

#OpenCurating

# ARCHIVE AS METHOD: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHANTAL WONG, HAMMAD NASAR AND LYDIA NGAI

*Head of Strategy & Special Projects, Head of Research & Programmes,  
and Head Librarian at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong*

BY LATITUDES



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Chantal Wong  
Hammad Nasar  
Lydia Ngai



01 Comprising 85% donated materials, the Archive is a community effort that has grown from a single bookshelf in 2000 to a collection of over 37,000 records.  
Courtesy AAA

\* This and following two quotations from [www.aaa.org.hk/About/Overview](http://www.aaa.org.hk/About/Overview)

ASIA ART ARCHIVE (AAA) WAS FOUNDED IN 2000 with the mission of documenting, securing and making easily available information on the history of contemporary art in Asia within an international context. Based in the Sheung Wan district of Hong Kong, the non-profit organisation holds hundreds of thousands of physical and digital items. AAA aims to stimulate dialogue and critical thinking about how the region's art histories are told and to "facilitate understanding, research, and writing in the field, enrich existing global narratives, and re-imagine the role of the archive".\* Through its website – [aaa.org.hk](http://aaa.org.hk) – AAA offers access to a wealth of digital material including scanned images, correspondence, artists' personal documents, audio and video of performance art, artist talks, lectures, and events. A broad range of initiatives including the journal *Field Notes*, research grants, residencies, symposia, exhibitions and teaching workshops address the core of AAA's commitment "to create a collection belonging to the public, existing not in an enclosed space, but in a space that is open and productive, generating new ideas and works that continually reshape the Archive itself".

**Latitudes:** Asia Art Archive shares some features of "the commons" in that it is an open and freely accessible resource. Furthermore, AAA is counteracting the notion of scarcity by digitising documents and putting them online, and as you describe, "AAA's activities ... are not about ownership; the Archive believes in preservation through sharing". Yet you obviously have to make critical judgements about what are worthwhile resources to collect and share in the first place. What do you think is happening to the cultural institution's traditional role as a "gate-keeper" of knowledge in this respect?

**Chantal Wong:** The commons is actually a model which we referred to when developing our copyright guidelines. So yes, we do share features. The main difference between us and Creative Commons is that the material covered by CC is necessarily licensed by the authors. A small percentage of what we make available online is created by AAA, but is digitally reproduced and circulated by AAA. As you mentioned, AAA does not insist on keeping original documents – although there is an ongoing internal

Chantal Wong is Head of Strategy and Special Projects at AAA. She was formerly Development Director at Outset Contemporary Art Fund, London.

Share





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discussion around the value of the original – for two main reasons: the privatization and capitalization of archives (American universities buying up vulnerable archives restricting public access to these documents), and the second, pragmatically, the amount of resources necessary for the conservation of this material. If we were to acquire original documents, as an institution, or “gatekeeper”, we would have to critically address the value we would imbue upon the narratives we house.

AAA was founded and constructed as a network, and as a collaborative project. AAA’s content is developed through ongoing conversations with our team, the researchers, advisors, our peers and friends doing field work, and a wide network of curators, academics, critics and thinkers. This ideology is implemented on multiple levels including our database back-end, the mechanism which enables the website to run. Our overseas researchers, based in Delhi, Baroda, Beijing, Manila amongst other locations digitise and upload directly onto the back-end and are encouraged to leave remarks, comments,

02 The AAA library in Hong Kong is a reference library open to the public free of charge, year round, from Monday to Saturday.  
Courtesy AAA

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Hammad Nasar is a curator and writer, and Head of Research and Programmes at AAA. He co-founded the arts organization Green Cardamom, and has curated numerous exhibitions in the US, Europe and Asia.

doubts and annotations in designated data fields – which they choose to make visible for the librarian only or to disclose to the public. This generates a dynamic environment of discussion and dialogue, where ideas or information can be exchanged immediately between the overseas researcher and the team in Hong Kong. As straightforward as this sounds, the archive is usually a top down bureaucratic exercise.

