Socially Engaged Archive: Art, Media and Public Memory in East Asia

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, visual archives related to social movements, activism, community activities, and alternative cultural practices in East Asia have rapidly emerged. This "archival turn" reveals a search for new ways of defining social and communal forms and images beyond official narratives and mass media. In this paper, I use three cases of socially engaged art archival practices – namely, Archive for Human Activities (AHA!), "The Day After" and "Socially Engaged Art (SEA) CHINA" – to illustrate how artists in East Asia utilize archives as a means of social and individual articulation and conversation. The three cases of archiving practices illustrate new trends in the way archives engage in producing new knowledge and narratives for art and social/cultural practices in East Asia.

Keywords

Digital archive, East Asia, Memory, Socially engaged art, Sound art

Introduction: Ordinary Archives as a Way of Doing

In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida (1995) draws two layers of meaning from the Greek *Arkhe*: *commencement* refers to a physical, historical, or ontological beginning, whereas *commandment* refers to an act by an asymmetrical power, whether god or the law. As Derrida goes on to explain, these two distinct meanings combined constitute an archival practice which is comprised of gathering signs and symbols to determine a singular cultural or historical meaning. We usually understand "archive" in reference to a topology of memory for keeping, classifying, and unifying traces of the past as through a public institution. For Derrida, however, the archive has a supplementary

power to decide the limits of our public memory in its capacity as a stable, comprehensive, and authoritative regime of knowing, and yet this power is equally susceptible to erasure.

In line with Derrida's pronouncements, I argue that the rapid privatization of archiving today now makes the "archive" completely ephemeral. Using digital media, one feels that the perception of historical time is largely accelerated because of the quick and convenient process of documenting and archiving, as well as the easy disposal and destruction of recorded sound, image, and text. But, in fact, there are at least two additional aspects of the digital that directly challenge the old notion of archival history. First, it must be acknowledged that everyone has become an archivist, especially if we consider the decentralized world of online social media. Second, and partially as a consequence of the first point, ordinary, and therefore unvalorized, images tend to prevail in the archive in ways they hadn't before. Public memory is therefore rendered precarious as we increasingly depend upon externalizing our memory through the digital. As Derrida himself asserted, "the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event" (1995: 17).

The transience associated with archiving digital media has fundamentally changed the nature of the archive as a centralized authority of public (and private) memory. Archiving is fast becoming a popular means of constructing a collective memory of the ordinary. The archive no longer merely represents an exclusive sovereign power of the socially privileged, but is rather increasingly related to a particular kind of public memory – a living memory (Clarke & Warren, 2009). In her "10 Theses on the Archive," Shaina Anand writes that unlike the prevailing wisdom informed by Walter Benjamin, archives must not be seen as a form of redemptive impulse against a state of emergency (2016). She writes that Benjamin's "desire to document that which is absent, missing or forgotten stages a domain of politics which often privileges the experience of violence and trauma in a manner in which the experience of violence is that which destroys the realm of the ordinary and the everyday" (Anand, 2016: 83). Beyond this tendency, Anand encourages us to develop a space in which an imaginative archival practice can allow for the "radical contingency of the ordinary"

(2016: 83). She argues that "radical contingency recognizes the possibilities of surprise in the archive and in the possibility that a descent into the ordinary suspends the urgent claims of emergencies" (Anand, 2016: 83). Archives, in other words, do not take the state of emergency as a rule but rather sustain the ordinary. Anand thus encourages us to normalize archives as sites of intervention into public culture. Indeed, the current situation is that we no longer need to search the archive for what we imagine or want, because archiving itself has become a way of doing – and, often, a form of activism. The publicness and ordinariness of the archive and archiving are central to understanding the changing nature of the lives of subjects and their active interplay with social identity and public culture.

This viewpoint opens my discussion on East Asian visual archives that function as an inventory of still and moving images and sounds, as well as texts related to social movement, activism, communal activities, and socially engaged art. While existing literature on the concept of the archive and archival activism, such as Andrew Flinn's work (2007, 2009, 2011) has focused mainly on Western cases, significantly less attention has been drawn to the developments of archival art and visual practices in contemporary Asian societies. In East Asia, as in many other places in the world, shifting patterns in storing collective memory originate from the changing materiality of mnemonic media and the democratization of the archiving process. In East Asia, ideas surrounding the archive imply nuanced meanings that are specific to local contexts. One example is how the translation of the Western concept of "archive" into Chinese impacted upon the broader significance of historical documents within ancient Chinese historiography.[1] Another example is that in Hong Kong, a former British Colony, the absence of archival laws can be regarded as a colonial design that aimed at depriving the city of its basis for building its own collective memory. In Japan, frequent natural disasters constantly threaten the material existence of large-scale archives. In a region where the number of Internet users also tops the world (Asia had half of the world's Internet users in 2017), the demand for other "ordinary" forms of archiving redefines it as a socially engaged action rather than simply a practice dominated and initiated by the state or by institutions.

