

The Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong

The Archivist



One early morning, I flew from Jakarta to Hong Kong expecting it, for some reason, to be similar to Singapore. Yet while the center of Singapore is basically one huge mall, Hong Kong has plenty of exciting small places: cafes, restaurants, antique shops and art galleries. I spent a week walking around and taking buses, trams and metros in this skyscraper city (there are more skyscrapers in Hong Kong than on Manhattan). And as we know, traveling can offer opportunities to meet the unexpected.

Roy Voragen

FOR ME, ART IS A GATEWAY to sheer endless possibilities, and Hong Kong has plentiful art galleries. Many are commercial places, of which Gagorian Gallery is one. This gallery has eleven exhibition spaces around the globe and at their Hong Kong branch there was a show with work by well-known painter Zeng Fanzhi from Mainland China. Extremely skillful, yet not necessarily very interesting an exhibition.

Upper Station and Blindspot photography galleries are better examples of more fascinating art spaces.¹ And then, of course, you have the Asia Art Archive (AAA), where I met researcher Janet Chan for a cup of coffee, a chat and a tour through the hospitable public library and workspace on Hollywood Road;² in a city that was decolonized from the British empire without becoming an independent state, as it is now a Special Administrative Region of China, street names are only one of the few visible reminders of its colonial past.

Urban geographer Carolyn Cartier claims that Hong Kong is displaced from our thinking by an often-repeated cliché that it is in fact a cultural desert.³ Well, AAA has, over the past decade, not only not internalized this 'idea of placism' or 'place othering',⁴ it actually tries to create awareness and appreciation for the richness and diversity of contemporary art practices by collecting, archiving, conserving and disseminating materials, and by instigating research on contemporary art in Hong Kong in particular, and Asia in general. "AAA's collection is a dynamic, growing body of material intended to reflect contemporary artistic practice and developments of Asia within an international context."⁵

AAA was founded in 2000 by Claire Hsu, Johnson Chang and Ronald Arculli. Hsu completed her graduate studies in art history at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies; whilst working on her final thesis she realized how difficult it was to access information on contemporary art in Asia. After graduation, she worked at Hanart TZ Gallery, founded in 1983 and owned by Johnson Chang. He encouraged her to start AAA.⁶

During the first few years, AAA focused on Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China; in more recent years, AAA has expanded its collection with materials from other Asian countries. However, the bulk of AAA's collection is still composed of materials from the first three locations, whilst it encourages further research by collecting raw and primary materials.

The Archive has started to digitize materials and the website functions as a portal to the collection. While AAA's physical

General Collection amounts to 34,000 records, AAA's digital collection includes hundreds of thousands of records.⁷ In addition, there are numerous Special Collections, each comprising thousands of files. Yearly, the Archive's physical space is visited by 2,000 or so people, of whom a third come from abroad. Another 14,000 attend public events organized by AAA; and the website is visited by approximately 200,000 people annually. The website aims at becoming a discursive platform: "we hope to provide a space that makes conversation possible beyond our physical location," explained Claire Hsu. However, language and internet access could be unfortunate barriers. Another way of opening up AAA's collection is through educational programs; since 2009 AAA has been conducting the 'Learning Labs' for high school students and their teachers, to show how contemporary art is not a luxury but that it can be experienced and appreciated in everyday life. "At the core of its mission is AAA's commitment to create a collection belonging to the public."⁸

Artists and researchers also form an essential part of AAA's audience. The Archive has developed a residency program for artists, and, since 2005, offers a biannual research grant of 10,000 US dollars for researchers. Artists-in-residence and researchers not only bring in new material, they also importantly identify gaps in the existing collection, and offer new interpretations of the collection. For artists, the residency program offers an opportunity to work outside their comfort zone. One of the residents, Wong Wai Yin, raised some interesting points during her recent residency: "what is 'Asia'; what criteria should be used to vet materials for the Archive; what unavoidable judgments the Archive must make; the preferences of the researcher [...]"⁹ Claire Hsu added: "AAA's collection is a valuable resource for curators planning their next exhibitions, professors designing courses of study, and students conducting research. It is an independent source of information for collectors and auction houses. And it is a source of inspiration to artists and theorists."

