Asylum Policy—The Way Forward," two panel discussions organised at Tai Kwun Contemporary Museum, Hong Kong on June 15& 17, 2018.

[4] Chung Tiffany, *Tiffany Chung, Artist Monograph* (Ho Chi Minh: Galerie Quynh and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, 2015), 19.

[5] When the source is not specified, the information comes from the three interviews I had with the artist, one in January 2016 at her studio in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the second one at Spring Workshop in Hong Kong, Nov. 4, 2017, and the latest, a Zoom conversation, on April 21, 2022.

[6] The 25 Hawkins Rd Camp and PulauGalang, respectively.

numerous visits to Hong Kong to collect archival materials, meet and spend time with the Vietnamese refugee community.

This chapter focuses on two related exhibitions: the artist's exhibition at Art Basel Hong Kong (March 2016) featuring five cartographic works and a mixed media installation entitled *flotsam and jetsam*, [7] and the display of her research archival material presented at Spring Workshop, a non-profit arts space in Hong Kong, in November 2017 (photographs, videos records, newspaper clippings, reports etc.).[8] Typical of her practice, four of the maps are drawn with ink, oil and acrylic paint on vellum paper. The last one is made with embroidery on canvas. They all deal with the Vietnamese refugee crisis in Hong Kong, but each one offers a different perspective: the map entitled "Permanent transitory homes: HK correctional institutions, detention centres and refugee camps from archival records and Google mapping" (2015), for instance, represents the Hong Kong territory filled with small and very dense colourful points that indicate the refugee prisons and camps, yet without any time reference. In contrast, "UNHCR records and figures: remapping regional movements, arrivals and resettlements of V-refugees in 1979" (2009) focuses on the refugee population movements across Southeast Asia and south China during the year 1979. Mixing statistics and embroidery, collective and individual stories, aesthetics and data, the project offers a fresh perception on this chapter of the history of Hong Kong and Vietnam.

With *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, Chung aims at "reconstructing an exodus history"[9] and at remapping "the now-erased spatial and historical

[7] *flotsam and jetsam*(2015–2016) is an installation that consists of 28 watercolor paintings, 40 pieces of engraved and painted text on plexiglass, 2 videos on tablets. The watercolor paintings are part of *Vietnam Exodus History Learning Project* carried out in collaboration with 4 young Vietnamese artists, Hồ Hưng, Lê Nam Đy, Nguyễn Kim Tố Lan, NguyễnVănĐữ.

[8] Spring Workshop was founded in 2011 by Mimi Brown in Hong Kong. It was a 5-year project aiming at developing experimental and cross-disciplinary cultural programs. The archives (2011–2018) can be consulted online: http://www.springworkshop.org/?lang=en#/spring-info/about/

[9] Chung's full title exhibition for the series at Tyler Rollins New York in 2017 was *The Vietnam Exodus Project: on historical amnesia: reconstructing an exodus history from fragmented records and half-lived lives.*

narratives of the local Vietnamese refugee community in Hong Kong."[10] An interdisciplinary artist, Chung borrows her research tools from the archivist, the historian, the cartographer and the ethnographer, and from extensive archive materials in order to learn and resurrect this traumatic past. Her research process makes visible the scale and complexity of this denied part of history, filling the gaps in knowledge and contributing to a plural and holistic understanding of its scope. By shedding light on the singularities of each individual story, it opposes stereotypes and conveys the humanity of the refugees, too often perceived negatively and approached as a homogeneous community.

Chung works rigorously in her scholarly research, yet, at the same time, in her role as artist, she remains free to be creative in how she assembles and represents the data she collects, emancipating herself from any academic framework and scientific constraints. There is a constitutive tension in her work between her search for the facts and her artistic transformation of those facts: facing the artwork, the viewer cannot directly connect to these data, except by referring to the archives on display. At the same time, the dry sets of records are turned into affecting visualisations: her cartographic works give a tangible and concrete expression to the multiple spatial and temporal journeys of the refugees, inviting the public to respond to the work both emotionally and rationally. In her case, the research process is not a separate tool but an inherent part of the artwork. Examined within the context of Vietnam, where local scholarship works tend to be limited by the dogmatic system in power, it gives agency to the artist and reveals a shift in the form of the artist's political engagement towards a form of research-based cultural activism. This new social role of the artist is far from being self-evident, though, and implies different ways to read art and its innovative artistic language. It calls for, and remains largely dependent on, an active engagement of the public and art critic.[11] With viewers being asked to re-appropriate the knowledge generated by the series, it is an invitation to think collectively about knowledge production.

[10] Chung's presentation text for her 2017 exhibition at Spring Workshop stated: "As an extension of her on-going research for the Hong Kong chapter of *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, Chung will exhibit archival materials and notes from her academic research and ethnographic fieldwork that excavate personal/collective histories and remap the now-erased spatial/historical narratives of the local Vietnamese refugee community in Hong Kong."

[11] This chapter is derived in part from Ha Thuc Caroline, "Research as strategy: resisting historical oblivion in Tiffany Chung's The Vietnam Exodus Project," *South East Asia Research* Vol 27 (3) (Sept. 2019): 291–306.

5.1   THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEE CRISIS IN HONG KONG

The Vietnamese Context: A History Officially Denied

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) is a one-party socialist republic with limited freedom of expression.[12] It produces official narratives that cannot be challenged. According to Vietnamese historian and former rector of Hoa Sen University Phuong Bui Tran,[13] history in the country has always been manipulated: before the colonisation, it served despotism; during the French era, it was oriented towards the West and, since socialism, it has been rewritten once more. Typical of this, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the socialist state of North Vietnam, asked scholars to write what was called the New History in order to produce a consensus view of Vietnamese history.[14] For the historian, the term "amnesia" is thus not too strong to describe Vietnam's current relationship with history.

Today, the topic of the "boat people" is still very sensitive and controversial, and this period of history is banned from the Vietnamese official narrative. Chung acknowledges that she would never have been allowed to exhibit this series in Vietnam: "in Vietnam, the post-1975 mass exodus is not officially recognized as part of the country's national narrative. It is neither a political nor humanitarian discourse to be examined or debated."[15] According to the 2013 D.113/2013 Decree, which defines the official framework within which cultural activities can develop in Vietnam, the notions of patriotism, family values and national identity remain at the core of the objectives of the development of the national culture.[16] Culture, deeply linked to social order, is still at the service of the dominant ideology and cannot threaten the country's unity. Quan Tue Tran demonstrates that "the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has continuously maintained that those who left Vietnam after the communist victory did so out

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[12] Thayer Carlyle A. "Political Legitimacy in Vietnam: Challenge and Response" *Politics & Policies* Vol.38 No3 (2010): 424.

[13] Interview with Dr. Phuong Bui Tran, November 2017.

[14] Pelley Patricia *Writing revolution: the new history in postcolonial Vietnam* (PhD thesis Cornell University, 1993).

[15] Tsai Sylvia, "To Be Remembered interview with Tiffany Chung," *Art Asia Pacific Magazine* 100 (2016): 128–137.

[16] Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, *The Regulatory Framework for Creative Hubs in Vietnam* (Vietnam National Institute of Arts and Culture Studies (VICAS) British Council Hanoi, 2018).

of pure economic reasons"[17] At the Vietnam National Museum of History in Hanoi, there are three rooms dedicated to "the process of making Vietnam a strong country of prosperous people, democracy, justice and civilization (1975–present day)" but there is no mention of the "boat people" or of any Vietnamese fleeing the country.[18] Their fate is also absent from the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The museum highlights the atrocities and crimes committed by the Americans during the war, and the long-term consequences of their intervention, such as the effects of Agent Orange, but there is no mention of any Vietnamese fighting on their side, and not even a hint of the massive flow of Vietnamese who escaped the country after its reunification.

The degree of knowledge of a whole population about any specific topic is very hard to assess.Even though this part of history is denied and not taught at school, practically everybody knows about it. In Vietnam, most people have a member of their family who was a refugee, and the story of the "boat people" is told over and over. Vietnamese artist Dinh Q Lê points out that the government is now increasingly trying to attract the former Vietnamese refugees who used to live abroad (the "viet-kieu"), encouraging them to invest in the country or to share their knowhow.[19] Indirectly, the government is thus recognising the existence of these overseas Vietnamese.[20] Dinh Q Lê is himself a "viet-kieu" who settled back in Vietnam in 1997. There are other artists who came back to work in Vietnam after growing up abroad, such as Nguyen Tuan Andrew or Trong Gia Nguyen. These "vietkieu" are now integrated within society and share their experience as "boat people" with the local population. Duong Lan points to the contradiction between the government seeking to woo "viêt-kieu" while still "dismissing the history of refugees and re-education camp

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[17] Tran Quan Tue, "Remembering the Boat People Exodus" *Journal of Vietnamese Studies,* Berkeley Vol. 7 Issue 3 (2012): 94.

[18] From a visit at the Museum, Nov. 2017.

[19] Interview with Dinh Q. Lê, Hong Kong March 2018.

[20] From 1980, the Vietnamese government has implemented programs aimed at organising legally the departure of Vietnamese abroad (Ordely Departure Program) as well as measures aiming at encouraging the return of the refugees, especially from 1991. Tran mentions, in particular, the recent Resolution 36, which "aims to establish a more positive relationship with diasporic Vietnamese in order to attract overseas economic and intellectual capital to Vietnam." In Tran Quan Tue, ibid., 98.

prisoners."[21] Furthermore, while she acknowledges that there is no film archive about the diaspora in the Film Institute in Hanoi, she adds that these films are nevertheless circulating among the population, either on the Internet or as DVD.[22] Ann Hui's *Boat People*, a docudrama based on a fictional story combined with archival materials and interviews with refugees, is available on YouTube. Another example of how this part of history is globally recognised would be the 2015 best-seller *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen which deals with the Vietnamese war and with its subsequent exodus. The book won the Pulitzer Prize, and thus gained much public attention. It has not been published in Vietnam, but another book by the same author, *The Refugee*, was translated and published there.

Even if, in Vietnam, the story is well known today, this knowledge might progressively disappear with the passing of older generations and nothing nor anybody in charge or able to keep this memory alive. Besides, it remains fragmented and full of gaps: people usually only know one part of the story. Before she embarked on her investigation, Chung did not know either about the scale and scope of this issue. Her first motivation was to learn and fill these gaps, building a more holistic and plural perspective on what happened.

The Hong Kong Context

In Hong Kong, the history of the "boat people" has not been denied, but only a few art and heritage institutions have taken responsibility to dealing with this specific period of time and events. Hence, many have forgotten about what exactly happened. One of the few public exposures of the crisis comes from the Hong Kong Correctional Services Museum: there are two rooms dealing with the "boat people" event, but the focus is clearly on the riots and does not take into account the human dimension of the crisis. One of the two rooms is dedicated to hand-made and unauthorized weapons created by the Vietnamese in the camps, which tends to give to the visitor a negative and violent image of the refugees.

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[21] Lan Duong "Viêt Nam and the Diaspora: Absence, Presence and the Archive," in *Looking Back on Vietnam War: Twenty-first-Century Perspectives*, ed. Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim (New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 65.

[22] Lan Duong, "Viêt Nam and the Diaspora: Absence, Presence and the Archive," in *Looking Back on Vietnam War: Twenty-first-Century Perspectives,* ed. Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim, 64–78 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press 2016), 64.

The first wave of refugees arrived in Hong Kong in May 1975. At that time, the territory was known as a safe haven for asylum seekers, attracting more and more people. The ethnic cleansing that took place in Vietnam from 1979 triggered another important wave of refugees, mainly from Chinese origin, with a record of 55,700 arrivals on that year.[23] Bigger camps were opened, some with huge capacities: for example, the Argyle Street Army camp, opened in 1979, was supposed to accommodate an estimated 20,000 refugees while the Whitehead camp, opened later, had a capacity of 28,000.[24] Liberal and humanitarian at the beginning, Hong Kong's policies became harder from the 1980s onwards, favouring deportations and tougher rules inside the camps. In 1982 Hong Kong adopted a "closed camp" policy: the refugees were not able anymore to move freely or get out for a job. They were confined like in prisons.

In 1988, after a third wave of arrivals, a "screening policy" was adopted in order to select the asylum seekers and to differentiate between the political refugees from the economic migrants. Life inside the camps was very harsh. In order to "minimize the impact of migrants on local society,"[25] the refugees were segregated. Hong Kong scholar Sophia Suk-Mun Law refers to them as "Invisible Citizens:" "The boat people in the camps did not have a national identity and were therefore 'invisible'. In addition, the high walls and barbed wires enclosing the camps made the "boat people" physically invisible to the outside world."[26] According to her, what people in Hong Kong remember about these 25 years are only the riots, usually due to refugee protests against forced repatriation.

The perception of the Vietnamese refugees by the Hong Kong people tended indeed to be negative for many reasons: Nguyen assumes that, after a first period of acceptance, the continuous flux of refugees started to spark "fears of limited resources and lack of available space to

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[23] Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/persons_of_concern

[24] See Suk-Mun Law Sophia, *The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of Vietnamese Boatpeople* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2014).

[25] Suk-Mun Law, *The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of Vietnamese Boatpeople,* ibid., 74.

[26] Suk-Mun Law ibid., 106.

accommodate them."[27] Furthermore, the author recalls that there was a feeling of resentment that developed among some Hong Kong people, mainly from Chinese background, because the refugees from Vietnam were better treated than the refugees from China: from 1974 indeed, Hong Kong adopted a very strict policy at its borders, deporting every illegal entrant coming in from China. Finally, after so many waves of arrivals, the author uses the expression of "compassion fatigue"[28] to describe the state of mind of the Hong Kong people, which is also an expression used by Chung, who pinned the sentence on the wall among the exhibited archival photographs at Spring Workshop.

Overall, Suk-Mun Law states that most studies dealing with the life inside the camps were very critical regarding the treatment and living conditions of the refugees. She describes the camps as "a world of distorted laws and orders" without the values and the social structures that are the backbones of every society.[29] Some refugees were drug addicts and had criminal records, while children born at the detention were stateless citizens. The question of resettlement was delicate, and Vietnam refused to take these people back.

According to Christina Li, who curated Chung's exhibition at Spring, this part of history is little known in Hong Kong, especially for the generation born after the 1980's. She used the term "amnesia" to describe this gap in the Hong Kong history.[30]

The term "amnesia" is often used in the art field when dealing with history. Even if it refers to a loss of memory due to a brain damage, in that context it means the loss of memory of a group of people, not only the ones who suffered from a trauma, but also of the global population who forgot about what happened, usually because this part of history has been erased from the official history, or voluntarily overlooked. It is used by the artist in the full title of the series, *The Vietnam Exodus Project: on historical amnesia: reconstructing an exodus history from fragmented records and half-lived lives.* The radical nature of this expression suggests the urgency for

[27] Nguyen Vinh, "Ann Hui's Boat People: Documenting Vietnamese Refugees in Hong Kong" in *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: Twenty-first-Century Perspectives* ed. Brenda M. Boyle, Jeehyun Lim (New Brunswick, New Jersey, *London:* Rutgers University Press, 2016), 100–101.

[28] Nguyen, ibid., 96.

[29] Suk-Mun Law, ibid., 84.

[30] Interview with Christina Li, Hong Kong November 2018, cited in Ha Thuc Caroline, "Vietnam Exodus: Open memories," *Artomity magazine* (Winter 2017): 54–63.

the artist to address this topic and to resist this historical oblivion. The term, however, could be nuanced.

Scholar Yuk-Wah Chan, specialised in Asian migrations and Diasporas, acknowledges that there have been many scholarly works written on the subject of the Vietnamese refugees, from their early arrivals in the 1970s to the policies of resettlements and adaptations in the 2000s. She also refers toa number of studies dealing with the life in the camps during the 1980s and early 1990s.[31] In 2012, she published *The Chinese Vietnamese Diaspora: Revisiting the Boat People,* in order to "allow the inclusion of new data and a more-balanced understanding of events in Vietnam and of the many Vietnamese who fled their country."[32] In particular, she argues that the "Asian part" of the story was still missing, pointing out that most of the existing studies had been focusing on the refugees who resettled in the West, while the issue of the refugees who were repatriated or who remained "stuck in places of first asylum"[33] was seldom addressed. As a response to this void, her book gathered many scholarly publications and covers the issue in depth. It contributes to resisting the amnesia, at least from an academic perspective.

The general public might not know these studies, but people can access this knowledge through other channels. At the Hong Kong Correctional Services Museum in Hong Kong, as mentioned earlier, even though the chosen perspective is the one from the prison guardians, the story of the "boat people" is inscribed within the history of Hong Kong. Besides, some popular films spread the knowledge about the Vietnamese refugees in the territory. In fact, "one of the most important cultural documents of the war in Vietnam emerged (…) from the Hong Kong film industry of the 1980s."[34] Especially, Ann Hui's *Boat People* was acclaimed by the critics and received five prizes at the Hong Kong Film Award.[35] Earlier, Ann Hui directed a shorter film focusing on the life of a Vietnamese refugee arriving in Hong Kong and struggling to integrate the Hong Kong society.

[31] Chan Yuk-Wah, *The Chinese Vietnamese Diaspora: Revisiting the Boat People* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[32] Chan, *The Chinese Vietnamese Diaspora: Revisiting the Boat People*, ibid., 3.

[33] Chan, ibid., 4.

[34] Nguyen Vinh, "Ann Hui's Boat People: Documenting Vietnamese Refugees in Hong Kong," in *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: Twenty-first-Century Perspectives,* ed. Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim (New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 94.

[35] Nguyen, ibid., 98.

This short piece was broadcasted on television, as part of a popular series.[36] This visibility, and the commercial success of the film *Boat People*, could relativise the amnesia associatedwith this part of history in Hong Kong. The film, however, was released in 1982, and the new generation might not be aware of it. According to Nguyen, it is seldom screened in Hong Kong today. Besides, as Nguyen points out, there has been the "1997 factor" at play in writing this history in Hong Kong, a trend consisting in interpreting the cultural production of that time in light of the handover, and according to the Chinese communists' relationship with Hong Kong. The specific issue of the Vietnamese refugee, thus, might have been neglected.

Yuk-Wah Chan underlines that people usually do not know about the Vietnamese refugees who were not repatriated and who remained in Hong Kong. She proposes the figure of thirty thousand former refugees living now in the territory.[37] She recalls that most of the Vietnamese refugees refused to be repatriated and used alternative tactics to stay within the territory, such as fake documents or arranged marriages. The current situation of these former "boat people" seems indeed to be a lesser known issue among the Hong Kong population. In 2017, before Chung's exhibition at Spring Workshop, two artworks were addressing this issue: Vicky Do's documentary *From Now On* and Fai Wan's documentary film *2 or 2 things about the bridge*.[38]

In the series presented at Art Basel Hong Kong and at Spring Workshop, Chung is not directly addressing the issue of the current situation of the former "boat people" living in Hong Kong: *The Vietnam Exodus Project* (1975–2000), as defined in the title, covers the period from 1975 to 2000 and none of her cartographic work deals with today's situation. However, at Spring, the installation featured *km0-Son's story* (2017), an interview of a former refugee living in Hong Kong. Besides, in her panel discussions,

[36] Nguyen, ibid., 96.

[37] Chan, ibid., 6.

[38] Vicky Do's *From Now On*, exhibited at Floating Project collective in June 2017, already cited; Fai Wan' s *2 or 2 things about the bridge* (2014) a documentary film addressing the issue of a group of refugees living in Sham Shui Po, under the flyovers, among whom many are former Vietnamese refugees (exhibited at Duddell's, Hong Kong in the framework of ifva, independent film, Sept. 2017).

Chung always invites former refugees in order to discuss their present condition and to reflect on the refugee law frameworks and policies.[39]

In summary, it seems that the history of the "boat people" has not been actually erased in Hong Kong, yet the local collective memory about this refugee crisis might still be tinged with negativity and confusion. The Vietnamese refugees brought with them a lot of tensions, and this long-term crisis triggered many controversies among the population. Chan emphasises how much the issue has divided Hong Kong society during the late 1980s and 1990s.[40] In light of that, *The Vietnam Exodus Project* allows to reactivate this part of history, bringing new perspectives on the events. Especially, the artistic project sheds light on the humanity of the Vietnamese refugees, valuing individual and embodied experiences. At the same time, the artist's research process and accumulation of evidence gives tangibility to a past that has for too long be neglected.

5.2   THE ARTIST-RESEARCHER

Born in Danang in Central Vietnam in 1969, Tiffany Chung emigrated with her family to the United States after the Vietnam War. Pamela Corey notes her early involvement in historical research and site-specific projects, notably in Japan, and underlines her interest in the evolution of urban landscapes, that would eventually lead her towards cartography.[41] When Chung settled down in Ho Chi Minh City, first in 2000 then subsequently in 2007, she was astonished by the local lack of knowledge about the Vietnam War. She realised that this gap was mainly due to a political strategy that encouraged people to look forward and to avoid dwelling on the past.[42] This official denial, linked to radical changes in the local physical

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[39] Chung exhibited another iteration of the project at Tai Kwun in 2018. For this exhibition, she presented a scroll painting that interweaves images of some former Vietnamese refugees living as homeless in Sham Shui Po at the time of her fieldwork, interwoven with current images of sites of former detention centers all over Hong Kongwith archival images of the refugees back then. Besides, two panels brought together some former refugees residing in Hong Kong with Hong Kong-based human rights lawyers who worked on their cases in the past.

[40] Chan Yuk-Wah, *The Chinese Vietnamese Diaspora: Revisiting the Boat People* (New York: Routledge, 2011),10

[41] Corey Pamela, "Tiffany Chung: Between Imagination and Historicity," in *Tiffany Chung, Artist Monograph,* ed. Galerie Quynh and Tyler Rollins Fine Art (Ho Chi Minh City, 2015), 11.

[42] Conversation with the artist in her studio in Ho Chi Minh City, January 2016.

landscape made in the name of progress, is likely to have strengthened her interest in research as a way to reflect on the history of places. At the same time, her personal experiences as a former refugee and witness of the war have deeply informed her work. Her father, a South Vietnamese helicopter pilot, was captured in Laos and imprisoned for 14 years. Chung remembers her mother waiting at the demarcation line between the North and South Vietnam, near the 17th Parallel, for his possible release through a POW swap: "The wall between North and South Vietnam was invisible but nonetheless one of the most painful ones. I then decided to focus on the most traumatic conflicts of the twentieth century in hope of shedding light on unspoken stories of people who lost everything to those ridiculous conflicts."[43]

Today, she works both an artist and a researcher, locating her practice "between aesthetics and archives, poetry and statistics, lived experiences and top-down policies, national narratives and micro histories, political imagination and participation."[44] Her research process is well recognized, and the existing literature alludes to her role as a historian, archivist and ethnographer. However, her methodology of work has not been studied per se. Corey, in particular, highlights Chung's engagement with history and ethnography but describes her methodology as being more "experimental and affective," pointing out the psychological and aesthetical dimensions of her work rather than examining the systematic research components of her practice.[45] Recently, her engagement in research has intensified with her unprecedented building of the archive collection about Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong exhibited in part at Spring Workshop.

The Vietnam Exodus Project is entirely based on her extensive research and fieldwork she conducted on this topic. The artist gathered a huge number of archival materials, working as an archivist in this collecting process. While she looked for evidence to "reconstruct" the history of the Vietnam refugees in Hong Kong, she is inspired by the work methodologies of historians. Simultaneously, she also worked as a cartographer,

[43] Chung Tiffany "Scratching the Walls of Memories," talk at Asia Art Archive America on the occasion of her solo exhibition, [November 4 2010–January 8 2011], 2011. www.aaa-a. org/programs/presentation-by-tiffany-chung/

[44] Tiffany Chung's lecture "remapping history: the unwanted population," at Yale September 8, 2017. https://ritm.yale.edu/event/remapping-history-unwanted-population-tiffany-chung-artist.

[45] Corey, "Tiffany Chung: Between Imagination and Historicity," ibid., 21.

"remapping" the population movements and flux, or locating the detention centres in Hong Kong from the data and statistic she gathered and from her site visits. Finally, as she immersed herself within the Vietnamese refugee community in Hong Kong, she borrows her research tools from the ethnographer, collecting stories and personal archive materials from the refugees.

The Vietnam Exodus Project is thus a complex combination of very diverse elements that nevertheless converse with each other and account for an original perception of history. Even though Chung working process is holistic as she moves from one field to another with fluidity, weaving her research findings with her artistic input, it is useful to examine her relationship with each discipline separately. The comparison with these academic fields aims at pointing to the originality of the artist's approach when she combines academic research methodologies with her artistic vision, giving birth to her singular creative language and to an artistic form of knowledge production.

Image: Tiffany Chung, *The Vietnam Exodus Project*. Installation view at Spring Worksop, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Spring Workshop

The Artist Working as an Archivist

Archives have always played a key role in Chung's practice. She either displays them alongside her artworks or draws her inspiration from them, especially for her cartographic drawings. In *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, though, archives occupy an unprecedented place, constituting a central pillar of the enterprise. Most of this material was displayed at Spring, since the exhibition focused on the archival dimension of the series and worked as an extension of the one that took place during Art Basel.

Many photographs from various sources, personal photographs given to the artist by some refugees, newspaper archival photographs or photographs taken recently by Chung and showing all the former sites of the refugee camps and detention centres were displayed on the wall. In-between, quotes and titles highlighted some important dates or moments and the overall spirit of that time ("Twenty years after all this began, those remaining in the camps are not one of our concerns any longer").[46] A few copies of the front page of a local newspaper Tap Chi and Freedom Magazine, published by the refugees inside the camp in the 1990s, revealed in particular the highly radicalized atmosphere of the camps ("Kill us all don't send us back").

On a long table, seven folders containing testimonies and documentation offered very different perspectives about the history of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong: UNCHR records (mainly from their headquarters in Geneva where the artist spent a lot of time), refugees' personal documents (diplomas, letters, identification documents…), VOLAG (Voluntary Agencies) reports, law studies and academics studies such as "Mistrusting Refugees" and "Indefinite Detention and Mandatory Repatriation, the incarceration of Vietnamese in Hong Kong" by Dinah PoKempnert.[47] Among the personal archives, some letters from kids expressing their feelings of being rejected by the others because of their origin are particularly moving. There was also a folder dedicated to a detailed timeline of the story from 1975 to 2000. Facing this dense documentation, three screens were showing film footages from the UNHCR on the riots that took place in the camps but also on the daily life of the

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[46] The quote is by Jean-Noel Wetterwald, head of UNHCR Hong Kong office.

[47] Including, for example *Mistrusting Refugees* ed. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen (1995) and *Indefinite Detention and Mandatory Repatriation, the incarceration of Vietnamese in Hong Kong* by Dinah PoKempnert (1992) UCLA Pacific Basin Law Journal.

refugees, Vietnamese returning home or small histories such as the refugees who got married in order to be allowed to remain within the camp.

This multiplicity gave the public an idea of the complexity of the event and of the entwined interests at stake: human, politics, economic, legal, cultural… Chung did not dictate to the audience how to read her archival material: there was no entry point and no direction. The whole display resembled a web with no definite links between the archives that offered a multiplicity of possible connections. However, Chung's work did not seek to be impartial, and her humanitarian perspective was obvious. Most of the selected pieces on the wall reflected the hard life in the camps and the human trauma of the refugees. They also make visible and evident the burden and the work that Hong Kong had carried out on behalf of the British humanitarian authorities by proxy. Presented as such the archives relinquished their sense of neutrality and began to be hierarchized.

Archivist, Sue Breakell, Head of the Archives at the Tate Gallery in London, underlines the necessarily objective dimension of archives, arguing that the archivist should "describe material neutrally, document what they do to the archive, and intervene as little as possible if an original order is discernible in the papers."[48] Curating the archives is a way to intervene and to introduce discourse into what is supposed to remain neutral. Traditionally, an archivist is someone who maintains and is in charge of archives (designing record-keeping systems, selecting, assessing and describing the archive).[49] The choices of what to keep and what to discard have to be justified, which is not the case with Chung. While she sees indeed the archive as a site of political struggle (what do we keep, exhibit, why and how), she actually keeps everything. The artist, here, does not seek to replace the archivist, but rather uses archival methodology to fill in the vacuum on certain parts of this refugee movement and to highlight the complexity of its scope. Besides, the accumulation of documents brings validity and value to her work process and personal initiative. Facing the huge number of archives and the thickness of the files, the public cannot but recognize the existence of the "boat people". There is even something excessive in her collecting practice: the viewer is quickly overwhelmed by the number of documents. Against the denial of the Vietnamese government, this quantity could represent a claim of its own. When delving

[48] Breakwell Sue, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive," *Tate Papers* 9, 2008. www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tatepapers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive.

[49] Schwartz Joan M. and Cook Terry, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory" *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1–19.

into the archives' content, the public cannot deny the struggles and sufferings of the refugees. Considering the absence of institutionalized and organized archives on the topic, Chung is taking the first step towards a public acknowledgement of the events, contributing to a collective, holistic understanding of its scope. Her archival collection could work as a point of departure for history to be rewritten, and perhaps for archivists and historians to take over this process.

Archival collections may also be considered as evidence of trauma, as defined by Fiona Murphy, an anthropologist at Queen's University, Belfast, with experience in this field: "We primarily see the archive as storehouse of memory and fact, as the place from whence history issues forth. However, the archive is much more than this; it is… a place of trauma and pain. It is a place of sorrow and loss for many, where unpacified ghosts with unfinished business await, yielding stories and letters different from expectation, a site where loss is localized and realized."[50] Murphy extends here the notion of archives from physical artefacts to places of memory. Certainly, Chung's collection evokes the trauma of the Vietnamese refugees. For example, in her archival documents, there is evidence of suffering and of the loss of dignity: refugee identity documents show how they were named only by numbers; letters from refugee children reveal their distress and anxiety at being different from other children. By gathering these documents, she makes it possible for people to refer later to these archival materials, extending their significance beyond the art space, building archives without walls. Her archives, thus, are turned towards the future rather than towards the past. Contrary to Jacques Derrida, whose vision of the archives is nostalgic, associated with a desire to come back to the origins of things,[51] Chung's archives seem to consist of a first step aimed at moving forward and healing the trauma. In that sense, her gesture could be seen as a form of creation as defined by Foster, a "desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions (…) into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations."[52] Besides, with the panel discussions she organised with former refugees, discussing potential changes in current refugees host countries policies and reactivating the archives within this perspective, the artist wishes to

[50] Murphy Fiona, "Archives of Sorrow: An Exploration of Australia's Stolen Generations and Their Journey into the Past." *History and Anthropology* 22(4) (2011): 481–495.

[51] Derrida Jacques, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (The University of Chicago Press Book, 1996).

[52] Foster Hal, "An Archive Impulse" *The MIT Journals* 110 (2004): 22.

contribute to shift their position from that of victims to the one with agency, bringing in new meaning to the trauma they have gone through.

The Artist Working as a Historian

Chung's systematic search for archives relative to the Vietnamese refugee crisis in Hong Kong is very similar to the research method of a historian. Yet, historians not only collect archive materials, they use written documents, physical artefacts and oral testimonies as evidence in formulating hypotheses about the past. With this objective, they seek to link together distinct events, establishing continuities, locating key features and identifying causes and consequences. On her part, as we have seen, Chung is not interested in creating such links and she does not activate the archives in the way historians would do. On the contrary, visitors are free to roam in the assembled materials and to create their own vision of history. The artist is rather inviting the viewer to become a historian, offering an array of source material and possible stories.This opening-up calls for a collective enterprise.

Chung is not re-writing history, but attempts to "reconstruct an exodus history," suggesting that there are many possible stories to tell, depending on the chosen perspective. The full title of the series recalls that the sources of the history that she proposes to reconstruct come from "fragmented records and half-lived lives." Her vision offers thus a set of entangled, open-ended and fragmented histories that may better reflect the reality of the events than a grand—and singular—narrative.

The Artist Working as a Cartographer

In 1954, when the French lost the Indochina war, Vietnam was divided in two parts. From a cartographic perspective, the line separating the two territories was straight: it was a man-made line drawn without any concern with the reality of the field. This line, however, had a huge impact on the population, and changed many lives according to which side of the new border people were. Chung remembers her mother waiting for her husband to be released by the North at the occasion of a prisoner's exchange. This memory sparked the artist's desire to work on territory's divisions and people separation. Maps have always played a huge role in these political partitions.

Chung's workas a cartographer is not an isolated trend. The late 2000s saw an "explosion" of artists engaged in mapmaking and, in 2009,

Katharine Harmon compiled a collection of about 300 contemporary artistic maps and cartographic installations from around the world.[53] In the wider Mekong region, Burmese artist Aung Myint has been creating expressive maps, yet, in Vietnam, Chung is the only artist engaged in cartography so far.

What directly triggered her cartographic practice is her return to Vietnam, and her daily confrontation with the constructions and modernisation of the local landscape. Annette M. Kim remarks that Vietnamese people are not familiar with maps.[54] However, the author immediately highlights the power of maps in the country as a major language of government city planners. The maps have for instance the authority to tell which part of the land will be urbanised, thus which population will be displaced. The first maps drawn by Chung were precisely dealing with urban development in HCMC.The artist was fully aware of thedeep relationship between maps and urban planning policies, and she collected urban planning maps from real-estate agents. At that time, her cartographic work was purely aesthetic, even though already a product of investigations based on the reality of a territory. The beauty of her design was developed to challenge the authority of the map, as counter-mapping. For example, the oil, ink and collage on paper *10.9667°N 106.4667°E* (2007), refers to an exact location in HCMC where developers excavated the land. The title refers to the exact topographic location of the field she is representing. However, the work is totally abstract with organic patterns and explosions of colours that hint to the demolition works and to the craters they created. From this aestheticized viewpoint, she opposed the functional, commercial and state-driven perspective of the territory. Her map could echo Denis Wood's objective "to free maps at last from the tyranny of the state."[55]

Drawing maps has been Chung's main artistic practice since 2007. Her cartographic work is usually made with ink and oil on vellum paper, a translucent paper known for its precision, typically used in applications

[53] Watson Ruth, "Mapping and contemporary art," *The cartographic journal* n°4 Art & Cartography special issue Vol. 46 (Nov. 2009): 293–307. Harmon Katharine, *The Map As Art, Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).

[54] Kim Annette M. "Critical Cartography 2.0: From "participatory mapping" to authored visualizations of power and people"*Landscape and Urban Planning Journal* (August 2015): 217.Annette M. Kim is Director of the Spatial Analysis Laboratory at the Sol Price School of public policy.

[55] Wood Denis, *The Power of Maps* (The Guilford Press, revised ed. 1992), 111.

where tracing is required, such as architectural plans. *The Vietnam Exodus Project* consists of five cartographic works. As mentioned before, four of them are ink, oil and acrylic drawings on vellum paper, and the last one is made with embroidery on canvas. They are of different sizes but are all medium size artworks (roughly 75 × 100 cm). Some include a caption, while some are not. They all deal with the Vietnamese refugee crisis that took place in Hong Kong from 1975, but each one offers a different perspective, from macro visions to more detailed ones.