Since the 2000s, visual archives related to social movements, activism, community activities, and alternative cultural practices in East Asia have rapidly emerged. This "archival turn" can be characterized by a search for new ways of defining social and communal forms and images beyond official narratives and mass media. In contrast to historical archives, visual archives do not aim only at documentation and conservation but also at creating agencies and provoking critical reflections. The "archive" is increasingly becoming a very common and important motif for artistic practice and exhibition. Along with this advancement, an increasingly complicated and diverse relationship is developing between the concept and the material being of archives, as well as between public memory and urban space.

In this paper, I use three cases combining socially engaged art and archival practices to illustrate how artists in East Asia utilize the archive as an autonomous means of communication between the social and the individual. The first case is the Archive for Human Activities (AHA!), which was initiated by the Japanese media research/art group "remo" in 2005. AHA! is a project that has been holding communal gatherings for people to share, screen, and discuss obsolete 8mm films from their household to (re)invoke the impulse of storytelling of social history among ordinary citizens. The next project, entitled "The Day After," was authored by a group of sound artists in Hong Kong after the Umbrella Movement in 2015 to create an acoustic archive depicting a state of exception. Finally, "Socially Engaged Art (SEA) China" is a digital archive for public education and an online resource base for socially engaged art in Mainland China. Together, these cases speak to three kinds of archival urgencies in the face of the memory crisis of our age: the decay of "old" media, the ephemeral soundscape of urban movement, and the absence of easily accessible resources for learning about time-based art projects in China. Interestingly, in both Chinese and Japanese, the word "crisis" dialectically combines two characters: 危 wei/ki means crisis, and 機 ji/ki means opportunity. The three cases of archiving practices in this paper thus illustrate the ways in which archives currently engage in producing new opportunities, knowledge and narratives for artistic, social and cultural practices out of memory crisis. Despite their ordinariness, these archives stand, as in Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopes, "as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members' images of themselves" (1981: 7).

AHA!: Intersubjective Media

AHA! is a long-term community art project initiated in 2003 by a Japanese non-profit organization named "remo," which stands for "record, expression and medium-organization." With media used as a way of "knowing," "representing," and "discussing," the starting point of remo's various activities is to give media back to the people as a kind of stationery – a pen and paper – to articulate and communicate rather than to encourage the passive acceptance of information from mass media. Mass media actually becomes a tool for centralized control in political and commercial purposes with the help of various advanced communications technologies. To revive the one-to-one relation between the individual and the media, the main goal of the organization is to encourage the creation of individual expression through videos and sounds and offer the public new spaces for film screening. These expressions, therefore, often do not take the form of specific messages and narratives and are difficult for dissemination through mass media and for business purposes. However, the members of remo believe that these are worthwhile expressions for different reasons.[2] Its current projects, all of which have been running for more than 10 years, are what remo calls "expressive activities" with the individual as the central player.[3] The organization's activities and projects organically mix research, experiment, viewing, and practice, providing the community with chances to reconsider their method and content of expression via the tool of mass media.

AHA! (人類の営みのためのアーカイブ) focuses in particular on 8mm film, which was the first personal documentary media that was popularized among ordinary households in postwar Japan between the 1960s and 1980s. However, since the rise of digital media in the 1990s, 8mm films rapidly became obsolescent and eventually disappeared from the market and the daily life of Japanese society. For remo, the disappearance of 8mm film accompanied the disappearance of a particular form of life and collective memory. AHA! thus attempts to recreate an archive that excavates these long-forgotten films from Japanese households. Through opportunities for public viewing, this archive contravenes the perception of being a static storage unit of old materials for an outdated media, although AHA! does take a

role in digitizing the films. This particular utilization of the films breathes new life into the materiality of media and into the memories of participants. I present the two recent projects of AHA! below to show how archiving can serve as a way first to reestablish people's relation with the medium, and ultimately, to reconnect people with each other.