Besides facilitating research, the Archive has had an in-house researcher since 2002, and it has established research posts to map developments and collect materials in the following cities: Taipei (since 2002), Beijing (since 2003), Bangkok (since 2005), Seoul (since 2005), Tokyo (since 2005), Singapore (2005-2006), Yokohama (2007-2008), Manila (since 2007), New Delhi (2007), Mumbai (2008) and Lahore (2007-2008).

AAA also organizes exhibitions, workshops, conferences and publications in collaboration with other organizations in Hong Kong and elsewhere: MoMA, Guggenheim, the Substation

(an independent art space in Singapore), and universities, museums and art spaces in Hong Kong. At the recent art fair Art HK11, AAA had a booth and organized discussions. In collaboration with the Hong Kong Museum of Art, AAA organized a series of lectures on contemporary art in Hong Kong. And in 2007, in collaboration with art space 1a, the Archive organized 'Talkover/Handover – Dialogues on HK Art 10 Years After 1997', which was a research and exhibition project to create criticism of post-1997 art practices in Hong Kong. John Batten, though, claims that "the research intentions of the exhibition [were] problematic. The handover was a political event with social ramifications – and there [was] just not enough politics" at the exhibition, for which he blames the artists and not the curators and organizers from 1a and AAA.¹⁰

The three terms that make up AAA's name – 'Asia', 'Art' and 'Archive' – are actually all complicated terms. For AAA, Asia is not so much a continent, but it concerns artists working in Asia (including non-Asians) and artists from Asia working outside Asia. Claire Hsu writes: "Asia is the location in which AAA is physically situated. [...] However,] AAA is not about individual national agendas, but about creating a platform from which to understand our neighbors and contemporaries."¹¹ How to archive when 'Asia' and 'art' are only loosely – instinctively – defined by AAA? And to archive for whom? Curating an archive on contemporary art requires raising the matter of legitimacy: to collect and disseminate what, from and to whom, in what languages? Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, curatorial consultant for the Lopez Museum and a faculty member of the University of the Philippines, Department of Art Studies, adds: "Given the attention that Asia is indeed getting, there is no denying the hunger for information on it. Yet this constantly brings up the problem of what kind of information is in fact seeping through."¹²

What (or where) is Asia? Is Asia a geographic location (a continent)? Or is it a shifting, complex amalgam of ideas? Asia can no longer be defined from the outside, i.e., from a European perspective it is merely not-Europe.¹³ Lee Weng Choy, former artistic co-director of the Substation and AAA's Academic Advisor, states that "'Asian' as an adjective often characterizes something as Asian in its essence [...]. Whereas the term 'Asia' [...] signifies a deliberately complex, contested and constructed site."¹⁴ Instead of seeing 'Asia' as an essence – cultural, geographic or otherwise – Lee Weng Choy focuses on the always shifting discursive practices in and on Asia.

If we look at AAA's physical General Collection,¹⁵ we see that most contents are related to China and Hong Kong (8,389 and 7,355 respectively); contents related to other countries

All photos courtesy of AAA



include Japan (3,957), Taiwan (3,458), India (2,048), Korea (1,939), Singapore (1,652), Philippines (1,514), Thailand (1,352), Indonesia (1,090), Vietnam (722), Malaysia (700), Pakistan (416), Macau (382), Myanmar (233), Bangladesh (203), Cambodia (102), Laos (69), Nepal (60) and Bhutan (27). Now it seems as if Singapore is larger than Indonesia, for example. But beside the imbalances in the collection, there are also lacuna: no contents relate to former Soviet Union countries or countries from the Middle East. It is also interesting to note that the most dominant language of the materials is English (20,497 contents), with Chinese languages on distant second and third places (respectively 8,014 and 3,366). Three more European languages are present in the collection: French, German and Portuguese (Indonesian only relates to 267 contents).¹⁶ This more than likely indicates lacuna within these above mentioned country collections as well, as publications published in English are more likely to be collected.