The field of cartography has recently witnessed the emergence of critical cartography.[56] J.H. Andrew underscored the multiplicity of the existing definitions of what is a map: he collected 321 different definitions of the English word "map" used from 1649 to 1996.[57] The term has indeed been used for different objectives, and its definition was adapted to fit various needs. We will refer here to the traditional academic field of cartography, with its scientific approach including genuine sources and references: "a representation on a plane surface, at an established scale, of the physical features, (natural, artificial or both) of a part or the whole of the earth's surface, by the use of signs and symbols, and with the method of orientation indicated."[58]

According to Chung, and as highlighted in many of her work's titles, her maps are drawn from actual figures and data extracted from her research outcome. This accuracy is at the core of her practice, and the artist often states that she tries to be as precise as possible in turning the statistics into visual forms. Yet, at first glance, her cartographic works do not seem conventional and do not look like academic cartography.

Globally, Chung is re-purposing the conventions of map-making for her own ends, using the cartographic language to serve her objective. Like the French "précieuses" intellectuals of the seventeenth century whose *Carte du Tendre* combined "a visual language borrowed from contemporaneous practices of cartographic pictorialism with a centuries-old tradition of allegorical discourse and utopic speculation,"[59] Chung borrows from the cartographic field the language of signs and symbols in a very

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[56] See in particular Wood Denis *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (The Guilford Press, 2010).

[57] Andrew J.H. "What Was a Map? The Lexicographers Reply" *Cartographica* Vol.33 Iss.4 (Winter 1996): 1–11.

[58] American Society of Civil Engineers, *Definition of Surveying, Mapping and Related Terms* (New York, 1954), 7 quoted by Andrew, ibid., 8.

[59] Peters Jeffrey N. *Mapping Discord: Allegorical Cartography in Early Modern French Writing* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 31.

innovative way. Some of the symbols are indeed conventional, such as pie charts, arrows, graphics or roads representations, while others are merely artistic. Especially, she uses an organic pattern made from small dots, which resembles fungus. Rather than filling a space with plain colour, for instance, she fills it in with this motif. These dots can in turn be linked or surrounded by another motif, which is more linear, and which would function like arteries. Overall, these patterns give to the maps a sense of dynamism and suggest that the reality represented is alive. From a more critical perspective, they insinuate that people could be assimilated to dots that seem to multiply, out of control like a virus.

This pattern, which has become Chung's typical cartographic motif, can be traced back to her 2005–2006 collages dealing with the urban development of Japan, which in turn were inspired by Japanese floral textile. She used to represent urban growth through organic and colourful abstract round shapes very similar to flower petals that strongly resemble the round shapes from *The Vietnam Exodus Project* series. Pamela Corey underlined that her Japanese collages forced her as well "to grapple with a highly controlled palimpsestic process of construction and reconstruction" that eventually led her to her cartographic drawings. This spatial urban representation is indeed already linked with a dynamic of accumulations and overlays that is at the core of her representation of the dispersion of migrant populations. Describing her first cartographic drawings, Chung explains that "colourful dots and patterns are used to mimic microorganisms and to metaphorically suggest the rapid development as rootless as the microscopic plants of fungi, which thrive in decay and feed off other organisms." Some patterns in *The Vietnam Exodus Project* are common with other cartographic works dealing with forced population movements and migration, in particular Chung's recent sets of drawings reflecting on the routes and camps of global migrants across the world (*The Global Refugee Migration Project*) and more specifically on migrants fleeing the Syrian conflict (*The Syrian Project*). Even though each individual story is different, and each context is specific, Chung's choice to link these projects together with similar motifs indicates the common fate of these migrants, often deprived from their rights and conceived as a flow or a mass rather than from an individuated perspective. It also suggests that while these three series are deeply characterised by their contextual frameworks, they can be understood from a universal perspective.

Chung is also diverting the conventional use of cartographic language by mixing playfully the connotative and the denotative levels of meaning.[60] The use of a pie chart to represent population, for example, is very conventional in cartography. However, in *HKSAR statistics on yearly arrivals and departures of V-refugees from 1975–1997(*2016), these charts seem to fall, as if they were moved by something above them. Some pie charts are also drawn in the sea, adding to the confusion. This dynamic is not conventional. The process of mapping is here distorted to reveal the powerlessness of the refugees. They can be perceived as a threat (falling and invasive balls), but at the same time it highlights their vulnerability since their group could fall apart. The colour filling of the circles seems also to overflow their outlines, strengthening this impression. Everything, in this map, looks fragile and in an ephemeral state of balance.
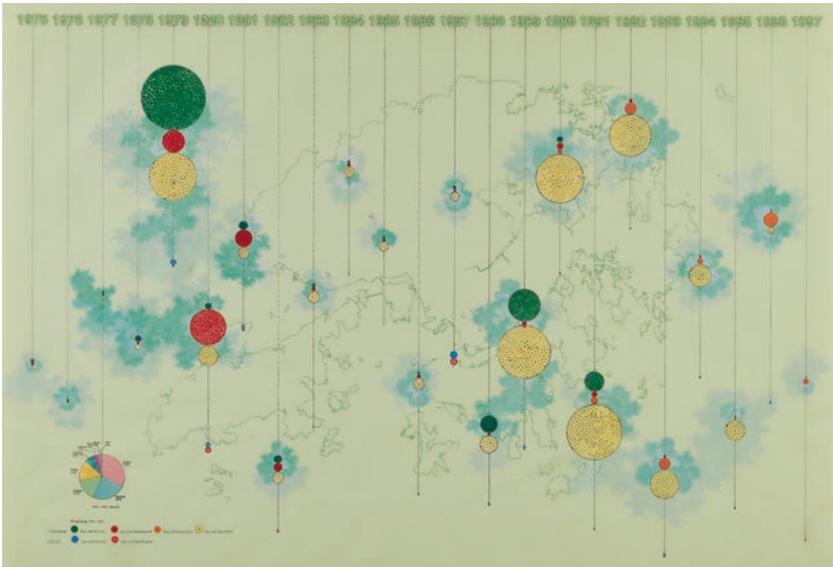
Image: Tiffany Chung, *HKSAR statistics on yearly arrivals and departures of V-refugees from 1975–1997(*2016), acrylic, ink, and oil on vellum and paper 79 × 100 cm. M+, Hong Kong. Brown Family Annual Acquisition Fund, 2016. [2017.9]. © Tiffany Chung. Photo: M+, Hong Kong

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[60] I borrow these two concepts from Barthes in Barthes Roland, *The Elements of Semiology* (London: Cape, 1967).

The artist, here, questions people's perception of the refugees, but also how governments represent them. The term "Vietnamese refugees," by definition, refers to a group of anonymous people. They have no name, no stories: they are big circles on a map that invade territories and spread everywhere. Besides, they cannot wander freely, and their journey is driven by necessity and by the authorities. There is no trace of individuality in Chung's map, no trace of free will, or fantasy. Cartographic drawings do not include shadows: with this mode of representation, there is no place to hide, no corners for secrecy or intimacy. The dots are extremely dense, and the excess of details leads to a feeling of suffocation. From these almost physical impressions, the viewer starts to ponder about the policies of refugees in Hong Kong, and how they impacted the society. Visually, the use of dynamic graphic pie charts overlapping the map's background strongly suggests a contrast between mobility (the flux of refugees) and politics of containment. This mode of representation also underscores the opposition between exclusion and inclusion: none of the outlines are neat with elements accumulated at the borders of the pie charts. They seem thus neither inside nor outside and could be perceived as a surplus… Space, for Chung, is never a neutral place, but a place of tensions in a perpetual state of change. Her dots confined in pie charts representing human beings are metaphors for the refugees struggling to make their way. One feels they try to expand, to free themselves from the constraint of the map, from its predefined outlines, and probably from their fate. Her representational mode questions the territories' ability of absorbing or integrating these newcomers. The creation and implementation of the refugee policies are not explained nor represented in the cartographic works but are reflected by her artistic language.

Chung uses colour symbolism in a very expressive way, such as in *Permanent transitory homes: HK correctional institutions, detention centres and refugee campsfrom archival records and Google mapping* (2015). This map represents the territory of Hong Kong against a blue background. The land is filled with small and very dense colourful points that create different zones: green, yellow, orange red and dark red. There is no caption, but we can suppose that the green zone has no refugees, while the dark red zone indicates a strong concentration of camps and prison. Chung, here, juxtaposes the green colour, known for being associated with nature, energy and renewal, with the colour red symbolizing violence, anger and danger. The contrast between the two is strong, and the visual impact of this map is immediate, highlighting the number of camps

and prisons hosting Vietnamese refugees. This, as we have seen before, might be an overlooked piece of information for Hong Kong people. The dynamic of the red colour further suggests that these camps and correctional institutions were the centre of violence, or that they were perceived as threats. This is not stated but can be felt from the design of the map, intuitively. The consequences of the Hong Kong policy towards the refugees are here again at stake: one might question why so many refugees were in detention centres. In the title, the provocative juxtaposition of the terms "permanent" and "transitory homes", the apposition of the terms "correctional institutions, detention centres and refugee camps" and the difficulty in differentiating them on the map strengthen the amalgam and trigger further questions, such as what could have been the factors that drove people to associate refugee camps and prisons? Hence, while academic maps strive to provide facts, Chung's cartography triggers questions and offers commentary. While Denis Wood demonstrated how, historically, maps have above all been constructed to serve the political power of the states,[61] the artist is reversing and re-appropriating this power for her own objective.

The most representative example of her free use of the cartographic medium may be the embroidered map entitled: *from the sea and back to the sea—ten-year journey of a stateless, unaccompanied minor* (2016). This work represents the Hong Kong territory with its highways and airport and some dotted lines indicating directions. Hong Kong Island stands out, coloured in different hue of pink and purple, with three main areas. The rest of the territory is green. There is neither mention of data, nor a provided source of information. The only piece of factual information may come from the title, referring to the "ten-year journey of a stateless, unaccompanied minor", but we know neither the name of this "minor", nor who he/she is. The period is not defined either although a few dates have been inscribed along the lines and arrows together with the mention "from Vietnam" and "to Vietnam." This map offers a spatial and temporal perspective on the itinerary of one individual, on land and across the sea. There is an adjacent plaque, difficult to decipher, representing the replicate of the minor's identity document in detention. It indicates her sex (F), identification number, name (a series of x), date of birth (1st December 1976) and a few reference numbers. Due to the embroidery technique, the lines of the map are thicker and more approximate in comparison to a

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[61] Wood Denis, *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (The Guilford Press, 2010), 2.

standard map. This apparent clumsiness recalls childish drawings and may reflect the young age of the minor. In using embroidery, Chung probably hints at the famous work of Alighiero e Boetti. When asked about this choice, she said that she chose this domestic and resilient technique in memory of the war, when the women were doing embroidery while waiting for their fathers or husbands and sons to return. The process suggests time and painful work. This might be a way to suggest the long and painful journey of this minor. Finally, graphically, the artist has represented many lines, creating a confused network among which the itinerary of this minor seems lost. From this representation, one can immediately feel the psychological state of mind of this refugee, and her confusion when she was looking for a safe heaven and for a home. The absence of name, and precise story, suggests that this is the story of many Vietnamese minors, and that this scenario did not happen only once. Embroidery, associated with the private sphere, invites the public to reflect on the intimate and individual dimension of history.

Chung herself opposes her artwork with conventional and academic maps: "When juxtaposing a map of a particular place with its history and cultural memories, one can unveil certain realities and perspectives that were hidden behind a map's mechanical representation of the place."[62] By drawing beautiful maps, the artist moves away from their "mechanical representation", injecting emotion and sensations. This emotion, she hopes, will destabilize the viewer and trigger the desire to make research about her topics. According to Corey, Chung's cartographic representations activate "formal pleasure for conceptual subversion."[63] The art critic points out that Chung has been very much influenced by the theory of Dave Hickey,[64] who defends the return of beauty in art against arid academism. However, the aesthetic developed by Chung is not merely sensuous or based on imagination. Even in her mere artistic expression, the artist seems to follow rules. As we have seen, Chung uses the artistic language to code the exodus history in a logical, stylised and consistent way.

[62] Chung Tiffany, *Tiffany Chung, Artist Monograph* (Ho Chi Minh: Galerie Quynh and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, 2015), 34.

[63] Corey Pamela, "Tiffany Chung: Between Imagination and Historicity," in *Tiffany Chung, Artist Monograph*, ed. Galerie Quynh and Tyler Rollins Fine Art (Ho Chi Minh City: Galerie Quynh, 2015), 15.

[64] Hickey Dave *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009) cited Corey, "Tiffany Chung: Between Imagination and Historicity," ibid., 15.

Her practice invites to a dialectical thinking, with the viewer moving between the aestheticized yet codified representations of the Vietnamese refugee history, and the archival materials on display. This freedom of choices and interpretation requires the active participation of the viewer, though. It is sometimes difficult to decipher the works, especially with the absence of caption, or with the use of unexplained abbreviations.

Furthermore, while her data sources might be accurate, Chung purposely omits facts or allows uncertainties in her visual representation of them. For instance, in *Permanent transitory homes: HK correctional institutions, detention centres and refugee camps from archival records and Google mapping* (2015), there is no caption on the map, and no mention of any dates or duration period. The map does not reflect on the evolution of these camps, it does not include the ruptures of history, nor its nuances: it only shows the camps as a stable and fixed image, without defining temporal boundaries. Above all, the map does not indicate that all these camps have actually been shut down now, which is an essential element of the history of the refugees in Hong Kong. Chung is here purposely omitting key facts to convey her own ideas: by suggesting some camps remain open today, or allowing the doubt about this fact, she brings back history into the present time to emphasise its actuality.

In fact, Pillar Point in Tuen Mun was the last camp to close in Hong Kong in 2000, but even if the "boat people" era now belongs to history, for many refugees the trauma remains vivid. The children who grew up inside the camps are now adult but are deeply transformed by their traumatizing experiences. Besides, there is still a discrimination against Vietnamese people who wish to enter the Hong Kong territory, and some issues have not been solved, such as the stateless status of some former refugees.[65]

The Artist Working as an Ethnographer

Chung visited Hong Kong at least five times, and deeply connected there in a rather deep fashion with the former Vietnamese refugee community. She relates that she started to search for the former refugees through social media, little by little gaining their trust.[66] Rather than asking direct

[65] See for instance Suk-Mun Law Sophia, *The Invisible Citizens of Hong Kong: Art and Stories of Vietnamese Boatpeople* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2014).

[66] Interview with the artist at Spring Workshop, November 2017.

questions, she tried to integrate into the community and to make friends. She presents herself as a former refugee who speaks Vietnamese,[67] which facilitates the communication and mutual understanding. According to the artist, this was a very long process, but it was also very rewarding. Thanks to the creation of these connections, the artist collected personal stories that helped her to better understand the community, and what they have been through during the refugee crisis. It also gave her some insight about their current situation in Hong Kong, and in particular their citizenship issue (some of them are still stateless).

At Spring Workshop, Chung's presentation text announced an exhibition of "archival materials and notes from her academic research and ethnographic fieldwork."[68] The term "ethnographic" is used here in a very broad sense, probably in a way to emphasise the value of the artist's work. For the American professor of anthropology James Spradley, "ethnography is the work of describing a culture. The central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view."[69] This is not the case of Chung, who rather draws her inspiration from what she learnt among former Vietnamese refugees than works as an ethnographer.

However, the ethnographic approach sheds some light on certain key questions when it comes to studying another community, and to give it public exposure in one way or another. In her work, Chung does not speak for the refugees, she lets them speak through the archives and their testimonies. She underlines that they do not need anyone to speak for them: if one looks at the film footage featuring the riots, or the local newspaper printed within the camps, it is easy, she says, to understand that they were able to express themselves. "People are not voiceless: we just do not listen to them."[70] In the unique interview she filmed, *km0-Son's story* (2017), she disappears behind her subject. It is an interview with Son Hoang, a former refugee who is ethnic Chinese Vietnamese. He relates his journey to Hong Kong and his struggles to remain within the territory.

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[67] In 1990, when her father was released after 14 years being imprisoned by the North Vietnam, Chung and her family were able to leave the country under a U.S. sponsored program called Humanitarian Operation. They left Vietnam by air with refugee status via Bangkok, where they stayed in a transit camp before flying to the United States.

[68] From Spring Workshop's website page on the exhibition, and from the text of the leaflet given during the show.

[69] Spradley James, *Participant Observation* (Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1980), 3.

[70] Zoom conversation with the artist, April 21, 2022.

The refugee, who was also invited to testify at a panel discussion organised by the artist at Spring Workshop,[71] shares his personal story, talking directly to the camera. We do not see Chung, nor do we hear her voice asking questions. In the panel discussion, Chung also let the refugees talk directly, and did not talk on their behalf. Yet, her cartographic work, and, in fact, her whole project, touches upon their community and contributes to its public exposure. Therefore, the core ethnographic question of the otherness is still at stake here, even though we are far from Hal Foster's critical exotic and post-colonial perspective.[72] Engaging in a research practice devoted to a specific community of people inevitably raises the question of the artist's ability to reflect upon another culture, without exploiting or misreading it.

As a former refugee herself, Chung feels probably that it is legitimate for her to tackle the issue of refugees, as she can talk "from within." However, she rather insists on leaving her personal biography aside. Her long-term approach with the local former refugees allows her to "speak nearby," in Trinh T. Minh Ha's classic turn of phrase."[73] Chung does not "need" to be a refugee to address this issue. As we have seen, she always leaves some room for the refugees to express themselves. From victims deprived of rights to recognized citizens, she hopes to contribute to a shift in how they are usually perceivedby the general public. While her cartographic drawings might represent them as passive dots invading maps, a video such as *km0-Son's story* (2017) and some archives reveal their individual personalities, journeys and agencies.

5.3   Cultural Activism and Knowledge Production

Research and Cultural Activism

Chung always states that she wishes to be useful as an artist, putting her art at the service of social and political changes: "When I was a young art student, with a refugee background and the baggage of the Vietnam conflict, I never dreamed I would be doing this kind of work. It's a blessing

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[71] PERMANENT IN-TRANSIT" on Nov. 5 (Sun), 11am to 1pm. Spring Workshop, Hong Kong. Participants: Mark Daly, Son Hoang, Gladys Li, Đúc Hong Nguyen, Que Nguyen, and Carol Tong Thi Xuan.

[72] Foster Hall, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" in *The Return of the Real Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, United States: MIT Press, 1996), 303.

[73] Extracts from the film can be watched on you Tube.

to be given such opportunities, but that comes with profound responsibilities. I continue to struggle and fumble in figuring out what we can do when confronted by injustice and pain in a world in which only a small group of people holds the power and makes decisions for all of us. So, stirring social consciousness through art is a great thing but not enough, due to the limitations of what art can achieve. I aim for my work to go beyond the realm of art and contribute to international policymaking on issues concerning borders, refugees and asylum, at least for the time being."[74]

Turner and Webb define a "cultural activist" as the one who produces "creative artefacts and events designed to mobilize affects." They underline that the degree of commitment can be very different from one cultural activist to another. What they share, though, is their attempt to "achieve political change and social justice by mobilising people through emotional engagement."[75] In order to engage such a mobilisation, the authors continue, the activist needs to "successfully convince the general population that their efforts are both legitimate and of value." As we have seen, research is a key means of finding and demonstrating this legitimacy and of convincing people of the value of the artist's argument.

Chung's involvement campaign against fraught histories and towards social justice could be located in relationship to Vietnamese cultural activism that has been significant over the last century, first opposing colonial rule and later resisting State controls over society.[76] In the art field, many collectives and artists have resisted official authority.[77] Very active from 1986 to 1996 and known for their free and experimental paintings, the artists from the Group of 10, for example, paved the way for the recognition of abstract art in the country, a form of art that used to be banned by the government. More recently, curator and artist Tran Luong praised the courage and inventiveness of Vietnamese artists who are manoeuvring to

[74] Tsai Sylvia, "To Be Remembered interview with Tiffany Chung" *Art Asia Pacific Magazine* 100 (2016): 128–137.

[75] Turner Caroline & Webb Jan, *Art and human rights* (Manchester University Press 2016), 36.

[76] See in particular Turner & Webb, ibid. and AlapaggaMuthiah, "The Nonstate Public Sphere in Asia: Dynamic, Growth, Institutionalisation Lag" in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* ed. Alapagga, 455–477 (Stanford, California: Stanford UniversityPress, 2004).

[77] See, for example, Taylor Nora A. "De la parodie à la propagande: La résistance anticoloniale vue par les graphistes vietnamiens à partir des années 1950" *Arts Asiatiques* 65 (2010): 27–35.

address the taboos and contradictions in what he calls a "dictatorship society." He highlighted the artists' "attitude of resistance" and "enduring stamina,"[78] and stressed the artists' responsibility in resisting this system: "in this situation, only the intellectuals and artists are able to take responsibility to make honest look at the history, and humaneness [sic]. Their studies, projects or works will create the awakening, open up a different perspective, or simply providing information, creating a new way of thinking for the public."[79] Like Tran Luong, Chung feels responsible to address sensitive issues, and to open up new perspectives on history. In the region, what seems to be new, though, is the artist's engagement in research that drives this new form of activism.

Building a Collective Memory and Reclaiming an Identity

One direct consequence of a lack of education and historical oblivion is a pressing need for building a collective memory that would notably give back an identity to the former refugees: the denial of the existence of the "boat people" amounts to ignore them as Vietnamese citizens. It is not surprising that this topic has been addressed by the three most important "vietkieu" artists who grew up in the United States and came back later to live and work in Vietnam: Tiffany Chung, Dinh Q. Lê and Tuan Andrew Nguyen.[80] As former refugees, they all felt they had to address the subject in one way or another at different moment of their career, and they all did it through a research process.

Building a collective memory is not an easy task. Scholar Quan Tue Tran, who specialised in the Vietnamese diaspora, relates that in 2005 a group of former refugees came back to Pulau Bidong and Pulau Galang, two important camps in Malaysia and Indonesia, in order to build memorials, commemorating the exodus of the "boat people," their own past and the fate of those who did not survive. The memorials aimed also at showing their gratitude towards the international authorities that assisted them. While the Vietnamese government requested their destruction, with the

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[78] Tran Luong, « Mien MeoMieng » in *Mien MeoMieng/Contemporary Art from Vietnam*, ed. Bildmuseet (Sweden: Bildmuseet, 2015), 16.

[79] Tran Luong, "Interactive-Art in Development Projects for Everyday Life," Conference text from the 2015 Asian Art and Curators Forum organized by the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. Courtesy of the artist, 2015.

[80] See for instance Dinh Q. Lê 1999 *Mot Coi Di Ve* ("Spending one's life trying to find one's way home") and Tuan Andrew Nguyen's *The Island* (2017).

argument that they were "denigrated the dignity of Vietnam,"[81] Tran shows how much controversial these memorials and ritual ceremonies have been.Especially, they were criticizedfor the way they solely expressed the overseas Vietnamese communities' ideologies and personal visions. By conveying a global gratitude towards international organisations, and by referring to the "boat people" as an anonymous yet homogeneous group, they fail to embodythe complexity and plural perspectives of history.

With *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, Chung is avoiding the trap of the simplification of the topic by offering a very open-ended view on the event. The artist does not pay homage to any specific group of refugees, nor does she express any gratitude towards anyone: her series cannot be perceived as a memorial, yet it allows the reactivation and the building of a collective memory. Each piece of archive revives individual voices, while connecting to a common experience. The diversity of the mediums chosen by Chung as well as the variety of the documents she displays embody this plurality built from a constellation of individual stories and perspectives. Furthermore, this multivocal memory is still in the process of being written by the former refugees themselves. When invited to testify about their past experiences within Hong Kong detention centres, and about their struggle to obtain a refugee status, the former refugees featuring in the public panel discussions organised by Chung continue to produce knowledge and to refine this period of history.

Today, the topic is not anymore addressed only by "vietkieu": recently, Vietnam-born artists have been also working on the question of the "boat people," bringing along their own vision. As mentioned before, *From Now On* by Vicky Do is a 30-minutes documentary based on the artist's long-term investigation research on the current life of former Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. Through a series of interviews, the film tackles the issue of their integration after the camps, questioning the sensitive questions of identity and marginalization, indirectly challenging the Hong Kong policies towards refugees. *Everyday's the Seventies* (2018), a video installation by Nguyen Trinh Thi, does not address directly the specific topic of the "boat people," but examines the perception of Vietnam by Hong Kong people from that time until today, mixing fiction, personal memory and media perspectives. Implicitly, the question of the refugees remains prevalent. In the United States, a few American artists of

[81] Tran Quan Tue, "Remembering the Boat People Exodus," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* Berkeley Vol. 7 Issue 3 (2012): 82.

Vietnamese descent are also exploring their family memories, questioning the traces of their personal and collective trauma.[82]

As long as the Vietnamese government will deny the existence of the "boat people," artists will probably continue to activate and engage in these narratives. *The Vietnam Exodus Project*contributes to thisjoint effort, fighting oblivion and challenging the State authorities in order to rebuild a collective memory.

Objectivising and Mending a Traumatic History

When dealing with a painful past, a dry and systematic academic research, through the research process, can create a necessary distance between the artists and their topic. The dialogue between the cartographic drawings, watercolours painted by young Vietnamese artists based on archival photographs, and the whole set of archives allows for a constant back and forth movement between the lived reality of the refugees and abstractions (the dots and pie charts from the maps), between human figures and objective documents and reports of policymaking. In-between, lies the question of the dignity of these people, the question of their inhumane treatment and consideration, as well as the void regarding their stateless condition. Here, Chung subtly manages to approach with the right degree of distance the delicate topic of what Georgio Agamben calls the "bare life,"[83] a life close to the biological life because it mainly amounts to surviving. Agamben refers to life in concentration camps, which is not the same as the "boat people" refugee camps, but the question of how art can represent such a "bare life" or a "Life Full of Holes" is still relevant.[84]

With her work, Chung is aiming precisely at filling the gaps, trying to establish connections between recorded facts and memories, between population movements and policies, between suffering and camp rules, and between the past and the present. Her embroidery map serves as a relevant metaphor: while she recalls the story of a young refugee, she is repairing holes, stitching together scattered pieces of history: "It is also

[82] See for example, Truong Hong-An with her multimedia installation *On minor histories and the horrifying recognition of the swift work of time* (2016).

[83] Agamben Giorgio, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[84] Agamben, ibid. cited in Demos, T. J. *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis (*Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013),Prelude p.XV.

within the archive that acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument."[85] The suture, a meaningful image used by Enwezor, is present here not only between the past and the present, but also between the multiple voices and different perspectives involved in the story. The archival materials nourish the artworks and vice versa and, above all, the back and forth between art and documentation makes it possible to represent what cannot be represented. Research is a starting point but also a point of arrival: it encompasses causalities and consequences, and the interplay with the artworks enables free trajectories between all these possibilities to recreate what has been torn apart. Furthermore, the series does not depict the Vietnamese refugees as passive victims caught within the mesh of history: although they are represented falling in the map *HKSAR statistics on yearly arrivals and departures of V-refugees from 1975–1997 (*2016), visitors can read the newspapers some of them were publishing when in camps, or understand how they were trying to settle in other parts of the world, for instance by listening to the story of Son Hoang, a Chinese-Vietnamese former refugee who relates his story in the video *km0-Son's story* (2017). From these viewpoints, one can feel the courage deployed by some refugees who resisted the circumstances they were trapped into.

Chung's project, although mainly based on the past, is thus more about "reconstructing" than it is about mourning. It is turned towards the present and the future: research becomes a tool used to reactivate the past in order to shed light on the present, and especially on the conditions of life of the former refugees still living in Hong Kong. Beyond this specific context, the project emphasises the larger question of migration today and the status of refugees. Often perceived as victims, or as "unwanted population," refugees continue to be associated with stereotypes and approached as a homogeneous and anonymous bulk of people. *The Vietnam Exodus Project* offers a much more contrasted and human view, contributing to a shift in the general opinion about these communities. It empowers the refugees while raising the question of their fate.

[85] EnwezorOkui, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Gottingen, Germany: Steidle 2008), 47.

Escaping Authoritarian Frameworks

In Vietnam, there is a general mistrust regarding any form institutional knowledge. A long history of bureaucracy and corruption has led to a general suspicion regarding documents and official administrative processes. In a country dominated by propaganda discourse and mistrustful bureaucracy, the relation to official knowledge is undeniably profoundly affected. Bureaucracy, there, is associated with "red tape, incompetence, inefficiency, duplication, profligacy, and corruption."[86] Even though these problems may be encountered in many countries, they are particularly acute in Vietnam. Ken MacLean develops examples and case studies that emphasize how much the "transition" from state socialism to market socialism has been characterised by mistrust. Consequently, his demonstration reveals the relation that the Vietnamese might have developed with reality itself: living in a state of mistrust and lies, officialdocuments do not represent reality anymore in a context "where official representations of reality take precedence over actual conditions." Additionally, MacLean points to the so-called "scientific" management of the countryside in Vietnam in the name of which everything and above all anything has been done, and eventually failed.[87]

The role of local scholars seems also ambiguous. Studying the state commemoration of the past as strategies to claim its sovereignty over some controversial territories (Paracel and Spratly islands), Edyta Roszko related that there has been some competition between different families about the recognition of their ancestors as national heroes, or about their lands as historical sites, and that a recent "commemorative fever" pushed citizens to invent stories and to seek the support of local scholars, historians and journalists to do so. From her study, it seems that in Vietnam it is possible to influence the writing of history and gain the status of historical site/national heroes thanks to such supports, which again strengthens the feeling of mistrust vis a vis scholarly works and official narratives.[88]

Chung's artistic and plural perspective on the history of the Vietnamese refugee as well as her personal appropriation of social sciences work methodologies appear as a relevant response to this context of defiance. The

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[86] Maclean Ken, *The Government of Mistrust: Illegibility and Bureaucratic Power in Socialist Vietnam* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press 2013).

[87] Maclean, ibid., 28.

[88] Roszko Edyta, "Commemoration and the State: Memory and Legitimacy in Vietnam" *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* Vol. 25 No1 (2010): 1–28.

artist does not propose her version of history against the official narrative, which would imply opposing two authoritative systems of knowledge. As we have seen, although she borrows her research tools from the academic sphere, referring and quoting sources from foreign institutions, she keeps her distance from these frameworks. Her reluctance towards authority is embodied in the display of her archives and choices of her subjects. Children drawings and letters are juxtaposed with official documents, individual stories constantly combined with broader viewpoints or policies records. Her maps tell us about statistics but also about the personal journey of a stateless, unaccompanied minor, mixing affect with facts, individual and public memory. Visitors are free to move between all these featured elements, reading a refugee newspaper, browsing records from the UNCHR then contemplating Chung's colourful interpretation of the multiplication of the refugee camps in Hong Kong. There is no hierarchy between what is presented.

Likewise, the knowledge generated by her work is not dogmatic and reflects a democratic perspective. The heterogeneity and variety of the works invite viewers to weave their subject according to their personal inclination, perception and affective response.

As an artist working freely in between different fields and outside any institutional framework, Chung's practice escapes any form of legitimacy conferred upon these established forms of knowledge production. For the artist, there is no need for such a legitimacy: the point, for her, is not to convince anyone that her understanding of the history of the Vietnamese refugee has more value than the official version. Her objective is to reclaim the narrative from its dominant version, emphasising the need to make visible the plurality of its perspectives.At the same time, however, her research process generates substantive knowledge about the history of the Vietnamese refugees that would gain being validated. Such a validation, it seems, stems for viewers themselves: while they navigate between the variety of artworks and documents proposed by the artist, they co-produce and re-appropriate the knowledge they generate.

To the single official narrative of the Vietnamese State, and to the mistrust such a system of knowledge production implies, Chung responds with a collective and dynamic conception of knowledge. Instead of accepting passively a given knowledge, viewers are creating their own, based on what they understand and feel from the artwork. This critical process of knowing might be a constructive way to resist oblivion in the long term, empowering people to continue the research process started by the artist.

This collective mindset is exemplified with *flotsam and jetsam* which is part of the *Vietnam Exodus History Learning Project* (2015–2017). It consists of 28 watercolour paintings, 40 pieces of engraved and painted text on plexiglass and 2 videos on tablets. Because of the censorship, the *Vietnam Exodus Project* has never been exhibited in Vietnam. As a way to counter this ban, the artist has collaborated locally with four young Vietnamese painters. Sharing her research material, she proposed them to revive the archival photographs of the refugees into watercolour paintings. The objective was to encourage them study the details of the faded photographs and to engage in research when necessary. For instance, in order to convert the black and white images into colour, some artists had to look for the exact colour of the uniform and gears of the Hong Kong riot police from this period. "The project has compelled these young artists to acknowledge and confront this traumatic chapter of Vietnam's history. Despite government censorship, I plan to continue this project with new groups of artists within Vietnam, as a gesture of protest against what I call a 'politically driven historical amnesia'."[89] By appropriating these images, the painters implicitly engage with their own vision of history and participate in its exposure.

Building Knowledge from Fragmentations

Chung's approach to the history of the Vietnamese refugees is both holistic and multi-layered: as we have seen, it requires an active participation of the public in connecting the diverse elements of her research finding. The artist expects viewers to spend time with her work and does not wish to be didactic. The different iterations of *The Vietnam Exodus Project* gave her the opportunity to explore different modes of display in her quest to find the right balance between the exhibition of her collection of archives and her artworks. The beauty and emotional charge of her cartographic drawings might function as a first point of encounter with the visitors, triggering their desire to know and inviting them to delve into her research material. Chung's embroidered map, for instance, tells in one glance the suffering of a refugee and the impossible and long route of his/her journey. The work speaks perhaps first to the affect, generating empathy, then to curiosity. How a non-accompanied minor could have been caught

[89] Tsai Sylvia, "To Be Remembered interview with Tiffany Chung," *Art Asia Pacific Magazine* 100 (2016): 128–137.

within such a traumatic experience? Why has no one intervened? These open questions activate further the public engagement with the artist's body of work, and hopefully, with the issue of Vietnamese refugees. From there, viewers will grab the folder about the Chinese refugee testimonies, read the children's letters about their feeling of solitude or watch footages from videos about daily life in the camps before going back to a cartographic drawing.Here again, different layers of knowledge juxtapose, from tacit to explicit, emotional and rational. The artist does not expect viewers to read all the exhibited documents. She rather let them knit the fragmented and various pieces together so that an open-ended, yet embodied knowledge emerges.

