

THROUGH THE GATE / an(g)archivery

susan pui san lok

PREAMBLE

To offer a sense of direction (possibly false), this presentation is in two halves, verbal and visual, each in turn comprising two parts. In the paper, I will share some archival preambles, followed by some preliminary findings, which are really questions met with further questions, and the prospect of future deviations. While the following notes are numbered, my path through the archive is far from linear, repeatedly diverted by potholes and rabbit-holes (or perhaps *I am diverting it*).

The doubled visuals will unfold and loop concurrently in a ten-minute experimental film called *an(g)archivery*.



susan pui san lok, an(g)archivery, 2018, 2-channel video, 10 mins



SOME AMBLINGS

1. How might we come to know, or forget, the Gate Foundation archive, acquired by the Van Abbemuseum (VAM) in 2006? What questions arise from its integration, or disintegration, and dispersal into this museum's collection? I am not an archivist, but rather an artist given to archiverish impulses (Kristensen & Lok 2014)¹; interested in systems of classification, orders of identifications, as well as misidentifications, disorders, omissions, ill-fitting categories, and the slippages between.² What happens when two archives converge? What might be gained or lost in the process? When one archive subsumes another, one 'active', one 'dormant', what mutual transformations might occur?

One might not ordinarily associate archives and collections with volcanic metaphors, but I rather like the idea of the archive as a sleeping, mountainous entity, that looms over and ahead, rather than beneath or behind the museum. The archive whose surface stillness may suddenly break, its shadows finding form, spewing smouldering debris and setting alight (both in the sense of burning and firing up) the ideas constructed at its foothills. Perhaps the curating of archives as the 'taking care' of objects should also carry the sense of a warning, a precaution – 'take care' – beware of histories erupting.

2. I am struck by the Gate's limited online presence. At www.gatefoundation.nl, I find a single post by Admin, dated 10 October 2011, which Google translates as: "Welcome to Gate Foundation NL. This is the former Gate Foundation website. This foundation is no longer active. The information on this website may not be current. Read this information in the past. This website is in no way connected with the Gate Foundation".

And for emphasis in the sidebar: "Disclaimer: Gate Foundation no longer exists".

As is often the case when a web domain is vacated, the page is squatted by advertisers. The former Gate homepage now proclaims the virtues of various pens suitable for different sales scenarios (ballpoint versus fountain, writing instruments that resemble gadgets...), while the sidebar links to information on common medical conditions (anaemia, blood pressure, motherhood, hairloss...).

I find myself dwelling on this site – this schism – at which the Gate no longer dwells, yet nevertheless remains. The URL or Universal Resource Locator clearly no longer locates the resource. There is no forwarding address, no redirection or reason offered, just junkmail for discerning pen-lovers. On acquiring an archive, does the museum inherit both its material and virtual remains? Should such vacated spaces be salvaged? Such schisms read as part of the archive's afterlife. After the institution, where does the archive begin and end?

3. "The Gate Foundation was established in 1988 in Amsterdam with the aim to stimulate the communication between western and non-western art. Until its closure in 2006, the Gate Foundation had accumulated archives with documentation on more than 750 non-Dutch artists, plus a specialized library" (Medina 2010).³

This extremely short history is offered in the documentation accompanying two earlier projects on the Gate archive at VAM, by researcher and curator Gemma Medina. In 2010, *Gate Keepers* explored links between the so-called "non-Western artistic world and the Netherlands", involving "a presentation of (parts of the) archives by invited guests from those regions



in the world represented in the Gate Foundation archive as well as those who [were] not". In 2014, *Still at the Gate* focused on Latin-American art shown or produced in the Netherlands, in relation to the narratives proposed by the São Paulo Biennale curated by Charles Esche that year, inviting audiences to "dive into the Gate archive" and "[propose] re-interpretations of these projects from the present..." (Medina 2014).

Elsewhere, I come across a short interview with Sebastian Lopez, originally published in *ArtAsiaPacific* in 2001, which credits Lopez with "spearhead[ing] consistent art programming of artists from Other continents – artists born in the Netherlands, those resident in the country, as well as those from outside... Under Lopez's directorship, the Gate Foundation pursues research into contemporary and modern art and maintains an archive of documentation of work by Dutch and European artists of colour, and those from other continents" (Lopez 2001). The introduction highlights – but does not go on to discuss – several so-called 'Asian artists' who had exhibited at the Gate since 1997, including Bhupen Khakar, Wang Du, Sikay Tang, Ding Yi, Hong Hao, Tiong Ang, Yee-Ling Tang, Tariq Alvi and Ken Lum.