In a similar vein, we have also started to involve external annotators into the enrichment of data sets for each record through the back-end. This means that single or clustered records can be enriched by multiple scholars and experts outside of AAA, from anywhere in the world. For any one item, we can juxtapose a contextualisation or description by a historian, the owner of the archive, and individuals directly related to the document (photographer, author, etc.).

**Hammad Nasar:** You are right to point out the critical judgements we need to make to decide what to digitise. We have no quest for “comprehensiveness” in what we are trying to do. So we have to choose. And our choices are not driven simply (not to say that there is such a thing as a simple choice) by judgements around the material itself. But also around what the material can do. For in the context of Asia with its specific conditions of weak knowledge infrastructure (but also physical infrastructure in many cases) we have to think of *archive* as a verb, as well as a noun. To think about what we can enable, and not just what we can do. To think in terms of the options certain material or programmes open up.

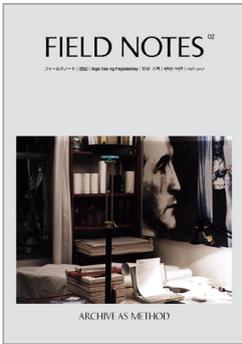
**L:** Do resource users participate in decision-making about what comes into the collection?

**CW:** It is difficult to differentiate between users and collaborators of AAA as the number of rigorous researchers in the field is not huge. We have around thirty advisors whom we are in contact with, and provide feedback in regards to our projects/propositions and some of them are both users and advisors. We have three vague strands of focus which include significant individuals, important spaces and themes which include performance, pedagogy, and so on. All these are prioritised by varying degrees of ephemerality or vulnerability.

Another major factor of consideration is how useful

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*“The ability for scholars to do field work in their living rooms – at least for part of their research needs – is a development of immense promise.”*

03 *Field Notes*, Issue 2,  
“Archive as Method”  
Edited by Chantal Wong  
and Janet Chan  
Cover: Hans Van Dijk’s  
apartment in Beijing  
Photo: Mai Zhixiong  
Courtesy Hu Fang / AAA

they are as a “pressure point” or as “point of inflection”, in other words their potential to reflect upon a number of other parallel or counter phenomena. It is important that what comes into the collection is only a starting point to trigger further debates; they are in no way conclusive.

Which is why the conferences, meetings, and our journal *Field Notes*, are really important platforms to generate these kinds of debates and to catalyse ruptures or more diverse contexts to enrich the collections. We want to extend the parameters of what AAA and its contents are and can be. So in response to your question, it is not a formal democratic process, but an ongoing evolutionary one where the organisation, its dialogue and interactions with its users, publics, advisors, etc., bring to light narratives and opinions that otherwise wouldn’t emerge or be made visible.

**HN:** There is also a desire on our part for others (in particular the academic and scholarly communities) to think of us as a resource for their own projects – for research, for teaching, for speculation. We have a number of our academic advisors who engage us in ongoing dialogues with whatever they are doing in their academic lives and outline trajectories where we can overlap. As a natural extension of this, we see the same kind of desire from research institutes and institutions trying to figure out how to “do global” – where we are much more interested in having ongoing dialogues rather than participating in the sort of list-making activity that a lot of exhibition or collection-driven research can easily slip into.

In some small way – through making primary material available in digital form for free on the web, we are also leaning in against the economics of doing academic research, where scholars have to buy their way out of teaching commitments, fund long and expensive trips to do field work. The ability to do field work in their living rooms – at least for part of their research needs – is a development of immense promise.

**L:** We’re increasingly seeing contemporary art museums engaging beyond the artworks in their care to display and install archival materials and research processes themselves. The merging of collections’ and study-centre databases (as MACBA have recently done) reflects a

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04 Review by Akla Raghuvanshi and Sumita Thapar of "Hundred Years From the NGMA Collection", curated by Geeta Kapur, 1994. AAA began to digitise the personal archives of Delhi-based critic Kapur and artist Vivian Sundaram in 2010. Courtesy AAA

conceptual realignment in which artworks are seen less as isolated objects and more, as Steven ten Thije described in a previous #OpenCurating interview, as "contexts".