In its entirety, *The Vietnam Exodus Project* offers nevertheless a tangible visualisation and rationalisation of the stories that, hitherto, might have appeared only individual and isolated. By inscribing these stories into the larger scope of history, and by giving them consistence, Chung contributes to consolidating this knowledge.At the same time, she encourages the audience to complete and participate in the building of this knowledge so that the effort becomes collective and dynamic, as opposed to the authoritarian, single and fixed knowledge produced by the official system of power. Her cross-disciplinary and multimedia approach generates a web of possible connections and increases the audience's ability to relate to the history of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong from a multiplicity of perspectives

As always with non-dogmatic processes, the challenge is to inspire visitors and to give them the motivation to pursue their investigation on the topic. Some viewers might be put off by the complexity of the data and their density. Other will not make the effort to connect the various exhibited elements or to look at the archives. A constant negotiation is at play within each of Chung's artwork as she interprets, materialises and converts artistically her research findings. How to transform dry facts and statistics into visual, aesthetics features? Reading Chung's cartographic maps is not always easy. Most of them have incomplete captions and the artist does not provide the keys to access their information. During a public talk at the Asia Art Archive in America, the audience's questions revealed that people did not decipher the codes and meanings of the maps that were exhibited in the gallery. Someone asked about the signification of the pie charts,

another about the colours used to represent countries.[90] These questions reflect the complexity, and sometimes the confusion, created by research-based artworks: viewers immediately try to "decipher" what could be simply felt. They require logics and methods while they could first let go and immerse themselves into the works. Switching from a mode of knowledge to another is not an easy task.

With *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, Chung reconfigures our conceptions of knowledge by activating an emancipatory combination of research and aesthetics, opening a space where rationality and creativity are deeply interwoven. Mixing evidence and affect, cognition and fine arts, the artist develop an artistic language at the service of a novel form of cultural activism. The dynamics, collective and non-authoritative nature of the knowledge generated by her artwork stems from the constant back and forth movement which she creates between her academic materials, her own interpretation of history and the active participation of the public: in this loop, rationality is constantly re-evaluated by the affect and vice versa while knowledge appears as an on-going and collective process.

[90] From a talk at Asia Art Archive (AAA) accessible on AAA website. On the occasion of Tiffany Chung's solo exhibition *Scratching the Walls of Memories*, [November 4 2010–January 8 2011], Asia Art Archive in America invited the artist to discuss her practice.

CHAPTER 6

Research as Strategy: Reactivating Mythologies in Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung's *The Name* Series (2008–)

On 29 November 1885, British troops entered Mandalay, the royal capital of the Burmese empire, sending the royal family in exile within the following 24 hours. In Britain, a comics magazine published a caricature of the event: the engraving shows an English soldier kicking King Thibaw represented by the form of a toad. Pushed away, he is letting down a bottle of brandy and his royal sceptre.[1] Since then, the king has often been described by European writers as foolish,[2] or cruel.[3]

However, in *The Name*, the Burmese artists couple Wah Nu (b.1977) and Tun Win Aung (b.1975) present him standing up and proud, wearing the royal costume he wore for his coronation, and looking at the viewer with determination. At the background, one can see the royal palace, and, in the sky, the moon and the sun shining together.

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[1] The detailed of the engraving is *The Burmese Toad: General Prendergast shown kicking the reputedly drunken King Thibaw out of his kingdom.* Another toad, symbolizing France, watches in the background. An engraving from Punch, 31 October 1885 (courtesy of Noel F. Singer) The image has been reproduced on the cover of the book *The British Humiliation of Burma* (Blackburn, 2000).

[2] Aung Htin, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752–1948* (The Hague: M. Nijoff, 1965).

[3] See in particular Webb, George, "Kipling's Burma, an Address to the Royal Society for Asian Affairs" *The Kipling Society*, June 16, 1983. http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/rg_webb_burma.htm.

With a systematic approach, Wah Nu and Aung borrow their research tools and work methodologies from historians. Considering the very weak education system in the country,[6] the lack or absence of reliable sources[7] and the general lack of trust in the state,[8] their engagement in research reflects a pressing need to learn, appropriate, and share their own history, as seen from a local perspective.

Over time, there has been a succession of overlapping and sometimes contradictory interpretations of history that echoes the fluctuations of the Burmese socio-historical production of narratives.[9] Redressing gaps in history, as is the artists' intent, does more than just oppose a British discourse to a delayed post-colonial one. What is at stake is not so much what happened but what it is said to have happened. Haitian scholar Michel Trouillot recalls that "each historical narrative renews a claim to truth."[10] As they excavate, interpret and re-contextualise archival material, the artists are building their own interpretative vision of Burmese history. They use the research tools from historians with much more interpretative freedom than would scholars, and in a manner that involves personal and aesthetic choices. Besides, they do not display the outcome of their research, nor their archival material. Even though the names of the figures represented are part of the list, the enumeration of the 700 names is not linked to the projection of the 33 portraits, thus the names and images do not match. There is no explanation about who these figures were, and the artwork is all but didactic. The knowledge generated by the series is

[6] See Salem-Gervais Nicolas, and Metro Rosalie, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 27–78. And Lall Marie, "Education," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson et al., 268–78 (London: Routledge, 2017).

[7] See in particular Aung-ThwinMaitrii, "Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 297–317; Gravers, Mikael. "Spiritual Politics, Political Religion, and Religious Freedom in Burma." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2013): 46–54; Myint, Tun. "Public Memory of Myanmar." http://contentdm.carleton.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/PMM (Accessed: 12 March 2019).

[8] Aung-ThwinMaitrii, "The State" in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson et al., 15–24 (London: Routledge, 2017).

[9] See Myint-U Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Aung-Thwin, "Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion," Ibid.; Salem-Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," Ibid.

[10] Trouillot Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 6.

definitively not a factual one: the installation does not include corrected biographies of the featured figures, nor any revised narratives.

With *The Name*, Wah Nu and Aung invite the public to reconsider the collective memory of the past with a renewed and open perspective. Contrary to the local representation of history, which tends to valorise specific moments and heroes, especially with military leaders claiming the heritage from the Burmese Great Kings, the artistsdo not play one historical figure against another: all the portraits are represented side by side, without any chronological order, with their names mixed together. They seem to form a unique, timeless figure that embodies at once resistance and the fight for freedom. Even though the framework of their topic is clearly limited to the colonial period, they suggest a connection between pre-independent Myanmar and the present, from Saya San to General Aung San or Bo Aung Kyaw, implicitly excluding the socialist and military era, as if there was a history that needed to be continued. By reviving these figures in the present time, both visually and acoustically, with aesthetical elements drawn from traditional symbolism (notably from Buddhist iconography), the installation resembles a monument where visitors experience a quasi-religious ritual that re-actualises a myth of resistance and freedom. However, its non-didactical dimension leaves its interpretation totally open, offering personal and plural responses.

Despite its past-oriented topic, the series *The Name* is thus highly political, for it unravels sensitive issues of concern today and points out how history has been written so far in Myanmar, not only by the British but also by the successive military governments. While the artists may not convey "the truth" about the colonial period, or about the lives of the featured figures, their series is producing an original perspective that challenges the official historical production of narratives. Yet, the artists do not pretend to be historians: their own omissions and personal choices create a singular vision of history, which instead emphasises critically the essential subjectivity and inherent fluctuations of any historical narrative. The artists' engagement in research seems therefore to be as much a means to gather information and facts about history as a strategy aiming at legitimising this new and alternative viewpoint. Considering today's uncertainties and tensions within the country, *The Name* appears as an attempt to find unity and reconciliation in a chaotic society and to rethink openly and critically the Burmese national identity. Its innovative combination of research and aesthetics as well as its ritual dimension, drawn from the local system of beliefs, opens original paths toward an emancipatory process of

knowledge production and dissemination that would not be tied to any ideology or academic norms. At the same time, its implicit call for unity, together with the references to national—and in majority Buddhist— heroes, colonial history and traditional symbolism, reminds us of the constant past and present military's praise for union and might generate some ambiguities regarding the political interpretation of the work. This critical reading reflects the climax of increased religious and ethnic tensions that pervades the country and the complexity of building a plural yet collective memory.

Finally, because of a lack of art spaces and art structures in Myanmar,[11] it is worth noting that the serieshas been exhibited more abroad than locally, reducing its possible impact on the local audience. Besides, when the exhibition took place in Yangon in 2015, the reception and discourse of contemporary art were still emerging in Myanmar and the work might have had less impact than expected by the artists. Yet, their process of work marks a shift within the Burmese art scene still largely dominated today by traditional artistic languages. *The Name* is probably one of the first research-based artworks of the country, reflecting the artists' desire to take part in the local production of knowledge and to rethink the role of the artists within society.[12]

6.1   The Artists Working as Historians

Against the Humiliations

There is no need to demonstrate how Burma must have felt humiliated by the British colonisers. When the king was ousted and sent to exile, the British transformed the palace into a gentleman's club and auctioned all

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[11] The issue of the lack of art spaces and resources scarcity in Myanmar has been addressed by the artists in their series *Blurring the Boundaries* (2007–2009) featuring photographs of miniature models for fictive exhibitions.

[12] This chapter is derived in part from an article published in the *Journal of Burma Studies*: Ha Thuc Caroline, "Research as Strategy: Reactivating Mythologies and Building a Collective Memory in Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung's *The Name* (2008–)" *Journal of Burma Studies*, Vol.23, iss.1 (2019): 87–124. In 2021, a revised and shorter version was commissioned by the Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and the Research Centre for New Art Museum Studies, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, published online and available at http://trans-seatriennial.gzarts.edu.cn/.

the furniture, including the sacred throne.[13] Maurice Collis, who served in Burma as a British officer, confessed that the British have treated the Burmans as "inferior beings."[14] Burma was not even a colony on its own, but a province of India, and many scholars agree on the destructive impacts of the colonisation.[15]

The Name started in 2008 when the artists read Nehru's book, *The Discovery of India* (1946): Nehru wrote it when he was in jail, imagining and praising India as a sovereign nation, in homage to the Indian heroes who fought for its independence from the British. This reading pushed Wah Nu and Aung to engage in a similar process. Besides Nehru, they have been deeply influenced by Burmese historian Ni Ni Myint's 1983 book *Burma's Struggle against British Imperialism* (1885–1895), which is practically the first detailed documented local account of the Burmese resistance against the British.[16] Following in her footsteps, the artists underline how much the memory of many fighters was sullied over time by history. By modifying existing archival images—old reproductions from British history books—they aim to reclaim history, giving back dignity to these Burmese figures.

According to the artists, much of what has been written about that time has been done in English, from the British perspective.[17] In their records, the colonisers tend to name as thieves or "dacoits" the rebels who fought for independence and accuse them of banditry. Many of these rebels were jailed or hanged for these reasons. At that time, there were no historical accounts from the Burmese side: in Myanmar, history has been taught for the first time under the British, with English textbooks praising Britain as the mother of the Burmese.[18] As far as photographic documents are

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[13] Blackburn R. Terrence, *The British Humiliation of Burma* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2000).

[14] Collis Maurice, *Trials in Burma* (London: Faber Finds, 1938), 216.

[15] See in particular Myint-U Thant, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [2006] 2008); Holliday Ian, *Burma Redux* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

[16] Sarkisyanz Emmanuel, "Preface," in *Burma's Struggle against British Imperialism (1885–1895)*, ed. Ni Ni Myint (Rangoon: Universities Press, 1983), i–vi.

[17] See note 5.

[18] Salem-Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 31.

concerned, only foreigners were taking photographs,[19] and the country was represented either through stereotyped exotic sceneries that pleased them, or through the images of the "dacoits" taken by the officers fighting them. The first local photographs of public figures appeared much later in the 1940s.[20]

From the 1920s onward, a nationalist movement developed, including strong critiques about the way the British were teaching history, in particular among the movement of the *National Schools*.[21] Burmese historians started to write their own accounts of the past, referring back to ancient chronicles of past glorious achievements.[22] However, these historians were often favouring patriotism over historical accuracy.[23] After the independence in 1948, and during the following decades of military rule, the local representation of the colonial period has been constantly nourishing nationalism and xenophobia, rather than being the object of truly academic research.[24] In 2008, at the beginning of the project, it was very difficult to conduct scholarly research in the country.[25] Since 2011, Myanmar has slowly opened, but scholarly history books written by Burmese historians for Burmese people remain scarce. Most of the scholars are still foreigners and either expatriate Burmese or Burmese who

[19] Singer, Noel Francis. *Burmah: A Photographic Journey 1855–1925*. Stirling: Kiscadale Pub, [1993] 1995; Suen, Wong Hong. "Picturing Burma: Felice Beato's Photographs of Burma 1886–1905." *History of Photography Journal* 32 (2008): 1–26.

[20] Interview with Lukas Birk, archivist and curator of the exhibition *Burmese Photographers*, organized at the Goethe Institute in Yangon Feb. 18 to March 11, 2018.

[21] Salem-Gervais Nicolas, "École et construction nationale dans l'Union de Myanmar" (Schooling and Nation-building in the Union of Myanmar)" (PhD diss., INALCO Paris, 2013), 68–69.

[22] Sarkisyanz, Emmanuel. "Messianic Folk-Buddhism as Ideology of Peasant Revolts in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Burma." *Review of Religious Research* 10, no. 1 (1968): 32–38.

[23] See Aung-ThwinMaitrii, "Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 303; Salem-Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," Ibid., 33; Geertz Clifford, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, [1973] 2017), 305.

[24] Jacques Leider, head of the Bangkok-based *Ecole Française de l'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) and a well-known advisor to the Myanmar military's Armed Forces Historical Museum in Naypyidaw, email interview with the author. March 2018.

[25] Gravers Mikael, "Spiritual Politics, Political Religion, and Religious Freedom in Burma." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2013): 47.

studied abroad.[26] Professor Ian Holliday acknowledges that despite the current development of universities, the notion of scholarship is still alien to most of the students and the teaching of history is lagging behind.[27]

Considering the ongoing political instability and today's difficult state of transition, it is easy to understand that, for Burmese people, there has been little space to build a consistent post-colonial discourse and to achieve a post-independence national identity, even if these questions have been at the core of many political debates. It is in this context that Wah Nu and Aung wish now to redress history and to give back voices to Burmese people: "it is time for those who have appeared in the pages of history books as thugs, thieves and robbers to be given back the true account of their lives."[28] Based on the outcome of their investigation, the artists attempt to convey the true representation of some important Burmese figures who fought for independence, giving them back the dignity they deserve and, for some of them, resisting the oblivion where they have fallen into.

A Systematic Process of Work

Wah Nu and Aung graduated from the Yangon University of Culture, respectively in music and sculpture. Both have later developed other artistic mediums including painting, video and performances. For personal reasons, Aung is passionate about collecting books and magazines, and he soon began to collect archival images from the colonial era. The artists do not claim to work as historians but originally combine their artistic process with some methodologies of work of historians. In order to support their argument, they borrow their research tools from the academic field of history, reconsidering facts, excavating archives, comparing them and, according to their findings, proposing a renewed vision of history.

From the beginning, the artists defined a specific period for their research that coincides with the colonial era, from 1824 to 1945, and very clear criteria for the selection of the featured figures. These figures, men or

[26] Maitrii Aung-Thwin did his PhD in the United States and lives in Singapore; Thant Myint-U was born in New York city and educated at Harvard and Cambridge Universities; Dr. Maung Maung was educated abroad; Htin Aung was educated at Oxford and Cambridge….

[27] Ian Holliday, interview with the author. March 2018 at Hong Kong University. Holliday has notably edited the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar* in 2018.

[28] Artists' statement, Singapore Biennale 2016.

women who opposed British colonisation, must have been under what the artists call "mudslinging", that is, whose names have been sullied throughout history. Most of the Burmese rebels who fought against the British were indeed described as 'dacoits' or robbers, ignorant, restless, excitable, and superstitious people in the British history books and reports.[29] For his part, artist, poet and an important political figure of the Burmese history, ThakinKodawHmaing, later known as Sayagyi (extraordinary educator) by the Burmese nationalists, was for instance perceived by the British as an "adversary of the state" and treated as such.[30] We have already seen how the British denigrated the memory of King Thibaw. His tomb has long been neglected, located in a "nasty unconsecrated place," before becoming only recently a protected monument.[31] For the artists, falling into oblivion accounts as well for an insult and they included many figures who have been unfairly forgotten.[32] In addition, the figures chosen should not have been rewarded for their engagement into the resistance against the British. As a result, former Prime Minister U Nu from the first post-independence civilian government is not included in the series.

For each figure, the starting point of the research is usually an archival photograph found in a history book or in a magazine. Systematically, Wah Nu and Aung deconstruct these images, decontextualising and re-appropriating their historical material in order to represent each figure with dignity through a process of work that I will detail in the next section. Once they find a relevant image, the artists delve further into their topic. They try to identify all the persons involved, looking not only for their names but also for details about their lives that can be added to their own representation: type of weapon used when they were fighting, social status, specific attributes such as hat or costume, occupation in civil life etc. They use both scholarly and non-scholarly sources, drawing on macro

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[29] See for instance the 1931 British report on rebellion, East India (1931, 349).

[30] From 1941, he was part of the 'Burma List', which listed British adversaries, including Aung San. For more on ThakinKodawHmaing: https://myanmars.net/history/famous-people/thakin-kodaw-hmaing.html (Accessed: 22 February 2019).

[31] Shah Sudha, *The King in Exile* (New Delhi, India: HarperCollins, 2012), 324.

[32] Most of the Burmese people I met could not recognize half of the featured figures. In addition to this general oblivion, some names have been abruptly removed from history, such as U Wisara and U Ottama who have totally disappeared from textbooks since 2000 (Salem-Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," 37).

and micro history, buying books on eBay, contacting collectors or collecting oral stories.[33]

From the existing archives and British records, Wah Nu and Aung managed so far to identify 33 key figures from this period, whose portraits compose the work.[34] They also found 700 other names, enumerated in the voice-over of the installation: for these men and women, the artists are still searching images to create their portraits. There were thousands of people who gave their lives for the independence of the country, but there are no records about them. Most of them will probably never be remembered.

The artists are very precise in their work methodology. They also claim to be very cautious when it comes to trusting a source. However, and contrary to historians, they do not systematically document their process of research. I visited their studio twice but could not have a clear idea of all their references, not because they did not wish to (they were really helpful), but because they could often not find the records. For the exhibitions, they did not publicly display their documentation, wishing to "keep the findings and materials private"[35] as a mark of respect for the figures they are studying.

It might not be deliberate, but there might be another reason for not disclosing their documentation. For the public, the display of their archival records might bring about a totally different experience. Archival materials are bound to reality and their presentation would ground the work into the real, preventing the viewer from being transported into another dimension, more emotional and perhaps more mythical. I will develop this point later.

[33] For example, one of their important sources was the Pansodan Gallery in Yangon where the owner, Aung Soe Min, shares an important personal collection of ancient books and magazines.

[34] The British kept the records of the rebels who were jailed or hung, and published detailed accounts of some rebellions, citing the names of rebels in their files. See for example *The Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion* (1930–1932). Rangoon, 1934 IOR/V/27/262/19 cited by Aung-Thwin Maitrii, "Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion." Ni Ni Myint (1983) also lists in her bibliography most of the British files and official documents used by the artists as sources for their research.

[35] Wah Nu and Aung, unpublished interview by Chu Yuan from the Singapore Art Museum at the occasion of the Singapore Biennale 2016 *An Atlas of Mirrors.*

In Search for "Truth"

"What a sad thing that they (the British) wanted the whole world to see such honourable revolutionaries as the rebellions. But to us who know the right facts, they were not the ones as being accused."[36] In their statement, Wah Nu and Aung express their wish to represent the "true account" of the lives of the featured figures, opposing a biased British perspective to a correct historical narrative.

As we have seen in Chap. 4, the notion of truth in history is continuously debatable and delicate. Marc Ferro demonstrated that there could not be a universal, unitary representation of the past but a multiplicity of local histories. There are, for sure, different interpretations of Burmese history, and truth on both sides.[37] The idea of what is true might neither be stable over time.[38] The heroes of today are not necessarily the heroes of tomorrow, and what makes a hero is also very relative according to everyone, to every culture and period of time.

Ultimately, the artists are less challenging the facts than the perceptions of the facts and historiography. In history, even though there is room for interpretation, there is still an idea of truth: from solid sources, one can say with confidence that General Aung San was assassinated on 19 of July 1947. There is little chance that this fact will be questioned in the future, even though the possibility remains open, as it is always with past events. However, it is hard to tell if the king was really an alcoholic or if some rebels were really fighting for independence or were also thieves. Some archives are contradictory, and some rebels might have been both: many authors acknowledge the confusion,[39] while Thant Myint-U admits that, in the rebellions' period, "there was brutality on both sides."[40]

The lack of reliable sources concerning this historical period leads to various interpretations. The artists are facing what amounts to a lost reality, which only survived through a multitude of narratives. A good example would be the case of Saya San, a former monk and alchemist who led

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[36] Wah Nu and Aung, unpublished interview of the artists by Chu Yuan from the Singapore Art Museum at the occasion of the Singapore Biennale 2016 *An Atlas of Mirrors.*

[37] Ferro Marc, *The Use and Abuse of History, or, How the Past Is Taught after the Great Fire* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[38] Larmore Charles, "History & Truth," *Daedalus* 133, no. 3 (2004): 46–55.

[39] See for example Collis, *Trials in Burma*, Ibid., 214; Blackburn, *The British Humiliation of Burma*, Ibid., 111.

[40] Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, Ibid., 29.

a famous rebellion against the British in the early 1930s, known as the Saya San Rebellion. With 3000 men, he marched against the British troops, "armed with magic," protected only by tattoos and chanting.[41] Aung-Thwin analyses all the different interpretations and readings of the rebellion by various generations of scholars, both from Burma and from the West, and underlies the wide scope of readings that exist.[42] His study reflects how much such an event can be constructed to serve specific discourses, be them nationalist or post-colonialist. Furthermore, he demonstrates that all the literature focusing on Saya San is not based on accurate facts, since scholars tend to copy each other without examining the primary documents. He suggests that some parts of the story might have been only based on rumours. There are archival images, though, that can testify about reality. For sure, Saya San was a rebel who was hunted down by the British as such: they printed his face on a "Wanted" poster which Wah Nu and Aung have found back, and which served as a basis for their own portrait of the rebel.

As far as "the truth" is concerned, one can also question the artists' objectivity in conducting their research: by wishing to find evidence against the British point of view, and to empower the Burmese side, they might have disregarded some of the sources that do not fit their goal, even unconsciously. In particular, the artists do not put their work back into its historical context: they only focus on the colonial era, as if it could be isolated from the rest of the Burmese history. However, there have been rebellions in every period of Burmese history and the resistance movements do not date back to the colonial era.[43] Michel Trouillot emphasises the crucial role of silences in the writing of history and shows how these silences are producing specific narratives.[44] Similarly, Wah Nu and Aung propose their own vision of history, including their gaps, silences and highlights.

Moreover, and contrary to historians who constantly refer to their sources to support their arguments, the artists do not provide the public with their pieces of evidence. Viewers are asked to trust the artists about

[41] Collis, *Trials in Burma*, Ibid., 212.

[42] Aung-Thwin, "Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion," Ibid., 297–317.

[43] See in particular Leach Edmund, "Frontiers of Burma," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 1 (1960): 49–68; Prager Susanne, "The Coming of the 'Future King'" *The Journal of Burma Studies* 8 (2003): 1–32.

[44] Trouillot Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 29.

their research process, and about what they assert to be true. The renewed vision of history they propose is not only based on their findings but also on their aesthetic choices, strongly supported by their references to traditional symbolism and local systems of beliefs.

6.2 From Representation to Interpretation and the Construction of a Myth

The Name can be perceived as a palimpsest made from interwoven layers and meanings that I propose to analyse in turn. From a lost reality to its representation, interpretation, re-actualisation and, finally, to its possible mythification, Wah Nu and Aung seem to draw on a wide range of references to propose an alternative historical narrative based as much on research as on beliefs and cosmological views.

From Archival Materials to Representation

Once Wah Nu and Aung have identified a figure from an archival photograph and gathered evidence about his/her story that fits their selection criteria, they work on their own alternative representation. Firstly, they modify the found image on computer, erasing some parts of it or combining it with other found images. Then, they print the result in an A4 format and add elements of painting. The result is in turn photographed in a very high resolution. If printed again, the image would be 110 x 157 cm, which means that the figures almost have an actual human size.

For the representation of Bo Cho, for example, the starting point was a found black and white image representing him and his two sons before their hanging. This image belongs to an illustrated English-language book written by Thirkel White, a civil servant who worked in Burma for about thirty years. The caption says "Bo Cho, the robber and his two sons." The three men are represented bare-chested in white sarongs, sitting in the middle of the image and fettered with foot cuffs. Their gaze is fierce and stern as they stare at the photographer. Two armed Indian guards surround them. The author relates that Bo Cho was said to command seven hundred men, "a leader of a formidable gang", and depicts how he was finally arrested.[45]

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[45] White Thirkel H., *A Civil Servant in Burma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1913), 260.

For Wah Nu and Aung, Bo Cho is not a robber but an honourable revolutionary. They feel sad to see how he is remembered. To oppose this vision of history, they kept only his face from the image and changed his clothes and posture: from their research, they learned that he was a village chief, so they chose his costume accordingly. They also show him standing in order to give him back his dignity (Image 6.1).

Image 6.1   Wah Nu & Tun Win Aung, *The Name* (2008–). Multimedia installation. Detail: Bo Cho. (Courtesy of the artists)

The whole series is very consistent in terms of colour and staging: all the figures are standing, looking at the viewers with pride. The black and white tones from the original archival images are still visible, as the artists painted on the top on them. They only used grey, dark pink, and green colours, so that the images look like ancient photographs. The background is usually very simple, slightly blurry, only filled with painted plants or clouds encircling the head and the body of the figure. Additional small fittings refer to the life they had, as poet, chief village, farmer, university student etc. Some iconographic elements indicate specific facts of their biography as well. Typical of this, Bo Aung Kyaw, who was hit at the head during the Rangoon University students protest in 1938, and who later died from his injuries, is represented with the head surrounded by stars and fireworks.

Wah Nu and Aung are also including symbolic accessories that belong to the general Burmese culture. For example, Queen Supaya Lat is featured with a dancing peacock with an open large tail. The animal has been recently used as a symbol for the fight for democracy, but, in this context, it stands for royalty, and especially for the Konbaung dynasty, which was the Queen's dynasty. Garuda (Galone in Burmese language) is also accompanying one of the fighters as a reference to the army of Saya San, named after this god. Therefore, every detail has a meaning and contributes to represent the figures in the "right" way, reflecting their true essence and not what historical records have made of them, and revealing what has been hitherto concealed.

The artists' choice for the portrait genre could be considered unexpected. It seems paradoxical to use a typical Western genre to criticise colonialism. There is no tradition of portrait in the Burmese culture, and this genre is a British legacy.[46] Surprisingly, there has been a few photograph-paintings created at the end of the nineteenth century, which could have influenced the artists. However, because of a lack of sources, we do not know so much about this trend.[47] Later, in the region, John Clark mentions the emergence of "a genre of portraiture of leadership" that arose with the independence of Asian countries, as a way to revive historical and national figures from the pre-colonial past.[48] In any case, the

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[46] Ranard Andrew, *Burmese Painting* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), 37.

[47] Ranard, *Burmese Painting*, Ibid., 25.

[48] Clark John, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, United States: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 21.

choice of the portrait enables the artists to remain as close as possible to their subject thanks to a realist approach.

In their representation, the artists do not aim at erasing the original image, but only at transforming it. Their gesture symbolises what they wish to do with history: to correct it. Systematically, they have preserved the face from the archival image, building their own representation around it. They do so probably because the face is what represents human beings the most. It also invites viewers to create a new link with the subject in a "face-to-face" relationship that participates in recognising him/her as a human being, thus as a person of dignity.[49] This direct eye-to-eye contact strengthens the feeling of facing the true representation of these figures, or at least a true representation based on the artists' interpretation.

From Representation to Interpretation

The depiction of the figures involves a succession of choices, which are inevitably personal. Emblematic of this, General Aung Sanis represented smiling, standing in the countryside and wearing his "Bogyoke's Costume." According to the artists, these clothing is not his traditional costume but the one that has become his trademark since his assassination. They confess that this is also the way they like him the most. In contrast, his hat, bag and swordare Kachin traditional accessories that he did not usually wear. The original photo chosen by the artists was taken in November 1946 in Myit-Kye-Na, Kachin State, where Aung San met Kachin Leaders. The choice of this specific moment and the Kachin accessories underline the role played by Aung San in his attempt to unify the country between all the different minorities, shortly before his assassination.

Wah Nu and Aung have also chosen to name each figure with their most honorific form. General Aung San is named "Bogyoke Aung San," which is how Burmese people used to call him affectionately. Many bear the title of "Thakin," a title borrowed from the colonial British that means "Master", used by the nationalists as a way to protest against the British domination.[50] The prefixes "U" or "Ma" that indicate respect in the Burmese culture are also often added. The choice of these titles clearly reflects the artists' desire to pay homage to these figures.

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[49] Levinas Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

[50] Holliday Ian, *Burma Redux* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 37.

Above all, each portrait is highly aesthetic and beautiful. The small and vivid brushstrokes of paint impart an enigmatic atmosphere to the work, while giving a sense of dynamics to the composition. The figures look alive, revitalised by this vibrant background. Both brushstrokes and pixels from the photographs are visible and sometimes overlap: time seems to be frozen, and the figures look eternal. From this perspective, the artists are freely creative and the research they have conducted does not seem to interfere with their choices. They rather use the language of art to strengthen their desire to empower their subjects. In their representation of Khai Kam, for instance, the Chin leader, known as being as strong as five men,[51] is surrounded by long white strokes of light, tearing vertically the sky apart, just like a superhero. Some fighters are also shown with their arms hung behind them, as if they were in the middle of a blazon. As for General Aung San, he is represented surrounded by a white cloud, which, according to the artists, stands as a metaphor for power and struggle.

The presence of this large and white cloud in many portraits might suggest that *The Name* is more a work of devotion than a work of mere representation. This pictorial element does not produce any specific knowledge per se about who these people were, but rather embodies the aura that the artists try to re-establish.

In many cultures, clouds are associated with celestial spheres: they connect the earth with the sky and represent the fusion of elements. Clouds are also directly hinting at the Buddhist pictorial and traditional representation of gods. Some patterns used by the artists are very similar to the ones painted in the Abeyadana Temple in Pagan (late eleventh century), showing celestial figures flying on clouds.[52] Pagan was the former capital of the first Burmese empire, and the temples of Pagan have continuously inspired artists over time, including contemporary ones.[53] In Buddhist iconography, there are often flying Apsaras or Bosatsu on clouds, and these analogies invite the audience to draw a comparison between the portrayed figures and gods. For some of the figures, this deification is already part of their history: the king, of course, who was regarded as "an

[51] Carey Bertram Sausmarez, *The Chin Hills: A History of Our People* (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing, 1896).

[52] Ranard, *Burmese Painting*, Ibid., 2.

[53] For example, see the rows of Munch's *Scream* heads aligned like the effigies of Buddha in Aung Myint's paintings, or Htein Linn's motif of dancers that are all inspired by mural paintings from Pagan temples.

incipient Buddha,"[54] Saya San, who proclaimed himself king and "Setkya-Min or universal emperor,"[55] and even General Aung San, considered as a "larger-than-life hero."[56] Some Burmese stories say that Aung San was from a royal lineage.[57] Suzanne Prager argues that his political actions fit the career of an imminent so-called "future king" (*minlaung*), a millennial belief rooted in Burmese culture.[58]

Interestingly, Wah Nu and Aung created in 2012 an installation consisting of 40 small busts of General Aung San, aligned in a light box.[59] The busts are facing the wall, so viewers cannot see his face. At the same time, the bright light is creating a strong aura around his head. The busts are very polished, and it seems that the General has no hair: this representation is very close to a religious representation, and especially to a representation of Buddha. This installation pointed to the recent political ban on the representation of the figure of the general, as from the martial law promulgated in 1989. Yet the work reinforces the connection between religious and political representations, a feature of the Burmese culture where Buddhism has always played a key role in the organisation and political life of society.[60]

The dramatisation of *The Name* is finally strengthened by the voice-over, which works like an incantation. The names of the 700 Burmese who fought against the British and who have been identified by the artists are enumerated by a masculine voice, in a loop, in a very formal and ceremonial way. Originally, the artists added a piece of music but changed their minds in order not to distract the focus of the public. This monotonous voice pervades the space and surrounds the figures with its own sacred dimension, adding to the aura of these people.

[54] Leach Edmund, "Frontiers of Burma," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 1 (1960): 57.

[55] Adas Michael, *Prophets of Rebellion Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

[56] Naw Angelene, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2001).

[57] Naw, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*, Ibid.

[58] Prager Susanne, "The Coming of the 'Future King'" *The Journal of Burma Studies* 8 (2003): 1–32.

[59] Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung, *White Piece #0132: Forbidden Hero (Heads)*, 2012.

[60] See Gravers Mikael, "Spiritual Politics, Political Religion, and Religious Freedom in Burma," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2013): 46–54; Carstens Charles, "Religion" in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson et al., 126–35 (London: Routledge, 2017).

The Building of a Monument

The staging of the 33 figures reminds us of the painted portraits of leaders from the past as they can be contemplated on the walls of palaces or temples. Everything seems to have been activated by the artists in order to represent them as heroes: their use of symbols, aesthetic, and the dramatic staging of their body cannot be perceived as realistic and objective. Here, we leave the realm of reality to enter the realm of rituals, constructed collective memory and commemorations.

When looking at the series projected with the images scrolling one by one, with the ceremonial enumeration of the names, the images impose themselves and convey a strong and straightforward meaning: one feels immediately that these figures deserve a special consideration for their role in the making of Burmese history. Moreover, by showing them together, in a consistent way and without any clear-cut, the artists are building a visual and spatiotemporal continuity. They invite the audience to create a link that goes from King Thibaw and the earliest fighters for independence to General Aung San. When they were praised, insulted or forgotten, these figures were indeed praised, insulted or forgotten separately. The artists are gathering them all for the first time.[61] This unity coincides with a renewed vision of history: over the past, the featured figures have been alternatively instrumentalised by the rulers as if they were mere puppets.[62] On the contrary, the series displays the figures without any chronology or hierarchy, juxtaposing some people who have sometimes been set up one against the other. For example, in the end of the 1980s, Aung San's image has been replaced on the 45 and 90-kyats banknotes by those of Saya San and Boe Hla Gyi.[63] Projected one after the other, on the same part of the wall and without any clear-cut separation, their bodies seem to melt, giving to the viewer the impression that they are all part of the same body.

The fact that the artists do not display the archive, or the outcomes of their research, strengthens this argument: the work seems to be less about

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[61] Later, in 2012–2013, Burmese artist Zwe Yan Naing (b.1984) did a series of four portraits representing Aung San, Saya San, Aung San Suu Kyi and Phoe Hla Gyi painted against a background of banknotes designed with their effigies. The artist praises them as heroes, but does not create the historical unity produced by *The Name* (Zwe Yan Naing, Facebook interview with the author, September 2018).

[62] Salem Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 27–78.

[63] Salem Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," Ibid., 35.

each figure individually than about a figure that would combine them all. *The Name* would suggest the constructing a new figure that resists time and transformation: "the king is dead, long live the king!" The notion of the two bodies allowed for the continuity of monarchy even when the monarch died, as summed up in the well-known traditional formulation of European monarchies.[64] In the same way, from these dead figures from the past, the artists create a spiritual and eternal body that would personify the power of resistance.