4. I begin to wonder how 'Asia' and 'Asian' might have been defined or articulated institutionally and curatorially across projects; how these artists, identified as 'Asian', may or may not at particular moments recognise themselves as such; and how they might be otherwise visible through the Gate and VAM.

I note that of the nine artists, only two are women: Sikay Tang and Yee-Ling Tang. I am interested in Sikay Tang and Tiong Ang in particular, as artists working in and between moving image and film in apparently very different ways. Tang appears to have moved from

contemporary art to commercial film, while Ang has incorporated film, televisual and theatrical tropes into his art practice. Do their paths converge?

I met Ang at the 2015 Guangzhou Triennial, where we were both exhibiting. Ang's collaborative site-specific multimedia installation and performance work, called *Universality: Decorum of Thought and Desire*, struck me as bold, complex, intriguing, generous, and funny. I wondered about Ang's clear identification as a Dutch artist (mindful of my own persistent hesitation to identify as 'British', 'Chinese', 'British-Chinese', or latterly 'British diasporic', though I will settle for 'British-born Hong Kong Chinese diasporic', if I must). I had to admit my ignorance of Chinese and East Asian migrations to the Netherlands. Could collaboration be a strategy to mitigate and complicate binary projections of 'Dutchness' or 'Asian-ness', to counter homogeneity with heterogeneity? Moreover, I wondered about the work. In the context of this Triennial's theme, *Asia Time*, questions of centricity, ex-centricity and displacement, were necessarily provoked. What, where and when are the geographies, histories and the contemporary, in and of the museum and archive? How might they become more eccentric (strange) or ex-centric (estranged, decentralised)?

5. In the absence of an overarching view or record of the Gate's history, scope and remains, the visibility of the Gate within VAM is confined to the elements that have been integrated as physical objects and digital data, namely the Gate's specialist library and artists' archive. Although I come across references to the Gate's collection of 3,000 books and documentation concerning 700, 750 or 900 artists, the VAM database only returns 2,041 entries relating to the Gate, of which 1,320 are publications. The number of artists' files integrated into the VAM is around half the



Gate's estimation. Such disparities may be attributed to multiple copies of books, differing criteria for creating and maintaining an artists' file (such as period of continued activity), or indeed human error and hyperbole. The Gate's materials span some 60 institutions, at least 15 languages, 100 countries and over 75 cities, contributing significant cultural and historical scope to the VAM library and resources. So what do numbers matter? If conflicting narratives raise questions of truth; of accounting and accountability, what is institutional truth? To whom does it belong? And to whom is it owed?

6. Periodically, the team of librarians and archivists allude to the abrupt acquisition and chaotic condition of the Gate's arrival at VAM. I hear about the Gate's sudden loss of state funding, and speculations as to why this happened. Faced with imminent closure, the Gate entered into discussions with various museums. VAM proposed to take the archive in its entirety (that is, the library, the artists' archive, as well as the institutional archive), and hence a sliver of its history, policies, processes, politics and practices. Discussions took place over several months, while books and artists' materials continued to arrive, accumulating in boxes around the office. Suddenly given two days' notice to vacate their premises (allegedly due to a failure to keep up rental payments), the process of transition became an emergency. As such, the archive was packed up in a panic, and delivered to VAM's door without warning. From an archival perspective, this was disastrous. Filing cabinets and shelves had been emptied haphazardly into crates, loose desktop papers swept into boxes, and loaded in a van along with the desks themselves. Any coherence was, if not destroyed, then disrupted or corrupted, compounding the archival work to follow, and obscuring the history of the archive itself.⁴

7. On my first pre-residency visit, I learnt that beyond the integrated collection of books and artists' files (a process that took two years), and the 31 boxes containing the uncatalogued institutional archive, there are a further 8 boxes of uncatalogued 'stuff'. The archive does not exist 'as a whole', but rather in dispersed parts, some visible (the catalogued library and artists' files), and some opaque (the uncatalogued boxes). Aptly enough, while sampling a box from the institutional archive, I happen upon a project called *Orientation*. *Orientation* proves elusive however, as the semblance of order falls away – papers are collated more or less chronologically, then jump a year or two, forwards and back again. How to navigate these unwieldy contents? A few months later, the boxes have been numbered, though the numbers bear no relation to the chronology of their contents, which remain jumbled. Since there is still no identifiable beginning or end, I decide that should I have time to return to these boxes, I will move through them backwards – after all, why not?