Archive between Medium (媒介) and "Mediumability" (媒体)

In 2015, AHA! launched a project named "穴アーカイブ: An-Archive" in Tokyo's Setagaya-ku (Setagaya ward). Setagaya-ku was among the fastest growing urban areas in the capital city in the 1960s, when the Japanese economy began to boom. According to remo, the images captured by ordinary citizens who had just begun to use their own viewpoint to observe and document the rapidly changing environment provide viewers with a perspective from which to see the "people," "life," and "townscape" from a given time period.[4] The project consisted of three stages. First, after soliciting 8mm films from district citizens, a communal public viewing session was held.

Figure 1: remo's community screening of 8mm films. Courtesy of Matsumoto Atsushi @remo.

Most of the acquired films depicted family rituals in public spaces, such as a child's first day of school, zoo visits, campus sports games, shrine visits, summer festivals, and street views. Given the ordinariness and familiarity of the images, viewers, particularly those who belonged to the neighborhood, easily participated in them as remnants of collective memory. In the public viewing, 15 scenes selected from the films were displayed. Participants then wrote down anything they could think of from the images and the objects seen in the images. The results were unexpected. A 30-second moving image of a tram, for instance, could invoke a forgotten memory of a hot water bottle as it reminded one participant of the days he brought a hot water bottle to work by tram. In the second stage, participants were asked to look for objects in or related to the scene. Finally, participants brought the objects they found back to the communal gathering and explained why they chose the object and any stories behind the scene. Thus, in a circuit from the image to one's memory and to the object related to that memory, all the various elements become interconnected through the process of viewing, finding, and explaining, forming a living archive consisting of medium, mind, and material.

Figure 2: "Conversation Piece" Catalogue p. 41: The destructed Factories of Fighters' engines after the air raids, September 7., 1949, photography by the US Army. Source: Geospatial Information Authority of Japan. Courtesy of Matsumoto Atsushi @remo.

Applying a similar methodology, another AHA! project also utilizes public forms of sensual exchange through media. "Conversation Piece: Documentation of An Indefinite Form" (カンバセーション_ピース：かたちを（た）もたない記録) is a collaborative art exhibition launched in 2016 between AHA! and the Musashino Shiritsu Kichijoji Museum in Tokyo in 2016. During World War II, the Musashino area was one of the largest centers for manufacturing engines of fighter aircraft.

Thus, the area became one of the earliest objects of US army air raids. As in "穴アーカイブ: An-Archive," five sets of 8mm films from the residents of the Musashino area were collected in advance of public viewing sessions. In the screenings and the ensuing discussions, the film providers showed how they perceived the "peaceful Showa (era)," that is, the postwar years in the 1950s and the 1960s, including what they personally experienced during that time, and their memory of how the war was experienced by the older generation (Matsumoto, 2017). In addition to the submitted films, short interviews with the film providers were conducted about their families' stories of living in the area. The interviews were recorded as soundtracks and also transcribed into print texts. The five interview texts, together with AHA!'s field work records, photos from local residents, consolation letters, and everyday life happenings, were collected and organized into a booklet entitled "Play a Record" for visitors to read at the exhibition site or back at home.

Another part of the exhibition consists of drawings and paintings by Konishi Noriyuki (小西纪行) that were inspired by his family photo albums. Abstract and blurred strokes constitute human figures and undefined behaviors in his works, which are mostly untitled.

"Play a record," or its Japanese name "あとを追う" meaning searching for the traces, is not merely a booklet for visitors to obtain more information about the context of the show. It also serves as one nodal point of a trace-searching chain of museum visitors, film providers/interviewees, and even curators. Four kinds of trace-searching processes take place in the public viewing, the museum space, and

beyond. First, the film providers recall their memory of when the films were recorded during the viewing session; second, feedback was collected from the providers after viewing their films; third, texts on previously stated thoughts and feedbacks are recorded in print form; and fourth, visitors read the texts in the museum (Matsumoto, 2017). At this moment of reading, the trace-searching experience of film makers and museum visitors merge into one, evoking new memories in visitors and in those who saw other visitors' trace-searching process in the museum space. The chain of memory and visual impressions thus float from the film medium to the subjectivity of the filmmakers, then to the print booklet, and finally to each individual museum visitor as both subjective and objective nodes in the chain. When one views someone else's document or listens to someone else's voice, a look into this "I" who is appropriating someone else's "I" emerges, producing a common image.