Since "monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life,"[65] we could consider the installation as a monument dedicated to the Burmese people who fought for an independent and free country. Since the archival material of the research is not displayed, the public does not know so much about each figure. As is the case with monuments, what matters is less the biography of individuals than the global commemoration of the collective. We usually do not know, for example, who are the soldiers who died and who are the persons commemorated in war monuments. But we remember that they existed and that is enough to build a collective memory. However, it is essential to be sure, to believe, that the soldiers are real ones, and that the list of their names is accurate. Similarly, in the case of *The Name*, it seems indispensable that the work should be based on research in order to validate and legitimate the selection of the featured figures, and such a monument.

Wah Nu and Aung did think about the series as a monument with each figure printed and exhibited in the public space.[66] That would give another dimension to the series, emphasising the physical presence of the figures today, rather than calling in their ghosts. At the Singapore Biennale in 2016 the images were only projected, but this immateriality, and the overlapping of the bodies and faces, reinforced the feeling of continuity and unity.

[64] Kantorowicz Ernst, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 (1957).

[65] Young James E., *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), quoted by Nora Taylor, "Re-authorizing images of the Vietnam War: Dinh Q Lê's 'Light and Belief' installation at documenta (13) and the role of the artist as historian," *South East Asia Research* 25, no. 1 (2017): 47–61.

[66] Unpublished interview with Chu Yuan for the Singapore Biennale 2016.

The Creation of a Myth?

As it reactivates the past in a lively way, mixing a set of beliefs and pieces of knowledge, the series raises the key question of the possible "mythification" of the portrayed figures. Roland Barthes wrote his "Mythologies" in a very different context, but the semiological tools that he used to analyse the mass media ideologies can be borrowed to shed light on contemporary constructions of any mythologies. From his diagram illustrating the mechanism of the construction of mythologies,[67] we can indeed suggest that Wah Nu and Aung are reactivating existing myths in order to create a new, and stronger, contemporary myth.

The portrait of Bo Cho can be used as an example with the archival image showing him with his two sons as a starting point. At the first level, the level of language, the signifier of this image is the capture of a Burmese rebel fighting for independence. The British superiority embodies the signified (concept). The sign of this image, that is, how it can be read, is thus that the British control the Burmese people, even the rebels: they affirm their power. From there, a myth can be created by adding a second layer to this original scheme, departing from the portrait done by the artists, where Bo Cho is represented standing and free: "British affirm their power" is still present, but it becomes the signifier. The signified, which is an added concept, could be "freedom and resistance" (there is no soldier anymore). The new sign, and thus the myth, could be then read as follows: "we are resisting the British power, we are independent and free."

According to Barthes, the function of a myth is to deform what exists: "When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains."[68] What Barthes is calling meaning is the pivotal term that is at the end of the first language system (the sign), and which becomes the first term of the mythical system (signifier). In our example, it is "British affirm their power." This term is "full on one side and empty on the other" and this is exactly what the artists are doing when they "correct history": they deform and transform the idea of the British power, they propose a new vision of it through their representations, and the idea of the British power is sent back to history while a new myth is activated.

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[67] Barthes Roland, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957), 187.
[68] Barthes, *Mythologies*, Ibid., 190.

The reality is indeed forgotten, and the context reduced to its essential meaning. I already mentioned that the artists did not consider the period before the arrival of the British, leaving some questions unresolved: the fighters were struggling to force the British to leave, but what was the state of the country before them? What about the economic crisis and the tyranny of the king? The myth does not look for answers to such questions as it produces a global meaning that goes beyond reality. What only matters is the revitalisation of the idea of freedom and resistance.

The problem with the myth is that it is not founded on truth but on language and on beliefs. Barthes acknowledges that it can only produce blurry knowledge. Building mythologies would alienate the artists from their goal to disclose the truth about each figure, unless we expand our notion of truth. The Greek term *mythos* is opposed to the term *logos*, and therefore myths are usually associated with everything that is fictional, or that cannot exist in reality. Mircea Eliade, though, disagrees with this definition and examines myths as "true stories", arguing that myths are still alive in that sense that they propose models for the human behaviour.[69] For him, the knowledge produced by myths is double: they provide knowledge on how the world was created, and they provide knowledge on how to repeat this creation, thanks to the rituals.[70]

Eliade is obviously discussing indigenous myths related to the creation of the world, and not contemporary myths as defined by Barthes. However, his arguments could be relevant to this study. The story told by the artists is addressing the origins of resistance in the Burmese history. If we apply Eliade's argument, and if we consider this story as a myth, then we could argue that knowing these origins, and this myth of resistance against oppression, will give Burmese people the ability to repeat such movements of resistance.

The installation *The Name* becomes then the physical support for what was before expressed and embodied in rituals: according to Eliade, knowing the myth is indeed not enough.[71] The knowledge induced by a myth needs to be experienced; it is not an exterior knowledge, nor an abstract knowledge. It is important to re-actualise it, to demonstrate it, in short, to share it, which could be one of the goals of the artwork when it is

[69] Eliade Mircea, *Aspect du mythe (Myth and Reality)* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 12.

[70] Eliade, *Aspect du mythe*, Ibid., 26.

[71] Eliade, *Aspect du mythe*, Ibid., 31.

exhibited and experienced. A monument aims at building a collective memory; a myth goes beyond and aims at reactivating this memory. Since the linear chain of time is broken, the series sends the audience into the time of myths where events can be eternally repeated. This would be about literally bringing back the dead among the living, which is also one feature of photography.[72]

This interpretation of the work seems very far from the artists' original intent to represent these people from their true nature, without serving any cause or ideology. They aimed to reach the human beings behind the image constructed by history. However, is it possible? These men and women are what history has made of them. In fact, with their process of work, the artists do not try to erase this history. On the contrary, their gesture reflects the passage of time and the accumulation of meanings, in which they participate. This multiplication of perspectives can alienate us from the truth, or paradoxically bring us closer to another truth: even though these men and women have been forgotten, or that their names have been insulted, praised, or appropriated over time, they are still there, standing and looking at us.

For Eliade, to "live" the myth is necessarily a religious experience, because it is an experience that goes beyond the daily life. Here, we touch again upon the delicate question of the possible religious dimension of the series, reinforced by the analogy between the installation's loop and the Buddhist wheel of life. In fact, the artists could not have created a myth out of nothing. In Myanmar, supernaturalism co-habits with Buddhism[73] and deep-rooted millennial beliefs. In particular, there is a prophecy about a Future King or Buddha who would come at an age of decline to restore order.[74] If we consider, with Susanne Prager, that there is a continuity in history, and that this traditional idea of a future king did not vanish with the defeat of Saya San, but found its reincarnation in the figure of Aung San,[75] a possible common point of the featured figures of *The Name* would be their ability to embody a king-to-be and the hopes for a restored order. The reference to a future king or "righteous ruler" that would bring back

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[72] Barthes Roland, *Camera Lucida, "The Return of the Dead"* (London: Flamingo, 1984).

[73] See Spiro Melford E., *Burmese Supernaturalism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, [1978] 1996).

[74] AdasMichael, *Prophets of Rebellion Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

[75] Prager Susanne, "The Coming of the 'Future King,'" *The Journal of Burma Studies* 8 (2003): 1–32.

stability is yet to be considered with great care: the artists do not believe in such a prophecy, and the nationalist interpretation of Buddhism might lead to xenophobic views.[76]

6.3   Research as a Strategy

The Name reconnects with a post-colonial discourse that has been interrupted in its process after the independence, and that could not express itself because of the political turmoil and repressive regimes. In fact, beyond a mere post-colonial perspective, the series challenges the production of historical narratives and the current local system of knowledge. Its research component reflects a pressing need for developing emancipatory modes of knowledge production, as well as the necessity to bring legitimacy to a renewed and open-ended vision of history.

Countering Ignorance and the Official Narratives

From the outset, Wah Nu and Aung engaged in a research process in order to redress historical gaps created by the British legacy. As we have seen, they also compensated for the scarcity of scholarly works on the subject caused by the recent decades of repression and violence that left very few opportunities for historical research. Until today, historiography has participated in the construction of a national identity tailored by the military and backed up by a deficient system of education based on a rote learning system that discourages critical thinking.[77] Some now talk about a society that would have become "intellectually blind."[78] Jacques Leider acknowledges that teaching has not much evolved since 1948, especially, as far as history is concerned.[79] Most of the people I interviewed confessed that they had left school without knowing anything about history. Besides, contrary to the increased interest for the past noted by Emmanuel Sarkisyanz in the 1980s, the field of history does not seem to attract much

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[76] Gravers Mikael, "Spiritual Politics, Political Religion, and Religious Freedom in Burma," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2013): 48.

[77] Salem-Gervais Nicolas and Metro Rosalie, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 27–78.

[78] Ma Thida, a Burmese writer, interviewed in Education in Myanmar No questions asked, *The Economist* December 2, 2017.

[79] Jacques Leider, E-mail interview with the author, March 2018.

attention.[80] In Myanmar, the good students are encouraged to study medicine and engineering while history is perceived as a discipline for the bad students.[81]

This context, and decades of propaganda, civil wars, weaken infrastructure and political divisions, have generated a lack of trust in the state and, probably, a deep and general mistrust toward the official system of knowledge.[82] In 2008, when the artists started the series, this feeling might have been reinforced by the shocking "apathetic response" from the government after the disastrous destructions caused by Cyclone Nargis, said to have affected more than 3.5 million people.[83] That same year, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) implemented a new constitution, voted by a farcical referendum and boycotted by the National Ligue for Democracy (NLD).[84]

Against such a backdrop, the artists' research process and search for truth could be seen as a strategy to counter the current official narratives. Beyond any specific political ideology, they offer a stable and fresh vision of history that propose to reconcile Burmese people with their past. The notion of truth, thereby, could be understood as encompassing all that does not derive from the state and from the establishment. It echoes Moe Satt's exhibition entitled *If I Say It's True Seven Times* that took place in Yangon in 2018. The Burmese artist combined satirically personal and collective memories from the 1980s and 1990s, stating that: "my works are my efforts to unlock/reveal truths."[85] The texts accompanying the artworks repeatedly underscore promises that have not been kept and lies, crystallising the feeling of nonsense that has dominated the artist's youth. For Nietzsche, the search for truth (as it has been pursued by all the philosophers before him) is a way to reassure oneself. It is triggered by the

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[80] Sarkisyanz Emmanuel, "Preface," in *Burma's Struggle against British Imperialism (1885–1895)*, ed. Ni Ni Myint, i–vi. (Rangoon: Universities Press, 1983).

[81] From interviews with former doctor and now photographer Minzayar Oo and artist Maung Day, Yangon February 2018.

[82] Aung-ThwinMaitrii, "The State" in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson et al. (London: Routledge, 2017), 22.

[83] Rogers Benedict, *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads* (London: Rider, [2012] 2015), 189–203.

[84] Barany Zoltan, "Moving Toward Democracy: The 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Myanmar." *Electoral Studies* 42 (2016): 75.

[85] Satt Moe, *If I Say It's True Seven Times*, exhibition at Myanm/art, Yangon, August 2018.

fear of the unknown.[86] Perhaps the artists' desire to create a monument and their longing for stability stem from a similar sentiment.

Building a Legitimacy

Against a state that struggles to establish its legitimacy, the artists oppose their own credibility based on an original combination of rationality, tradition and charism, which constitute the three different types of legitimate authority defined by Max Weber.[87] There are at least two juxtaposed discourses driven by the series: the post-colonial discourse, explained by the artists' statement and supported by their rigorous research methodology, and a more implicit one, induced from the first one but supported by cultural beliefs and traditions, which invites viewers to reconnect with, and revive, a collective past nourished by resistance and freedom impulses.

Since 1962, the military junta has imposed its power and governed the country by what many see as violence and force rather than by a legitimate authority. The so-called rule of law serves the dictators' political and ideological views.[88] In their search for legitimacy, the governments have constantly referred to the legacy of history, tracing a direct line between today's leaders and the past glorious kings of the Burmese empire, or re-appropriating traditional symbols.[89] For their part, it seems that the artists are also drawing on the same traditions, symbolic language, and cultural beliefs in order to build and share their own vision of history. However, the state claims a legacy of power, while the artists promote a legacy of resistance and freedom, expressing their views through an open-ended, non-authoritative artistic form. Geertz underscores the tensions that exist in new states, as they develop after their independence, between a new civil state and what he calls the primordial feelings, attachments that come from a cultural legacy. These feelings are the "assumed givens of social existence" such as language, religion, assumed blood ties, customs etc.

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[86] Nietzsche Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, Part V, Section 355 (Paris: Club Français du Livre, [1882] 1957).

[87] Weber Max, "The Three Types of Legitimate Rule." *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions* 4, no. 1 (1958): 1–11. See Chap. 2.

[88] Cheesman Nick, *Opposing the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[89] Salem-Gervais Nicolas and Metro Rosalie, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 1 (2012): 27–78.

They are so strong that their authority is often more powerful than the authority of the new civil state, which they threaten.[90] Just like a new civil state needs to acknowledge these primordial attachments before moving away from them in order to gain legitimacy, the artists are drawing on cultural beliefs to strengthen the credibility of their renewed vision of history. The authority of the work stems also from its aesthetic power, which could be analysed as Weber's charismatic rule: when immersed in the installation, the audience is convinced by the consistence, the unity of the work, struck by its mythical authority and caught in its ritual dimension. Furthermore, the artists' engagement in research provides a rational frame to their perspective. The exhibition of the work within a foreign institution such as the Singapore Biennale in 2016 reinforces this legitimacy: the discourse of the curator, and the artists' statement, strongly highlight the research component of the work and the rigor of the methodology involved.

However, as we have seen, the archival records and documents are not displayed: the stress is put on the artists' process of work rather than on their outcome. In fact, this apparent contradiction embodies the strength and originality of the work. *The Name* is at the same time grounded in the real, generated by a rational apparatus, and rooted in beliefs thus exposed to any intuitive responses. The knowledge it generates is fragmentary and uncomplete. This open approachopposes the established authoritative system of knowledge and allows for a trust-based relationship to emerge between the public and the artists. Confronted to the artwork, to its aesthetic and immersive experience, viewers need to be active in their personal (re)connection to this proposed collective memory. Through this process of re-appropriation, and according to their own interpretation of the series, they are collectively participating in the recollection of the past.

Activating Debates

Artist and poet Maung Day points to the quasi-absence of figures from the ethnic minorities in *The Name* and raises doubt about its possible nationalist tone. How would all the ethnic nationalities recognise themselves in this mainly Bamar and Buddhist reshaped collective memory? For him,

[90] Geertz Clifford, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, [1973] 2017), 274–332.

this vision might nourish the current political campaign that aim at discriminating the ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar.[91]

Wah Nu and Aung do not aim at promoting a nationalist ideology, and their choice to represent General Aung San in the Kachin State is a way to emphasise the importance of a reconciliation between minorities. However, Day's point is relevant and reveals how much the topic is sensitive and how much the concept of a national collective memory remains delicate. One of the questions could be whether fighting against the British for independence could be a unifying topic, considering that, for example, the Karen minority enjoyed certain privileges under the colonial rule that they lost afterwards, and that the army of Aung San fought against them during the war.[92] Salem-Gervais recalls how plural the Burmese history can be, according to which ethnical perspective is considered, and suggests that a "heroes approach" in the national narrative may not be best adapted to today's complex reality.[93] All current attempts to bring back order, or to unify the nation, may indeed echo the "Burmanization" of the country, its domination of the Bamar group,[94] and the nation-building strategy of the junta, thereby resulting in an increased state of mistrust. However, one can believe with Aung-Thwin that "nation-building and the development of a civic identity—while regarded with suspicion by minority groups—are still a priority for Myanmar." [95]

The Name is calling upon national pride, but this feeling is not connected to any specific group or minority: on the contrary, it praises the idea of resistance at large, and re-engage with post-independence feelings, when it was time to build a new civil state. Independence is an event that unifies all groups, and as Geertz suggests, it is an attainment for all the people of the country, a general and radical redistribution of political power between all the members of the society, who gain a new political consciousness.[96]

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[91] Maung Day, interview with the artists, Yangon Feb.5, 2018.

[92] Rogers Benedict, *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads* (London: Rider, [2012] 2015), 4–5.

[93] Salem-Gervais Nicolas, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today: Great Opportunities, Giant Pitfalls? (Part III)," *Tea Circle Website*, 2018. https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/10/04/teaching-ethnic-languages-cultures-and-histories-in-government-schools-today-great-opportunities-giant-pitfalls-part-iii/ (Accessed: 15 March 2019).

[94] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, Ibid., 307.

[95] *Aung-Thwin*, "The State", Ibid., 23.

[96] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, Ibid., 289.

Most of the artists I talked to wish nevertheless to move away from the colonial period, arguing that it locks the country in the past and reminds them of the military demonisation of the British during the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)/SPDC governments, with the colonialists accused of all Myanmar's contemporary difficulties. In majority, they do not understand why the artists are dealing with post-colonial questions rather than addressing recent Burmese history.[97] In fact, many of Myanmar's current issues date back from this era, especially the tensions between ethnic minorities.[98] Wah Nu and Aung hint at this continuity. *The Name* does not demonise the British but empowers the Burmese people who resisted oppression. Beyond the colonial era, and beyond their national context, they question the sense of these values—freedom and resistance—in the contemporary society, and how they could possibly be reactivated to transcend ethnic divisions and political ideologies.

For their voice to be heard, though, a stronger art structure needs to arise in Myanmar, with a larger audience and a public sphere where debates could take place.[99] Today, just like in 2015 when the series was exhibited in Yangon,[100] the reception and discourse of contemporary art are still limited, with an audience reduced to a small art circle and no art magazine that could favour the circulation of such discourses.[101] Besides, the art

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[97] For example, for filmmaker and director of Wathann Film Festival Thai Dhi, bringing back these figures amounts to working on the same path as the nationalists as they nurture stereotypes and hatred. He feels that he does not need the support of heroes to develop his own resistance (interview with the author, May 2018).

[98] See in particular Myint-U Thant. *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 254; Salem-Gervais, "École et construction nationale dans l'Union de Myanmar," PhD diss. (INALCO, Paris, 2013); Holliday Ian, *Burma Redux* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 25;33.

[99] Contemporary practices emerged only in the 1990s in Myanmar. The context of work remains hard, though, with no public support for contemporary practices and very little art infrastructures. On the Burmese contemporary art scene in general, see for example Ha Thuc "Burma at the Crossroads," Ibid.

[100] The small group exhibition, featuring local artists and artists from Southeast Asia, took place in the former villa of General Aung San, and was the first exhibition opening the Goethe Institute in Yangon.

[101] A good illustration of the situation is given by the only reference publication that exists today on Burmese contemporary art, *Myanmar Contemporary Art 1* (Aung 2016). It has been written by Aung Min who is not an art critic but a doctor and a filmmaker. The book has been translated in English by artist and poet Maung Day: this case reflects how everyone needs to wear different hats to compensate for the lack of professionals and structures.

scene is still largely dominated by traditional artworks, mainly paintings,[102] with Wah Nu and Aung's research practice remaining in the margins. In the art community, they also feel themselves isolated, even though conceptual art began to emerge in the country as soon as the late 1980s, but only created by a handful of pioneers artists.[103] According to gallery director Pyay Way, their artistic language is indeed perceived by local people as difficult to decipher.[104] He opposes their multi-media and conceptual approach to expressionist paintings by artists such as Aung Kyi Soe or Aung Khaing which are dealing with the recent history of the country, like the 8888 movement, in more accessible ways.

In order to transmit knowledge about specific figures of history, there are other strategies. Artist Htein, for example, did a work dedicated to the student leader Bo Aung Kyaw, however not based on research, but conceived as a socially-engaged artwork. *Culm-Nation* (2016) is an installation of masks made from bamboo culms from the groves in Yone-Zin village, the birthplace of the martyred student, created in collaboration with the local young people.[105] *The Name*, though, goes further into the critical investigation of Burmese history as it challenges the whole system of knowledge, including the possibility, for artists, to participate in its making. Their practice, within the specific context of Myanmar, remains therefore original and *The Name* is probably one of the first research-based artworks of the country. Yet, with a new generation of artists eager to investigate history and their own culture, together with the further expansion of and exposure to contemporary languages,[106] such practices might develop in the future, bringing back agency to the artists and modifying their social status within society at large.

Research and myths have one thing in common: they attempt to organise reality and, somehow, to find some order within chaos. The act of naming is also associated with a reorganisation of the world: as such, the

[102] Carlson Melissa, "Art versus Artifice: Contemplating Burmese Contemporary Art," *Orientations* 46, no. 4 (2015): 100–102.

[103] See in particular the practice of pioneer artist Po Po (b.1957) in Aung Min, *Myanmar Contemporary Art 1* (Yangon: MARCA theart.com, 2016), 325.

[104] Interview with the author, September 2018.

[105] Interview of Htein Lin by the author, Yangon June 2017.

[106] Since the re-opening of the Yangon Secretariat Building for art exhibitions in 2017, the city has welcomed international large exhibitions of contemporary art such as *A Beast, A God and A Line* (2018) and *Concept Context Contestation* (2019), favoring the circulation of contemporary discourses and introducing more conceptual works to the local audience.

enumeration of the names and the general artists' gesture in *The Name* invite to reshape the past in a way that it would become meaningful: from a humiliated, sometimes contradictory and scattered vision of history, they try to reconsider history with pride and to build a collective memory not so much based on any specific man or woman, but on the values they embody.

According to Benedict Anderson, the tombs of Unknown Soldiers are emblems of the modern culture of nationalism.[107] For him, nationalism is defined both as a "historical *fatality* and as a community imagined through language"[108] that positively creates a sense of belonging between the citizens of a same country: to construct this imagined community is to give shape to the given, and especially to a collective memory. Contrary to what is usually said, nationalism or nation-ness, for him, does not encourage racism and hatred but generate cultural creations and love.[109] From this constructive definition, the work could be perceived as an invitation to build an alternative nationalism based on a revised knowledge of the past and focusing on its continuous legacy of resistance and freedom.

The research process brings legitimacy to this unifying vision of history freed developed outside any institution and expressed artistically. This original legitimacy, in turn, transforms the role of the artists and their potential position in the society as initiators of emancipatory modes of knowledge production. As an artistic form, *The Name* remains plural and open to different interpretations and challenges. It calls for a critical debate to take place, activating everyone's memory and responses to the existing collective representation of history.

[107] Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 9.
[108] Anderson, Ibid., 146.
[109] Anderson, Ibid., 141.

Beyond the Artist's Discourse: Implicit and Sensuous Knowledge in Khvay Samnang's *Preah Kunlong* (2017)

Preah Kunlong (2017) is a two-channel 18-minute film by Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang taking place in the Areng Valley, in Koh Kong, a southwest province of Cambodia. It features choreographer and traditionally-trained dancer Nget Rady wearing successively 11 animal masks, dancing in the midst of this part of the rainforest, known as one of Southeast Asia's last great wilderness areas.

The work was commissioned by Documenta 14 and was presented as the outcome of the artist's fieldwork with the Chong community, the ethnic minority living in this region, caught today between modernity, fast development, political tensions and the ecological crisis on the one hand, and the preservation of their culture, environment and identity on the other hand. In his statements, interviews and talks, Khvay underlines the relationship that he built with the Chong people and how much he has learnt from their traditions and system of beliefs through his multiple visits. Especially, together with a few villagers, he created the 11 animal masks that the dancer is wearing in the film, inspired by their animal totems that represent the spirits of the forest.

This engagement in research reflects the artist's thirst for knowledge and his eagerness to address contemporary issues of relevance in Cambodia. It can be analysed in a larger, yet recent, trend in contemporary Cambodian art which sees a greater number of practices based on research and field-work. Many local artists feel increasingly the need to better understand

and document the recent drastic changes occurring in the country. In doing so, they aim at re-appropriating their own culture while resisting what they perceive as the present-day authoritarian power and official system of knowledge.

Preah Kunlong offers a particularly relevant example of this tendency. The starting point of the artist's research was the mediatised controversy that took place in the Areng Valley about the construction of a hydropower dam, perceived as a threat for the Chong community. Wary of the news, Khvay decided to go there in order to see by himself what was happening. This dam project epitomizes today's transformations of the country which participate in the disappearance of some local cultures and landscapes, hitherto preserved thanks to their isolation. Inspired by this context, Khvay transformed his fieldwork experience and personal feelings into a metaphorical artwork aiming at raising people's awareness of the situation. To an official discourse praising progress and development, *Preah Kunlong* opposes images of a pristine nature that seems to speak for itself, only troubled by the movements of the dancer who appears like a hybrid creature, half-human and half-animal.

Noting the trend toward ethnographic-oriented artistic practices in Cambodia during the last 20 years, and referring notably to a previous work by Khvay, Ashley Thompson introduces the term 'auto-ethnographic' to shed light on the self-reflexive dimension of such practices.[1] Khvay's fieldwork resembles indeed the methodology of work of an ethnographer, but the artist borrowed very freely the tools of the social scientist. Besides, for him, the Chong people do not probably embody a 'self', as suggested by the prefix 'auto' but, on the contrary, a cultural and social otherness he wishes to discover. Their community would rather function like a mirror of his own culture and aspirations as an urban citizen in quest for authenticity. The Chong culture is in fact already on the verge of disappearing. The community the artist is referring to might thus, for a part, be romanticised.

Immediately, the delicate question of the representation of "the other" arises, the main risk not being a search for exoticism but an over-simplification or a misrecognition of the community involved, a misconception that would notably impact the knowledge produced by the

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[1] Thompson Ashley, "Emergenc(i)es: The Auto-ethnographic Impulse in Contemporary Cambodian Art," in *Essays on Art in Southeast Asia: Charting Thoughts*, ed. Low Sze Wee and Patrick Flores (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 293–303.

artwork. Limited in time and space, and oriented toward artistic research, Khvay's fieldwork can only reflect a fragmented reality and mainly serves as an inspiration source to create the work. In fact, *Preah Kunlong* never refers directly to the Chong people and does not document directly the way of life and beliefs of the community. With no voice-over nor text, it does not feature anyone from the ethnic minority in person, but only features Nget dancing with the masks, improvising and freely directed by the artist. There is no evidence that the film takes place in the Areng Valley, nor that the masks worn by the dancer have been made according to the Chong traditions and beliefs.

What might be problematic, then, is the way the artist himself and Hendrik Folkerts, co-curator of Documenta 14, depict the work as an experience of encounter with the Chong people whose beliefs and livelihoods are constantly highlighted and opposed to modernity and development. Such a discourse, increasingly used nowadays as narrative to contextualise research-based practices, tend to transform a dynamic and complex social reality into static generalities, mixing different issues such as climate change, indigenous rights and foreign-financed development projects. While indeed many of these contemporary issues coalesce in the Areng Valley and are deeply entangled, the risk is at once to miss the specific reality of the Chong people and to reduce the scope of the artwork, taken as a mere illustration of this specific context.

Khvay avoids such a risk by proposing a very personal and creative understanding of his experience with the Chong community. *Preah Kunlong* can be interpreted beyond the curator's or even beyond the artist's own discourses, and beyond such an ethnographic perspective altogether. By confronting the viewer with nature as a subject, magnified and fully present, and with a possible reconciliation between humans and non-humans, the installation invites us to rethink the relationship of humans to nature and to approach what Philippe Descola called an anthropology of nature. Ultimately, the work defies us to reconsider the way we inhabit the world, and to think in terms of fluid, dynamic and inclusive relations rather than of entity, otherness or sameness, fusion or oppositions. Besides, while Nget, the dancer, transgresses with grace the usual boundaries between humanity and animality, reaching a state of total openness with the outside world, he also invites the viewer to feel the flow of energy that inhabits him, to abandon his position as a dominating human being and to trust his/her own inner nature. At once resisting and transcending any discursive approach, and instead of directly shedding light on the specific Chong

community, the work opens a path towards an expanded form of knowledge, elusive and implicit, probably located at the crossroads between the inner self and nature as an open field, expressed intuitively and sensually.

As a curator, I invited Samnang and Rady to take part in a group exhibition in Hong Kong, [2] and we organised a 2-day workshop about body language and ecological art.[3] Nget performed on the rooftop of the space, too, after having worked with the participants in the local jungle, collecting vines to make local masks. Together with the artist and his wife, I also went to the Areng Valley in October 2018 in order to discover by myself the area, and to learn more about the Chong people. We went first to Chi Phat, a village relatively easily reachable by road, and then to a smaller village, Chumnoab, deeply lost in the Areng Valley at the end of a new, yet already bumpy and often impassable road. In Chi Phat, there are Chong people living together with other communities, including Khmer people, while in Chumnoab there are only Chong population (about 100 families).[4] These events and shared moments gave me plenty of opportunities to discuss with Khvay and Nget, and to attend their interviews, talks and workshops. For this chapter, I base myself on these conversations and on those I had during my visit to the Areng Valley.[5]

7.1   A Thirst for Knowledge

The starting point of Khvay's research was the mediatised controversy that took place in the region about the construction of a hydropower dam on the Areng river. The dam would have caused the displacement of about 1300 persons and flooded a 9500-hectare area.[6] After many protests, the

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[2] *Constructing Mythologies*, Edouard Malingue gallery, Hong Kong. Sept.–Oct. 2018.

[3] The workshop took place at WING Platform for performance, Hong Kong. September 15–16, 2018.

[4] According to the artist. It is difficult to have data about the Chong people. An April 2018 Phnom Penh Post article mentions 200 families living in the Koh Kong province (https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/ethnic-areng-valley-minority-group-petitions-recognition).

[5] The first part of this chapter is derived in part from an article commissioned by the Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and the Research Centre for New Art Museum Studies, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. It was first published online in 2021, available at http://trans-seatriennial.gzarts.edu.cn/.

[6] The Cambodian Daily, Feb. 4, 2015 (https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/hun-sen-defends-proposed-areng-valley-dam-77352/).

project has been postponed but there are still uncertainties about its implementation.[7]

Commissioned by Documenta 14, Khvay chose to go to the Areng Valley in order to see how he could address this ecological issue, in continuity with his previous works focusing on the environment. Since 2011, with his series of photographs *Untitled* (2011) when he was pouring buckets of sand over his head, immersed in polluted waters, the artist has been engaged in works and performances dealing with the exploitation of resources, land grabbing and forced population displacement taking place in Cambodia. For instance, the 3-channel video *Where is My Land* (2014) reflects on the erosion and landfalls caused by the practice of sand-dredging with natural lakes being filled up for urban development projects, without any consideration for the local populations. For *Rubber Man* (2014), Khvay visited several times the Ratanakiri Province in the north-east of the country and expressed his concern for the disappearance of the forest due to an increased exploitation of the land, a process that had started with the French rubber plantations during colonial times. The video features his performances during which he poured fresh and white latex over his naked body and walked across the forest.

The tensions and controversies that have arisen in the Areng Valley crystallise recurrent issues that plague the country: massive deforestation, illegal logging, indigenous protests for their rights or land grabbing. In Cambodia, the indigenous communities account for approximately 1.4% of the population.[8] Theoretically, they are all recognised as Khmer citizens, but in reality some ethnic minorities are still deprived of their rights, and in particular of the right to own their land.[9] Additionally, and because of the richness of their lands, the indigenous people are constantly threatened by new project developments from private investors or from the government, and increasingly controlled by Non-Governmental Organisations

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[7] A Mar. 15, 2017 article from the Cambodia Daily entitled 'NGO Wary of Promise to Cancel Hydropower Dam Project' suggested that there are still doubts about the future of the project. (https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/ngo-wary-of-promise-to-cancel-hydropower-dam-project-126565/).

[8] According to the report from the 'United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues' Sixth session, New York May 2007 (https://www.un.org/press/en/2007/hr4916.doc.htm).

[9] On this point, see in particular *Indigenous Peoples/ethnic minorities and poverty reduction in Cambodia* (Philippines: Environment and Social Safeguard Division of the Asian Development Bank, 2002), 9–10.

(NGO) or new regulations aiming at protecting the natural environment, sometimes at the expense of the local populations.

In Cambodia, despite active NGO and public regulation projects, there is no strong policy that would help the indigenous communities to live through these deep transitions, develop education, alleviate poverty and secure their land. Globally, these populations are among the poorest of the country, powerless in front of the commercial and state interests.[10] All literature on the subject underscores the weakness of Cambodian institutions, their lack of transparency, corruption and the non-implementation of the policies supposed to empower the indigenous people. For example, the protected and wildlife conservation areas, created by the government in order to protect natural resources, are in fact "disappearing quickly owing to illegal encroachment, and in particular their illegal sale to domestic and foreign companies as part of economic land or forest concessions."[11]

The context of the Areng Valley offers thus an overview of the complexity of the issues at stake and how much their perception can be biased according to the chosen sources of information. Alex Gonzalez-Davidson, the activist and founder of the environmental group Mother Nature who had been living in the Areng valley for years, was deported by the government in 2015 because of his activities against the hydropower dam project. Khvay acknowledges he always had to be careful, and we could not talk openly about the dam when there.

A general sense of mistrust pervades the country. None of the artists I met trusts the media and Khvay hints at the impossibility to believe either the press or the discourse of the government. Today, and despite an "open face" presented to the outside world, most of the media in Cambodia are owned or controlled by the government or by the Cambodian People's Party, the ruling party since 1979. Sebastian Strangio points out that, actually, "a free and impartial press has never really existed in Cambodia."[12] Politically, the country has been governed since 1985 by Hun Sen who

[10] See for example the report from the *United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues* Sixth session, New York May 2007. https://www.un.org/press/en/2007/hr4916.doc.htm.

[11] Sokphea Young, "Practices and challenges towards sustainability," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia* ed. Brickell Katherine and Springer Simon (Routledge, 2017), 113.

[12] Strangio Sebastian, "The Media in Cambodia," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia* ed. Brickell Katherine and Springer Simon (Routledge, 2017), 76.

abolished the main opposition in 2017 and established his personal rule.[13] Besides, the corruption and constant violations of the human rights are unanimously denounced. Typical of this, and on the legal side, Catherine Morris underscores the corruption of the law and the weakness of the legal system. Despite a liberal democratic Constitution, voted in 1993, the lawyer and expert in human rights observes that "corruption and lack of independence from the ruling party have corroded public trust in Cambodia's courts, police, lawyers, and public officials."[14] She quotes a Cambodian human rights organisation which compares the justice system to a "charade". As for him, Strangio speaks about the Cambodia's "'mirage' of liberalism and reform" and about a "mirage" of freedom".