8. How can we consider this archive of the past in relation to the museum in the present, when we do not know the past of the archive? My tactic is to embrace the opacity, to venture semi-blindly, in anticipation of dead ends, loops, and short circuits, with myopic and "optimistic uncertainty" (Slager 2017, p. 4).

Between January and July, I return several times to move circuitously between catalogued and un-catalogued dimensions of the archive, privileging the boxes of as yet unclassified or unclassifiable 'stuff', presently eluding recognition and validation; I am particularly interested in the archival excesses that slide between systems.

Looking before knowing, I am frequently disarmed, disorientated by this self-inflicted anxiety-inducing

approach. I meet the archive's unknown scope with my own known-unknown limits – the simple fact of my not-speaking and not-reading Dutch is a continual reminder of that which can be seen but not known, that which may be unknowable, and the inevitably selective, partial, incomprehensible nature of my errant archivery.

Soon, the idea of tracing configurations and interpellations of 'Asia' and 'Asian' seems a gargantuan if not impossible task, that I happily, indefinitely, postpone. Instead, I defer to the analogue distractions of the archive's disparate materiality – remnants and repetitions, soon revealing shadows and traces of Ang.

SOME FINDINGS

1. On my second visit, the eight boxes of uncatalogued material have become twenty. The boxes have moved, and I am invited to re-number them. Here are the labels:

- 1 "IIAS"
- 2 "1996-2000 Fotos / Projecten 1"
- 3 "Projecten IV / Vietnam 93 ELS"
- 4 "A Short Historie Video Art 2003-2006 / Projecten X"
- 5 "91 Lezingen [lectures], 94 Symposium / Lezingen I"
- 6 "Inventarisatie Archief I" Inventory – Archive I
- 7, 8, 9, 10 Unlabelled, marked "Van Abbe" or "Van Abbe archief"
- 11 ("7") "Van Abbe archief (multi media)"
- 12 ("4") "Agenda's, Gastenboek" [Diaries, guest books]
- 13 "Foto's CD's Video's – A Short History of Dutch Video Art / Fotos 2"
- 14 "BYZ"
- 15 "Algemeen [General] '98, Limited Space '97, Suriname '97, Democracy Show '98, Dunya 2000 / Projecten VI"

- 16 ("3") A Short History of Dutch Video Art
- 17 "BIBL" for library
- 18 "BIBL Depot F80A", Sealed
- 19 and 20 Unlabelled

I open them up, and find that:

- 7 boxes hold 7 or 8 lever arch files, containing mostly paperwork, but also slides, photos, negatives, cards, notebooks, press cuttings.
- 5 boxes contain unbound printed matter, stationery, diaries and guest books.
- 6 boxes hold assorted VHS and Umatic tapes, DVDs, audio cassettes, slides both sleeved, boxed and scattered, and assorted ephemera, including two biscuits.

2. From the 'first' box, I pull out a file and land in 1995: a list of 'top ten' publications. At number ten is Ramdes, A. and Lopez, S. (1995) *The Land that Lives in Me*, with a note: "Tion Ang" [sic] and "Vinh Phuong", "2 from Asia". 'Asia' is referenced as both a geographical place of origin and conceptual realm, existing both outside / beyond, and inside / within the artist. VAM does not have the catalogue. I wonder: is this an inherited gap, or was something misplaced in the move?

There are further 'top ten' lists, letters, handwritten notes, and numerous faxes sent between 1995 and 1996 – quarterly call-outs for information to be included in the Gate's "agenda of worldwide Asia-related activities", which it compiles for the cultural pages of the IIAS newsletter (the International Institute for Asian Studies, based at Leiden University).

