



**CIRCLING THE ARCHIVE**

DIDEM PEKÜN AND SUSAN PUI SAN LOK /  
LOK PUI SAN IN CONVERSATION  
WITH NICK AIKENS

15 NOVEMBER 2021

NICK

Didem and susan, could you talk about your work with archives and how that then got transformed when thinking about *Disturbed Earth* and *REWIND/REPLAY*?<sup>1</sup>

DIDEM

It was essential for me to consider how to deal with this topic ethically, emotionally and representationally. This film stems from *Araf* (2018), which was my previous film on Bosnia. Following *Araf*, I received an award from the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, the Visegrad Grant, which gave me access to vast amounts of documents on the war in Bosnia and the Srebrenica genocide, including transcripts of UN and NATO meetings gathered by David Rohde. I digitised and logged this material with a brilliant team of four student assistants (Nikola Gajic, Stefan Simanic, Mila Bajic, Ivan Tranfić). It was pedantic, slow, obsessive work, which I think I initially did out of a desire to gain time, to figure out what the hell to do, but also so that

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1 This conversation took place before the 'Rewinding Internationalism', Network Aalst, 19th February - 1st May 2022. At the Van Abbemuseum a second version of susan pui san lok/lok pui san's *REWIND/REPLAY* was presented.

the archive could become accessible to others. After the digitising, I had the idea of making the archive speak in a *scripted* performance of bureaucracy, as it were. We had a year and a half period of scriptwriting back and forth with Paris, Deniz and Barış.<sup>2</sup> And the script is essentially voicing those documents, an attempt to animate them and see how the UN/NATO think. It was going to be a feature film and then the pandemic happened. Right before the lockdown, we extracted part of the script and shot that material in one day, as a rehearsal. At the end I used no archival material at all in the film. For various reasons – from issues of rights, to ethics, to questions of power [regarding] who holds the rights to the archive and allows access, etc. At some point I decided, 'I've seen what I needed to see. I've read, I've digitised, I've done my work. I delivered it back to its owner, and now I would like to do something *freely*.'

Reading Rebecka Katz Thor's archival book *Beyond the Witness: Holocaust Representation and the Testimony of Images* (2018), how she conceptualises archival work on such

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2 Barış Uygur and Deniz Aslan are the script writers and Paris Helene Furst has been a vital part of the film – from archival research and scripting process to the shoot. Paris was the associate producer, with Dilara Catak.

atrocities, as witness to the event, was important for me. She wrote the book as the last survivors of the Holocaust were dying. For her, archives became the witnesses. So I was a witness to the witness of Srebrenica, having seen the material. And I thought, 'I don't need to go through mechanisms of power or questions of representation. I can fold it, make it something else.' I distilled from the archive the notion of bureaucratic incompetence.

#### SUSAN

When I first encountered the Gate Foundation<sup>3</sup> archive in 2016, there was not so much an absence of material, but an absence of means to navigate it. The Gate had come to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 2006 in a state of disarray. Some of it had been integrated into the Van Abbe library and collection – artist files, books – but many boxes had remained unsorted. I sampled the institutional files and soon found that there was no order, and thus no way to move through it, except by a series of arbitrary decisions.

Searching remotely, online, I found one short article – an interview with the second director of the

Gate Foundation, Sebastian Lopez,<sup>4</sup> in *Art Asia Pacific*, which mentioned nine Asian artists and presented the purpose of the Gate in terms of researching and programming work by 'Dutch and European artists of colour' and 'from other continents'. One of the artists, Tiong Ang, happened to be someone I'd met about a year earlier in Guangzhou. And Tiong turned out to be the most well-represented of the nine across both the catalogued aspects of the Gate archive and the wider Van Abbe collection, as well as turning up regularly in the uncatalogued boxes of ephemera. Pursuing these particular traces I started feeling a bit like a stalker. This touches on what you were saying earlier about ethics, emotions and representation. So many questions were thrown up by the conditions of the materials inherited by the Van Abbe – the lack of care – and what it meant for the Van Abbe to have 'rescued' or 'saved' this archive from the skip.

#### NICK

As a result of your project and realising the chaos of the archive, the material was catalogued and organised as much as it could be by two researchers, Michael

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3 The Gate Foundation was established in 1988 in Amsterdam to foreground artists from Asia to a European public.