And what is contemporary art? Pose this question to a hundred different curators and art critics from around the globe and we end up with as many different answers.¹⁷ The art journal *e-flux* dedicated a book to this question, and each of the thirteen contributors offered very different answers. German art critic Boris Groys, one of these contributors, claims that contemporary art is characterized by doubt and indecision, because we lost the hopes and dreams of modernism, which he equates with modernity and modernization.¹⁸ If this sounds like German *Angst*, Indian Susanda K. Sanyal concurs in a recent issue of the magazine *Art Etc.*: "Art now responds to a hybrid, dystopian world, where styles, isms, and collective beliefs in the power of art are obsolete."¹⁹ While Indonesian art critic and curator Jim Supangkat claims that anti-modernism is no longer relevant,²⁰ the origin of contemporary art as a category is a widespread dissatisfaction with the universal pretensions of modernism without respecting the otherness of art practiced outside the West.

How much more cosmopolitan is the contemporary compared to the modernist art world? Art from the West is more parochial; an artist living and working in London can without harming her or his career easily ignore whatever happens in Asia, while an artist from Bandung has to familiarize her- or himself with what is happening in London (perhaps not as thoroughly as with what is happening in Bandung, but still). Moreover, for an artist from Bandung it is considered an honor to have her or his work exhibited in London (also for financial reasons), and not the other way around, generally speaking. Worse, art from Asia shown in the West is not shown alongside Western art, but is grouped according to nationality,²¹ supposedly so Westerners can learn something about Asian cultures (which we do not directly demand from, say, Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God*).²²

And why do we hardly ever speak of contemporary Western (or American or Belgium) art, while we do often speak of contemporary Asian (or Chinese or Korean) art? It is a good way to keep non-Western artists in their place: a subcategory for subaltern art.²³ In her discussion of developments in contemporary Chinese art, Carol Yinghua Lu states that "the question how actual contemporary art practice in China is relevant and valuable to that of the Western world remains unanswered."²⁴ But for whom is this a relevant question? This might not be a very relevant question for most Chinese artists.²⁵ Anyway, this question can only be answered in the West. There is no reason, though, to make final judgments of value dependent on the generosity of the West.

Economic and political self-confidence in Asia has increased, and the same can be said of cultural self-confidence. The headquarters of the magazine *Art Asia Pacific* has recently moved from New York to Hong Kong.²⁶ Biennales in Asia increasingly start to look at their own hinterland instead of looking for involvement and re-confirmation from the West. And AAA is another shining example.

What constitutes an archive of contemporary art? A 'living' archive – as AAA collects material on contemporary art – is impossible to complete, and as such it is a rather Sisyphean task.²⁷ Of AAA's collection, 76.29% was published over the past ten years.²⁸ While libraries and archives in the West are connected to major institutions, such as museums or universities, and were often born as an afterthought, AAA is not only unique in the sense that it is independent, it is also distinctive in that it is forward looking.²⁹ This uniqueness comes at a price, Lee Weng Choy claims that AAA "cannot rely on existing models to justify their curation; they have to find their own form of legitimization."³⁰ Collecting inevitably requires selecting some, and not other, materials. The present can be at times rather overwhelming, so the question is then how to decide what is or could become significant. AAA's researchers actively search for new materials, but often materials are donated. The founding collection, for example, was donated by Hanart TZ Gallery, which specializes in Chinese art.³¹

AAA is more than an archive, it is a place to meet and exchange thoughts about contemporary art.³² AAA sees itself as a 'discursive space',³³ which begs the question: what are the relationships between an archive as 'discursive space' and actual art practices across Asia? Or, to put it another way, how does, on the one hand, the intertextuality of materials on contemporary art in Asia relate to, on the other hand, the many different practices of visual arts in Asia? Perhaps the relationship could be viewed as – potentially – supporting processes of validation of contemporary art practices in Hong Kong in particular, and across Asia in general, in the absence of art museums, which traditionally perform that role in the West (such as MoMa in New York). So writes Claire Hsu that AAA "has evolved into a space that offers the tools to enrich and complicate the way in which [...] local and regional [art] histories are told and accessed." And, she continues, AAA "has an important role to play in enriching, complicating, and challenging prevailing global narratives about contemporary Asian art."³⁴