Interestingly, the Gate did not set any parameters beyond 'Asia-related', allowing institutions to designate 'Asia', 'Asian' and 'relevance' on their own terms. As such, this expansive category comes to encompass exhibitions from San Francisco to Rotterdam to



London, Tokyo and Queensland. Between 1995 and 1997 alone, these ranged from *Splendors of Imperial China*, *Manifesta*, *Gwangju Biennale*, *Rhapsodies in Black: the Harlem Renaissance*, *Asia Pacific Triennial*, to *Parisien(ne)s*.

3. If the faxes are a reminder of a much slower era of global networking (early Internet, pre-social media, punctuated by beeps, whirs, screeches, pips and dings), they also suggest the Gate's persistent endeavour to make itself known to an international network of public institutions and commercial galleries.

At the very back of the last file in the box, an inconclusive exchange of letters between the Gate and IAS dated November 2000, intimates disagreements and dissatisfaction over terms, services and payments, and the end of an eight-year arrangement. Perhaps the IAS, in the burgeoning era of email and Internet usage, no longer saw the need to outsource this editorial work. Perhaps the Gate had also outgrown its IAS role (I can only speculate).

After the departure of founding director Els van der Plas, and the arrival of Lopez in 1997, the material suggested a shift in focus and volume of activity, signalling a growing ambition to not only compile the Asia-related agenda but also define it. In an undated mission statement, circa 1994, the Gate highlighted several large-scale projects to date – exhibitions inspired by Japan, showcasing foreign artists living in the Netherlands, modern and contemporary artists from Indonesia, and a festival of Vietnamese contemporary art and film. From 1996 onwards, the Gate's activity seems to multiply five-fold, with the Gate curating or co-curating some twenty-five to thirty projects over the next ten years, that also see a significant move away from what might be called

ethno-centric programming, towards solo shows and thematic projects. Artists include: Toshihiko Komatsu, Fernando Arias, Eduardo Padilha, Keith Piper, Milton Moreiro, Bhupen Khakhar, Julia Ventura, Bülent Evren, Ken Lum, Remy Jungerman, Mariano Maturana, Gillion Grantsaan and Tiong Ang. Among the few projects documented by publications in the VAM library are: *Migrating Identity – Transmission / Reconstruction*, the Shanghai Biennale, and *The Third Space in the Fourth World*, Shanghai (all 2004), and *A Short History of Dutch Video Art* (2005). (In addition to the missing institutional history, there are exhibition histories yet to be reconstructed.)

4. By my third visit, I still haven't found anything on Sikay Tang. There are no results in the library database. The uncatalogued 'stuff', which includes at least three boxes of loose artists' materials – slides and photographs labelled with return addresses, which have evidently never been returned; unlabelled slides and negatives in sheets and loose rolls, some of which I unfurl and recognise as works by Xu Bing, Yue Mingwei, Qiu Zhijie – how did they get here? There is an artist's limited edition print gifted by the Wellcome Trust,⁷ enclosed with a letter – to whom does this now belong? And a small cellophane bag with biscuits, in a box labelled 'Gingerbread 1999' – not a snack, as I later realise, but an artwork by Mary Evans.

One box contains the 'VVN Archief' (1995), a project with the Dutch Refugee Council on so-called 'refugee artists'. Five folders titled 'Strangers in NL' are filled with reams of inquiry forms, information sheets, and materials submitted by artists in response to a call for information, and the offer of free membership of the Gate's Artists' Archive (the usual cost being f25 guilder a year plus an entrance or joining fee of f50). I search a few of the names in the VAM database and find



nothing. The artists remain strangers / estranged from the archive.

Some boxes contain materials from the touring exhibition, *A Short History of Dutch Video Art* (2005). Soon after the Gate's arrival, VAM invited Irit Rogoff and Deepa Naik to open the crates as part of the *Academy* exhibition and research programme in 2006. When word reached Tiong Ang that his work had been screened as part of *Academy*, VAM discovered that the Gate did not own rights to this material as had been previously understood. This called into question the entirety of the artists' materials and their status within the collection.

What was the nature of the Gate's relationship with, and responsibilities towards, the artists it worked with? Having sought to promote artists who were "neglected by institutions",⁸ was the Gate also guilty of neglect? These materials left behind, within yet without the archive, raise questions of status, of ownership, of responsibility and care. How many artists were *an*-archived by the Gate? The prefix *an*- suggests 'lack', a state of being 'without', a negation. What is the archive lacking or missing, and who are the artists situated *without* or outside it? How many artists remain neglected, negated, suspended between the two – the Gate and VAM?