Although AAA comes at this from a different trajectory, not being primarily based around display, could you reflect on what its relationship is with this newly porous sense of classification between archive and artwork, and the notion that, rather than being an inherent quality, art might now be produced through the act of selecting and displaying things?

**CW:** AAA's collection contains both archival documents and images of artwork, which is more raises an interesting tension and debate: what is archival material that is

Art critic Geeta Kapur has curated an exhibition of contemporary Indian art that has drawn much flak. *Alka Raghuvanshi and Sumita Thapar report*

## Geeta Kapur stirs up a row

**G**eeta Kapur: Left intellectual. Controversial. Art historian-critic-writer. Baroda school sympathiser. Mouth of a powerful lobby of artists. A powerful member of various selection and purchase committees. Has double standards. Well-read. Knowledgeable. All these mixed opinions and descriptions are by artists whose art she writes about. She has just stirred a hornet's nest with 100 Years of Contemporary Indian Art, an exhibition she has curated for the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

Members of the art community — be it artists or critics, are up in arms over the selection. Let alone her detractors, even some of her 'friends' are unhappy. While nearly all of them are unanimous in defending her independence as a curator, they are equally vociferous about the gaps in the selection both in terms of periods as well as artists.

Such 'her perceived power that few artists are willing to come on record. They cite the instance when artist Anand Padwad had as member of an ICR committee not approved her bid to show on the grounds that as member of that panel herself, she could not be personally benefited. Artists recount how her 'controversial' approach led to her being removed from an artists' board for six months to brand Gajraj 'communal'.

In this instance too, Kapur is member of the NGMA programme advisory committee which comprises of Manjit Bawa, Krishen Khanna, Anjolie Ela Menon, Merinul Kabir, Sandeep Dutta and Geeta Kapur. She has also been a permanent member appointing her to effect it amongst the committee members and appointing her to be a member of the selection panel. She will also be called for putting up the show. The file is in the midst and the amount is yet to be decided. "My vote would not have influenced the decision but I would have borne the brunt," said a member of the panel. "Challenging the myth that a creative person must be an embodiment of courage."

"If the selection had to be made from the gallery's own collection, where was the need to go so far familiar with the collection and could easily have put up a show like what we are doing all this while, instead of bringing in an outsider," they say.

The fact is that a large num-

ber of the paintings have been doing the rounds of earlier exhibitions in the gallery and are not novel. In the absence of a proper, well-thought-out rationale of curation for choosing a particular work, it is not explained. It is no secret that NGMA has bought several works of indifferent quality and this exhibition represents history in the odd-possible way.

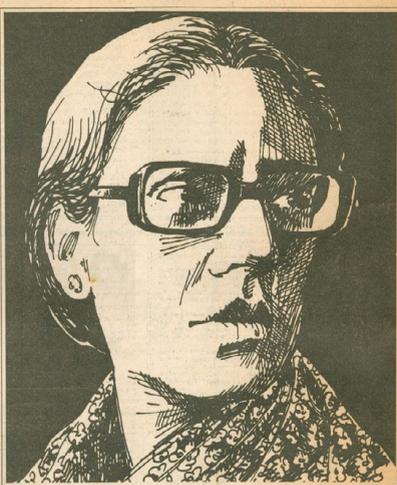
As for the object of all this controversy, Kapur is cryptic: "that what exists in the gallery is an objective fact. I took a lot of trouble for this concept. Writing it and doing it room by room. I am making a statement and it stands on its own. I am leaving myself open to criticism and evaluation."

The universal practice for curators is that a curator does his or her research, writes the format and the final report is submitted to the advisory panel which then studies it and any consequent differences of opinion are conducted over the table. In this case however, no report was made and when the final show opened, there was much hue and cry.