AAA, though, does not have the ambition to have a complete archive on contemporary art in Asia. As indicated above, a 'living' record cannot be completed. But the Archive also has practical reasons for this ambition; firstly, its own spatial constraints (real estate is extremely expensive in Hong Kong); secondly, AAA does not want to duplicate what has been collected elsewhere. AAA, therefore, aims to collaborate with archives elsewhere throughout the region, such as the Indonesian Visual Art Archive in Yogyakarta.³⁵

I left this city I only knew from the cinema – especially the Wong Kar-wai movies, including *Chungking Express* (set in the city's concrete jungle) and *Happy Together* – but now I also know it as the city that can love the arts passionately and ambitiously.

Roy Voragen is a Bandung-based writer, art critic and co-founder of Roma ARTS; he can be contacted at fatumbrutum.blogspot.com. For more information on Asia Art Archive see www.aaa.org.hk

Notes

- 1 See <http://theupperstation.com> and www.blindspotgallery.com. In the latter gallery I saw RongRong & inri's wonderful retrospective exhibition 'Three Begets Ten Thousand Things'; my review: "Three Begets Ten Thousand Things," *Asia Views/Tempo Magazine*, November 16-22, 2011, 24-6.
- 2 AAA's "current location is generously sponsored by Sino Land and Kerry Properties. As the organization grows, we cannot rely on the eternal support of our current landlords, and as we run out of space, we are seeking a permanent home to meet our long term needs." Claire Hsu, email 9-1-12.
- 3 Carolyn Cartier, "Culture and the City: Hong Kong, 1997-2007," *The China Review* 8, no.1 (2008): 59-83; <http://tinyurl.com/74g9tlu> (accessed 27-12-2011).
- 4 In an email (20-12-2011), Cartier compares 'placism' to racism, perhaps orientalism is a more apt comparison; internalized orientalism is then seeing oneself as the exotic other.
- 5 Claire Hsu, email 9-1-12.
- 6 See www.hanart.com.
- 7 The AAA General Collection is catalogued, indexed and searchable online <http://tinyurl.com/7vgdjm8> (accessed 25-1-2012).
- 8 *Asia Art Archive Ten Years, 2000-2010* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2010), 29.
- 9 See <http://tinyurl.com/7b3t9j6> (accessed 27-12-2011).
- 10 See <http://tinyurl.com/6mt5jdm> and <http://tinyurl.com/7xpowa> (accessed 20-12-2011).
- 11 Claire Hsu, email 9-1-12.
- 12 Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, "Speakeasy"; <http://tinyurl.com/7hln8w8> (accessed 3-1-2012).
- 13 See for example, Goenawan Mohamad, "Of Borders, Death and Footprints," in *Overlapping Territories, Asian Voices on Culture and Civilization*, Bambang Sugiharto and Roy Voragen (eds.) Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming; <http://tinyurl.com/78loyov> > (accessed 3-1-2012). Goenawan Mohamad is a well-known poet in Indonesia.
- 14 Lee Weng Choy, "Criticism and 'the essence of contemporary Asian art,'" <http://tinyurl.com/6pm2w9k> (accessed on 3-1-2012).
- 15 *Asia Art Archive Ten Years*, 42.

16 *Asia Art Archive Ten Years*, 43.

17 "AAA believes it is important to stay up to date with the different discussions happening around the definition of the contemporary and is in fact currently conducting a survey with over 200 professionals in the field [...]. The interviews will be published on our new website later this year." Claire Hsu, email 9-1-12.

18 Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle (eds.) New York: Sternberg Press/e-flux, 2010. There is actually no consensus among art historians what is and what is not modernism, let alone how it relates to modernity and modernization, postmodernism and postmodernity, and contemporary art.

19 Susanda K. Sanyal, "Sex, Culture and Otherness: Two (W)edges in Kolkata's Art," *Art Etc.* 4, no.4 (December 2011), 46. Many curators and art critics in Asia are trained in the West, which could be problematic if they use theories that do not apply to their home societies. For example, many curators and art critics in the West claim that their societies are in crisis, of which flux is an assumed symptom. Artists, curators and art critics in Asia should then be at an advantage, as flux could be considered a normal feature of their societies.