In this context, it is easy to understand why the artists feel the need to engage in their own investigations in order to make their own judgements. This thirst for knowledge is also the result of a deficient and biased educational system. During the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), most of the schools were closed and many adults with formal education died, either executed or from starvation and disease when they had been exiled to hard labour in the countryside. Even if schools started to re-open 9 months after the end of the regime, the consequences of such a trauma and eradication are still deeply felt.[15] A good example of the state of knowledge in the country can be found in Katherine Brickell's reminder of the teaching of contemporary national history. Especially, after the Khmer Rouge, and in order to favour the peace process, the teaching of Pol Pot's regime did not belong to the national curriculum. It is only from 2007, with the establishment of a tribunal, that Cambodian people started officially to know about what happened, although many already knew from their family's stories or from popular culture. Yet, according to Brickell, there are still many gaps in the local knowledge of history. For instance, there is still no discussion about the French legacy, or about the

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[13] See in particular Sutton Jonathan, "Hun Sen's Consolidation of Personal Rule and the Closure of Political Space in Cambodia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 40, 2 (Aug. 2018): 173–195.

[14] Morris Catherine, "Justice Inverted," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia* ed. Brickell Katherine and Springer Simon (Routledge, 2017), 29.

[15] Sokhom Hean, "Education in Cambodia: highland minorities in the present context of development," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5:1 (2004): 141–142.

American bombing that took place during the Vietnamese war, killing an estimated 600,000 persons.[16]

While activists are easily jailed or even assassinated,[17] and journalists often threatened,[18] the artists feel paradoxically freer, and they are the ones who address these sensitive topics. For example, *Bomb Ponds* (2009) by Vandy Rattana deals with the lasting physical and psychological impacts of these bombing. A self-taught artist, Rattana underscores his lack of knowledge on the subject, and the necessity, for him, to investigate.[19] For this series, he rented a car and drove along the Vietnamese border, asking people on his way if they knew about a bomb pond, and then photographing them while engaging in conversations with the local people. Rattana denounces the systematic attempt by the government to eliminate the traces of the past, and a system that discourages true research and critical thinking. For him, research is a response to this ignorance, and he often cites Vandy Kaonn's book *Cambodia or Politics without the Cambodian* to emphasise the lack of political agency of the Cambodian people within their own country.[20]

Research, indeed, is another way to regain agency and to actively respond to this context of authoritative power. Willing to "take ownership of Cambodian narratives,"[21] the artists move away from the artistic exploitation of the Khmer Rouge trauma,[22] and wish to re-engage with the creative impulse of the 1960s,[23] increasingly using photography to document the current transitions of the Cambodian society. As with Khvay,

[16] Brickell Katherine and Springer Simon, ed., *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*, (Routledge 2017), 3.

[17] See in particular the assassination of famous activist and political commentator Kem Ley on 10 July 2016, but closer to *Preah Kunlong*'s ecological topic, Morris relates the case of an environmental activist investigating illegal logging who was killed in Koh Kong province in 2012. See Morris, "Justice Inverted," Ibid., 35.

[18] Strangio underlines the pressure under which the reporters have to work, often being threatened or bribed. See Strangio, "The Media in Cambodia," Ibid., 82.

[19] Interview with the artist over the phone, Nov. 17, 2017.

[20] Vandy Kaonn, *Cambodgeou la politique sans les cambodgiens* (Cambodia or Politics without the Cambodian people) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993).

[21] Vuth Lyno, "Knowledge sharing and learning together: alternative art engagement from StievSelapak and Sa Sa Art Projects," *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies* 12, (2014): 258.

[22] Thompson Ashley, "Forgetting to Remember, Again," The Johns Hopkins University Press *Diacritics* 41.2 (2013): 82–109; Corey Pamela, 'The 'First' Cambodian Contemporary Artist', *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* (2014): 61–94.

[23] See Daravuth Ly and Muan Ingrid, *Cultures of Independence* (Phnom Penh Cambodia: Reyum Publishing, 2001).

fieldwork seems to be the key approach to these research processes. Vuth Lyno notes that most of the artists do not have a culture of reading, as a possible consequence of the scarcity of scholarly books written in Khmer language,[24] and observes that fieldwork is their personal path towards knowledge.[25] Most of the artists I met enjoy more learning from people rather than from books and the encounters with people are often at the core of their work. Emblematic of this tendency, Lim Sokchanlina has embarked on a long-term multimedia project in Southeast Asia since 2018, meeting systematically some communities of Cambodian migrant workers in order to learn about their livelihoods and conditions of work.[26] This empiricist slant might also come from a culture based on apprenticeship where knowledge is orally transmitted from masters to apprentices.[27]

7.2   The Artist-Researcher: Working Freely as an Ethnographer

Khvay's process of work is fully emphasised in *Preah Kunlong* and was largely described in the presentation of the installation, both by the artist during his talks, interviews or statements and by the curator when the work was exhibited. These discourses anchor the artwork within the social, political, ecological and cultural reality of the Chong community. At the Documenta 14, the label said:

> *Preah Kunlong was made over 16 months for documenta14 during which time the artist and various collaborators spent around ten weeklong stays in Areng Valley and Chi Phat, in the southwest of Cambodia. The artist was interested to experience this unique ecosystem first hand—the area is the largest unbroken rainforest in all of Southeast Asia. He had hoped to learn from the indigenous Chong people to better understand their beliefs and livelihoods, especially at a time when governmental and corporate interests threaten all life in the valley through deforestation and damming.*[28]

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[24] Even after the independence of the country, education remained largely conducted in French language, and books were in French. Interview with Ang Choulean, Siem Reap, Mar. 2019.

[25] Interview with Vuth Lyno Oct. 2018.

[26] Phone interview with this artist from Tokyo, Oct. 9, 2018.

[27] Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, Ibid., 245.

[28] From d14 Floor Label, text given to the author by the artist.

For Khvay, *Preah Kunlong* represents a further step in his engagement with fieldwork. The artist went several times in the Koh Kong Province in order to understand the situation and to be immersed in the local culture. During his multiple stays, he also tried to gain the people's trust, which was far from a given: the hydroelectric dam project had drawn attention to the area, bringing political organisations, ecological activists and journalists to the villages in addition to the Chinese investors. In this context, the indigenous people were not inclined to trust anyone as the tensions were growing. At first, Khvay presented himself as a tourist, and later explained that he was an artist doing research. During the project, some local people chose to move away from him, afraid that working with him would affect them negatively. Establishing trust is a long and difficult process and we never know to which extent one remains perceived as an outsider. Hean Sokhom, who focuses on indigenous people from the northeast territories, notes that they "are not likely to tell an outsider their own identity"[29] especially when they live nearby the Khmer population, because of their fear of xenophobia. Considering the local political context, it is easy to understand that some of them might be wary of foreigners. However, in Chi Phat and Chumnoab, Khvay seems to have been really accepted as a member of the family and he is still invited to go back there for weddings, housewarmings or other ceremonies.

In the beginning of John Bishop's film *In the Wilderness of a Troubled Genre*, that discusses film documentaries, American filmmaker and anthropologist Robert Gardner calls the ethnographic film "a troubled genre." Brent Luvaas, who is also an anthropologist, underlines that, indeed, the ethnographic film, like anthropology as a field, suffers from a lack of definition. However, according to him, this feature makes it precisely an open field that pushes anthropologists "to be continually exploring new avenues and methods for interrogating the truth, or what gets to count as truth, in any case. (…) When given the opportunity to enter the pastures of scientific clarity, we push ourselves even further into the wilderness."[30]

It is which such an open mind that we should consider Khvay's ethnographic fieldwork in the Areng Valley. The artist borrows indeed very freely from the ethnographer's research practice, approaching the Chong

[29] Sokhom, Hean "Education in Cambodia: highland minorities in the present context of development," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5:1 (2004): 139.

[30] Luvaas Brent, "Forging Deeper into the Wilderness: The State of Visual Anthropology Today," *American Anthropologist journal* Vol. 116 Issue 3 (Sept. 2014): 652–653.

community without any clear objectives nor methodologies. If we had to follow the criteria established by Jay Ruby, the American founder of visual anthropology, that define what is an ethnographic film, *Preah Kunlong* would certainly not comply with these requirements. The first criterium, for instance, requires that "the major focus of an ethnographic work must be a description of a whole culture or some definable unit of culture."[31] While the Chong community could be defined as a particular unit of culture, there is no description, in the film, of its specificities. In fact, what is striking is the outright absence of the Chong people who never appear directly in the work. However, their presence irradiates the film which works as a metaphorical mirror of their culture, as perceived by the artist.

Since Ruby, the field of ethnography has considerably evolved and has been constantly reconstructed. Chris Marker, the documentary film director, was already famously called a "poetic ethnographer" and, increasingly, anthropologists seek to open up the field of anthropology and to collaborate with artists. According to Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, for instance, art can bring a fresher approach to anthropology thanks to its ability to connect to the imagination and to hidden and sensitive dimensions of the world, an often missing connection in classical anthropological studies. The anthropologists highlight the "multisensorial experience" of such inter-disciplinary practices,[32] and *Preah Kunlong*, with the sensuous conversion of the artist's research findings, offers a similar sensuous encounter.

Above all, Khvay never meant to work as an ethnographer and rather defines himself as a translator, interpreting what he observes, learns and feels. There is no reason, thus, for him, to deliver any specific outcome from his fieldwork, nor to be consistent in his interpretation of the Chong culture. To complete his knowledge of the ethnic minority, and of their environment, Khvay mentions reading a few articles and reports such as the reports from the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Commission.[33] He nevertheless acknowledges that he responds better to fieldwork than to literature, his favourite sentence being "if I want to know, I should go." According to him, this bookish kind of research comes afterwards, as a

[31] Ruby Jay, "Is an Enthnographic Film a Filmic Ethnography?" *STUDIES in the anthropology of Visual Communication*, Vol. 2(2) (Fall 1975): 106.

[32] Schneider Arnd and Wright Christopher, *Between Art and Anthropology* (Berg, 2010) (republished by Bloomsbury, 2013).

[33] Lopez A. (Comp.), *MWBP working papers on Mekong populations of the Siamese Crocodile Crocodylussiamensis* (Vientiane, Lao PDR: MWBP, 2006).

way to verbalise something he might have intuited first. Besides, Khvay conducted many informal interviews with the Chong people but did not record them. He only took a few photographs as a way to document his research. These photographs are not on display with the installation, though, and are kept by the artist for his personal use or as supports of his public talks.

The knowledge gathered by the artist from his fieldwork is not so much discursive than flowing from his intuition and personal experience, translated in the work. In order to reach out to this unfamiliar world, he tried to put his own mind on the side, and to open all his five senses. For instance, besides the discussions he had with the villagers and when he was walking in the jungle, he relates how he kept tracking smells that were unusual to him, helped by his guide who can easily use odours to find back his path in the forest. His research process is also entangled with his practice of creation as he progressively integrated what he learnt from his experience into his artwork. This is for instance how came the idea of creating animals' masks by using traditional weaving techniques: with local people, they tried different kinds of design until an old lady proposed this original method using vines and fishing nets techniques. The Chong people do not create such masks for themselves: for some ceremonies, they do wear a hat with two horns on it, but it does not cover the face.

The Chong people rely deeply on the forest for their livelihood, collecting fruits and vegetables to complement their diet, resin to generate income, rattan and small trees for their constructions. A tight relationship between the villagers, the forest and the local animals has been consolidated for centuries and passed on from generation to generation. They believe in spirits which protect them, and especially in Arak, the spirit of the forest. It is unclear how exactly these spirits manifest themselves, but some animals are said to have helped villagers, either to find water in times of drought or to find their way when they were lost, thanks to their footprints left purposefully on the ground. The title of the work could be understood as *The Way to the Spirit* (*Preah* means God or spirit and *Kunlong* means path or footprint), which is also the way taken by the animals of the forest.

Ultimately, Khvay's fieldwork and encounters nourished freely his inspiration. *Preah Kunlong*, as a work of art, reflects this freedom of interpretation. The work features a series of 11 masks representing the heads of animals, all belonging to species that can be found around the Areng Valley in the Cardamoms Mountains, presented on bamboo sticks as if

they were hunting trophies. In the two-channel 18-minute film, though, the masks are worn alternatively by choreographer Nget Rady, who brings life to them again. The dancer, half-human, half-animal, embodies the spirits of the forest who wander in the jungle and make one with nature. Nget's costume, a simple skirt, was made from pineapple leaves, a traditional weaving technique almost lost in the villages. The film is silenced: there are no human wordings but only the sound of nature, running water, the chirping of birds and the songs of insects only interrupted by Nget's punctual growls or small screams.

Nget himself went also on site several times to accustom himself to the jungle. He wished to "feel" the spirits of the animals, the energy of the place and of the natural elements, which inhabit his dance once he wears the masks. In order to know more about the eleven animals he had to interpret, he went to the zoo in Phnom Penh and observed them behind bars, mimicking their behaviour or sounds. Nget is a classical Cambodian dancer who has been trained since the age of nine to play the monkey in the Ramayana: in this traditional epic poem, all the gestures are coded and precise. Embodying freely a monkey and other animals from the Areng Valley was thus a totally new research experience for him.

7.3 Discourse and Cultural Appropriation

Ashley Thompson describes Khvay's practice as part of a Cambodian "auto-ethnographic impulse" that consists, for the artists involved, in studying their own culture.[34] However, for Khvay, the Chong people seem rather to represent an otherness that the artist tries to reach out to. In fact, with the ethnic community's traditions and culture on the verge of disappearing, it appears difficult to clearly distinguish between their heritage and the representation of this heritage, which might be for a part romanticised.

Richard Rogers defines cultural appropriation as "as the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture," and recalls that the term appropriation implies making

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[34] Thompson Ashley, "Emergenc(i)es: The Auto-ethnographic Impulse in Contemporary Cambodian Art," in *Essays on Art in Southeast Asia: Charting Thoughts*, ed. Low Sze Wee and Patrick Flores (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 293–303.

use of something without the proper right or authority to do so.[35] In light of the discourses of Khvay and Folkerts that underline the mutual exchanges between the artist and the Chong people on the one hand, and the subordinated nature of the Chong culture on the other, one might need to further examine the artist's relationships with, and representation of, this ethnic community.

A Cultural and Social Otherness

"The question of the other is not just a theme that anthropology encounters from time to time; it is its sole intellectual object, the basis on which different fields of investigation may be defined."[36] While, in ethnography, the subject of study is alterity, this alterity can take different faces. Thompson, in particular, added the prefix 'auto' to the field to illustrate the current Cambodian trend consisting in studying one own's culture, from the inside. For the scholar, beyond a "banal identitarian orientation,"[37] the trend encompasses all movements turned towards the study of the past, such as traditions, crafts, cultural beliefs etc. as if the ethnographic subject of study, in this case the alterity, was displaced in time. Her conception of 'auto-ethnography' includes the practice of some artists who do not conduct fieldwork but who are integrating traditional components in their artworks. This expanded definition of ethnography highlights the possibility, and complexity, of a relation between a self and a similar other, a relation which is representative of Khvay's specific positioning.

What can be destabilising is that the artist seems to hold a kind of middle position between the outside and the inside. Seen from a foreign perspective, it might be easy to associate Khvay to the disappearing figure at the end of the film, when the dancer abruptly vanishes: he would thus incarnate Cambodia's environment being threatened by invasive foreign investments and development projects. From this reading, the artist makes one with the Chong community. However, Khvay lives and works in Phnom Penh and is not related in any way to these people. He was born

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[35] Rogers Richard A., "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation," *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 474.

[36] Augé Marc, *Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe, (Verso 1995), 18.

[37] Thompson, "Emergenc(i)es: the Auto-ethnographic Impulse in Contemporary Cambodian Art," Ibid., 294.

in Svay Rieng in 1982 in the southeast part of Cambodia, and soon moved to the capital where he graduated from the Painting Department at the Royal University of Fine Arts. His parents were not farmers and do not belong to any ethnic minority. The sameness is thus only superficial as this perspective disregards social and cultural differences. Perhaps we could introduce an idea of degree in a scale that would go from the self toward the other, but does Khvay's perception of the indigenous people really differ from that of a Western ethnographer's who would have learnt to speak their language and would have come on purpose to study their culture? At the global age of 'the end of exoticism,'[38] the otherness is located closer. French anthropologist Marc Augé shows how it has been displaced from the external to the internal, both in terms of space and time.[39] In fact, in the art world, the taste and interest for the social other, especially living in rural areas, has been existing for a very long time, from the antic pastoral mode to the Renaissance bucolic genre and romanticism.[40]

Khvay does not hide his fascination for the region and for the local lifestyle. This romantic perspective should be analysed in line with the rapid urbanization of the country:[41] as urban citizens, Cambodian artists are fascinated by the countryside and by traditional ways of life that do not exist anymore in Phnom Penh. They witness the emergence of new shopping malls and high-rise buildings in the city centre, while the periphery, hitherto covered by fields, is now the home of satellite city megaprojects.[42] Khvay responded to these changes in many of his previous works, and his

[38] See for example Bensa Alban, *La fin de l'exotisme (the end of exotism)* (France: Griffe essais Anacharsis, 2006); Marc Augé's reference to "the death of exoticism" In Augé Marc, *Le Sens des Autres* (the Sense of Others) (Paris: Fayard 1994), 10 quoted by Fagnart Claire, "Art et Ethnographie," (Art and Ethnography) (Vincennes: Marges 2007), 12.

[39] See in particular Augé Marc, "The Near and the Elsewhere," in Augé *Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Ibid., 7–41.

[40] Today many artists are documenting the life of gypsies, prisoners, migrants etc.—actually all the marginalized populations who lack exposure or have less opportunities to voice out for themselves. See for example the work of French photographer Mathieu Pernot.

[41] Cambodia's urbanisation growth rate is one of the most important rates of Southeast Asia (4,5% between 2010–2015) See Scornet Catherine, "The Southeast Asian population and its challenges," in *L'Asie du Sud-Est 2019—Bilan, enjeux et perspectives*, ed. IRASEC (Paris: Les Indes Savantes 2019), 28.

[42] The important 2013 exhibition of Cambodian contemporary art *Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology* curated by Erin Gleeson featured the artists' responses to this rapid urbanization and highlighted how much the artists are sensitive to their changing environment.

concern probably goes along with his desire to find an alternative to the intense transformations of the landscape: the Areng Valley seems to offer him this alternative, as it epitomizes wilderness and authenticity, together with an intimate relationship to nature. The place, then, becomes the embodiment of the artist's own projection of his representation of nature, and of an idealistic intimacy with it, explored through the intermediary of the Chong people, who might act as a catalyst for his own quest.

This othering echoes what John Clark analyses in the neo-traditional art form, which is an artistic expression that emerged with the independence of Asian countries, and which combines the re-articulation of pre-colonial discourses with modern aspirations. This art form and style imply what the art historian calls "double-othering" because they resist, and challenge, "both the discourse from which the transfer took place and different interpretations or references from within it."[43] In other words, they propose renewed versions of what is supposedly traditional, with the traditional dimension being itself a constructed projection of the past. "Whatever was passed down from the past, it is always an ideological process to categorize it as 'traditional.'"[44] Just like Khvay who cannot reach the reality of what it could have meant to belong to the Chong community and to live like a Chong, the artists practising the neo-traditional style were inventing the traditions they were referring to.

This projection on an idealized otherness might be even stronger as the Chong community, in fact, has almost already lost its identity. There have been very few scholarly works dealing with the Chong people, but, today, it seems difficult to precisely define their culture and specificities.[45] The Chong people belong to the Poar group, scattered between Thailand and Cambodia, and, more generally, to the group of highlanders' inhabitants, who are located throughout Southeast Asia. Scholars have different ways to localize them and to name them, adding to the confusion about their

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[43] Clark John, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, United States: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 25.

[44] Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 71.

[45] Most of the scholarly work about the Cambodian minorities and indigenous people focus on the Northeast region. See for example *Indigenous Peoples/ethnic minorities and poverty reduction in Cambodia* (Philippines: Environment and Social Safeguard Division of the Asian Development Bank, 2002).

identity.[46] Cambodian anthropologist Ang Choulean notes in particular that the appellation Khmer Doeum, or "Original Khmer" which is often used to claim their precedence over the Khmer people, is not correct.[47]

The Pearic language is the most salient feature of their culture. It belongs to the Mon-Khmer language group and is currently an endangered language.[48] During the Khmer Rouge regime, speaking local languages was forbidden, and even today, by fear of xenophobia, some ethnic minorities deny the knowledge of their mother tongue. [49] Interestingly, Alex Gonzalez-Davidson declares that the Chong language has been completely forgotten in the region.[50] From the 1960s, the Chong have been increasingly mixed with Khmer populations, with governmental policies aiming at facilitating their integration.[51] During the Khmer Rouge period, they experienced a decline in their population and a loss of some of their traditions.[52] A religious website dedicated to minorities around the globe even mentions the possibility that no more Chong people remain in Cambodia.[53]

Overall, the Chong identity is not self-evident. Ethnographical research in the region of the Cardamom Mountains, including the Areng Valley, stopped in 1970. Since there were still some Khmer Rouge soldiers hidden there, it is only after the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991 that research

[46] See in particular Baradat R., 'Les Sâmrê ou Péâr. Population primitive de l'Ouest du Cambodge' (The Samrê or Péar, a primitive population of western Cambodia) *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 41 (1941); Martin Marie A. «Esquisse phonologique du Somree,» *Asie du sud-est et monde Insulindien*, 5.1 (1974): 97–106; Schlesinger Joachim, *The Chong People: A Pearic-Speaking Group of Southeastern Thailand and Their Kin in the Region* (Schlesinger, 2017).

[47] In reference to Marie Alexandrine Martin eponym book (1997). Interview with Ang Choulean, Siem Reap Mar. 2019.

[48] Thomas David and Headley K, Robert, "More on Mon-Khmer subgrouping," *Lingua* Vol. 25 (1970): 401.

[49] *Indigenous Peoples/ethnic minorities and poverty reduction in Cambodia* (Philippines: Environment and Social Safeguard Division of the Asian Development Bank, 2002), 6–7.

[50] Ethnic Areng Valley minority group petitions for recognition Phnom Penh Post 4 Apr. 2018.

[51] Sokhom, Hean, "Education in Cambodia: highland minorities in the present context of development." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5:1 (2004): 140.

[52] Schlesinger, *The Chong People: A Pearic-Speaking Group of Southeastern Thailand and Their Kin in the Region*, Ibid., 23.

[53] From Joshua Project, available at: https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/11366/CB.

could resume.[54] The only concrete and specifically attested feature of their culture comes from their burial rituals, recently revealed by archaeological discoveries of funeral sites. Old jars and coffins containing bones have been found that reflect unique forms of rituals.[55] Yet, these rituals belong to the past. Tep Sokha, the archaeologist in charge of these discoveries, thinks that the Chong people have lost their specific knowledge and culture. Today, he tries to record some of their popular songs, which often relate the life in the forest, but for him too, the Chong culture remains a mystery.

However, the Chong community has been recently mediatised, both in regard to the construction of the dam on the Areng river and in regard to their struggle concerning their rights. Recognition as an indigenous community would allow them to apply for a collective land title, protection from land-grabbing and displacement.[56]

In *Fight For Areng Valley*, a 2014 documentary by Kalyanee Mam about their fight against the dam project, we can see the protestors chanting "we are a community from the Chong ethnic group living in Areng valley," and these movements might have consolidated their identitarian consciousness.[57] In response to the land issue, Jonathan Padwe observes that ethnic minorities and their advocates have indeed "adopted the language of indigenous rights to frame their practices of resistance."[58] The notion of 'indigeneity' is in fact a very new concept in the country and Padwe recalls that no equivalent in Khmer language existed before the end of the 1990s. Even though the term can be challenged, it is increasingly used and valorised. Some indigenous people have also understood that their voice could be better heard if framed within indigeneity, and there are examples of community people who "reassert" their ethnic identity in order to claim for their rights.[59] The notion of a 'Chong indigenous

[54] Padwe Jonathan, "Cambodia's Highlanders," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*, ed. Brickell Katherine and Springer Simon (Routledge, 2017), 136.

[55] Interview with Tep Sokha, Ceramic Conservator/ Archaeologist (Head of Ceramics Conservation Lab, Koh Kong province) Department of Archaeology and Prehistory, Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Oct. 2018.

[56] Ethnic Areng Valley minority group petitions for recognition, Phnom Penh Post 4 Apr. 2018.

[57] The documentary can be watched online together with interviews and details of the project, supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/cambodian-dam-project-may-threaten-people-and-endangered-species.

[58] Padwe, "Cambodia's Highlanders," Ibid., 140.

[59] Padwe, "Cambodia's Highlanders," Ibid., 134–145.

community' could be thus seen as a political strategy aiming at unifying the people from the region in order to gain more agency and to promote a more inclusive, democratic and multicultural society.

Aside from their specific system of beliefs, common to many indigenous Asian communities, the most important feature of these people, today, is perhaps indeed not the specificity of their culture but their socio-economic and political situation. Deprived from the right to own the land where they have been living for centuries, they remain in majority excluded from the political debate as they face many different, yet superimposed, new challenges.[60] This is not specific to the Chong people, though, and concerns most of the Cambodian indigenous communities.

A Confusing Discourse

Who are then the Chong people Khvay is referring to? It all looks as if he reflects on a reality that is already gone, and that only exists in his representation of reality and imagination. We touch here upon the complex issue of cultural appropriation and of the representation of another culture which, if misled, can be harmful to this culture. Yet this vision seems too binary and reflects an essentialist approach of identity. According to Ang Choulean, being fascinated by an otherness does not necessarily lead to any form of instrumentalisation. The anthropologist does not hide his own fascination for peasantry which has probably driven all his well-recognised scholarly work on Cambodian beliefs.[61] As we have seen, the search for the 'primitive' or 'native' cultures as counterpoint to Westernisation and modernisation of the society is relatively common across a number of Asian modern art practices. Besides, as underlined by Richard Rogers, the phenomenon of cultural appropriation is "inescapable when cultures come into contact,"[62] which is increasingly the case with today's globalisation. However, a misrepresentation of a particular culture can be harmful to this culture, although its impact might be difficult to

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[60] In theory, the Land Law adopted in 2001 should protect their rights but the law is often bypassed, the indigenous people do not know their rights and furthermore the law can only be applied to specifically defined indigenous ethnic minorities. See the main points of the law In: *Indigenous Peoples/ethnic minorities and poverty reduction in Cambodia* (Philippines: Environment and Social Safeguard Division of the Asian Development Bank, 2002), 12–14.

[61] Interview with Ang Choulean, Siem Reap Mar. 2019.

[62] Rogers Richard A., "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation," *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 474.

evaluate. James Young highlighted for instance how Hollywood films representations of Native American cultures based on stereotypes have contributed to perpetuate discriminations.[63] In *Preah Kunlong*, this ethical question is complex because on the one hand the artist keeps referring to the Chong people through his discourse, and on the other hand the reference to the Chong people is never directly made within the artwork itself.

For Young, cultural appropriation can be defensible in arts, notably on aesthetic grounds.[64] If we focus solely on the artwork, its beauty and aesthetic does not indeed seem offensive towards the Chong people, even though they might not directly recognise themselves in this mode of representation (and are absent from the work). Besides, the 2-channel video offers a powerful possibility to move away from any form of dichotomy, therefore favouring a more inclusive mode of thinking.

In reference to Khvay's *Rubber Man*, Thompson introduces the composite term of "self-(mis)recognition" to reflect the "estranging of the self" at stake in the work,[65] a notion which can be helpful here. *Rubber Man* is taking place in Ratanakiri in the northeast of the country, a province known for the predominance of its indigenous people who are mainly farmers. By pouring white latex on his naked body, the artist connects the Cambodian colonial history, especially the French rubber plantations, with today's issues of deforestation and land grabbing affecting the region. According to Thompson, by hiding his face and body under the white liquid, he also expresses the acceptance of a social and cultural otherness which is nevertheless part of his identity.

When Cambodian filmmaker Kalyanee Mam, who flew the country in 1979, went to the Areng Valley to shoot her film *Fight for Areng Valley*, she said she was looking for her roots and that the local people represented her lost identity.[66] Insofar as it resonates for him, the Chong culture, be it real, fantasied or already gone, embodies a part of Khvay's identity as well. Benedict Anderson demonstrated that every notion of identity is partly

[63] Young James O., *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 107–108.

[64] Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. Ibid.

[65] Thompson, "Emergenc(i)es: the Auto-ethnographic Impulse in Contemporary Cambodian Art," Ibid., 302.

[66] Interview of Kalyanee Mam with National Geographic on 22 July, 2015. https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/cambodian-dam-project-may-threaten-people-and-endangered-species.

imaginative.[67] In *Preah Kulong*, the masks, just like the white latex, could symbolise a transitional identity and the film could metaphorically illustrate the passage from the self to an otherness. The two screens function indeed like two mirrors which would reflect similar yet different images. There are eleven different spirits, or creatures featuring in the film, all embodied by the same dancer. As the work unfolds, we understand that these animals' spirits can be one and the same, one and many. They also never meet but coexist harmoniously. Besides, there is a constant back and forth movement between observation and identification, and viewers might progressively feel what it could be like to become somebody or something else. Finally, with the natural elements (water, soil, mud etc.) arising as subjects, nature appears as the real otherness with which living creatures try to reconnect.

This powerful invitation to embrace otherness and to resolve dichotomies thanks to a unifying oneness is however compromised by the artist and curator's discourses which tend, on the contrary, to reinforce dualities. The constant emphasis on Kvay's fieldwork and on the specificities of the Chong culture generates misreading such as the one found in Art Asia Pacific magazine's description of the two-channel video, which "depicts rituals of the indigenous Chong people in the southwestern Cambodian province of Koh Kong."[68] From this perspective, the gap between the artwork and the reality described, as produced by the artist's discourse, may result in confusion.

There are for example disagreements within the communities about development projects. Not all the local people agree on issues such as the construction of roads and the building of hydropower dams: while the roads mean potentially more infrastructure development, environment degradation and commercial trade, they also embody a way out of isolation, a better access to health care and education. Some local people also backed the hydropower dam project in the valley, which would have brought them electricity.[69] In Chumnoab, for instance, there is still no electricity in the village. There are even tensions among NGO: Mother Nature was banned from the country, due to its activities against the building of the dam, but some of its members are still active, often in

[67] Anderson Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (London, New York: Verso, 1983).

[68] HG Masters, "Documenta Kassel part 2," *Art Asia Pacific magazine*, June 09, 2018. http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/Documenta14KasselPart2.

[69] "Hydropower Dam Puts a Way of Life at Risk," *The Cambodian Daily*, Feb. 28, 2015.

conflict with Wildlife, another NGO established in 2007 in Chi Phat in order to regulate hunting and to develop eco-tourism.

The difficulties and complexities to reconcile development and preservation in Cambodia has been clearly expressed by American botanist Timothy Killeen and coined as the *Cardamom Conundrum*.[70] It is clear that many complex issues coalesce here, and the context of *Preah Kunlong* cannot be reduced to a mere opposition between the preservation of traditions and biodiversity on the one hand, and development, capitalistic or governmental interests on the other hand.

These general simplification and oppositions have been reproduced in the discourse of Hendrik Folkerts when the work was exhibited at Documenta 14. In his text, the curator stressed on the political dimension of the artwork, reflecting on the Chong people's alternative ways to delineate territories. According to him, far from the authoritative Western boundaries, *Preah Kunlong* offers "a form of counter-mapping" based on the specific and intimate relationships between the land and the Chong community that could embody a "powerful form of resistance." In reality, as we have seen, some Chong people yearn for the right to own their land despite their traditional and borderless relationships with the land. Folkerts' reference to Western boundaries seems out of place since in the Cardamom mountains the concession lands are now defined by the government, and the private development companies are the ones which today create new frontiers. Above all, the Chong people, again, are here unilaterally represented as a unified group whose cultural features are used to serve the curator's purpose. This perspective contributes to re-activate the binary and colonial vision opposing modernity with tradition, rationality (Western people) with spirituality (the indigenous) observed and criticised by Foster as "narratives of history-as-development and civilization-as-hierarchy."[71] Ironically, the curator's choice to exhibit the film within the Natural Museum in Kassel showcasing mammoths and prehistorical artefacts tends to re-contextualize the work in a primeval time, reduced again to a narrow ethnographic perspective. In Athens, the masks were exhibited alone, mere artefacts deprived of their 'raison d'être,' only briefly brought to life by Nget's performance, which must have resonated strangely in a white cube, so far from the nature it is connected with.

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[70] Killeen Timothy J., *The Cardamom Conundrum: Reconciling Development and Conservation in the Kingdom of Cambodia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

[71] Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" Ibid., 177.

Politically, and globally, the indigenous peoples often do not have their word to say, but everybody seems to speak for them. Some NGOs, for instance, tends to impose their views about the management of their resources without integrating them to their decision-making.[72] These NGOs speak clearly in the name of the indigenous people but continue to maintain them in a socially lower position. It seems fundamental, and urgent, to move away from this form of paternalistic and deleterious forms of representation and, as we have seen earlier, to bring forth new approaches to the dichotomy between the self and the other. In fact, *Preah Kunlong* offers such a possibility, provided that we could put aside the artist's discourse. How the art market and the institution encourage artists to produce a discourse and to transform their research process into simplified storytelling would necessitate a study in itself, but they surely participate in Khvay's articulation and verbalisation of his own practice, at the expenses of his artwork (Image 7.1).

7.4   An Anthropology of Nature: Implicit and Sensory Knowledge Production

Beyond the context of the Chong people, and beyond any discourse that tends to structure it, *Preah Kunlong* can be approached as a powerful ecological manifesto that epitomizes humans' attempt to embrace what Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls "multinaturalist," the ability to radically embrace the perspective of others.[73] The dancer featuring in the 2-channel video nurtures a symbiotic relationship with nature which values, more subtly and indirectly, the indigenous system of beliefs, and opens up for new mythologies to develop, in line with our contemporary societies. With the artist's research outcome being completely dissolved and converted into a sensuous and body-based art experience, the knowledge generated by the artwork transcends the specificities of the Chong community and connects the viewer with a larger, plural and more intuitive understanding of the world.

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[72] Indigenous Peoples/ethnic minorities and poverty reduction in Cambodia, Ibid., 15.

[73] Viveiros de Castro Eduardo, *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Ed. and trans. by Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

Image 7.1   Khvay Samnang, *Preah Kunlong* (2017). Still from video. (Courtesy of the artist)

Consubstantiality

Preah Kunlong unfolds according to a continuum that would include time, space, and all living creatures: time, land, nature, animals and human beings seem to form a wholeness and a dynamic network of interwoven connections. There is no apparent global structure of the film as it can be seen as a loop, suggesting a possible eternal repetition, in line with the repetition of the cycle of life and Buddhist conceptions of time. When the film starts, the dancer is already standing in the left screen, but seen from afar on the backdrop of a mighty waterfall. He wears the mask of the deer. We feel that he has always been there. On the right screen, we can see him closer, but wearing another mask—the crocodile. He slowly stands up on the top on the waterfall. We thus have here simultaneously the idea of a continuum in time, and the idea of a birth, or at least of a beginning. Combined together, these images seem to set the time of the film in a mythological time. Myths, indeed, develop during the sacred times of the

origins, but through rituals, these times can be recalled infinitely.[74] We thus feel, at the same time, distant from and close to the scenes.