5. In contrast to Sikay Tang, there is a lot of material on Tiong Ang – indeed, out of the nine 'Asian artists' named in the *ArtAsiaPacific* interview, Ang has the highest visibility across the VAM library collection. There are 39 catalogued items, of which 27 are publications, mostly exhibition catalogues spanning the period from 1990 to 2006. Tellingly, Ang occupies multiple locations and categories, namely:

ART EDUCATION
TRIENNALES
NETHERLANDS
GENDERED ART
VIDEO ART
EXCHANGES
ART DESIGN
IDENTITY
MANIFESTATIONS
GLOBALISATION
PAINTING
ALIENATION
PRIZES.⁹

There are also numerous uncatalogued (hence inaccessible) items scattered through about a third of the boxes – Ang turns up on flyers, press releases, cuttings; a face in a crowd, a name printed, misprinted or scrawled on an envelope; in DVDs, slides and negatives.

6. It is evident that Ang's trajectory traverses both the Gate and VAM, and inverts the usual paradigm of institutional neglect. Embraced very early on by institutions including De Appel and VAM, with several high-profile shows in the mid-1990s showcasing new and contemporary 'Dutch art', Ang's involvement with the Gate came later, preceded by an invitation from Lopez to show in the 1994 Havana Biennial.¹⁰ After this, Ang exhibited and initiated a number of projects with and without the Gate, themed around Chinese-ness (or not-Chineseness), mobility, migration, identity, and decolonisation.

Alternately identified and positioned as 'Dutch' and 'Other', Ang's practice proceeds along concurrent and entangled paths of experimentation, re-situated through collaborative projects in South Africa,

Indonesia, China and the Netherlands. It continually re-articulates arguably contradictory (for whom?), contingent and mutable narratives. Moving from high modernism to situation comedy, from painterly sculptural installations to raw video works, Ang transforms or transposes the artist's studio to the TV set, the academy, soap opera, the seminar or pop concert. Such seeming schisms may have confused the very institutions and collectors that once readily embraced him, rendering him increasingly difficult to 'see' and place – an artist-producer-collaborator-performer, making serious mockery (and mockery serious).

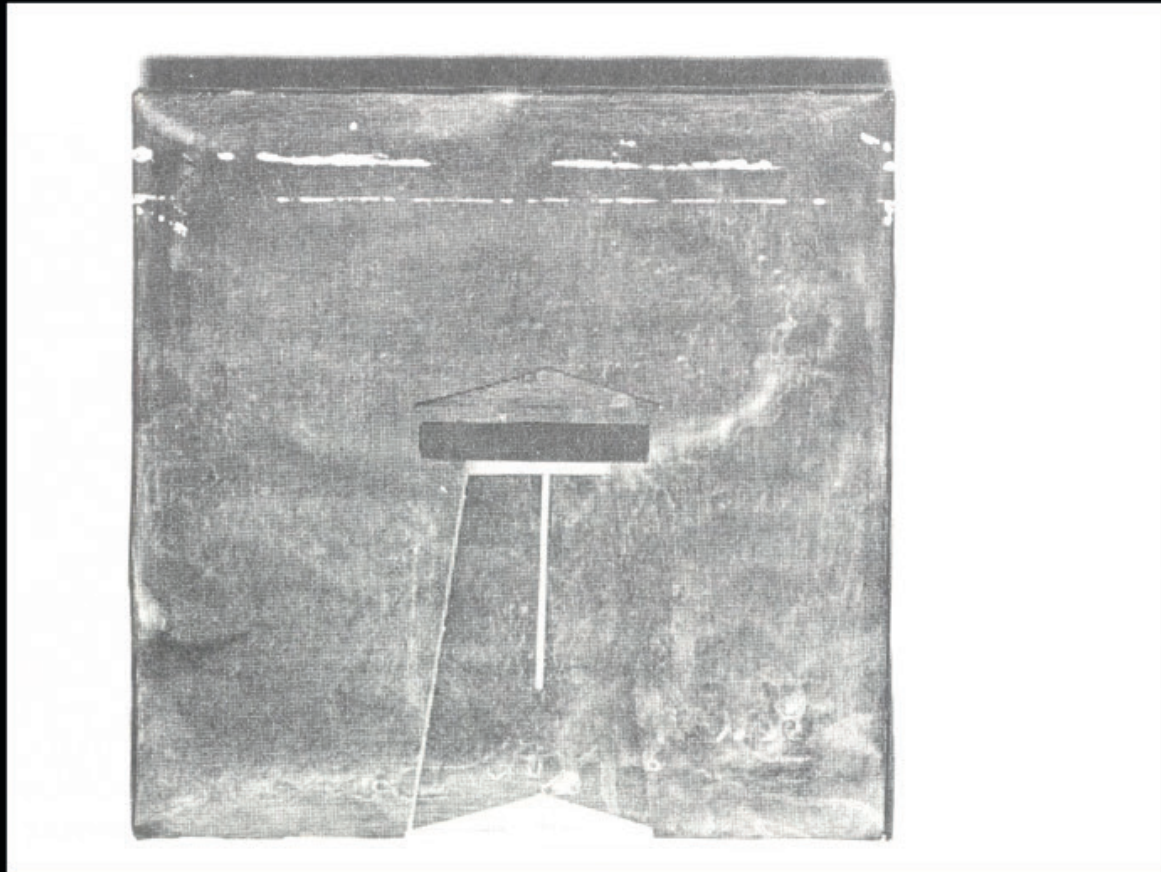
7. On my fourth and final visit, I look at VAM's museum files. Belatedly, it occurs to me that since Ang's work appeared in eight museum acquisition shows, Ang's work must be in the museum. Three works were acquired in 1991, 1994, and 1996: *Portrait of a Young Man* (1991), *Portrait of Two Boys* (1991) and *Portrait of a Man and Woman* (1993). *Portrait of a Young Man* was loaned to the Hague for *Peiling '91* and *De Appel for The Spine* in 1994; there are no details of any other loans. Last exhibited as part of VAM's new building display in 2004, and the *NL Not NL* show in 2005, it appears that these works have been sitting in the depot ever since.