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4 Els van der Plas was the founding director of the Gate Foundation; Lopez took up the role in 1997.

Karabinos and Jessica de Abreu. I then invited you back, within the context of the *Rewinding Internationalism* project, to work with the material again. Rather than go back in and either look for Tiong Ang or look for some of the artists that you couldn't locate before, you decided to do something else.

SUSAN

Yes. By late 2019 there an inventory, but by early 2020... well, no-one was going anywhere, so my return to the Gate had to be remote. The archive was now catalogued but remained analogue, so I made another 'arbitrary decision' – to focus on a series of VHS tapes and audio cassettes that remained uncatalogued and inaccessible, many missing labels and context. After digitising about 20 of each and skimming the audio and the video material for a sense of their contents, two strands of material started to emerge. The video material included a lot of men sitting around tables, talking about art. We listened to some of it together, Nick, and couldn't help but be amused by the familiarity of some of the language – the terms, the framing of debates around 'cultural exchange' and how to 'do' the 'international' in a way that 'includes' the 'non-Western'. A lot of these were conversations happening in the 1990s, weren't they?

NICK

But, depressingly, they could also have been last week.

SUSAN

There were also two mixtapes with about 20 songs between them, spanning 3 decades. And we were speculating: was each song chosen with care to speak to a significant moment in the foundation's history? Or did someone just forget to put the tapes back into the glove compartment of their car?

What I decided to do was devise two scripts or scores based on these two strands of material, and right now I'm focusing on the songs, lifting lyrics from each to construct these quite surreal, oblique 'conversations'. The idea is that these potential 'conversations' can be played out repeatedly, rehearsed ad infinitum, never finished and never settling on a single interpretation. We don't know the significance of the tapes or otherwise, but we can invent significance around them. After all, why should one assume that the tapes of men sitting around talking about art are any more important than the tapes full of pop songs?

DIDEM

This dialogue between vastly different materials gives us some clues as to a non-methodology of working with an

archive. Because it's a series of arbitrary decisions. We don't quite know where we are going with it apart from disturbing ourselves and trying to draw something out. Then there are the absences in the archive: the absence of a narrative, the absence of direction, the absence of a history. With the archive we try to reinscribe an absent history. susan, you mentioned one article and there is always one entry point that can spark something. In this tunnel of bizarre decisions, disturbances, searching, there is one thing that ignites it. For me, it was Kofi Annan's apology, which is the basis for the ending part the film.

NICK

I would like to speak about the relationship to representation that is operative in both of the works and both of these very different archives.

DIDEM

Looking at Srebrenica is impossible. You can't look at it. It's too much, but it did happen. And I have witnessed it, because of this archive. I felt like I had to respond to the vast amount of material I have seen. I couldn't show it. Rather, I turned my attention to the wider question of bureaucratic incompetence. My critique was, 'how could such a horror still

happen?' It could have been avoided. And what's more, it is still happening, in the case of Syria or the Cop 26 meeting in Glasgow last week: these are more examples of the fiascos of bureaucratic incompetence with catastrophic human consequences. This was the only place that I felt I could speak, not at the level of representation.

Similar to what I did in *Araf*, I removed the words Bosnia and Srebrenica from the script. I feel too much respect to this historical event, the Srebrenica genocide, to use these words in an artistic process – what happened in Srebrenica is real and it is horrific. I would like to pinpoint that horror, but not make light of it by using those words in a theatrical fashion. But also, to zoom in on the historical repetition of horror: it was indeed in Srebrenica, but it also happened, and continues to happen elsewhere.

SUSAN

I'm not interested in the archive as a concrete entity to be revered. I'm interested in the intangible as well as material elements that don't fit anywhere, that escape the archive's perceived order and test its value(s). I'm interested in drawing out the fundamental incoherence, or the fundamentally problematic relationships and

relations, that enable the archive to come into being. And why shouldn't song lyrics be the raw material for that – for imagining a series of encounters in or out of the archive that are very far from literal or representative? Why shouldn't this material potentially yield insights or glimpses into what relationships might be inferred through other parts of the archive? Ultimately the aim is to de-fetishise and de-monumentalise the archive; to light a fire underneath it; to let it smoke, and attempt to read its signals.