So much so that in a bid to soothe the uproar "gaps in history" were sought to be filled up by augmenting the selection by putting up works of Amarnath Sehgal, Pran Nath Mago, Shanti Dawe, Doshi Prasad Choudhry, Anjolie Ela Menon, Kamal Kishan and Asit Kumar Haldar. This was opposed by Kapur and she is reported to have gone right up to the minister for human resources. Arjun Singh eventually reached the order passed by joint secretary Komal Anand.

Arjun Singh has a categorical about the fact that Indian art has not been protected at this show. "People who see the show are not allowed to know that it has been curated. They will think this is history. Do 90 per cent people understand what curating means? In this case, it has not. Why do we not have a proper cultural policy and the museum will come into the picture. One of his drawings is part of the show." Arjun Singh says.

Veteran critic Sandeep Dutta says, "The show is a total disaster. There are some works that are redundant. Too many Amarnath Sehgal, leading the common view to think that Shanti Mago's paintings are the important painters. The fact is that the most important languages emerged in the 40s and did not owe anything to her. Nor did she influence future artists." Arjun G R Santhosh is disap-



Tampering with history? Controversial art historian-critic Geeta Kapur

proving. He says, "when it comes to national level, there has to be some objectivity. Geeta is prejudiced. The exhibition should have been more properly thought out. She should have done more research and recorded the history of the art movement. Her papers have always been an indication of the Western point of view. For how long are we take the others' point of view?"

Several artists who have figured in the ex-hibition are not represented by their best works. "Most of the top artists' later works are not part of the NGMA collection. Some artists may not have survived the 100 year span, but were important for that particular period and have influenced a whole set of artists from that era. Putting them in a historical perspec-

tion, it is a very good show, though there some very important ones missing." "Now everybody is just going to notice who's missing and one who thinks that the show is a classed and unfair, she feels that the selection is a matter is a personal choice of the curator." This is not an EA's annual exhibition where there has to be a quota. "You'll always have somebody left out — it is the curator's choice. It is an excellent exhibition with some never seen before paintings," she says.

Sharma opines that Kapur is a very knowledgeable and formidable critic and has the reputation of being the best qualified to comment on Indian contemporary art. "The whole controversy is in a very bad taste — to add some paintings later and then remove them is a very sad thing to happen. Now, all that people are going to remember of this exhibition is this. Each time something like this happens, the art community gets a black mark — that they keep fighting amongst themselves," she comments.

Art critic Juliet Reynolds feels that anybody's task in such a situation has to be ideological and aesthetic taste. Geeta Kapur has the right balance the viewpoint, we can argue against the joint secretary's order. The controversy would happen if Kapur was doing her job. The artists never think of the community as a whole. Whoever is not included, makes a selection. Kapur has tremendous knowledge and potential, but she has indulged in programs and is known to her strong affinities," she says.

Artist Jai Zarela feels that anybody who selects has to be biased. "Geeta Kapur is from Baroda — hence the obvious focus on Baroda. She has a closed mind and a closed circle of associates." Choudhury adds that personal likes and dislikes are bound to happen. "But as an art critic, the selection must depend on more than just liking a piece of art. What is it that it represents has to be seen. This is very necessary." Quoting Amarnath Sehgal, he also questions why Kapur was made the curator at a time when Krishna Chatterya was alive and

working. He questions the very need and occasion that called for this exhibition. "There was no writing-up at all that explained what they are putting up and why." Kapur's lack of including in group.

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Apart from the ones ignored, some artists with the halo of dead stars were created to a point they would not have been had they been alive. "The artist is the most important. Then the curator is the most important. The paintings are juxtaposed in a particular manner with a purpose. But that purpose is not explained," says Jain. Practically all invites at the opening had not received invitations, but had been invited over the telephone by Vivian Sundaram. No catalogue has been printed either. Apart from the advisory panel, Kapur is also member of purchase committee of the NGMA. In the first meeting Kapur is reported to have said that the chairman should be neutralised. When she was told that the constitution did not permit it, she is said to have mooted a proposal that the Rs 30 lakh budget should be divided among the six members of the panel to make the purchases.

When this was disallowed for obvious reasons, she wanted the panel to visit studios of artists. She produced the list of artists and their studios. When this was not agreed upon by the other members, both Kapur and another Baroda artist Akbar Padmasree quit.