What is true for time is also true for space: the dancer seems to have always been there, in the middle of the landscape, even as a part of it. Besides, Khvay's direction alternates between close-up shots lingering on details of the dancer's movements, and wide-angle views of the environment. There are no physical boundaries, and the spirits' territories are only defined by the natural elements, streams or mountains, rocks and trees. The succession of plans, from different locations amid the nature, seen from different perspectives (for instance top or foot of the waterfall) suggests an attempt to mark the territory through the presence of the animals' spirits, embodied by the dancer. Where he goes is where he belongs to.

Most indigenous cultures, in Cambodia, share also a particular relation with the land, and the way they inhabit territories. French researcher Alain Forest notes the distinction between the human territory, called *srok* in Cambodian language, and the wilderness, or forest, called *prey*. The latter is the place where mighty and unknown spirits are active.[75] It becomes a *srok* after land clearing, and once the limits of the territory have been fixed and a *neak ta*, or guardian spirit, has been installed by the villagers. The definition of boundaries is thus dependent on the spirits but can change according to human activities. This flexibility and freedom are highlighted by the way the dancer seems to appropriate each space while moving freely from one place to another. The two screens strengthen this idea of fusional continuity: from time to time, the dancer goes from one screen to another, breaking the rigidity of the frames. It is clear that the animals' spirits, embodied by the dancer, are ubiquitous, just like the sound of nature.

The solidarity between the natural world, animals and humans is expressed by the abolition of all hierarchies between these elements and Nget embodies the possible hybridity between human beings and animals. This "consubstantiality" has been described by Paul Mus as an essential feature of animism, a belief very common in Cambodia which endows all

[74] Eliade Mircea, *Le Mythe de l'Éternel Retour* (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*) (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

[75] Forest Alain, *Le Culte des GéniesProtecteurs au Cambodge* (the cult of guardian spirits or 'neak ta' in Cambodia) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), 15.

living creatures including plants with a human interiority.[76] In the film, a flow of ongoing energy circulates between the current of the river, the gestures of the dancer and the swing of the herbs, all elements being imbued with a common vitality which they give and receive alternatively. To translate the language of the rain forest, the artist has favoured the body language and got rid of the human language, probably too restrictive.

The process of identification with the animals' spirits and the land is reinforced by the sensuality of the framing. Mud, soil, water and vegetation are intimately sticking to the dancer's body. There are close-ups on his limbs, skin and muscles. Jerky rhythms alternate with static shots. In the middle of the film, the dancer starts to growl and squeak, mixing his voice with the sound of the environment. There is no day and night in the film, only a long day that seems to be eternal. Yet, before the end, the dancer's breathing starts to be heard louder. The last scenes show him standing at the edge of the waterfall before disappearing abruptly, reappearing on the adjacent screen and finally disappearing completely. After the long and slow flow of continuous movements, these cuts are highly noticeable. They subtly reflect on the current vulnerability of both this natural environment and of the Chong culture. Seen from this perspective, the body of Nget reveals his fragility as well: empowered by the animals' masks, he remains almost naked, and alone.

The primitivism mentioned earlier, disjointed from its specific reference to the Chong people's system of beliefs and examined independently, reveals thus an effort to bring back a knowledge that we have probably lost. It might be idealised, but it attempts to connect us back to a vision of nature in which human and non-human beings would live in a symbiotic way. In light of this, *Preah Kunlong* calls for the return of our ability to listen to, and respond to, another reality that we tend to have forgotten. Nature, then, and non-human beings, would be this otherness with which we try to reconnect.

An Anthropology of Nature

In fact, what looks like a mythology resonates with contemporary and global ecological concerns. The vanishing of the dancer, at the end of the

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[76] Muse Paul, *Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa*, *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrème Orient*, 33 (1933): 367–410. Quoted by Guillou in Guillou Anne Yvonne, "Potent places and Animism in Southeast Asia," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 18:5, (2017): 395.

video, could hint at the disappearance of the tradition and culture of the Chong people, as perceived by the artist. Yet, more generally, it could reflect a rupture of the links between humans and non-humans, the former being cut off from nature by modernity, naturalism and capitalism, trapped as they are in the beliefs that nature could be an unlimited resource that could be unlimitedly exploited to generate an unlimited growth.[77]

Philippe Descola suggests that the distinction between humans and non-humans is a Western characteristic, while "in many parts of the world, many peoples have not felt compelled to proceed to this reflexive objectification of nature."[78] His definition of animism involves identical interiorities but different physicality between humans and non-humans. The animist people endow plants, animals or other elements from their environment with a consciousness and intention similar to their own. Their physicality or "organic equipment," on the contrary, vary, and is often compared to clothes.[79] While there is no absolute continuity between humans and non-humans, there are constant interactions, made possible thanks to the possibility for the body to transform into another organic physical form. These metamorphoses create a unique field where humans and non-humans interact.

In *Preah Kunlong*, the dancer experiences these ontological transformations: as soon as he wears the mask, he becomes inhabited by the animal's spirits, and expresses sensually this fusional state. He plunges into the waterfall, walks into the deep jungle, hides between the high vegetation. At one point, he is rising in a vertical movement, against the backdrop of the waterfall, creating an identification between them.

Christopher Stone, who was among the first lawyers to question the possibility of considering non-humans such as trees as legal subjects, chronicles the evolution of laws and underscores how it has changed over time: he takes the example of infants who, for a long time, were considered as objects and not persons.[80] If we follow this evolution, he says, enlarging the circle as we go, we might soon include non-humans in our jurisdiction: nature, just like indigenous people, might soon claim rights.

[77] Here I paraphrase Philippe DescolaInDescola Philippe, "Humain trop humain" (All too human), *Revue Esprit* Paris, Dec. 2015.

[78] Descola Philippe, "Human Natures," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, 2 (2009): 147.

[79] Descola, "Human Natures," Ibid., 152.

[80] Stone Christopher D., "Should Trees Have Standing? Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects," *Southern California Law Review* 45 (1972): 450–501.

However, this perspective reiterates the distinction between human and non-humans and reproduces a discontinued vision of the world.

Descola proposes a more inclusive approach that would go beyond these entities, and that would better resonate with the work under study here and its attempt to express a feeling of interconnections.[81] The French anthropologist stresses the key role played by a multitude of micro relations that link humans and non-humans on a daily basis, but that we tend to disregard. Rather than perceiving the environment as the place where resources can be exploited and commercialized, he invites us to conceive it as a common place for which we are all liable. He thus suggests a switch in our usual conception of the term 'appropriation' of a land, which would not designate any more the individuals owing rights on a piece of the environment. Instead, it would refer to an environment, an ecosystem or a network of interactions between humans and non-humans which would become the rights holder, and for which the human beings would only be the usufructuary or guarantor. In fact, the anthropologist, who defends a political ecology, urges to extend the human rights, not so much to non-humans per se but to local environmental networks of connections that link them to humans. This radical change of perspective deeply challenges the conception of the individual as an independent entity as it has developed in the Western societies. Coming back to the question of the otherness, the attempt here is to open up the individual in order to reintegrate him/her within the environment.

Preah Kunlong embodies this possibility which does not refer to any mythological past but to tomorrow's reality in the age of the Anthropocene. Descola, who studied the Achuar Indians of the Upper Amazon, and precisely their animist beliefs, supports his arguments from his fieldwork observations, just like Eduardo Kohn who developed the concept of an anthropology 'beyond-the-human' from his fieldwork in Ecuador, where he observed how humans communicate with and transform into non-humans.[82] According to Descola, for too long, ethnographers have left these statements aside, as they were perceived as phantasmagories or beliefs disconnected to reality. The result of these misconceptions is the prevalence of a dichotomy "between on the one hand, objective

[81] See in particular Descola, "Humain trop humain," Ibid.

[82] Kohn Eduardo, *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

knowledge and practices, and, on the other hand, beliefs and magical agency."[83]

In this new framework, the Chong beliefs and traditional livelihoods are not linked any more to a fantasied reality, but to the radical possibility of modifying globally the way humans inhabit the earth. They offer a powerful model to approach what Descola has called an anthropology of nature, and thus a potent tool to think the future.

From this perspective, the question of the indigenous rights can also be reformulated as part of renewed definitions of the land they inhabit, in line with original conceptions of the territory. For example, in New Zealand, in 2012, the State recognized the Whanganui River as a living being and gave it the status of a legal entity. This decision includes the recognition of the common rights on this ecosystem of the Maori living along the river. Elaine Hsia aptly suggests that "through a process of reclaiming environmental rights, indigenous sovereignty itself can also be restored,"[84] and this is what *Preah Kunlong* could invite to. Ultimately, it is our vision of the world that is challenged: not thinking anymore in terms of entity, otherness or sameness, fusion or oppositions, but in terms of fluid, dynamic and inclusive relations.

We have seen that Khvay's fieldwork cannot be *strictosensu* described as an ethnographic work and does not intend to be. Yet, in turn, Preah Kunlong could inspire the work of ethnographers inasmuch as it epitomizes the radical possibility to become something or somebody else, an attitude which is defended by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. The Brazilian anthropologist's conception of anthropology implies for the anthropologists to accept drastic changes in their modes of thinking and modes of defining themselves. According to him, anthropologists have always been trying to understand what makes the other different instead of embracing this difference as another, and equally valuable, perspective on the world. For him, it is a question of fighting reductionism and of making "multiplicities proliferate."[85] His concept of Anti-Narcissus reflects this radical shift: in contrast with Narcissus who looks at his own image, even in the study of others, Viveiros's approach of anthropology implies embracing

[83] Descola, "Human Natures," Ibid., 148.

[84] Hsiao Elaine, 'New Zealand: Whanganui River Agreement—Indigenous Rights and Rights of Nature', *Environmental Policy and Law*, Amsterdam 42,6 (2012): 371.

[85] Viveiros de Castro Eduardo, *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Ed. and trans. Peter Skafish. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 45.

others' modes of thinking without trying to reduce them to any known concepts, and without trying to relate them to any know category. This is in fact what Nget tried to do in the rain forest, among the wild, and this is what the work invites the viewer to do, when we watch him trying to see, feel, think according to these surrounding non-human elements. Through his various metamorphosis, the dancer abandons himself to the unknown and accepts it as it is, without any safety net.

Viveiros de Castro asks himself how much ethnographers and ethnography in general owe conceptually to the people they study. In fact, the anthropologist seeks to demonstrate that the best concepts developed by anthropologists are borrowed from the conceptions of the world and cosmologies of the societies they aim at studying: these societies and cultures could be considered as co-producers of the theories elaborated about and from them.[86] From this perspective, the Chong people, and in fact the Koh Kong Province at large could be perceived as co-producer of the knowledge generated by the artwork, yet in a different way that we examined in the previous chapter. The villagers do not co-produce this knowledge because they have been collaborating with Khvay, but simply because they, their culture and environment, inspired him at the first place.

An Implicit and Sensuous Knowledge

In his *Confessions*, Augustinus wrote "What then is time? If nobody asks me, I know it; if I want to explain it to somebody who asks me, I do not know it." Pöppel and Bao use this famous quote to illustrate implicit knowledge (the first one), and especially its difference with explicit knowledge (the second).[87] For the neuroscientists, implicit knowledge refers to intuitions but also to bodily knowledge like riding a bicycle and "ritualized knowledge that characterizes daily activities."[88] In contrast with explicit knowledge, it does not stem from a reference system and does not

[86] Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Ibid., 39–41.

[87] Pöppel Ernest and Bao Yan, "Three Modes of Knowledge as Basis for Intercultural Cognition and Communication: A Theoretical Perspective," *Culture and Neural Frames of Cognition and Communication*, On Thinking 3 (Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 2011): 219.

[88] Pöppel and Bao, "Three Modes of Knowledge as Basis for Intercultural Cognition and Communication: A Theoretical Perspective," Ibid., 220–221.

accumulate by learning. The authors distinguish three modes of knowledge that form a universal framework from which every culture can express and communicate: explicit, implicit and pictorial. While they recall that explicit knowledge has largely been dominating Western culture, they warn that such a restricted conception of knowledge brings forth shortcomings and difficulties because these three forms of knowledge are deeply interdependent and obey to "the principle of complementarity."[89]

With no verbal language and a succession of sensual plans in which viewers identify with the dancer, *Preah Kunlong* generates an implicit knowledge transmitted by affect and body language. It is not indeed a factual, rational knowledge about the Chong people but an intuition about how it could feel to transcend the limits of the self and become part of a larger wholeness. When Nget transgresses the usual boundaries between humanity and animality, reaching a state of total openness with the outside world, he invites viewers to experience, through the artwork, the flow of energy that inhabits them, to abandon their position as dominating human beings and to trust their inner nature. Perhaps this is a knowledge that we all had in our childhood, and that we have forgotten or, on the contrary, a knowledge that we need to build by de-learning what we have learned before, and by getting rid of our rational approach to the world. In any event, *Preah Kunlong*, and the creature embodied by Nget, show the way to such an opening up of the self, a shattering of the individuality and the acceptance of the unknown.

While analysing a choreographic work about the history of colonisation viewed from an indigenous perspective, Australian historian Christine de Matos asked whether dancing could produce any knowledge. She notes that the difficulty is that there are no words to articulate this knowledge, but she nevertheless emphasises the power of the body language to convey what words cannot: emotion and empathy.[90] When watching Nget dancing, and thanks to Khvay's fine editing process, one feels actually more than mere emotion and empathy. *Preah Kunlong* opens the path toward

[89] Pöppel and Bao, "Three Modes of Knowledge as Basis for Intercultural Cognition and Communication: A Theoretical Perspective," Ibid., 217.

[90] Matos de Christine, "Akram Khan and telling historical truths through dance," *The Conversation*. Mar. 22, 2018. (https://theconversation.com/akram-khan-and-telling-historical-truths-through-dance-93644).

an intuitive understanding that Zhuangzhi described as a 'non-knowledge,' a knowledge similar to the implicit form defined above that would encompass what cannot be rationally known, and which is freed from any intentionality.[91] The Chinese philosopher was particularly interested in the tipping point when the body, artificially controlled by the mind, starts operating by itself. During this changeover moment, the conscious is released, and something else is taking over that seems to be superior, more complete, spontaneous and natural. This is exactly this moment that Khvay was waiting for when he filmed Nget dancing for hours in the jungle.

Despite the difficult working conditions on site, humidity, tiredness or leeches and teeming insects, Nget relates how he began to feel and behave differently as soon as he wore the mask, leaving his mind aside and trusting only his body's intuitions.[92] While he confesses that he was sometimes afraid of some dangerous locations where he danced, like the abrupt cliff where he performed the crocodile, he recalls that he felt empowered by the masks, and quickly relied on his instinct and on the energy that flowed in his body.[93] Literally, he let everything go, and his performance is a perfect expression of a spontaneity freed from the human will and intention. Like the sleepwalker who knows what to do even though he is sleeping, he trust his body knowledge, an implicit knowledge he has assimilated with years of practice as a dancer of *Lakhaounkhaol*, when he played the monkey character.[94] From this empiricist perspective, the conscious can indeed disappear while one is able to "espouse the metamorphosis of reality" and to evolve freely.[95] In *Preah Kunlong*, Nget resembles the swimmer who abandons himself to the flow of the stream without any fear, depicted by

[91] Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[92] Interview with Nget Rady, Sept. 15 2018, Hong Kong.

[93] In Hong Kong, along with the exhibition, Nget performed in the roof top of WING Platform art space. Despite the organisers' recommendations, he stood on the wall, above the void, with 22 floors below him, unaware any more of the dangers.

[94] This traditional theatre requires a long experience of training for the dancer to be able to feel and act like the interpreted animal and is mainly based on gestures as language since none of the animals speaks. For more on Cambodian theatre see in particular "A conversation with Pring Sakhon (Oct. 03, 2001)" in Daravuth and Muan *Cultures of Independence* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Reyum Publishing 2001), 133–134.

[95] I follow here the interpretation of the text by Jean-François Billeter, notably In Billeter Jean-François. *Leçon sur Tchouang-Tseu* (Paris: Allia, 2010).

Zhuangzi as an accomplished man. In this famous dialogue, Confucius sees a man who dives into the water, said to be too dangerous for anyone to swim.[96] He, who is supposed to know everything, is astonished to discover that this man can swim there so easily, and he asks about his secret. There is no method, replies the man, "I have no way". I simply "go under with the swirls and come out with the eddies, following along the way the water goes and never thinking about myself."[97] Likewise, Nget has learnt to follow his way, just like the animals and the spirits of the forest. The film is taking us with them on this original path.

[96] Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works*, Ibid., 151.
[97] Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works*, Ibid., 152.

Emancipatory modes of knowledge production in Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2003/2012–ongoing)

Anarchy, Buffalos, Corruption, Decay, Epidemics, Forest, Ghosts, Humidity, Irrigation, Nationalism, Tigers… the list, although presented as an ABC, might go on endlessly without exhausting the reality of Southeast Asia as seen by Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen. Neither language nor experiences seem indeed able to fully reflect this composite and ambiguous region of the world, at the same time real and imagined.

With the on-going, and probably endless, series *Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, Ho Tzu Nyen questions today's representations of Southeast Asia and attempts to embrace the region's plurality, fluidity, complexity and intangibility from an artistic perspective. The series, hereinafter referred to as the *Dictionary*, features a various and growing body of works including theatre performances, videos and academic essays, freely organized around the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet, each of which being conceived as manifestations of Southeast Asia. For each artwork, the artist draws on his extensive research to create connections and assemblages, and to construct lineages from his collection of archival images, texts and sounds relative to the region in order to rethink the languages, singularities and the power relations at play in Southeast Asia.

Ho's drive for research originates in his passion for scholarship but derives also from the post-colonial and authoritarian context he is working

in. Yet, beyond the "historiographical aesthetic" developed to challenge the official historiography of the region,[1] and beyond the archive fever taking place in Singapore,[2] notably in response to the gaps and linearity of the *Singapore Story*,[3] the *Dictionary* seems to escape those frameworks. The series indeed deploys as a larger political, epistemological and aesthetic model that potentially generates new modes of knowledge production, equally challenging colonial, post-colonial and nationalist discourses.

Writing about Gilles Deleuze, Claire Colebrook says that the French philosopher created concepts not in order to "label life and tidy up our ideas but to transform life and complicate our ideas."[4] This could apply to Ho, who proposes a multiple and complex vision of Southeast Asia, converted into an artistic experience: embedded in life and movement, and organized like a network of vegetal underground roots, or "rhizome," the *Dictionary* offers a dynamic, non-linear, multivocal and non-authoritative perspective of the region that resists any definition.

In the artworks, subtitles, voice-over, moving images and music often mix up and overlap. Facing such a dense flow of information, the mind is unable to follow any specific narrative thread, and soon abandons control: intuitions, affect and imagination take control. While the artist's original question seems rather theoretical (What is Southeast Asia?), the answer is actually not: the *Dictionary* needs indeed to be experienced as it invites the viewer to "feel" and even to "listen" to Southeast Asia. Its apparatus emphasizes alternative modes of knowledge transmission involving non-rational, imaginative and emotional responses. Paradoxically, thus, the knowledge generated by the series does not mainly come from the artist's research outcome and data, which function like modular sculptural blocks or painting patterns that constitute the works, but from their deconstruction and conversion into a performative and artistic language. This original approach invites us to question existing epistemological authoritative dogmas and to open up towards new and empirical conceptions of knowledge based on novelty, imagination and emancipation,

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[1] The term was coined by June Yap in Yap June, *RETROSPECTIVE: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (London: Lexington Books, 2016).

[2] Chua Kevin "Archive as Figure in Singapore Contemporary Art," *Art Journal*, 77:4 2008.

[3] See in particular LohKah Seng "Within The Singapore Story" *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 12(2) 1998.

[4] Colebrook Claire, *Understanding Deleuze* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002), XIX.

henceforth addressing the question of the decolonization of knowledge from a broader perspective. Similarly, the work proposes to rethink Southeast Asia as a mobile and open concept whose unity constantly and freely re-invents itself.[5]

8.1 What Is Southeast Asia?

Donald Emmerson compares Southeast Asia's name to "names that simultaneously describe and invent reality,"[6] and the notion of Southeast Asia remains controversial as a regional entity.[7] What is Southeast Asia, and which reality lies behind this rather recent and constructed unifying name? This ambitious question drives Ho's research and on-going series of artworks.

Nanyang, an ancient Chinese name, and the Sanskrit term 'Land of Gold' already broadly referred to the region located south of China in ancient times,[8] but there has been "no long-standing concept of Southeast Asia."[9] The term only appears, it seems, as an Euro-American view of the region in the early 1940s.[10] It emerges as the result of two almost simultaneous movements: the creation by the British of a South-East Asia command during the summer of 1943, in order to resist the Japanese occupation of the region; and, from 1941 on, the multiplication of Western scholarly publications dedicated to Southeast Asia. In the context of the Cold War, these first colonial-era publications were followed by

[5] This chapter is based on two long conversations with the artist in Hong Kong and Singapore and a few email exchanges between March and May 2019. It is derived in part from an article published in *South East Asia Research*: Ha Thuc Caroline, "What is South East Asia? Emancipatory modes of knowledge production in Ho Tzu Nyen's Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia," *South East Asia Research* Vol 29 (1) (Feb. 2021): 1–15.

[6] Emmerson Donald, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 1984): 1.

[7] See for instance Van Schendel Willem, "Southeast Asia, An idea whose time is past?" *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Vol. 168, No. 4 (2012): 497–503; Chou Cynthia and Houben Vincent, ed., *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006).

[8] Frederick William H. and Leinbar Thomas R., "Southeast Asia," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. https://www.britannica.com/place/Southeast-Asia.

[9] Tarling Nicolas, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia: To foster the political will.* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.

[10] Anderson Benedict, *The Spectre of comparisons Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 3–11.

more politically-driven scholarship and by an institutionalized field of research in the United States called Southeast Asian studies. They were created as a response to the expansion and threat of communism in the region. Hence, and according to Benedict Anderson, it was "the opening of the Cold War in Asia that really began the long process of making Southeast Asia the kind of imagined reality it is today."[11] The Vietnam war crystallized further the notion among the populations. The political scientist and historian explains the late naming of the region by four factors: the absence of a local historical hegemonic power, that would have justified its perception as a united region, its strong religious heterogeneity, remoteness, and, above all, its fragmentation due to its colonial history. Recalling the strong imperial rivalries and jealousy, Anderson observes, for example, that at the beginning of the twentieth century, young people in Jakarta might have known more about Amsterdam than about their neighboring countries.[12]

Locally, though, a similar, yet local, consciousness of the region seems to have arisen, especially as a source of identity and inspiration for anti-colonial nationalists.[13] It eventually led, in 1967, to the founding of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) which Anderson believes to be the first step "towards creating a regional diplomatic bloc," with the objective to resolve "intraregional quarrels without Great Power interventions."[14] However, post-independent states were more focused on the building of new nationalist states and, as a result, regionalism was slow to develop.

In fact, "Southeast Asia is perhaps the most diverse region on Earth" (…) "it is understandable that Southeast Asia should so often be treated as a miscellaneous collection of cultures that simply do not quite fit anywhere else."[15] Increasingly, however, some common factors are appearing, such as linguistic common roots or family structures, common commercial and cultural inheritance, giving substance to the idea of a unique Southeast Asia and providing a framework for its local study, disconnected from the

[11] Anderson, *The Spectre of comparisons Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, Ibid. 6.

[12] Anderson, *The Spectre of comparisons Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* Ibid., 4–5.

[13] Anthony Reid and Maria Serena I. Diokno, "Completing the Circle: Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia," in *Southeast Asian Studies: Pacific Perspectives*, ed. Anthony Reid (Tempe, AZ: Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 98.

[14] Anderson, Ibid., 16.

[15] Frederick and Leinbar, "Southeast Asia," Ibid.

Western perspectives.[16] For the historian Anthony Stockwell, "Southeast Asia had substantially determined the character of its nations and established a degree of regional cohesion" by the end of the last century.[17] Yet, according to Frederick William and Leinbar Thomas, it is too soon to talk about a precise Southeast Asian identity.[18]

Besides, the limits of the region are sometimes loosely defined or disputed. The Encyclopaedia Britannica includes 11 countries in Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam) but Anderson suggests, for example, that Sri Lanka be part of the region because of its common agriculture, climate, food and culture. Likewise, Hong Kong does not belong to the region, despite its former colonial status and despite the fact that it was also occupied by the Japanese during WWII. Some art exhibitions dedicated to Southeast Asia include the territory.[19] The former head of research at Asia Art Archive, Nasar Hammad, questions the national boundaries of Southeast Asia as well, from the perspective of art history. According to him, these partitions are still too recent to be really relevant, and are thus unable to account for today's entangled histories.[20] As to James C. Scott, he constantly challenges these

[16] See for example Goh Beng-Lan (ed.), *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region*, ISEAS 2011; Laurie J. Sears, ed., *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects* (University of Washington Press & NUS Press: Seattle & Singapore, 2007); Nicholas Tarling's trilogy of Southeast Asia: Tarling Nicholas, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia* (Routledge 2003), Tarling Nicholas, *Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Routledge 2004), Tarling Nicholas, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Routledge 2006); Lieberman Victor, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830. Volume 1. Integration on the Mainland (Studies in Comparative World History)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Lieberman Victor, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830. Volume 2. Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands. (Studies in Comparative World History)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Coèdes George, *The Making of South East* Asia trans. H.M. Wright (London, New York: Routledge 2015 (1966).

[17] Stockwell Anthony, "Southeast Asia in War and Peace in the end of the European colonial Empires," in *The Cambridge history of southeast Asia*, vol. 2, ed. Tarling Nicolas (Cambridge University Press 1992), 328.

[18] Frederick and Leinbar, "Southeast Asia," Ibid.

[19] Stanley Wong and Wilson Shieh featured in the M+ 2018 exhibition *In Search of Southeast Asia through the M+ Collections* which took place at the M+ Pavilion in Hong Kong from June to September 2018.

[20] Hammad Nasar & Karin Zitzewitz, "Art Histories of Excess: Hammad Nasar in Conversation with Karin Zitzewitz," *Art Journal*, 77:4 (2018): 109.

strategic geographical conceptions which, in his view, are obstacles to really understand what is at stake in the region.[21]

From a constructed concept originating in the West and a long yet disjointed history, to an internalized yet confused reality in-the-process-of-becoming, Southeast Asia would seem therefore to resist any definition. How could we approach it, then? Language itself is unable to embrace its complexity, contradictions and historical development: a list of its countries, languages, populations, climate, food or family structures will not exhaust its features. Above all, it might rigidify what is still evolving, missing the point of the elusive and ever-changing nature of the region. An empirical approach won't be more satisfying: wandering in old Pagan, riding a motorbike in Ho Chi Minh City or fishing with sea people in Thailand will not be enough to grasp the essence, if any, of Southeast Asia.

Reflecting on the open-ended, liquid, mobile and multilayered features of Southeast Asia, Ho Tzu Nyen proposes to approach it through the creation of an artistic platform, whose rhizomatic, plural and dynamic matrix reflects Southeast Asia characteristics. Since a single artwork could probably not have been enough to reveal this plurality, the *Dictionary* deploys into many and various artforms. Whilst acknowledging the constructed reality of the term, it contributes to give it a substance, thus giving weight to what has always been considered as the periphery of the periphery.[22]

The *Dictionary* originates in the artist's residency at the Art Asia Archive in Hong Kong in 2012 but picked up on earlier works of the artist since, as we will see, it is not a fixed structure but "a generator of projects." At that time, Ho was already doing research on tigers, a key figure of Southeast Asia that the artist studied for a few years, both from an historical and metaphorical points of view. This research led to the creation

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[21] Scott James C., *The Art of Not Being Governed (*New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 26.

[22] For Ho, Southeast Asia is emblematic of the periphery of the periphery: located in Asia, it used to be at the periphery of the Western world, and being in the south, it is a periphery of Asia, caught up between India and China.

of four different artworks that became the first manifestations of the series. [23]

Ho's artwork is inspired by George Bataille own *Critical Dictionary*, published as a separate part of the magazine *Documents*.[24] Written in the 1930s in a post-World War I and surrealist context, it mixed texts and images from the fields of ethnology, aesthetics, philosophy and literature and offered a critical and often humorous viewpoint on all these disciplines. In this series of writings, Bataille did not follow any logical structure: Fascicule VII, volume II of the magazine *Da Costa*, another encyclopedic work from the same period, was for instance published before any Fascicule I or volume I had been printed. Similarly, Ho does not respect the alphabetical order to create works within his *Dictionary*. The first artworks that came out of what Ho calls his creative matrix were related to the letter T for Tiger, followed by a video responding to the letter G for Ghost. Several artworks are connected to the same letter, and some artworks can be reached from different letters. For example, the 2015 video *The Nameless* can be found at the letter N for Name but also at the letter L because the work deals with a spy agent named Lai Teck. Ho associates it as well with the word Legacy. Besides, the 26 letters of the alphabet generate different concepts, used as different entry points or integrated within the works: A for Altitude or Anarchism, B for Buffalo, C for Corruption or Cosmology, D for Decay… There are no rules dictating how the *Dictionary* should grow. Besides, it might never be finished or even turn out as something that is not a dictionary anymore.

The heterogeneity of the mediums and formats reflects this freedom and diversity of perspectives: so far, the *Dictionary* comprises, at least, one Heavy Metal concert (*Like The song of the Brokenhearted Tiger*), theatre performances including shadow puppetry (*Ten Thousand Tigers, The Mysterious Lai Teck*), video animations *(2 to 3 Tigers; One or Several Tigers; R for Resonance),* videos based on film footage (*The Name*; *The Nameless*), academic essays (*Every Cat in History is I*; *H for hydrography*), videos based on Internet footage and edited by an algorithm (*R for Rhombicuboctahedron*)

[23] *Like The song of the Brokenhearted Tiger* (2012), a heavy metal concert featuring a traditional Malay dancer; *Ten Thousand Tigers* (2014), a theatre performance including shadow puppetry; *2 to 3 Tigers* (2015), an animation video; and, finally, *One or Several Tiger* (2017), a 2-channel video installation that combines many elements of the former works and complete them.

[24] Bataille Georges, "Critical Dictionary," in *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, ed. Georges Bataille (London: Atlas Press, 1995).

and installations (sculpture, lightboxes etc.). Through this artistic plurality, Ho attempts to approach the essence of Southeast Asia from an original perspective: taking as a starting point a rather academic question (what is Southeast Asia and what could unify it?), he responds by a creative flow of artworks, a constellation of autonomous, yet linked, manifestations of Southeast Asia.

Usually, dictionaries provide fixed meanings for everything. Against these efforts to fit and classify the world into specific forms, Bataille praises a "formless" universe and aims at "overturning the code of branches of knowledge (…) to open up the notions they define in a new, illegitimate, unacceptable directions."[25] Similarly, Ho's *Dictionary* denies any attempt to confine Southeast Asia to a permanent definition and, somehow, works like an anti-dictionary that proposes open-ended and ever-changing definitions. However, even though he plays with surprising ramifications, Ho does not include arbitrary components in his dictionary: all its featured elements come from a long and extensive research process.

8.2   THE ARTIST-RESEARCHER

Extensive Academic Research

For each artistic project, Ho estimates that 70% of his time is dedicated to research. In fact, research and academic knowledge might be what led him to art: as a child, he did not have so much exposure to art forms, and it is through reading that he began to feel attracted by the field, being especially inspired by avant-garde movements and art theories. Originally a student in communication, he quit this path for a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Arts in Melbourne. He majored in sculpture, admiring artists such as Richard Serra, but once he came back to Singapore, he realized that sculpture was not an easy medium to deal with, especially without a studio space. Video, being what he calls "a medium for compression," appeared as a solution. His video works, as we will see, can actually be perceived as sculptural in their ability to unfold and create multilayered dimensions one could walk into virtually.

Driven by his passion for academic research, reading and writing, Ho then embarked into a master's degree in Southeast Asian studies with the

[25] Cited in Brochie Alastair, "Critical Dictionary," in *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, ed. by Georges Bataille, Introduction (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 11.

National University of Singapore, interested in the cross-disciplinary dimension of these studies, from anthropology to art and history. From the beginning, his artworks have been informed by his readings and academic research. His first artwork, a 22-minutes film entitled *Utama: Every Name in History is I (2003)* is based on his research about the history of Prince Sang Nila Utama, a Srivajayan prince of a South Sumatra province who is said to have founded Singapore in 1299, and of whom he searched the lineage and legacy. Ho considers this work, retrospectively, as a part of his *Dictionary* because of its connection to the global narratives of Southeast Asia. Another example of Ho's previous research-based artwork is *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), exhibited at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Besides its extensive collaborative part involving various musicians, the video originates in the artist's interest for the iconography of clouds, analyzed through the history of art both in the West and in China. Ho's study encompassed classical paintings but also poetry and theoretical texts such as books written by the seventeenth century Italian iconographer Ceasare Ripa or *The Theory of the Cloud* (2002) by art historian Hubert Damisch.

For each topic, Ho would try to read all that has been written about it, essentially from academic sources. For the *Dictionary*, he delves into different forms of archives, collecting and selecting texts, books, still and moving images which he then transforms and mixes with different techniques. Some topics lead to others, and he follows them like spoors, expanding progressively his field of research. His video scripts resemble essays, as they include a lot of footnotes and references. Ho also builds diagrams and atlases to structure the flow of information and the growing web of his research outcome. A good example would be his long research on tigers, which play a key role in Southeast Asia. The artist traced back their history and analyzed their metaphorical and mythical representations, especially in the colonial context of Singapore. As an animal, the tiger has been around in the region long before the arrival of *Homo sapiens*, tigers being therefore often considered as the ancestors of human beings.[26] As an imaginary creature, it occupies an important place in the local cosmological beliefs, being endowed by magical powers and often associated with a shaman. One of its manifestations is precisely the

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[26] More on the history of tigers in the region in Boomgaard Peter, *Frontiers of Fear—Tigers and People in the Malay World, 1600–195*0 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) cited by Kevin Chua in Chua Kevin, "The Tiger and the Theodolite George Coleman's Dream of Extinction," *FOCAS Forum on Contemporary Art & Society* 6 (2007): 124–149.

weretiger, a half-human half-tiger figure that crosses boundaries between life and death or between civilization and wilderness. As a metaphor, it has incarnated many heroes or enemies in the more recent history of the region.[27]

In order to reflect on this polyphony of meanings, and inspired by their metaphorical scope, Ho drew a diagram where tigers and weretigers are linked to a complex network of various elements and manifestations from Southeast Asia including British colonialism and the rise of communism in the region from the Second World War. Each entry is described and developed from a historical, economic, social, cultural or geographical perspective. The diagram is paired with an atlas where the artist has organized a series of images dealing with tigers, similarly all connected and described by short subtitles such as "Buffalo-tiger fights," "BRITISH RETURN, The Malayan Communists retreat into the Forest (becoming tigers)", "shadow puppetry," or "Japanese occupation." This combinatory and heteroclite representation of Southeast Asia resembles the *Mnemosyne Atlas* by Aby Warburg for its juxtaposition of hitherto unrelated diverse images, symbols and notes with a view to foster new insights into its topic.[28]

Ho's sources are indeed fairly diverse: in that case, for example, the fifteenth century expedition journal of a Chinese traveler and translator having been to Malacca;[29] an early twentieth century black-and-white photograph featuring weretigers;[30] a 1865 German painting representing a British civil servant being assaulted by a tiger on his way to a land survey mission and, more recently, *To Tame a Tiger, The Singapore Story*,[31] a 1995 graphic novel whose cover shows Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime

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[27] In a 1946 interview for the *New York Times*, for example, Ho Chi Minh compared the people from the Viet Minh—the communist Vietnamese resistant organization—to tigers who can defeat the mighty elephants (the French colonial) by jumping on their back. In Montagnon Pierre, *L'Indochine française* (Paris: Tallandier, 2016), 221.