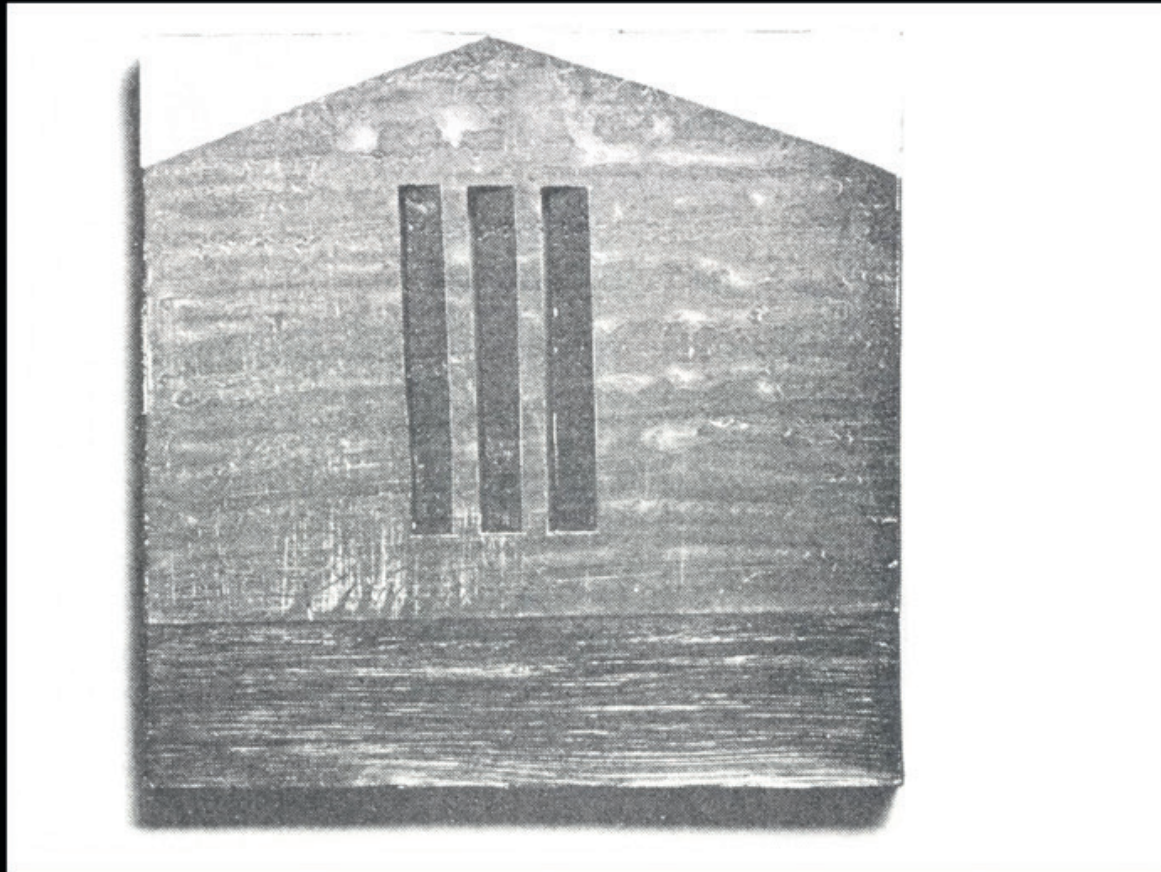
8. It strikes me that Ang's is a deviant practice, paradoxically typified by atypicality, exceeding and defying both collection and archive. Perhaps the continuity (if continuity is desired) is in the schism. The medium criticality of his early works expanded into critiques of visibility and visuality: engaging global, local and transitional visual cultures; through architectonic and scenographic tropes, and parodies of form and performance.