The fact that Kapur wields a lot of clout in the Department of Culture is evident by the fact that the joint secretary's order was repealed. A number of artists are scared of incurring her wrath as she holds the strings of government patronage. Kapur is also a member of the Department of Culture panel to select artists for foreign exhibitions and trips. Besides, she holds history group in the year selector. It is common knowledge that Kapur was trying to wrangle the directorship of NGMA. "If she gets it, we will all disappear. She is a young selector. It is many Baroda make a bouquet. The fact is that she is not it. And as Gajraj says, both Hasmith and Lenin make history and the one who is not or another cannot be wished away. It is not a matter of likes and dislikes of one's own tempo. It is a matter of how to interrupt one's admiration for art — curated or otherwise."

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not, should AAA include images of artworks, is it the role of the museum to generate images of artworks? We look for ways to work around certain media such as performance document, or video art, or digital photographs. As a content provider, and resource, perhaps we need to look past these segregated categories, arbitrary value-based systems. To have access to both images of and texts on, for instance, ink painting is richer than just documents or secondary writings alone. I think for the purpose of context and genealogy we need to be clear about nomenclature and document type (a photograph versus a slide of an artwork) but not be bound by these categories.

**HN:** I have a partisan view in favour of images of both art works and their installations in key exhibitions, as meaning-making comes at least partly from the contexts of display. And these can change not just through different art historical insights over time, but also through different juxtapositions. Also in contemporary art practices over the last few decades, process-driven practices and archive-driven practices have become increasingly visible (at least in the slice of the art world that likes to think of itself as critical). And I would argue that the archive or the document is also an artistic form. In fact this is an area we are looking to explore with artists as part of an upcoming programme of talks.

**L:** In the interviews with the [Walker Art Center](#) and [MACBA](#) web teams, we talked a great deal about the task of creating relationships through collection or archival content, through journalistic [stories](#) or user-generated [itineraries](#), for example. Apart from the search-engine facility of the site, could you talk us through the main ways the website in particular aims to create entry points into what is a vast back-end?

**CW:** Some of the main tools to navigate the back-end include tree structures, a digital filing system, for each of the [Special Collections](#) which are developed in conversation with the archive's owners. For instance with [Mao Xuhui](#) and [Zhang Xiaogang](#) are ordered chronologically whereas [Roberto Chabet's](#) is organised by his own artworks and his institutional affiliations.

Another entry point is the "[Shortlists](#)" bibliographic tool around themes in the context of contemporary art in

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Asia. These lists of recommended readings from AAA's collection are compiled by individuals with expertise in the related subject to compile and accompanied by an introductory essay. Our website has also been constructed to allow the cross referencing of material through features like "you may also be interested in" that links up and highlights thematically relevant or connected events. Similarly, through a system of keywords on the collections but also through *Field Notes*, you can connect to other resources on the site through keyword association.

Not to mention a larger strategy to make the collection live through mapping projects, conferences and research grants that encourage investigations and new interpretations into the holdings, discursive platforms which help to offer new contexts to the material.

**HN:** One of our (many) priorities going forward is to develop more powerful visualization tools to help not just external users but also our own colleagues develop ways of navigating that are more intuitive.

**L:** AAA's extensive programmes of talks and symposia, workshops and education projects, exhibitions and residencies clearly create many amazing ways into the archive for the physical visitor. How have artists engaged with the collection as researchers, whether commissioned by you or otherwise?

**CW:** AAA has been hosting residencies since 2007. To date we've worked with seven artists or collectives and their projects have ranged from Wong Wai Yin who spent six months performing the tasks of an AAA researcher, building up a collection of material on Hong Kong art that she identified as a gap in the collection. Through the process she collected correspondences, interviews with friends in the art community, and build up a personal collection on "Wong Wai Yin" including school report cards with comments like "this student is an independent thinker, but she lacks enthusiasm for school" from teachers and childhood drawings unearthed by her father. Along a similar vein, Song Dong's project recounts thirty-six years of history including socio-political history, personal experience, and art history – from a personal perspective in the form of hand-drawn wall calendars. Artist/architect duo MAP Office methodically visited every monograph and



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**L:** New material is constantly coming into the archive, from all over Asia. Does this continue to be a process of territorial “mapping” at ever finer scales, or is the map already made, so to speak? Does the process then become more like news-gathering?