NICK

In both of the works there is a very porous relationship between the history you are beginning with and a clear frustration, anger or depression, that certain processes and structures are still operative. It's not only about how to avoid representing what was happening then, but in scrambling it, in speculating with it, in really deliberately not being true to it, you seem to want to push back against where things are now. Here 'rewinding' seems to be a political choice driven by the conditions of the present.

DIDEM

Maybe the anger, that frustration that comes from both of us is the fact that the things that created these archives

are still there. I think rewinding alludes to a sense of patterns repeating themselves.

SUSAN

You talked about being a neighbour to historical and contemporary events whose legacies continue, and also the impossibility of looking at them. Trinh T. Minh-ha<sup>5</sup> talks about 'speaking nearby'; the resistance to representation is about not speaking for, not speaking about, but speaking with, and placing yourself in proximity. If you allow yourself to be close you are admitting to not being able to see all, to be above, or to see things in their entirety.

There's something in your film, *Didem*, about how the eye of the camera assumes an almost vulture-like attention as it circles. This circling might be read as relentless scrutinising, and there's no optimum vantage point, each position presents an equally obtuse view. And it underlines the fact that they are going around in circles. But there's something else about that proximity and circling which seems to be about giving over to a different kind of attention that requires time.

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5 Trinh T. Minh-ha (1952, Hanoi) is a filmmaker, writer, literary theorist, composer and professor.

In *REWIND/REPLAY* I've composed something relatively quickly, but the idea is that it requires time to play out indefinitely. So the slowness and the circling, for me, is like the back and forth of your writing of the script for *Disturbed Earth*, but it's coming after the words have landed, as opposed to before.

NICK

Both works deploy the form of the rehearsal as strategies for resisting representation, for not fixing meaning. For both of you it seems it serves as a method to work towards something, without ever arriving at the thing.

DIDEM

The idea of the rehearsal is multiple. It was a practical solution because we had one day to shoot and I needed to make this film otherwise I felt it was going to bury me. But also the concept of the rehearsal allows a different relationship with the source material. As I mentioned, we removed specific references to Srebrenica as a device to gain distance. In this 'rehearsal' you see that the kitchen is open. We see the cast in the background, we see the actors' scripts. So it is rehearsing a meeting, that is very clearly constructed and in process. This processual method was a strategy to approach the material and look at it.

Like susan, I also would like to refer to Minh-ha, the aim was to speak next to it, not on or about it.

NICK

The role of the music by David Lang turns *Disturbed Earth* into a highly choreographed, staged piece. It has an operatic feel to it. The relationship between the music, the script and this circular camera work is fundamental to the film. Music, susan, is one of your starting points. But more than that, the format or the methodology of the score, and the sonic are deployed as a counter device to organising principles of the archive and, again, systems of representation.

SUSAN

Treating the voice musically or sonically is a way to distance from the idea of the voice as location of truth. There's the question of who speaks, whose voices are elevated and audible or not, and how to put voices into parentheses, in a way: to question their truths, their authority. If you heard the words in the script/score in the context of the songs, you'd be able to place them immediately. They belong mostly to white male Western European or American songwriters. They're so recognisable and it's so hard to get at, or imagine what they could mean, other-

wise - how they might be subverted - until you 'Laura Mulvey' them and disassociate the visual narrative from the soundtrack, or rather the text from the music. If you separate the familiar melody and the voice that sings it from the words, the words can take off and do something else. The voices become instruments for folding possible fictions together, but they are also instruments for folding potential truths.

#### DIDEM

We edited the film (with editor Eytan Ipeker) with David Lang's music, which David was very happy about. And then, Fatih Ragbet, the sound designer with whom I have worked with for many years, did incredibly detailed work in creating what was not seen on the screen or the set. The screen, the performance of the bureaucrats, operates in proximity to the horror event. The sounds we designed signal the immensity of the mistakes they are making, which we are not seeing. The music becomes the operatic tragedy of the event, and as operas do, gives it a historical, timeless feel. The lyrics of the piece by Lang, called 'Again', also echoes the film's wider theme, that of the cyclical nature of events repeating themselves, which runs throughout my work, running back from *of dice and men* (2011-16) to *Araf* (2018) to *Disturbed Earth* (2021).

## SITUATED INTERNATIONALISMS

SARA BURAYA BONED IN  
CONVERSATION WITH NICK AIKENS