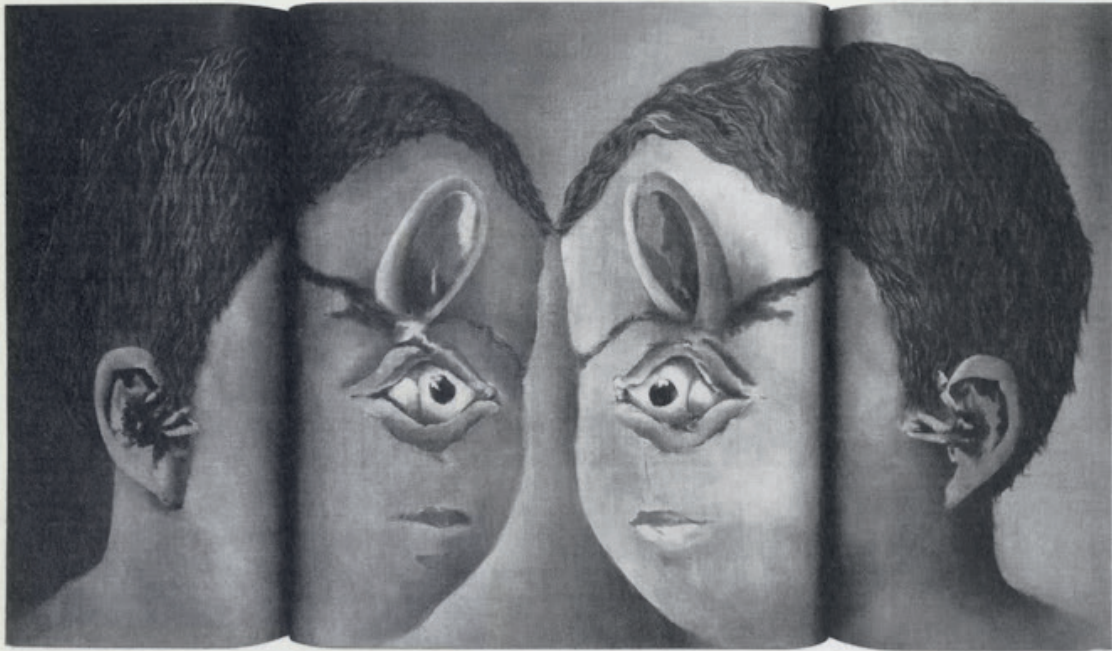
Across Ang's intermittent series of sparse yet dense artists' books – *Toerist* (1986), *Tiong Ang* (1990), *Initiatie* (1992), *Prothese (N)* (1992), *Not Dark Yet* (1998), *Underworld* (2001) and *Prisoners* (2003) – we might identify a trail of clues pointing towards 'not-seeing', a sequence of cues for refusal, and props for wandering and dreaming.