**CW:** This is a question that never ceases to plague us, it is not only an ideological question but one that organizes our everyday operations. There is no simple, black-and-white answer. At the moment, in a corner of the library hangs a map with a controversial line around the “borders” of our area of focus traced with a pink highlighter (we still haven’t identified who took the marker to the map): the line excludes Iran, Russia and Papua New Guinea and includes Indonesia and “the -stans”. Of course on the one hand it is a question of resources and priorities: where is archiving most urgently needed? How can we best focus and make the largest contribution? This may sound arbitrary, and in many ways it is, but archiving is necessarily a question of priorities and selection. So what do we actually do with material from Turkey, and do we list the names of “non-Asian” artists in biennials? These are all questions that plague us.

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*“Where is archiving most urgently needed?*

*How can we best focus and make the largest contribution?*

*Do we list the names of “non-Asian” artists in biennials?*

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But we are not just an archive on Asian contemporary art for Asia, we believe in the potential of the narratives of art that happened in Asia to reflect upon narratives outside of Asia. Case studies in Vietnam can be applied and studied in Latin America, and vice-versa. The histories that we are bringing to light are a way of diluting the dominant narrative of modernity, and sharing the possibility of multiple narratives of modernisms.

At the moment we are working on the third issue of *Field Notes*, tentatively titled “Mapping Asia”, that aims to unfold this very concept and to open up the possibilities of reimagining this space beyond or adjacent to Asia, fictionalising its historical construct, and bringing visibility to the conditions and subjectivities that it has produced.

**HN:** There are at least a couple of levels at which to engage with your question. The first is around how we digest what we are continuously adding to our collection as it comes, invariably and quite naturally for particular places over time. How it builds up a denser picture of a particular place or scene. How it is additive. The second is

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at the cumulative effective of these multiple places. What kind of “Asia” does that construct?

This second question is particularly tricky. In what kind of mapping of the art of the 20th and 21st centuries is London (for example) not part of such an “Asia”? We are interested in these almost Borgesian notions of mappings. We are open to – and in fact delight in – the violence that this does to neat national, regional and civilizational narratives of art history.

The answer to the first lies in developing some tools that we can update periodically – the shortlists are one, others can include timelines of significant exhibitions and institutional ruptures. This is a work in progress for us.

**L:** A question related to the previous two: Do you think spatial or temporal formats such as exhibitions and talks offer ways of using and presenting the archive which are valuable because of their “finishability”? In contrast to the intimidating scale of the archive, or the relentless flow of information and choice offered by digital experience, they create something which can be “completed” and “knowable” rather than constantly expanding?

**CW:** I’m not sure that exhibitions or discursive programmes are necessary “finished” (at least not the ones I find most inspiring), but through the propositions they make, rather open up possibilities for continued expansion through a sharing of ideas, contexts and debate.

For instance, in the exhibitions presented by institutions like the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, the National University of Singapore Museum, or the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, these museums have used documentation and archival material in their capacity to open up discussions and points of relevance. The added contextualization through archival documents provides independent access points for audiences. One may not know the art historical context of a certain performance but if you juxtapose it with, for instance, a newspaper clipping of a political event, suddenly one can relate this gesture to a specific political moment in time.

**HN:** As a curator who never “finished” an exhibition (mine just kept evolving, being revised, re-fashioned) I am also skeptical about “finishability”. I think what exhibitions and discursive programmes do offer are points of

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entry into, and “lines of flight” out of the Archive. And that can be quite liberating.