From this perspective, "Play a record" is relayed by "record a play." This element of repetition and passing-over generates a new memory experience between the self and the other. According to Matsumoto (2017), the exhibition is an experiment in which: "Through the readers, someone's documentation became some other kind of documentation. At that moment, book and reader, object and human, documentation and memory, became a kind of image-recorder for documentation, as well as a kind of image-player for reproduction. The most important thing is not the difference between object and human, but the difference between medium (baitai 媒体) and mediumability (baikai 媒介)."[5]

For AHA!, in other words, media consists of two dimensions: the visible material medium (媒体), on the one hand, and the invisible "mediumability" (媒介), or the capacity of a medium to initiate communication, on the other (Matsumoto, 2017). Ultimately, the participant is asked to contemplate and dissect medium-ness (メディア性) within the self, and therefore to traverse both the mediumability that transmits the image, and the medium inscribed in the image. Importantly, this individual exploration has to find its way out of the narcissistic gaze back to oneself, and then exit to the public, collective, and intersubjective experience.

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もどんどん建ち始めてきました。4人の子どもたちも大きくなってきて、市ヶ谷の家がすこし手狭になってきたんです。だから、昭和41年、うちの下の子どもが小学校に上がる時に、それぞれの家族に分かれて住むことになったんです。姉の家族は三鷹市に、私たちは武蔵野市に引っ越したんです。今年が戦後70年。昭和に直すと昭和90年だから、この武蔵野の家に引っ越してきてから50年くらい経つことになります。

正二　今から観る映像は、市ヶ谷にいた頃の中でも、昭和30年から35年に撮影したものです。今から50年以上前のこと。そんな頃の記録なんです。

『八王子行』　昭和33年 | 八王子市浅川 | 5分

さち　…今映っているのは、八王子の浅川です。川の近くに極楽寺という大きいお寺があって、そこに父の墓があったので、お参りしたんだと思います。父は学校の教師をしていたんですが、早くに亡くなりましてね。あたしども姉妹を父の代わりに育ててくれたのは、叔父です。大きな機屋をやっていました。…これが浅川橋。

Figure 3: Booklet "PLAY A RECORD," pp.22-23. Searching for the traces of the five groups of film providers' traces after several decades. Courtesy of Matsumoto Atsushi @remo.

Figure 4: "Conversation Piece" Catalogue, p.26: in a simulated domestic space, with Konishi Noriyuki's painting and AHA!'s reading corner. Photo by Arisa Yuki. Courtesy of Matsumoto Atsushi @remo.

Communicating through Unreliable Archives

The main focus of AHA!'s archives, in the same vein, is not only the 8mm films per se. Instead, the absent, the undocumented, and the unseen constitute the most significant part of the archive. Referring back to the title "穴アーカイブ: An-Archive," "ana" is not only an indefinite article, which does not really exist in Japanese, but also means "hole" (穴). In this case, the holes are referring in particular to perforations on the margins of 8mm films. To put it another way, the participants in public discussions are not only those who have experienced the era that is depicted in the images, but also the younger generations who have no living memory of such past. Rather than only providing an opportunity for nostalgia, the archive, which represents a combination of both human memory and media object, thus plays a role in transforming, expanding, and handing over the memories of participants who do not share the experience by filling in the gaps between them.

One key question for AHA! is how those with certain memories can exchange their experiences with people who did not themselves have the same experience. Talking about the "ana" is one way of finding new potentials for this intersubjective dialogue between individuals. This approach reveals a process of producing a kind of "postmemory," which, according to Marianne Hirsch,

> describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch, 2008: 106-107).

However, the "ana" may never be fully filled, and the "archival information" does not represent any authority over the past experience. On the contrary, the ana-s are filled with the mis-memory, misunderstanding, and illusions of the people. However, An-Archive is not an archive controlled and organized by an "archivist," but an archive by and for everyone to practice self-exploration through the revitalization of one's own and others' memories. Film as medium is no longer only an agency for documenting, but an installation for evoking imaginative memory power as well.

Documentation from both events – regardless if it is from the living memory of a human being or from archival representations inscribed in media, can always be modified subjectively or objectively. In this sense, documentation always possesses a simultaneous dual legacy. Practically speaking, the beginning of documentation paradoxically entails its ending. Archiving, likewise, is not only for creating a "true" version of the past but a tool for making possible encounters, where connection, disconnection, and misconnection happen all the time between objects and subjects. In documentation, archive, as well as the multi-visualized exhibition, may become a playground of "quasi-objects" and "quasi-subjects" floating around the relational networks of our collective and individual experience (Latour, 1993, cited in Ingold, 2009: 95).