[28] The *Mnemosyne Atlas* is a project developed by Aby Warburg between 1924 and 1929. It aimed at reconsidering the art history and culture through its visual recurring elements, originating in the Antiquity. See for example Gombrich, *E. H. Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[29] *Yingya Shenglan* (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores) by Ma Huan.

[30] From Walter William Skeat's 1906 Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula, cited by the artist.

[31] The artist saw probably an 1885 wood engraving that reproduces the painting, and which is exhibited at the Singapore Museum. It is also analyzed and reproduced by Chua in Chua, "The Tiger and the Theodolite George Coleman's Dream of Extinction," Ibid.

minister of Singapore, riding a tiger.[32] The diagram and atlas together form an on-going data base that nourishes Ho's inspiration, not only regarding his works about tigers, but also about any works pertaining to Southeast Asia. This investigation notably triggered his exploration of the left-wing movements of the 1940s, leading thus to much more artworks. The artist does not display these documents but uses them when he gives talks about his practice.[33]

Among the most significant books that have participated in the shaping of his thoughts about Southeast Asia, hence of the *Dictionary*, are works by Benedict Anderson, James C. Scott, Clifford Geertz, Rosalind Morris, O.W. Wolters and George Coedès but also by Deleuze and Guattari, whose Anti-Oedipus was the first philosophical book he ever read, leaving a deep and lasting impact on him. Although most of his sources are thus anthropological, he does not engage in any fieldwork since he believes that "much fieldwork has generated works that are mediocre, or that are lost in clichés."[34] He however recognizes that the hundreds of hours he spent going through online videos could be regarded as a kind of ethnographic engagement with a community. Above all, he does not try to depict Southeast Asia from an anthropological nor historical viewpoint but to propose a renewed vision of it: as such, he does not intend to work as an ethnographer or as an historian and rather aims at converting the outcome of his research into artistic forms and language.

While he nevertheless borrows some of his tools from the historian, the archivist or even the anthropologist, Ho does so very freely. Even though the *Dictionary* generates diverse historical narratives, they remain, for example, purposely fragmented and lack the links of causality and analysis usually brought forth by historians.[35] Ho, as we will see, tends on the contrary to break this linearity and chain of causality. Furthermore, the artist is not concerned about delivering any truth. In fact, his work rather tends to subvert the existing truths and points to the impossibility of grasping a stable one. This is particularly salient in his works revolving around the figure of Lai Teck, a Sino-Vietnamese triple agent whose identity remains

[32] Yeoy Joe, *To Tame a Tiger, The Singapore Story* (Singapore: Wiz-Biz edition 1995).

[33] With the exception of Ho's collection of books written by Gene Z. Hanrahan, displayed as part of the work *The Name*.

[34] Email interview with the artist, April 2019.

[35] See Chap. 3 of this book, and in particular historian Antoine Cournot, for whom history cannot be a sequence of isolated figures that would not impact each other in some way or another.

partly mysterious and whose "true story" seems to be definitively lost. Lai Teck led the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) from 1939 to 1947 when he was exposed and probably killed during his escape attempt in Thailand. Known under as many as 50 different names, he alternatively, and sometimes simultaneously, worked for the French, the British and the Japanese secret services, being responsible for the arrest and execution of many communists whom he betrayed. According to Leon Comber, a former British police officer, Lai Teck was the "Traitor of All Traitors" and "probably one of Asia's best-known spies."[36] For his research, Ho collaborated with American researcher Marc Opper whose work focuses on the history of left-wing movements in China, Malaya and Vietnam. Opper is one of the first researchers who accessed some Chinese-language primary and archival sources from the MCP. He notably wrote an unpublished book on Lai Teck, *The Life of Lai Teck*,[37] which crosses different primary and secondary sources as well as interviews with former MCP members. For his video *The Nameless* (2015) and his performance *The Mysterious Lai Teck* (2018), a stage performance about the life of the spy that combines video, sound and animatronic puppetry, Ho drew mainly on Opper's manuscript and on works by Leon Comber and Yoji Akashi, the latter being notably known for his research on the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore.[38]

Archives about Lai Teck are scarce and despite many articles written on the subject, and new primary sources being explored,[39] uncertainties and gaps remain about his life. Instead of establishing the true identity of the spy, the artist's investigation led him to uncover and bring to light the various narratives existing about him. In the performance, the narrator, speaking on behalf of the spy, keeps always a distance toward his own biography. He does not say, for instance, that he was born in 1903 but that "according to (…) Leon Comber, I was born in 1903." Furthermore,

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[36] Comber Leon, "'Traitor of all Traitors' – Secret Agent Extraordinaire: Lai Teck, Secretary-General, Communist Party of Malaya (1939–1947)," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (299) (December 2010): 1.

[37] See https://marcopper.net/research/.

[38] Akashi Yogi, *New Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore, 1941–45* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

[39] Comber in particular drew his article on interviews he had with Chi Peng, Lai Teck's successor as Secretary General of the MCP in 1947, whom he met directly. See Comber, "'Traitor of all Traitors' – Secret Agent Extraordinaire: Lai Teck, Secretary-General, Communist Party of Malaya (1939–1947)," Ibid. 17.

the voice immediately questions Comber's sources: "perhaps he obtains the date from a book by Quek Jin Tek, titles: *The Mysterious Lai Teck*."[40] Yet, Quek Jin Tek does not give his own sources…[41] In fact, according to the artist, none of the sources coincide and all the authors, including scholars, tend to fill the gaps by deducting facts that usually reflect their own projection of how a spy would act at that time.

For Ho, there is no possible truth, at least based on any factual or positivist approach, and what is presented as truth is suspicious. There are only "ghosts and gaps" as Lai Teck says. In different works from the *Dictionary*, a sentence is repeated again and again like a refrain borrowed from Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia: "the art of the narrative belongs to the police"[42] or, differently enounced, most of what we know "comes from spies, agents, traitors or informers, who are known to make things up"[43] and who are forced by the police to confess their stories. In the performance, Lai Teck recalls that Comber was indeed a former police officer turned historian, distilling doubt about all accounts from that period, which was particularly turbulent. Rather than emphasizing one version or another, Ho's narrative wanders among all possible and potential Lai Teck's biographies. For Ho, Lai Teck is like a "weretiger," able to transform himself and jump from reality to the forest of language where he lives as a metaphor. He is more interested in his fluid, multiple and symbolic identity than in the real one. There is no judgment on the man either.

Hence, while his research process of work sheds light on existing gaps, Ho does not aim at filling them but rather explores and exposes them. Even though the artist does not deny the political dimension of his practice, he insists being first and foremost an artist interested in plasticity and thus does not define himself as a researcher but as an "artist interested in research." The outcome of his research constitutes a material from which he draws his inspiration and out of which he produces his artworks. In fact, it represents an accumulation of pieces of knowledge that Ho seems to decompose in smaller, autonomous and modular parts in order to assemble them again in new configurations. Just as cubist artists expanded

[40] Extract from the script of *The Mysterious Lai Teck*, courtesy of the artist.

[41] I could not check this fact since I could not find the book, which, according to Ho, was only written in Cantonese, nor find anything about the author.

[42] This extract from the script of *The Mysterious Lai Teck*, can also be found in the video *The Name* (2015) under a quotation by Ricardo Piglia from his 1981 book *Artificial Respiration*.

[43] This sentence comes up in a more or less similar way in *Ten Thousand Tigers; The Name; The Nameless; The Mysterious Lai Teck, R for Rhombicuboctahedron*.

their modes of representation, breaking the perspective in order to include a plural approach of reality, Ho's complex and ever-changing combinations of modular elements allow him to get closer to a multilayered and expanded reality. Even academic books can be decomposed into various short sentences that are incorporated in what could be seen as a huge and heterogeneous data base dedicated to Southeast Asia. This is why one can find similar images or similar quotations from one work to another, creating an effect of apparent repetitions. The video *R for Rhombicuboctahedron* (2018) is a relevant example of this method of construction. The work is built on an algorithm that combines footage from the Internet with texts and music performed or read in various ways and taken from this data base. The footage (thousands of clips between 1 to 30 seconds long) has been selected by the artist's team and by himself according to their free interpretation of the concepts generated by the 26 letters of the alphabet of the *Dictionary*: altitude, anarchism, corruption, humidity etc. The loop video features the random weaving of these archival sounds, texts and images, creating an ever-changing tapestry in which, for example, an ethnical music can be heard on the top of a political discourse by former Filipino dictator Marcos combined with a quotation about mediumship in Thai culture. Here, the figure of Lai Teck comes back, together with the tiger, weretigers, Utama, and with some extracts from Ho's favorite readings. The quotations, written, said or sung, emerge out of context and without any reference. Ho likes to talk about "collages" even though his creative practice involves much more than simple assemblages: each work is also wittily staged so that the viewing of the work becomes an almost physical experience.

the critical dictionary of south–east asia   video index about +

a necessary tool for the rationalization of space

t for tiger, thedolite

a   b   c   d   e   f   g   h   i   j   k   l   m   n   o   p   q   r   s   t   u   v   w   x   y   z   en ko –
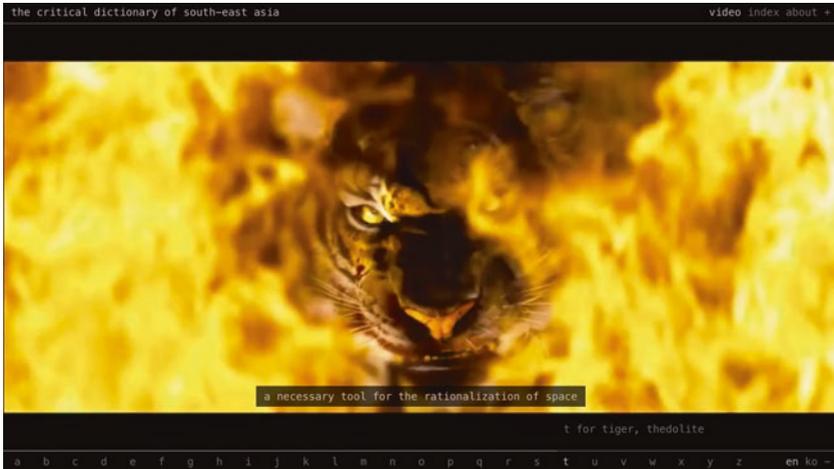
Ho Tzu Nyen, Video-Still from *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, 2017—(ongoing). Single channel, algorithmically composed video, infinite loop, voice by Bani Haykal. In collaboration with Jan Gerber and Sebastian Lutgert. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery

Expanding the Singaporean Context

Besides his personal drive towards academic research, Ho's process of work can be partly seen as a response to the specific context of Singapore where he lives and works. From this perspective, his research practice can be connected to the "historiographical aesthetic," a trend coined by June Yap to describe artworks whose subjects are an "event from the past or its narrative."[44] Numerous artists in Singapore are indeed engaged in investigative practices, suggesting a need to fill some gaps in the existing system of knowledge and historiography.

Singapore, as an independent nation, is a young country. A British colony from 1824, it became a self-governing state in 1959 under the authority of the British Crown, and only gained its full independence in 1965 after its separation from the Federation of Malaysia. In his analysis of the history of Southeast Asia, James C. Scott underscores the historical mystification generated by independent nations, when new states start to write

[44] Yap June, *RETROSPECTIVE: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia.* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 12.

their own account of history in line with their own nationalist interests, creating "historical fables."[45] Singapore is no exception. In particular, since 1997, the history of the state is presented through the *Singapore Story*, a National Education initiative aiming officially at reformulating Singapore's history. Like in many other countries of the region, history and historiography appear thus as a way to legitimize the dominating ruler, in this case the governing People's Action Party (PAP), a party created in 1954 which has been ruling the country since 1959.

Singaporean historian LohKah Seng notes that despite recent archaeological discoveries, the *Singapore Story* continue to focus on 1819 as the founding date of Singapore.[46] Ho's very first artwork, *Utama: Every Name in History is I* (2003), was a direct response to this national discourse. *Utama*, though, does not aim at redressing Singaporean historiography but rather at educating people and at arousing their critical thinking. The series features 20 oil paintings representing Utama and his lineage, and a 22-minutes film, shot in a living-room with changing backgrounds. The paintings are not archival paintings, but images extracted from the film on the top of which the artist painted. Their canvasses have been dirtied so that they look ancient. Hence, the figure of the Prince, presented by the artist, is the result of a series of copies, interpretations and counterfeiting and displays all the features of a farce. The work parodies how histories derive from myths and how History is constructed. It simultaneously produces knowledge and raises doubts about its legitimacy: Utama's story appears as just another myth of a founding figure of the nation that does in fact not differ from Raffles' narrative, opening yet a path towards a Singapore's pre-colonial past that was hitherto neglected.

June Yap aptly includes the work within the framework of her "historiographical aesthetic" along with many artworks that challenge the linearity of the *Singapore Story*. Numerous artists in Singapore are indeed questioning historiography and their works often point to the gaps left open by the official narratives, responding to what they call a "historical amnesia."[47] In particular, many topics related to the post-war left-wing movements are still taboo as the PAP maintains a complex relationship

[45] Scott James C., *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 35.

[46] LohKah Seng, "Within The Singapore Story. The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 12(2) (1998):13–14.

[47] Interview with Fyerool Darma and Jason Wee, Singapore May 2019.

with communism. Ho remembers growing up with the looming specter of communism, a uniform group that, in fact, comprised all kinds of opposition movements which soon incarnated all the threats and enemies against which Singaporeans should fight. In the name of the fight against Marxism, for instance, some people were arrested and detained without trial, notably in 1963 with the "Operation Cold Store"[48] and, in 1987, under the code name of "Operation Spectrum" or the "Marxist conspiracies." Both events remain controversial today. Despite an installation by Singaporean artist Jason Wee dealing with the subject and exhibited at the 2006 Singapore Biennale,[49] Kevin Chua notes that "Operation Spectrum has continued to have a shadowy existence in Singapore's public memory. It is an open secret—a piercing wound—that many shy away from talking about."[50]

Ho's investigations about the MCP, Gene Z. Hanrahan,[51] and the figure of Lai Teck must be therefore understood against such a tense political backdrop. It is not surprising that he collaborates with Marc Opper, an American researcher, since access to local archival material about left-wing movements is made difficult for the public, even for historians.[52] However, Ho's engagement with history seems to differ from most of the practices analyzed by Yap which mainly develop local counter-narratives, or claim to throw light on hidden figures and facts hitherto absent from history, often driven by a yearning for justice. For instance, in *Malayan Exchange* (2011), an installation featuring currency notes from Singapore, Green Zeng replaced the figure of the first president with the figures of people who were arrested without trial in Singapore during the 1950s and 1960s. His gesture points to the official denial related to those figures and could be interpreted as an attempt to redress this gap and to question another possible future of the country. In contrast, in the video *The Nameless*, an

[48] See for example LohKah Seng, Edgar Liao, Cheng Tju Lim, and Guo-Quan Seng, *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

[49] The title of the installation, *1987*, points directly to the event, yet the artist has combined the historical elements with very personal components, blurring its political dimension.

[50] Chua Kevin, "Archive as Figure in Singapore Contemporary Art," *Art Journal*, 77:4 (2008): 64.

[51] Gene Z. Hanrahan, a scholar who purportedly wrote *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*, is the subject of Ho's work The Name (2015).

[52] Blackburn Kevin, "The 'Democratization' of Memories of Singapore's Past" *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- enVolkenkunde* 169, no. 4 (2013): 449.

assemblage of film footage featuring iconic Hong Kong actor Tony Leung portraying a secret agent in Hong Kong,[53] Ho does not aim at rehabilitating Lai Teck but rather examines how the spy's personal story collides with history, transforms itself and multiplies in the realm of myths and fictions. Beyond the national framework of the *Singapore Story*, the work crystallizes Southeast Asia post-war conundrums and political confusion. It also underlines the inability of the existing system of knowledge to account for this period of history and for its inevitable mythification.

Ho's collection of archives does not serve as evidence to challenge the validity of any data or events. Incidentally, he does not display his archival material, except in the installation *The Name* where he displayed the 16 books supposedly written by Gene Z. Hanrahan, whose physicality was meant as a contrast with the intangibility of the man. Against the Singaporean "archive fever" critically identified by Kevin Chua, where the archives only serve a selective act of remembering,[54] Ho's archival material is activated by various temporalities and critical perspectives. As such, it does not focus on the act of remembering but includes oblivion and involuntary memory. In fact, the *Dictionary* is an inclusive model that aims at embracing all possible historical narratives and that does not divide the true from the false. From this perspective, it differs for instance from Koh Nguang How's practice, whose installation *Errata* (2004) brought forth the evidence of an error made by the Singapore Art Museum in 1996 about the date of a painting, printed in their catalogue. The pedagogical display of the work and the workshops that were organised, inviting the audience to become researchers and archivists, legitimized the artist-archivist-researcher as producer of knowledge, against the institution.[55] In contrast, the *Dictionary* does not challenge the authority of the institution in its own academic field but displaces the question of authority into the realm of art.

In Singapore, this sense of mistrust towards the institution is strengthened by the limited freedom of expression and the state control of the media.[56] However, most of the artists know the rules of the game and

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[53] Among which *Cyclo; Infernal Affaires; Lust Caution*; Wong Kar Wai's *In The Mood for Love*; *The Grandmaster*.

[54] Chua Kevin, "Archive as Figure in Singapore Contemporary Art," *Art Journal*, 77:4, (2018):62–71.

[55] See Chap. 2 in this book.

[56] More on Singapore's context and freedom, see Chap. 2 of this book.

succeed in passing by censorship. While the generation before him used to confront censorship, Ho says he tries to move around.

This local context plays certainly a part in the artist's thirst for knowledge, his drive towards research and historiography and his critical approach to any authoritarian system of knowledge. However, Ho's research on Singapore's history derives from, and participates in, his broader exploration of Southeast Asia as the country crystallizes the complex collusion of colonial, post-colonial and nationalist issues at play in the region. In fact, for artists working on history, it might be too narrow to focus on Singapore only since the territory is, and has always been, deeply connected to Malaysia and to the surrounding countries. June Yap mentions the concept of "Maphilindo" to reflect on the anti-colonial links between Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia,[57] but the circulation of cultures, trades and religious within Southeast Asia is ancestral. Ho's interest in Southeast Asia might have been notably strengthened by his early research about the *Nanyang* style as part of his video documentation *4x4: Episodes of Singapore Art* (2005), a series of television episodes discussing significant artworks of Singapore. One of the episodes is dedicated to Cheong Soo Pieng's 1959 painting *Tropical Life* which represents a realist scene of Malay women absorbed in their daily gestures, and which style exemplifies the encounter between East and Western pictorial influences that characterized the *Nanyang* style.[58] This artistic movement appeared first under the Chinese influence in the 1920s but it became famous with a 1952 trip to Bali undertaken by the "first generation" of Singaporean artists, including Cheong Soo Pieng. At that time, these artists attempted to capture the reality of Bali through their artistic languages, a complicated and controversial process that surely contributed to Ho's distance from any realist or ethnographic approach of Southeast Asia.

According to Jason Wee, the framing of the discourse about the region has also increasingly changed toward a Southeast Asian perspective with the opening, in 2015, of the National Gallery whose objective is to write a modern history of Southeast Asia.[59] He himself is engaged in a long-term research project about cannibalism in Southeast Asia, a topic he

[57] Yap, *RETROSPECTIVE*, Ibid., 51.
[58] See Low John and Ho Tzu Nyen "A Conversation about 4x4 – Episodes of Singapore Art," in *Singapore Art Show* 2005 (Singapore National Arts Council, 2005).
[59] Interview with the artist, May 2019. See also Low Yvonne, "Re-evaluating (art-) historical ties: The politics of showing Southeast Asian art and culture in Singapore (1963–2013)," *Seismopolite* Dec. 29, 2015.

explores both from a pre-colonial cultural viewpoint and as a contemporary metaphor for today's relations to the othering. While Zai Kuning has been working with the Orang Lau in the Riau Archipelago for more than twenty years,[60] Zarina Mohammad, from the younger generation, works for instance on ghosts and traditional beliefs from Southeast Asia. This shift suggests an increased interest for pre-colonial cultures and traditions that might be linked to a sense of nostalgia, or at least to a larger, and global, identitarian question. The *Dictionary* reflects all these trends and contemporary issues but seems to deploy as a larger political, philosophical and aesthetic vision. Its rhizomatic and experiential construction, in particular, allows it to explore those questions through an original structure and an artistic, empirical form.

8.3   Emancipatory Modes of Knowledge Production

A Rhizomatic Approach

Gilles Deleuze used the term 'rhizome' for the first time in 1975, in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*.[61] In this text, Franz Kafka's writing is compared to a burrow with multiple paths, giving birth to this notion of rhizome, a subterranean structure which develops and unfolds horizontally through infinite ramifications, like the roots of a plant. The word is transposed from the Greek word *rhidza* which means 'roots.' The concept, in a philosophical sense, has been further elaborated in Deleuze & Guattari's introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* in which the authors try to understand multiplicity, and point to the different models that have been unable so far to reflect it.[62]

For Ho, the *Dictionary*, as a network of artworks, grows according to a rhizomatic model, with each artwork sharing in turn the same construction as constellations of texts, images, sounds and moving images.

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[60] The Orang Lau are nomadic indigenous who settle in Malaya 4000 years ago. See in particular Kuning Zai *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2017).

[61] Deleuze Gilles & Guattari Felix, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[62] Deleuze Gilles & Guattari Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

It might be surprising to convoke a French philosopher here, especially in the framework of a discourse including the decolonization of knowledge.[63] Moreover, Deleuze has become such an almost systematic reference in the academic field that quoting him is almost a cliché. However, as the artist himself says, Deleuze has deeply and lastingly influenced his way of thinking. The French philosopher's concepts have also nourished many radical and recent theories aiming at upending our conceptions of modernity and at acknowledging the multiplicity of existing perspectives on the world.[64] Ultimately, Ho's approach to decolonization is not exclusive and does not imply standing against the West or against any colonial past but rather thinking beyond their legacy, while embracing together local cultures, histories and context.

One of the characteristics of the rhizome, as defined by Deleuze, is its heterogeneity and its ability to connect to everything. From animation to shadow puppetry and algorithm-based artworks, from ethnical music and academic quotations to film footage or from tigers, spies, Javanese Prince to bronze drums (like in *R for Resonance*), the heterogeneity of the topics, languages, mediums and format of the *Dictionary* is patent. It is also clearly present within each work, and is especially salient in *R for Rhombicuboctahedron*: the footage includes for instance cartoons or animal documentaries, biology animations or historical archives mixed up with amateur footage, videos shot on mobile phones, or made by hobbyists and enthusiasts. This reflects the heterogeneity of Southeast Asia and its plurality of cultures, languages, religions or landscapes. Within this flow of data, there is no link of causality: the images, sounds and texts overlap and follow each other in a contingent way. With "the best and the worst: potato and couch grass, or the weed,"[65] this connection allows to connect the Angkor temples with a baby's first steps, Rodrigo Duterte with a rainforest ecological activist in an attempt to reshuffle the given and to escape the traditional norms and status of these data and images. It also respects their respective singularities without attempting to dissolve them in the

[63] Spivak has notably criticized Deleuze's Eurocentric philosophy, see for example: Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[64] Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, especially, borrows many of his concepts from Deleuze, yet aims at decolonizing Western modes of thinking. Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Trans. Peter Skafish. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[65] Deleuze &Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* Ibid., 7.

multiple. In that regard, Ho's perspective rejoins James C. Scott's desire to replace people at the heart of history and write a "non-state-centric history of mainland Southeast Asia" that would replace the dominant histories of states.[66]

This perspective breaks down indeed any given power relationships and gives voice to what Michel Foucault called "subjugated knowledges," that is to say, in particular, "a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as…insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity."[67] The culture of orality, for instance, has, for long, been supplanted by writing and negatively associated with a lesser degree of development. All the works featuring in the *Dictionary*, on the contrary, situate oral narratives at the same level as textual or visual ones: texts are sung, recited, turned into sounds… Besides Ho's personal taste for music, his choice reflects the desire to empower this mode of knowledge and to reconsider it in the context of Southeast Asia. Illiteracy is indeed an important feature of the hills' culture that developed in Zomia, a vast territory that encompasses highlands overlapping ten countries of the region. Its inhabitants live at the margin of the local states, and, for a long time, they have been perceived as barbarians who did not know civilization. Scott demonstrates that, on the contrary, they were in fact "barbarians by design:"[68] they knew civilization very well and ran away from it. Similarly, they chose to favor an oral culture which freed them from written rules or history and, instead, fit the fluidity of their livelihood. These oral modes of knowledge transmission have nevertheless been undermined by the effects of colonization. Arjun Appadurai shows in particular how much the influence of a literacy culture joined to a long colonial history has shaped the modelling of the past and encouraged linear discourses on history at the expense of oral transmission and the perpetuation of mythic narratives.[69]

[66] Scott James C., *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 33.

[67] Foucault Michel, "Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975–76." St. Martin's Press (2003): 7.

[68] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Ibid., 8.

[69] Appadurai Arjun, "The Past as a Scarce Resource," *Man, New Series* Vol.16 no2 (1981): 204.

Among subjugated knowledges, animism occupies an important place in Southeast Asia.[70] Philippe Descola defines it as the "humans' imputation to non-humans of an interiority similar to their own."[71] The French anthropologist emphasizes how much animist beliefs have been for too long perceived by ethnographers as phantasmagories or beliefs disconnected to reality. The result of these mis-conceptions is the prevalence of a dichotomy "between on the one hand, objective knowledge and practices, and, on the other hand, beliefs and magical agency."[72] Contrary to this dualism, animism can be seen as opening space for interactions between humans and non-humans thanks to the imaginary possibility for the body to transform into another organic physical form. Metaphorically, these metamorphoses also create a peculiar field where different approaches to knowledge co-exist. Ho's *Dictionary* and the figure of the weretiger in particular constantly emphasize the possibility of such a "consubstantiality"[73] to emerge.[74] Objects, humans, animals transform continuously into one another and remain in a state of flux. This is especially striking in Ho's animation works such as *2 to 3 Tigers* (2015) where a colonial civil servant, who could represent the colonial forces responsible for the disappearance of wild tigers in the region, progressively turns into a tiger which, in turn, transforms itself into a Japanese military officer who defeated the British in 1942 and who was known as the *Tiger of Malaya*. At some points, the bodies are hybrid, half-human, half-animal but also half-real and half-mythical. Here, the consubstantiality is not merely ontological but temporal: history is condensed and explored from the perspective of the present.

A rhizome is also "a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure."[75] This anti-genealogic and horizontal model allows one to focus on the present, and to free oneself from any historical legitimacy or authority. Yet it does not imply getting rid of the past: on the contrary, the

[70] Animism used to be the dominant beliefs among hill people from Southeast Asia. See Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Ibid.

[71] Descola Philippe quoted by Guillou in Guillou Anne Yvonne, "Potent places and Animism in Southeast Asia," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 18:5 (2017): 389–399.

[72] Descola, Philippe, "Human Natures," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, 2 European Association of Social Anthropologists (2009): 148.

[73] This concept of "consubstantiality" has been developed by Paul Mus InMus Paul, "Cultesindiens et indigènes au Champa," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient*, 33 (1933): 367–410.

[74] See also the preceding chapter on Khvay Samnang's artwork.

[75] Deleuze & Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* Ibid., 12.

Dictionary is nourished by the history of the region, but the artist is more interested in how those multiple constructed narratives connect to, and activate, the present. We have already seen how Ho deconstructed the myths of the foundations of Singapore in *Utama*, suggesting that all foundation's mythical stories are embedded in the present and episodically reactivated as parts of official narratives. Formally, this is expressed by the artist's juxtaposition of traditional and modern mediums: proto-cinematic and post-cinematic technologies are combined with digital animation, live action or shadow puppetry. In the animation work *R for Resonance*, for example, the history of gong and bronze drums is told in a format very similar to a virtual reality game: the ancient traditional instruments are flying like spaceships and the audience is taken into the cosmos where all kinds of objects such as air conditioning devices pop up from nowhere, bend, expand, merge or transform at will. According to Ho, the discovery and the subsequent widespread use of bronze led to a stratification of the society with drums being devoted to the elite and court rituals. His choice to narrate this history with digital media and to confront it with present day technologies aims at questioning the socio-political impact of any kind of new technology, especially today's digital revolution.

Hence, elements of the *Dictionary*, like the tiger, can leap from one space to another, and from one era to another. This freedom is at work in the fluidity of the rhizome, which follows spontaneously any possible path or lines and connects or disconnects them at will. Historically, people from Southeast Asia also used to cross boundaries without knowing that they were boundaries. Benedict Anderson analyzed for example how Chinese people migrated to the south, being progressively absorbed by the local populations before they became aware of being 'Chinese.' It is the imperial powers which drew the lines that first separated clearly territories whose limits would become more or less today's boundaries, "erasing centuries of osmotic interconnections."[76] Despite those boundaries, flows of migrant workers have continued to embody this fluidity. Wee notes in particular that due to the British's call on immigrant labor in Singapore, "some 85 percent of its population is comprised of the descendants of immigrants, and, therefore, de-territorialised Chinese and Indians."[77]

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[76] Anderson Benedict, *The Spectre of comparisons Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 5.

[77] Wan-Ling Wee C.J., "Shortlist Singapore," *Art Asia Archive online*. https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/shortlist-singapore/type/collection-spotlight.

Meanwhile, rivers and mountains impassively cross borders and spread on all sides.

These networks do not lead just to roots but also to storages, organic reserves, i.e. worlds-to-be. Taking the comparison with a tapestry, we can see that each thread can itself be divided into fibers, filaments, radicles, which could in turn be recombined and segmented, leaving holes, creating thickness or different materiality. Just like this thread that can give birth to many fibers, Ho's tapestry is made out of infinite possibilities and ramifications. This principle of infinite reserve as potential for a new becoming, and this "mise en abîme," is at the core of Ho's work, crystallized in the succession of metamorphoses at play under both literal and metaphorical forms. In *The Nameless*, the figure of Lai Teck, for instance, borrows the faces of actor Tony Leung but, beyond his identity as a secret agent, his body functions like a container for our own mythical projections. In particular, the video suggests that he represents possible embodiments of the political forces that were at work a long time ago in the region, and from which the MCP originates: repeatedly, Lai Teck is referred to as the one who has no name, the one who thus has multiple names (he is "every name in History"[78]) and who can thus stand for all the nameless, bodyless, anonymous people. The reserve of the rhizome, in that case, could be a potential political force which could endlessly multiply without never being suppressed. "A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines."[79] The MCP is said indeed to have imposed to the British forces "the longest and fiercest resistance it ever faced in the history of its modern empire."[80] In that regard, the analogy with the rhizome recalls the 1994 performance by Wong Hoy Cheong in which the Singaporean artist planted, then burnt and cut rhizomatic weeds, the *lalang*, in reference to the 16 individuals arrested during the "Marxist' Conspiracy": this violent and public gesture would in fact regenerate the plants which might grow stronger.[81]

Like Kafka's burrow, Ho's rhizomatic representation of the region has no foundation since it is conceived as a reality in-becoming. The video *R*

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[78] Extract from the subtitles of the video from the first part "Every name in History."

[79] Deleuze &Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* Ibid., 9.

[80] Anderson, *The Spectre of comparisons Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* Ibid., 7.

[81] For an in-depth and contextual analysis of the performance see Yap, *RETROSPECTIVE*, Ibid., 142–143.

for Rhombicuboctahedron, constantly edited and transformed by the algorithm, reflects this autonomous, dynamic and "short-term memory" development: it is never the same and continuously re-creates or re-invents itself. Similarly, the artist keeps creating new works in relation to the *Dictionary*, expanding its body from multiple perspectives. This state of permanent transformation echoes the endless process of defining something and the impossibility to encompass a notion, especially when it comes to an identity which is alive. The substance or identity of Southeast Asia could be thus defined not through a unifying concept but through its ever-changing multiplicity, networks of accumulations and assemblages of singularities. Ho, like Deleuze, opposes a dynamic notion of conjunction to a static notion of being: "the tree imposes the verb" to be "but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction," and … and … and…"[82] This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be.' Therefore, Ho's approach of Southeast Asia challenges the possible existence of the term itself and how it has been hitherto defined.

Henceforth, the idea of Southeast Asia as it is presented in the *Dictionary* escapes any ontological form and any linear narrative: from the ancient concept of a "land below the winds" or "Golden peninsula"[83] to the more recent Western's political anti-Japanese then anti-communist constructions, it jumps to strategic local alliances like ASEAN without denaturing itself. Its rhizomatic model rather reflects movements and disjunctions, such as the ones at work in pre-colonial times when history was made of a series of state-making and state-unmaking patterns, with populations going back and forth between states and non-states.[84] Likewise, rhizomes have no center or rather have a multiplicity of centers and no periphery. If we extend the concept to the world, such a perspective allows Southeast Asia to free itself from its usual peripheral position, historically caught between the influences of the Indian and Chinese cultures, and today a locus of global confrontations between China and the United States.

Getting rid of the center involves recognizing diversities. Necessarily, it implies moving away from any form of authoritarian narratives. Instead of denying the colonial legacy, for example, the *Dictionary* embraces it and combines it with local traditional beliefs: Prince Utama cohabits with

[82] Deleuze Gilles &Guattari Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Ibid., 23.

[83] From a cartel describing the history of Southeast Asia, Singapore Asian Civilizations Museum (visited May 2019).

[84] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Ibid., 7.

Raffles. By doing so, the artist avoids post-colonial discourses which often favor nationalism. In particular, Ho does not give support to the concept of *Pan-Asianism* and the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" developed in Japan from the end of the nineteenth century in response to European imperialism.[85] Today, the *Singapore Story* promotes as well national values variously called "Asian," "Confucian," and "communitarian,"[86] which would strengthen a new sense of belonging among Asian people based on a particular system of authority (Confucianism). These "Asian values," based on family values and a strong State, have been also advocated by Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia and later endorsed in many countries in Southeast Asia.[87] Just like Zomia and the hills, described as zones of refuge and resistance towards state incorporation and state authority, Ho's Southeast Asia stands against such attempts at consolidating hierarchical values and systems of authority. If the countries of Southeast Asia were to be unified, the artist prefers thinking in terms of resonance, an association he explores in *R for Resonance* through the lasting physical vibrations of the gong: if each country were a musical instrument, he would play on it and reveal how each of their particular vibration can converge without being dissolved or altered.