**L:** AAA has recently launched a call for submissions for “Open Platform”, a programme taking place during the course of Art Basel Hong Kong (23–26 May 2013) offering “researchers, curators, writers, artists, students, academics, and art organisations to hold open meetings that might further their ongoing projects, catalyse new ones, or



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\* [www.aaa.org.hk/Programme/Details/405](http://www.aaa.org.hk/Programme/Details/405)

06 Tehching Hsieh and Lee Weng Choy at “Action Script”, a five-day symposium considering the practice of performance art in Asia, 2010. Courtesy AAA

simply be an opportunity to make connections”. \* These ninety-minute meetings are not recorded, and the only requirement is that the topics of discussion reference the concerns of AAA and its collection. How has this initiative worked in previous years and how do you anticipate it will work in 2013? How are the results communicated?

**HN:** This is, in some ways, new for us. Previous realizations of Open Platform took the form of a public panel

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Lydia Ngai is Head Librarian at AAA. Prior to joining AAA she was researcher of Hong Kong art history and design history and then a librarian in the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

discussion. This year we are trying something quite different. We are opening up our space and Rolodexes to enable conversations and meetings: some that we will be part of, others that we may not. We don't know what may come out of this. And have no intention of even attempting to communicate an outcome. We see this in the spirit of two ideas I described earlier: *the archive as verb*, and the notion of AAA as a *generative node* within a network. We have some hopes attached to this of course: for some new friendships, for some denser conversations, for some ideas to meet and mate, and for us to get some sense of the urgencies that are driving people, and the roles that the Archive can play in addressing them.

**L:** Will the “My Archive” feature allow web visitors to “favourite” content? Are there concerns about burdening the website with social interaction?

**Lydia Ngai:** My Archive is supposed to be the user's personal space on our website, they can select to keep records from the library collection and updates on our programme on the AAA website in their own space for easy reference or to revisit, which is a refined and powered up “favourite” function.

I do not see why we would see social interaction as a burden to our website. I see social interaction as an indispensable feature AAA should embrace and enable, which is in line with the idea of preservation through accessibility. If we want people to access our resources online, of course we must interact with our users online.

**L:** Could you share some of the discussions you've doubtless had about the conservation of materials and digital capital, both in terms of where you store your data – do you trust the cloud and outsourced storage? – and whether you encourage users to bookmark or download?

**CW:** We simply know it's safer to trust ourselves. So we have our own servers, our own back-end, our own back ups of back ups of back ups of digitized archives and our collection. We also believe that technology changes, but will likely continue to expand in its potential and reach, so as all the content is already digital, when necessary we will be able to convert the content into the next generation of media. But at a fundamental level the idea of the digital and reproduction is a major consideration of AAA's

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BETA VERSION



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**FIELD NOTES**

ISSUE 02  
Archive As Method

What does it mean to be archiving?  
Here we propose the archive as a method to illustrate the way in which initiatives like ours are taking the archive to counter, complicate, and reimagine systems in which narratives of modern and contemporary art are being produced, circulated, and understood.



**PROGRAMMES**



Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the making of recent art history in Asia - Open call for papers  
Call for Submission | Symposium | Submission Deadline: 3 May 2013

Open Platform  
Call for Submission | Application Deadline: 19 Apr 2013

Open Edit: Mobile Library  
Community Programme | 15 Mar - 15 Jun 2013

AAA Teaching Labs 2013: Hong Kong Conversations - Call for Visual Arts Teachers For Educators | 8 Apr - 12 Jul 2013

Indian Bibliography and Anthology Project  
Publication Project | Ongoing

Salon Natasha | Vietnam  
Digitisation Project | Ongoing

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- Material Donation: March 2013
- Individual Benefactor: Mrs Chantal Miller
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– is it our role to house original material, or do digitized copies suffice? Can we predict whether decades down the line what will remain, the printed and bound form or the digital copy? This raises the question around digital born material and the proliferation of self-documentation and preservation (access to technology and increased

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## #OpenCurating

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Hammad Nasar

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awareness of history). Rather than doubling efforts and documenting phenomena that is already being captured, which was one of the main roles of our national researchers, AAA is redefining its relationship to this kind of data. **LN:** We are aware of the cloud technology; it is true that the technology is getting more mature everyday, and it might be able to provide more secure control over data in the cloud in the future. But for now, we only put news and records in the cloud to enable effective searches into our collection, but we do not put digital contents in the cloud storage. Some of our data storage is off-site, for preservation purposes, which is remotely controlled by our IT staff.