9. Ang joins me on my last couple of days with the collection. We compare shadows, new potholes and rabbit-holes appearing. Of course, the Gate / VAM archive is incomplete, always already *an-archive* – lacking, missing, without – *an-archive-not-archive*. How might the museum move to re-position Ang's work? How might Ang's work potentially re-position the museum? We might adapt another cue from Ang (Slager 2017, p. 34): "Avoiding the cumulation of learned experiences into routine", each may be pursued along "an itinerary of the unexpected".















Film still, an(g)archivery, susan pui san lok, 2018



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Medina, G. 2010, *Gate Keepers*, exhibition leaflet, VAM, Eindhoven.

Medina, G. 2014, *Still at the Gate*, exhibition leaflet, VAM, Eindhoven.

NOTES

1. In this paper, we make reference to my " 'archivery' intervention, *Making Ways*, collaged from images of [Mike] Dibb's personal *Ways of Seeing* project archive... which had been literally buried under the floorboards all these years". *Making Ways* was a series of images published in a special issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* (Lok 2012) and a limited edition set of risograph prints. Art Vapours is an occasional collaboration between J.C. Kristensen and I: "Anarchival in approach, we understand Art Vapours as a potential space of counter-knowledge production, a dynamic that seeks to unlock the archive and expose its aporias... We like archives and fevers. We might liken our project to archiverish archivery".

2. My previous projects with archives include *NEWS / REEL* (2005), with the Media Archive for Central England, as part of Arts Council England's Necessary Journeys programme; *Faster, Higher* (2008), commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella and the BFI Southbank Gallery, working with the Olympics Archive held at the British Film Institute; and a Chinese Embassy news and documentary archive in London.

3. *Gate Keepers* explored links between the so-called "non-Western artistic world and the Netherlands", involving "a presentation of (parts of the) archives by invited guests from those regions in the world represented in the Gate Foundation archive as well as those who [were] not"

4. It is much later that I remember the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, founded in 1996 to archive the web itself. Here, I uncover snapshots of the Gate's homepage with the strapline, "The World of Art Has Many Capitals". Infrequent updates (quarterly or sometimes annual) offer a schematic picture of the Foundation's activity between 1999 and 2006. The final update links to a press release, dated 8 September 2006: "The board of directors is very pleased to announce that the collection of the Gate Foundation has been donated to the Van Abbemuseum [VAM] in Eindhoven. The Artists Archive and Art Library will be integrated into the collection of the VAM and therefore will remain accessible to the public. Since the State Secretary for Culture Medy van der Laan decided to stop financial support from the government as of 2006, the board of directors placed all of its energy on keeping the activities of the Gate Foundation alive. During the last months, after many meetings with various institutions, such as the Stedelijk Museum, Wereld Museum, Leiden University, a.o., the Gate Foundation collection [the Artists Archive and Art Library] have finally found a new home in the Van Abbemuseum". <https://web.archive.org/web/20060815082131/http://www.gatefoundation.nl:80/>. Accessed 22 August 2017.

5. IAS (International Institute for Asian Studies) was established by KNAW (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen / the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences), VUA (Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam / Free University of Amsterdam), and RUL (Leiden University) in 1993, now based at Leiden University.

6. Online, the IAS makes available annual reports going back to 2000; it is noted that, "Until cooperation with the Gate Foundation ended in December 2002, the Gate functioned as the Asian Art & Cultures correspondent". https://ias.asia/sites/default/files/IIAS_Annual_Report_2002.pdf Accessed 7 September 2017.

7. The print is by Deborah Aschheim, a US-based artist.

8. "The archive is open to everyone. If any curator wanted to do something with these artists, they are welcome, and they are helped by the staff and myself. The archive is important because it's a collection of reproductions by these artists – many of whom have been neglected by institutions" (Lopez 2001).

9. For Ken Lum, there are 18 items; for Bhupen Khakhar, 10; for Hong Hao, 5; for Tariq Alvi and Wang Du there are 4; for Ding Yi, 3; and for Yee-Ling Tang and Sikay Tang, there are none. Though Tang's name does turn up on a Gate flyer among the uncatalogued boxes, for a project called *Archives: On the Index*.

10. Ang cites Havana as a key moment that "changed my entire outlook... that made me radically change my practice about a year later". Conversation with the artist, VAM, 13 July 2017.

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