In his own methodology of work, Ho tries also to resist any normative constraints. When writing about each letter, the artist does not use any capital letters for names or for countries and uses special spelling such as *padi* for paddy: for him, these quirks sprung out naturally in the drafts of the *Dictionary* and he decided to preserve them and not to obey to any given norm, even more so that these codes are re-worked and re-assembled all the time in the region. In fact, according to him, these localized ways of spelling, or expressive quirks, contain probably as much history as the stories they are a part of. Besides, since there are no specific entry points in the rhizome, Ho started the project with the letter T for Tiger, then moved to G for Gene Z. Hanrahan. The artist seems to follow Deleuze

[85] Tarling Nicholas, ed., "Southeast Asia in War and Peace in the end of the European colonial Empires," in *The Cambridge history of southeast Asia*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press 1992), 333.

[86] Loh, "Within The Singapore Story. The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," Ibid., 5.

[87] See for example Cabasset Christine and Tran Thi Lien Claire, "Les défis d'un développement durable en Asie du Sud-Est (The challenges of a sustainable development in Southeast Asia)," in *L'Asie du Sud-Est 2019 – Bilan, enjeux et perspectives*, ed. IRASEC (Paris: Les IndesSavantes, 2019), 21–22.

and Guattari's method of work who started writing from one "plateau"[88] and continued in another, without respecting any "typographical cleverness" but rather letting themselves follow freely lines and paths to create assemblages of enunciation and connect or extend new rhizomes. Furthermore, the artist's use of digital images and algorithms allows him also to take a distance with his own work, and as such to let it grow more or less independently. The collaborative and algorithmic construction of *R for Rhombicuboctahedron* leaves indeed space for ruptures, irruptions and unrestricted connections to happen freely and not as commanded by any external authority or dominant signifier. It might thus get closer to reality, perceived as a dynamic flow of life.

Experiencing Southeast Asia

There is a kind of anarchy in Ho's rhizomatic architecture of the *Dictionary*, therefore in his vision of Southeast Asia, yet some lines or figures emerge, and the power of the series is borne by these tensions and dialectical forces. Beyond what could be perceived as a solely intellectual approach, the artist proposes an empirical vision of Southeast Asia and all the artworks from the *Dictionary* need above all to be experienced. In fact, Ho never answers his original question "What is Southeast Asia?" but leaves it to the audience to "feel" and intuit what such a notion could be like.

At first sight, with the artist's over-use of subtitles and spoken texts, Ho's works might seem didactic: the voice-over from *The Nameless* explains for instance the roots of MCP and gives some details about Lai Teck's biography. However, there are gaps, contradictions and ruptures in the narratives which offer different and overlapping threads that are difficult to grasp. Sentences are equivocal, whispered or repeated with an effect of echo, altered or blurred with the original soundtrack, and languages are sometimes mixed up (Chinese, English, Vietnamese, Malay). Above all, the density of the information makes it almost impossible for a viewer to seize it in its entirety and to follow the pace of its transmission. At some points, some fragments emerge, or some isolated quotes extracted from Ho's scholarly research are emphasized but these words seem to whirl around rather than being significant. As such, they rather appear as

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[88] "We call a "plateau" any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome." Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Ibid., 20.

mere material for the work, just like motifs on a painting, than as provider of meaning. The texture and intonation of the voice take also progressively the lead on the content of the speech and the mind easily drifts along with its modulations. Overwhelmed by information and numbed by its excess, the rational part of the viewer cannot operate, and the conflicting pressures of that time arise under the form of conflicting feelings. Departing from any pedagogical path, the work aims thus at crystallizing this intricate moment of the Southeast Asia history and to infuse it with complex sensations.

The *Dictionary* embodies indeed the artist's effort to convert and transform the outcome of his research into an artistic, multisensorial language. Ho has always been exploring the impact of sound on our relationship with images and texts, and how much it can affect our perceptions. *Pythagoras* (2013), one of his earlier video installations, was named after the philosopher who was known for having taught his disciples from behind a veil, so that they had to focus on his voice rather than being distracted by any visual interference. For *Earth* (2009–2014), a 42-minutes film, the artist collaborated with different musicians in order to create several versions of his video, each one developed with radically distinctive soundtracks. The experiences of each film were totally different: according to Ho, "some musicians make the work feel longer, in a good sense, and some manage to make it flow a lot quicker. For me, sound really transforms the image, almost mechanically."[89]

This sound exploration is at play in every work of the *Dictionary*. In *R for Resonance*, Ho's animation work about the gong, two computer-generated voices recite the 26 letters of the alphabet and the related concepts of the *Dictionary* (for instance "F for Friction, Fluidity, Forest, Frontier, Fiction…") against the background of an eclectic soundtrack, a powerful orchestration of percussions, electronic vibes, choirs and traditional instruments. There are no sentences, but constant repetitions of words detached from the music which intensity varies constantly up to the point when it culminates into explosions of sounds. The images, in turn, circle in the black cosmos, melt or transform. Rather than grasping the history of bronze casting in Southeast Asia, the audience is taken by the physical vibrations of the sound that link together meteorites, deep forests, bronze coins and halos of light. The text only gives clues, or rather

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[89] Extract from the artist's talk: *Ho Tzu Nyen: Earth, Cloud, Tigers*, Asia Art Archive America, Nov. 2016. http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/ho-tzu-nyen-earth-cloud-tigers/.

proposes possible path that one can freely follow. Each component of the animation has been thoroughly searched by the artist, but his investigations disappear behind his artistic interpretation and staging. The "T for Theatre" alludes for example to Clifford Geertz's book about Balinese pre-colonial state,[90] but as the artist often says, there is no need to know where these references come from: it suffices to feel the power of the gong, for instance as a key component of the religion and aural mandalas, or to imagine the grandeur of these past court ceremonies. For this work, Ho was driven by his own desire to explore the long-lasting physical vibrations of the gong as an alternative way to unify the countries and cultures of Southeast Asia. Besides, the work embodies the substantial connections that have always linked cosmology and various forms of technologies. Although this is already a strong and novel statement,[91] and depending on each viewer's expectations, it might be nevertheless frustrating to lose so much of the artist's research into this artistic and empirical conversion.

Ho's choice of mediums, modes of narration and staging, reflects his attempt to create performative artistic forms of language. For instance, we can better and immediately understand the impossibility to grasp the truth about the life of Lai Teck through the artist's setting in *The Nameless*. The installation is composed by two identical videos projected in two similar rooms which face each other but which are separated by a scrim. One of the videos is played in Vietnamese language while the other one has a Chinese soundtrack, in reference to the Sino-Vietnamese identity of the spy. Depending on the brightness of the images, these rooms become visible to each other, but otherwise remains isolated. This apparatus alludes to the impossibility of revealing at once the totality of one's identity. Ultimately, this closed system and mirror effect point to its own artificiality as a means to seize the elusive and bottomless truth about Lai Teck. The use of film footage, seen as recycled or second-hand images, suggests also the constructed dimension of his identity. Finally, echoes or parasite sounds constantly blur the voice-over which already overlaps the original soundtrack. When Lai Teck starts to speak in his own name, a sound of radio vibes can be heard at the back, as if someone was searching—in

[90] Geertz Clifford, *Negara The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali* (Princeton University Press 1980).

[91] Yuk Hui showed that technics and cosmology used to be approached separately in philosophy, and his term "Cosmotechnics" aims precisely to respond to what he sees as a lack. See: Hui Yuk, *The Question Concerning Technology In China* (Urbanomic 2016).

vain—for a clear channel. In terms of images, *The Nameless* opens with a close-up on a piece of paper burning, as a deliberate act of erasure, and ends up with an image of a man set on fire. A nostalgic music accompanies the first scene when Tony Leung enters a room, takes off his hat and raincoat, and looks at himself in the mirror, confronting coldly, but at length, his own image: from the start, the issue of identity and above all of its representation is clearly emphasized.

How do we perceive Lai Teck, and how much his name and story function like mere containers for our own projections is also clearly staged in the performance *The Mysterious Lai Teck*: until the middle of the show, only a shadow of the spy can be discerned behind what seems to be an endless series of curtains that keeps opening on new layers of blinds, creating an intense tension and high expectations. When the figure is finally revealed, video images directly projected on his face and body transform him into a kind of mutant creature. At the very end, viewers face an immobile animatronic puppetry that continues to challenge them with his empty look. The voice over enounces calmly: "now that I am a body without a voice, a voice without a place, I find myself drifting a lot, thinking about the past, as I leak, into the future" and Confucius hexagrams are recited mechanically: "One Wants to be Two, Two Wants to be Three etc." This accumulation of narratives and characteristics about the spy deprives him of his singularities as he becomes every name in history, the personification of Treason or "the shifting face of Southeast Asia in the Age of Treason"[92] and, at the same time, the incarnation of Resistance against both the colonial and Japanese order. The question of how to reconcile these two antagonist positions remains purposely open.

In the presentation of *The Mysterious Lai Teck*'s world premiere performance in Hamburg, the advertising emphasized the affective language of the artist: "Ho was able to turn highly complex discourses about the Southeast Asian colonial history into something sensuously overwhelming and touching."[93] However, in her review of the performance, art critic Patricia Tobin expressed doubt about it and pointed to its disembodiment: "The voice of Lai Teck states that we are made of two bodies—of blood and of words. We never see blood, only relying on words, and

[92] Quotation from the program of the performance *The Mysterious Lai Teck*, SOTA Drama Theatre, Singapore, May 17–19, 2019.
[93] https://www.kampnagel.de/en/program/the-mysterious-lai-teck/.

without blood, we will never fully understand Lai Teck."[94] Understanding Lai Teck is surely not the artist's objective, but it is true that despite the overflow of lights and projected images, the incessant aural narratives, monotonous teaching lessons and the last trick about the animatronic puppetry, might leave viewers with a feeling of void, frustration and confusion.

Confusion, frustration and void might actually be also one way to feel about politics in Southeast Asia. Lai Teck calls himself the shadow of Ho Chi Minh, and Lee Kwan Yew, before focusing on taming communism, might have met Lai Teck under the name of Plen for a political alliance.[95] Yap emphasizes how much "the history of Malaya has resurfaced as a conflicted site" and refers to "the unfinished business of Malayan history."[96] The history of the region is paved with more radical ambiguities and transformations such as the Thai general who organized a military coup in 1991 in the name of democracy.[97] These kinds of masquerades, treasons and metamorphosis are also embodied in the ambiguous figure of the tigers/weretigers and in the constant ruptures that rhythm or rather break any possible rhythm of the works.

While confusion can open critical and constructive paths, there is a risk to lose the audience on the way. There is thus a balance to find between creating a feeling of uncertainty, that might trigger some curiosity and push viewers towards self-questioning and further investigations, and submerging them to the point that they will lose interest in the work and in the topic. This balance appears to have been found in *R for Rhombicuboctahedron*. The work is absolutely hypnotic and takes the viewer away in a physical experience that speaks to the body and to the imagination more than to the brain: after a while, one stops trying to decipher the work or to connect the footage with the text, and one simply lets

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[94] Tobin Patricia, "Confronting Truths in Ho Tzu Nyen's "The Mysterious Lai Teck," *Arts Equator online magazine* May 2, 2019, https://artsequator.com/the-mysterious-lai-teck-tpam/.

[95] See here the account written by Yap in Yap June, *RETROSPECTIVE: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 89–96. However, according to the artist, there might be another confusion here because there have been at least 2 to 3 communists named "Plen" in Singapore post-1945 history.

[96] Yap, *RETROSPECTIVE: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia*, Ibid., 29.

[97] Morris Rosalind C., *In the Place of Origins, Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 262.

it go. Progressively, and according to everyone's own subjective response, another representation of Southeast Asia arises. The density of the data transforms into the density of the jungle while the breathless rhythm of the video plunges the viewer back into the typical Southeast Asian humid atmosphere, prone to breathing difficulties and respiratory conditions. The ruptures and acceleration movements of the flow recall the liquidity of water, an omnipresent feature of the region. It runs freely down from the Himalaya or is suddenly blocked by dams, canalized through irrigation systems or condensed as vapor. The chaotic assemblage of sometimes very contrasted images and sounds also evokes a feeling of violence that leads back to the multiple conflicts of the region, whose consequences can still be felt today. At the same time, and in contrast with such physically rooted feelings, the flatness of the screen and the flattening effect derived from the non-hierarchical organization of the elements seem to point to Southeast Asia's floating identity and rootless foundation. This impression gives tangibility to an original approach of culture as developed by Arjun Appadurai who thinks about culture from a diasporic perspective and proposes to unroot it from its physical territory, thus detached from its "ontological mooring."[98] Depicting a world of post- and trans-national identities and of nomadism, the Indian anthropologist conceives locality above all as "relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial." *R for Rhombicuboctahedron* invites us to drift along this path, questioning the foundations and expressions of Southeast Asia identity in the age of globalization.

In fact, the *Dictionary*'s repetitive and excessive apparatus reveals another possible interpretation of the work: instead of perceiving side by side all potential manifestations of Southeast Asia with their singularities, one feels that all images and figures could become similar, and almost interchangeable. Their accumulation would then destroy their specificities and homogenize them into a long and loud ritual that would express the power of today's globalization and uniformization of cultures and traditions. Furthermore, the state of void and confusion it triggers evokes the excess of today's flow of data, notably available on the Internet, that might only give the illusion of knowledge, and that might equally overwhelm individuals by its weight and its apparent endless reserve. As we have seen in Chap. 4, for Ho, these excesses collapse into emptiness. More radically,

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[98] Appadurai Arjun, *Modernity at Large Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press 1996), 178–79.

thus, the work questions the impact of globalization on our modes of knowledge production. It suggests that what we might consider, and praise, as knowledge is perhaps superficial, at least if not critically approached, and that there are other paths we can follow in order to know and to engage with reality.

Gaston Bachelard liked to describe himself as a "dreamer of written words." He compares words to houses, complete with cellar and attic: common sense can be met at the ground floor, but the more one goes up the stairs, the more abstract and conceptual become the words. In contrast, if one goes down into the cellar, one enters the world of dreams where words lose their original meanings and only retain their poetic potential.[99] Somehow, all the words accumulated by Ho's scholarly research resemble such a house: one can focus on their syllable and poetic resonance to escape in a mode of *rêverie* or, at the opposite of the scale, take them as abstractions that would open up philosophical thoughts. This mode of *rêverie* has actually been almost literally explored—yet without any reference to Bachelard—in Ho's previous video *The Cloud of Unknowing* inspired by an eponymous Christian mystic spiritual guide from the fourteenth century that encouraged people to meet God by surrendering their mind and ego to the realm of "unknowing." This mode of knowledge echoes the implicit knowledge we analyzed in Khvay Samnang's artwork in the preceding chapter. In Ho's video, inhabitants of the same buildings experience this kind of trances, usually triggered by an external sound (we meet here again the powerful impact of music in the artist's practice and its ability to unlock hidden worlds). Here, Ho was interested in the iconography and representation of clouds, but the film also reveals possible manifestations of reveries when brain and logic withdraw.

States of dream or trance indeed open unsuspected worlds and, as such, operate as alternative modes of knowledge production. They have actually been well known among shamans and sorcerers for centuries. Inspired by their powerful methods of transmission experienced while he lived in West Africa, American anthropologist Paul Stoller called for sensuous epistemologies to develop, arguing precisely that today's approach of epistemology is mainly Eurocentric and disembodied, and thus cut off from the sensible world.[100] In Southeast Asia, practices of mediumship aiming at transmitting knowledge are also numerous and very ancient. Working on

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[99] Bachelard Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon Press Boston, 1994).
[100] Stoller Paul, *Sensuous scholarship* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

Asian traditions, Gananath Obeysekere suggested in particular that "dreaming forms one part of a continuum of knowing" and even noted that the "excess, extraordinariness, and extra-legality" of non-ratio centric knowledge were considered a threat to the Buddhist order because they were resisting "reduction to textuality and normative speech."[101] Mediumship or possession allow to access such kinds of knowledge with transfers taking place from the possessed person and the spirit who inhabit him/her. Rosalind Morris gives the example of an illiterate old woman who was possessed by a Buddhist saint and who was suddenly able to write in ancient script.[102]

The *Dictionary*, because it convokes ghosts from the past and the present, could be perceived as such a mediumship experience involving hypnotic or dream-like states. The voices, songs, recitals and repetitive texts combine with floating images, flashing lights and haunting figures embark the viewer in ritual-like ceremonies during which this form of implicit knowledge about Southeast Asia could be transmitted. Ghosts and specters are actually abundant in the region and their beliefs are still common to all social classes.[103] They also pervade the *Dictionary*: Karl Marx's "specter of communism" seems indeed to lure around every artwork of the series while shamans transform ghosts into weretigers. Metaphorically, ghosts are the crowd of the anonymous people building up the MCP that we suspect behind the figure of Lai Teck, but also the crowd of the unknown workers who built Singapore at the price of their life.[104] However, ghosts do not return the way they used to be, and the continuous re-actualization of these specters, as experienced in the work, seems in fact to point to an absence: what we face are representations of representations of Southeast Asia, and the original question of the essence of the term seems to have been substituted by the question of its manifold manifestations. Yet, these manifestations are not mere, and passing, copies of an

[101] Obeysekere Gananath, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 180 cited In Morris, *In the Place of Origins, Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand*, Ibid., 290.

[102] Morris, *In the Place of Origins, Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand*, Ibid., 100.

[103] Morris Rosalind C., "Giving Up Ghosts: Notes on Trauma and the Possibility of the Political from Southeast Asia," Duke University Press *Positions* 16:1 (2008): 130.

[104] See in particular the animation *One or Several Tigers* (2017) and Kevin Chua's analysis of the work. Chua, "The Tiger and the Theodolite George Coleman's Dream of Extinction," Ibid., 140.

unreachable reality: on the contrary, they perhaps embody the becoming of this reality which constantly redefines itself.

In his invitation to embrace novelty, imagination and freedom to generate knowledge, Ho opens up an original path combining aesthetics and epistemology, and expands what the artist calls "the old question of the decolonization of knowledge" into the larger context of today's globalization and redefinition of modernity. By including traditional mythologies and spiritual practices, and echoing their vibrancy in contemporary Southeast Asia, he contributes to blurring the usual boundary that sets belief and scientific knowledge in opposition, suggesting a porosity between these two spheres, usually seen as conflicting.

Conclusion

Following the emergence of contemporary art languages and experimentations, research-based art practices mainly developed in Southeast Asia fromthe 2000s onward. From the primary need to challenge encrusted conceptions of the past and to fill gaps in knowledge under regimes of post-colonial governmentality, they have kept expanding and diversifying: today, the artists borrow, and divert, the tools and language of research in increasingly various and complex ways. Although they often overlap, three types of research-based art practices can nevertheless be distinguished: the first kind responds to a thirst for knowledge, the second aims at contesting an established knowledge, and the objective of the third kind is to challenge the process of knowing itself, the hierarchy of knowledges and the conventional modes of knowledge production at large. In all cases, these practices contribute to a liberating process that opens up our conceptions of knowledge and of art.

Conceived as prospective bridges between the spheres of art and academic research, research-based art practices expand indeed both fields while remaining independent. For the artists, they represent a powerful and strategic agent of emancipation that enables them to reconnect with different realms of society while taking an active part in the production of a local knowledge. Through cross-disciplinary approaches and fieldwork,

they allow the artists to engage in, and better grasp, an increasingly multi-layered and complex reality. In countries where artists tend to be invisible and isolated, the research process appears as a way to recover agency. It exports artistic debates outside the small art circles and spread critical thinking through the artists' original perspectives on reality. Chung's involvement with the Hong Kong former boat people, Khvay's interactions with the Chong community or Wah Nu &Aung's ongoing search for forgotten heroes from the Burmese history activate discussions and questioning among those populations and, beyond, among the audience. This involvement entails a change in the role of the artist within the whole society. As potential producers of knowledge, the artists participate in the reconstruction of a local, thus reflexive, knowledge and contribute to reinvent societies in the context of globalization and constant social changes.

Overall, the features of the knowledge generated by research-based art practices could be defined as fragmented, non-authoritative, open-ended, poetic, transdisciplinary, mostly empirical, multisensorial, often imaginary based and demanding (as far as the audience is concerned). This artistic knowledge constitutes thus an original form of knowledge, generated and transmitted in the specific milieu of art. As such, it critically supplements scientific forms of knowledge but do not aim at replacing them. The milieu of art could be conceived as a laboratory where artistic experiences can develop and where these new artistic forms of knowledge emerge. To expand outside this milieu requires a continuous process of trial, errors and corrections, and the involvement of a third party (peers, institutions, scientists etc.). The knowledge conveyed by the experience of the artwork constitutes indeed only a part of a longer chain of experiences and viewers might need more personal research or more evidence to appropriate, then consolidate, what they have perceived, understood and felt from the artistic encounter. The artists engaged in research practices can be thus seen as trailblazers and their artworks as invitations to a form of initiation. As original form of knowledge that expands the traditional systems of knowledge, it nevertheless constitutes an inspiring source for scholars from the academic field, and we can see indeed more historians and social scientists collaborating with artists to open up the scope of their fields.

Artists engaged in research also pave the way for a wider conception of research that would not be confined anymore to the academic field. Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues that research should be considered as a human right: instead of defining research as the work of specialists, he emphasizes the necessity for research to be conducted by and for everyone, "especially so in a world of rapid change, where markets, media, and migration have destabilised secure knowledge niches and have rapidly made it less possible for ordinary citizens to rely on knowledge drawn from traditional, customary or local sources."[1] Here, a more specific definition of research would be needed as well as propositions as to how this research could really be conducted by and for everyone, and recognized as such. Still, we can keep from Appadurai his general call for a democratization of research, especially in countries where the education system is ailing like in his native India, and in Southeast Asia in general. As we have seen, there is often a strong connection between research-based practices and an effort to re-define and renew education. KUNCI, the research collective created in 1999 in Yogyakarta, offers for example a relevant case of a platform working away from the Indonesian academic institutions while proposing educational programmes, developing cross-disciplinary experimental projects and artistic research.

Artistically, research produces a new material for the artists to creatively capture and represent reality. In converting their research findings into artistic forms, they invent a new and cross-disciplinary language that becomes increasingly sophisticated and that is less and less dry or didactic. In *Preah Kunlong*, viewers can identify with the hybrid creature and, in turn, project themselves into how it might feel to become one with nature. Far from its rational base and articulated historical discourse, *The Name* plunges the audience into a quasi-mystical experience that leaves the impression of penetrating into a mythological ritual. As to him, Ho invites us to follow him in a dreamlike state and, in his *Dictionary*, revives forms of hypnotic trance as a possible mode of knowledge transmission.

In contrast, the display of archival material, like in Chung's *Vietnam Exodus Project*, offers a very rational and discursive approach. Such a case

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[1] Appadurai Arjun, "The Right to Research," *Globalization, Societies and Education* Vol.4 no2 (2006): 167.

points out the paramount place that verbal discourses and documentation occupy generally in research-based art practices, which might sometimes turn the art experience into a tedious, abstract experience as opposed to the empirical experiences described above. This trend could prove Cazeaux right when he suggests that these practices are synonymous of poor-quality artworks that neglect aesthetics. From this perspective, the inclusion of social sciences within the art sphere could be perceived as a last blow to the aura of art, as it has been defined by Walter Benjamin.[2] Deeply rooted in the social reality as they are, research-based art practices might have lost their ability to transcend it, turning therefore their back to any form of sublime.

The experience of art is very personal, and each experience is unique. Viewers could be first transported by Khvay's video before pondering about its contextual framework. Conversely, they could first try to decipher from the artist's statement what it is all about, before forgetting this verbal introduction and turning towards an emotional response to the work. In chemistry, sublimation is the direct passage of a substance from its solid state to a vaporous state. In turn, a desublimation, or deposition, describes a substance's transition from a gaseous state to a solid state. If we leave aside Freud's interpretation of these chemical processes, the metaphor is relevant in the case of research-based practices that seem to oscillate between these two antagonist states, in this case realism and transcendence.

What is at stake is another form of knowledge located beyond the artists' research findings and which supports and completes it. "I am not a historian. But I know through many dreams that I have to open the box, let audiences know of this very first king in Melayu history."[3] In Zai Kuning's statement, knowledge appears as a key to an unknown world that exceeds social reality and seems to bring along its own form of aura. The artist aptly expresses the possibility of transcending the entanglement of academic and empirical forms of knowledge thanks to imagination. In particular, Zai emphasizes the importance of dreams which nourish and complete his scholarly and fieldwork knowledge of the Malay region and

[2] Benjamin Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (UK: Penguin, 1994 (1935).

[3] Zai Kuning, "Transmission of Knowledge: they get up from their knees and walk," in *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2017), 41.

of the Srivijaya empire. While he wishes to fill the existing historical gaps and to expand the knowledge of the area, he also recalls that knowledge cannot be his sole goal and that his creative process aims at illuminating another relationship to the world, based on imagination: "to imagine is important and that is the path for most artists and, as Einstein once said (if I am not mistaken), imagination is more important and powerful than knowledge."[4]

These tensions, I believe, bring back a possible aura to research-based artworks against their potential desublimation. The art experience could be seen as an initiation where the viewers are invited to enter new realms of knowledge, to open up to new forms of thinking through and with art. It is not surprising that *The Name* or the *Dictionary*, especially *R for Rhombicuboctahedron* have a mystical mood. Caught between the dialectical tension of academic languages and non-rational modes of thinking, these practices nourish themselves from and exceed these antagonisms. Even a disembodied display of archival material can be conceived as an initiation—and initiation takes time—in its ability to bring forth a sense of liberation and transformation.

Antariksa's *Co-Prosperity* #4 (2019) would perfectly embody this invitation. In the installation, the archival material has been printed on Ultraviolet sensitive ink on paper so that they glow in the dark. Viewers are initially fascinated by the documents which can be taken away but whose information will disappear as soon as they are out of the room, and this fascination leads to reflection. What we can see in the dark are traces of the past, flashing blue lines of evidence that shed light on the Indonesian artists and intellectuals' collaboration with the Japanese during WWII. For a long time, these archives were kept secret and the installation conveys perfectly this feeling of secrecy. For the artist, the artwork functions as a mediation, in the hope that viewers will deepen the subject by themselves. It also embodies perfectly the idea of initiation mentioned above: an initiation expresses the beginning of something new but also refers to the action of introducing someone into a secret society. In this case, the viewers discover a hidden part of Southeast Asian history and are invited to share physically and metaphorically some secret archives. They become insiders.

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[4] ZaiKuning, Ibid., 40.

Antariksa, *Co-Prosperity* #4 (2019). UV-sensitive ink on paper, A4 size, copies (Amounts variable), UV light. Commissioned by 2019 Asian Art Biennial. Courtesy of the artist

By including traditional mythologies and spiritual practices, and echoing their vibrancy in contemporary Southeast Asia,[5] research-based art practices also contribute to blurring the usual boundary that oppose beliefs and scientific knowledge, suggesting a porosity between these two spheres, usually seen as conflicting. This reconciliation produces creative tensions and participates in the wider reconceptualization of today's modernity in Southeast Asia, increasingly defined as "multiple, vernacular, alternative or hybrid."[6] Against the conception of modernity defined as a single project of global and secular homogenization, based on a Western

[5] The importance and persistence of spirit mediumship, popular beliefs and ritual practices have been in particular emphasized by Rosalind Morris In Morris Rosalind, *In the place of origins: Modernity and its mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). More recently see the anthology: Endres Kirsten W. and Lauser Andrea (ed.) *Engaging the spirit world: popular beliefs and practices in modern Southeast Asi*a (New York: Bergahn Books, 2012).

[6] Endres Kirsten W. and Lauser Andrea, *Engaging the spirit world: popular beliefs and practices in modern Southeast Asi*a Ibid., 5.

rational discourse and on a "marginalization of indigenous belief systems,"[7] these practices contribute to the recognition of plural modernities and models of modernization that develop according to the specificities of different cultures and civilizations. They also participate in what Isabelle Stengers calls, after the ethnologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the "decolonization of thought," a global questioning of the idea of the hegemonic scientific rationality that invites us to recover "the capacity to honor experience" against our preconceived conceptualization and segmentation of the world.[8] In the art field, it could take the form of relieving ourselves from our usual critical and rational perspectives in order to cultivate transformative experiences and recover the ability to feel and connect to the multiplicity of the world, including its "magical" dimension. Again, here, research-based art practices initiate the audience to such modes of thinking and contribute to opening up established conceptions of knowledge and visions of the world.

However, these expanded and critical conceptions of knowledge imply accepting a certain dose of insecurity and confusion. Against any dogmatic position, research-based art practices propose open-ended forms of knowledge that positively destabilize our handling of existing concepts.[9] This indeterminacy arises also as a necessary consequence of the poetic and aesthetic dimension of the works. The excess of data, in Ho Tzu Nyen's case, leads to a creative void that is nevertheless disrupting. This uncertainty might leave the audience behind or lead to a feeling of relativism. Artworks are at first assessed and interpreted according to one's own existing individual background.[10] When confused, viewers could tend to reach back to these personal cultural and emotional experiences. The artworks would thus generate as many forms of knowing as there are viewers and,

[7] Endres and Lauser, *Engaging the spirit world: popular beliefs and practices in modern Southeast Asi*a Ibid., 3.

[8] Stengers Isabelle, "Reclaiming Animism," *e-flux Journal* 36, July 2012. https://www.e--flux.com/journal/36/61245/reclaiming-animism/.

[9] This critical feature of uncertainty echoes Plato's condemnation of art conceived as a potential threat to the stability of the state. Citing Plato's *Republic*, Romain Laufer recalls that "major authorities in various times and places considered the existence of well-defined esthetic criterion as essential for the basic stability of the social order." Laufer Romain, "Uncertainty, Art and Marketing – Searching for the Invisible Hand," *Philosophy of Management* 16(3)(2017): 218.

[10] Panofsky Erwin, *L'oeuvre d'art et ses significations, Essais sur les arts visuels* (Meaning in the Visual Arts, The Renaissance: Artists, Scientist, Genius, 1955), trans. Marthe and Bernard Teyssedre, (Paris Gallimard nrf, 1969), 43–44.

instead of a single form of critical understanding, we may be left with a wide collection of distinctive opinions. Too much knowledge or too long statements and discourses can also numb the audience's mind instead of raising critical awareness. There is a difficult balance to find, there, which artists are still groping to find.

Anna Tsing suggests precarity as the condition of our time: "what if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the center of the systematicity we seek?"[11] As the anthropologist emphasizes, a precarious state often implies a vulnerability to others and, as such, a dependency on encounters. These encounters are in fact a positive factor of transformation, even though they might be unpredictable. They create changes, flux, adaptations, all conditions that make life possible.

This dynamism is also at the core of today's forms of knowledge production as defined by Nowotny and al. when they acknowledge the emergence of a second mode of knowledge production, or "Mode 2," which refers to knowledge produced outside the academic institutions. Characterized by its trans-disciplinary, collaborative and application-oriented features, it is also generated by a multiplicity of agents and networks.[12] If, with Bruno Latour, we consider knowledge as a dynamic system and as a vector of transformation, the process of knowing involves the willingness to participate in a continuous flux of exchanges, questions and investigations.[13] Research-based art practices do not produce new sets of dogma, but initiate dialogues rendered even more necessary by the indeterminacy it creates. This larger and more open framework leaves to the viewer the responsibility to re-appropriate and consolidate the new forms of knowledge it generates. This openness is correlative to the democratic vocation of research-based art practices which aim at favouring an increased circulation and distribution of knowledge against today's huge disparities across the globe and within each country. From this perspective, artists from Southeast Asia do not differ from artists from other parts

[11] Tsing Anna Lowenhaupt, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

[12] Gibbons Michael, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schwartzman, Peter Scott and Martin Trow *The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies.* London: Sage, 1994.

[13] Latour Bruno, "A Textbook Case Revisited: Knowledge as a mode of existence," E. Hackett, O. Amsterdamska, M. Lynch and J. Wacjman (editors), *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* – Third Edition (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2007): 83–112.

of the world. However, their practice takes on a particular urgency and salience because of the conditions and contexts in which they work.

In light of the cultural activism mentioned earlier and illustrated by Tiffany Chung's case, some of these practices eventually invite viewers to turn these forms of knowledge into action. *Myanmar Peace Industrial Complex Map III* (2018) represents a dense network of financial, governmental and institutional organizations' names entwined with countries, economic activities and various labelled such as "Fake news," or "Mass Deportation." For Burmese artist Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, this network incarnates all the connected parties and the flux of funding that were involved in what he describes as a failed peace process in Myanmar. The artwork resembles an institutional chart with all the names written in black boxes on a huge map and the connections marked with simple yet entangled red lines. For the artist, this artwork does not directly aim at producing knowledge, even though he exhibits here the outcome of his long-term research on the Burmese structure of power. According to him, everybody knows about the military hegemony dominating the country, its broad corruption and zones of influence. Producing knowledge is thus not enough: people know, but they do not care. The installation actually succeeds in allowing viewers to seize in one glance the extraordinary scope of the existing connections that link the Burmese military power to companies and institutions all over the world, but it also creates a feeling of dizziness and of powerlessness. For the artist, what really matters is above all to have the courage to draw conclusions from this knowledge and to act accordingly.[14] The provocative juxtaposition of words such as "MasterCard" and "Ethnic Cleansing" might nevertheless not be enough to reach this objective.

There is always a risk to rest content with the display of the research findings without the creative input that would transform them into a work of art. It is strengthened by a tendency to "stage" knowledge and to use it as a mere communication argument, a concern already raised by Christopher Frayling who, in 1993, expressed his worry to see research becoming "a status issue, as much as a conceptual or even practical one."[15] Producing knowledge has become an overused expression undermined by marketing strategies and exploited by our society of the spectacle. The risk

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[14] Interview with the artist over the phone, September 2019.

[15] Frayling Christopher, "Research in art and design," *Royal College of Art Research Papers* 1(1) 1993:5.

here is to see on the one hand an increased number of artworks claiming a research component in their work while there is none, and, on the other hand, the development of artworks that merely stage or illustrate literally their research findings. With knowledge drowned in the midst of today's sea of data, and used as a by-product, critical modes of knowledge production and transmission remain vital. We have seen how most of research-based art practices derive from a primary thirst for knowledge and the desire to fight ignorance. Conversely, however, what if too much factual knowledge leads again to another form of ignorance? When the mind is overwhelmed by images and information, it is sometimes difficult to turn this feeling of emptiness into creative and critical modes of thinking. What could remain from a research-based art experience could be only the illusion of knowledge. Besides, do we need to know everything? Some factual knowledge might be sometimes superficial for non-specialists. Do we need to know the Latin names of flowers to enjoy a walk in a beautiful garden? Against the backdrop of this global context, research-based art practices might thus play a key role of resistance in proposing collective, dialogical, poetic and emancipatory forms of knowledge that would not be mere superficial products but dynamic and engaged modes of thinking and acting within society.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.