Except for the AAA produced information products, like *Field Notes* and Shortlists, we do not provide downloadable contents. We did provide some downloadable documents in the previous version of website, but we have started systematically replacing and removing all downloadable contents, and centralising the online viewable contents through [Collection Online](#), which only allows viewing online.

**L:** A related question on the technology side – do you see possibilities for shared services or solutions with partner organisations in a similar way to the [Getty Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative](#)? Are you in discussions with [M±](#), for example?

**CW:** We've spent a lot of resources and a number of years developing our back-end and database system and we very much hope, and are strategising, how to share the tool with other emerging initiatives. Some of the strengths of our system include the shared annotation that I mentioned and the tree structure. At the moment, we are still in the process of refining the system which is still in its beta phase, but one of our goals over the next few years is definitely to open up or link up our system to others so that multiple platforms can be crossed searched. For instance we've been in conversation with the Indonesian Visual Art Archive ([IVAA](#)) to see how both resources can be linked up. We are also looking at models like [Shelfari](#) as third party platforms to share resources. One of the major challenges is how to engage individuals and organisations with limited resources to commit to contributing to this platform for the long term, so it is necessary to find

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a user and resource friendly option. Perhaps one day Asia Art Archive will not be a single institution but a dynamic network of knowledge, narratives and exchange.

We haven't developed a formal working relationship with the Getty, but we are in communication, and very much in touch with one another's work. Many members of our team have visited their archives and offices in Los Angeles and they have visited us in Hong Kong.

M+ is the institution being built within the West Kowloon Cultural District project (a smaller Abu Dhabi with homegrown "brands") dedicated to 20th and 21st century visual culture. In fact Claire Hsu, the co-founder and director of AAA, and the Chair of its board, Jane DeBevoise, were members of the Museum Advisory Group in 2006–2008, and together with twenty other art professionals, developed the concept for M+. They purposely decided not to use the word "museum" and give equal weight to the "plus" to signify a move away from the importance traditionally placed on the display of the object within the museum to one where research, knowledge, the library, the archive, the audience and learning occupy equivalent weight. In fact, what we spoke about earlier – rethinking the idea of value within the museum.

It was also recognized that considering Asia's short museum history, this was a chance to begin from a very

08 Ray Langenbach's hard discs containing more than twenty years of video documentation of performance art in South East Asia. Courtesy AAA

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different perspective of what a museum today could be and the story it could tell. This concept is now in the hands of a team of curators to be translated and we believe that there is great potential for collaboration and exchange of material and research going forward. Claire is still on the M+ committee and we collaborated on AAA's residency with Song Dong, co-presenting the exhibition with them earlier this January.

**HN:** Actually I already like to think of us as moving towards (if not embodying) this idea of a dynamic network – or the generative node I talked about earlier. Shared services as an idea is almost a no-brainer, the challenge is to realize it by navigating the practicalities of accounting and IT systems, of governance structures, of differing priorities. The start comes from an attitude towards sharing and collaboration, and the acknowledgement that sharing is hard, takes time, effort and lots of practice. We are practicing. Promiscuously. #

'Archive as Method: An Interview with  
Chantal Wong, Hammad Nasar and  
Lydia Ngai' by Latitudes  
(Max Andrews & Mariana Cánepa Luna)

29 April 2013

Part of the research project and  
e-book series *#OpenCurating*  
[www.LTTDS.org/projects/opencurating](http://www.LTTDS.org/projects/opencurating)

Editor and design:  
Latitudes [www.LTTDS.org](http://www.LTTDS.org)

*#OpenCurating* is a research project by  
Latitudes produced through *La Capella*.  
*BCN Producció 2012* of the Institut de  
Cultura de Barcelona.



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