20 Jim Supangkat, "Indonesia in Contemporary Art Discourses," in *Contemporaneity, Contemporary Art in Indonesia* (Shanghai: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010), 18.

21 The recent 'Indonesian Eye' exhibition at Saatchi Gallery is an example. My review: "Indonesian Eye: New Perspectives," *the Pocket Arts Guide* 24 (October 2001): 22-7; <http://tinyurl.com/6s2sd34> (accessed 4-1-2012).

22 Even worse, sometimes contemporary art from Asia is shown in ethnographic museums, which is condescending. For example, Indonesian artists Heri Dono and Oscar Motuloh had exhibitions in the Tropenmuseum recently (ethnographic museum in Amsterdam); <http://tinyurl.com/7zme4qp> and <http://tinyurl.com/7vxho9> (accessed on 23-1-2012). Perhaps this is because many Westerners think they live in post-traditional societies. See Anthony Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society," in *Reflexive Modernization, Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

23 Joan Kee, "A Call for a Normalized Art History," <http://tinyurl.com/7oe4mmn> (accessed 3-1-2012). Joan Kee is AAA's Academic Advisor and an art historian.

24 Carol Yinghua Lu, "Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds," *e-flux* 11 (December 2009): 1-9; <http://tinyurl.com/7q29s2a> (accessed 3-1-2012).

25 To explain this with an analogy: recent news reported that Brazil's GDP is now higher than that of the UK, the news was the comparison and not that Brazil increased its GDP.

26 *Art Asia Pacific* chief editor, Elaine Ng, was also mentored by the founder of Hanart TZ Gallery. See www.artasiapacific.com. Susan Acret writes: "to assume that all Chinese, Japanese or Indonesian readers are tuned into, and interested in the 'contemporary Asian' – largely a Western creation – is misleading. [...] magazine's psychological heart is dictated by its physical home [...]." Susan Acret, "Publishing and Contemporary Asian Art," <http://tinyurl.com/73jaqzy> (accessed 8-1-2012). Susan Acret is an art critic and former editor of *Art Asia Pacific*.

27 Jane DeBoise, Chairwoman of the Board of Directors, claims: "One of AAA's goals is to develop and maintain the most comprehensive and relevant collection of research materials about contemporary art in Asia. We have largely accomplished that goal." *Asia Art Archive Ten Years*, 2. Claire Hsu explains: "one of our main goals will be to generate new research based on the collection. AAA does not want to be solely about accumulation but also about research, interpretation, and dissemination. [...] While AAA will continue to grow the general collection horizontally, the next decade will see a shift towards a more vertical approach – expanding special collections and building up deeper pockets of material around specific subjects or areas. A road map will be developed to clearly identify these areas of focus based on AAA's current collection strengths and gaps. [...] We will also be allocating resources towards the interpretation of the collection and the production of new readings in the field with the eventual goal of becoming an important research platform for contemporary art from the region." Claire Hsu, email 9-1-12.

28 *Asia Art Archive Ten Years*, 43.

29 Huang Yin, "The Asia Art Archive: Keeping the Present for the Future," *Orientations* 36, no.5 (2005), 69.

30 Lee Weng Choy, "Tomorrow's Local Library: The Asia Art Archive in Context," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Art* 4, no.4 (2005), 20.

31 Even AAA has, as Stuart Hall puts it, a 'pre-history', i.e., "prior conditions of existence." Stuart Hall, "Constituting a Voice," *Third Text* 15, no.54 (Spring 2001), 89.

32 Susan Acret, "An Archive Of Visions," *Asian Art News* 13, no.5 (2003), 69.

33 *Asia Art Archive Ten Years*, 28. Michel Foucault defines the archive as "the accumulated existence of discourses" or "the system of discursivity."

34 *Asia Art Archive Ten Years*, 6 and 8.

35 See www.ivaa-online.org. AAA also collaborates with ARTstor, a New York-based digital image library for the arts and sciences; see www.artstor.org.