The Day After: Archiving Sounds against the Suspension of Everyday Life

Between September and December 2014, Hong Kong's public space was significantly transformed by a rare, long-term physical occupation by the public. On 31st August 2014, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress denied "true universal suffrage" for the selection of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017. The selection requires that every individual citizen, rather than the pro-China representatives, vote directly for his or her political leader. The decision led to a week-long class boycott by student associations and high school students that started on 22nd September. On Sunday 28th September, after an increasing number of citizens joined the student protest in front of the Legislative Council Complex in Admiralty, the Hong Kong police force finally decided to use tear gas. The "Occupy Central Movement" (later known as the "Umbrella Movement" because protestors used umbrellas to defend themselves from pepper spray and tear gas) immediately followed and then evolved into a nearly three-month-long civic occupation of three major public spaces: Admiralty, the political center; Causeway Bay, a shopping area on Hong Kong Island; and Mong Kok, a commercial center on the Kowloon side (Pan, 2015).

The Umbrella Movement ignited an avalanche of images, icons, and visual objects in the occupied urban areas. As the occupation went on, an unprecedented boom of street visuals emerged, which even led to the idea of setting up an Umbrella Movement Visual Archive by a group of artists and activists (Pan, 2015). As I discuss the visual archive elsewhere, I focus here on another endeavor of collecting sensory memory and traces of states of exception in the city. "The Day After" is a CD album that includes 23 pieces of field recordings on the sites of the occupation between 29th September and 12th December 2014, covering the entire period of the movement.

Produced by 10 Hong Kong-based visual and sound artists and sponsored by a local sound art initiative by Soundpocket, entitled "The Library,"[6] the project archives a less "noticeable" sensory dimension of the movement. The occupation not only suspended normal traffic flow and movement of people who use the public space in

visual terms, but it also fundamentally changed the soundscape of the everyday space both with new and absent sounds.

Figure 5: Cover image of "The Day After". Courtesy of Soundpocket.

Archiving Noise against "Police"

According to one of the participating artists, Law Yuk-mui (2016), the initial idea of the project stemmed from the hope of diversifying forms of documentation and artistic expression that emerged with the movement, particularly when the majority of such expressions were in visual and print form. Music and songs did not strike participating artists as being particularly interesting. Yet sound is unique because of its innate capacity to produce spatial and atmospheric materiality, and indeed sound depends upon the environment to bounce acoustics from one place to another. With the disappearance of major urban sounds from traffic, other sounds that were covered over suddenly emerge or change in the field of perception. In reflecting on the project, Law (2016) reexamined the strength of such hidden sounds at particular historical moments:

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In the movement, sound did not seem as strong a mobilizing power as a visual image because it is not a strong emotion mobilizer. That explanation may also justify why few people recorded sound and only took pictures. People did not seem to have felt much urgency to record sound as to visually capture something. However, sound is more time-based and will, therefore, disappear. This fact actually makes recording more urgent, and it became the main motivation for us to push the button to record sound (Law, 2016).

The artists connected to this project used their own way of approaching and capturing sound through field recording, that is, through a basic methodology that is nevertheless associated with "guerilla tactics" used by sound artists or producers "who position microphones in our everyday places" (Mullane, 2010: 7). Law noticed the signal sounds from traffic lights that worked in vain as there were no longer any cars. Wong Fuk-kuen paid extra attention to the sound of people's footsteps on a wooden board that was temporarily set up for passing between the isolation zone and the street. Samson Cheung Choi-sang was experimenting on both a journalistic style of field recording of accidental happenings and his own creation of sounds, such as stones thrown into empty tunnels. Steve Hui inserted scene 11 of his cinematic opera, "1984," which was performed on the street as a part of the project. Wai-lam recorded voice messages that she left on WhatsApp through her smart phone and found many of her friends saying "be careful." Fiona Lee Wing-shan conducted her field recording between the Civic Square and the City Hall. During her field recording, she seized a group of contrasting sounds from the solitude of morning with birds singing to the police's swift pulling of iron barricades. "DJ Sniff" (Mizuta Takuro), a Japanese sound artist, hardly edited his raw recordings but moved around to allow encounters between his body (as a device) and sound to happen.

The nature of field recording, which does not exclude "meaningless" noise and "irrelevant" information, is precisely what challenges stable sensory "police" where everything is fixed well in its position. According to Jacques Rancière,

> the police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of
> the ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that
> those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is
> an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that particular activity
> is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as
> discourse and another as noise… (Rancière, 1999: 29)

For Jacques Rancière, the process in which noise becomes sound is a highly political moment when the formerly omitted other is recognized and heard; the sensible harmony/hegemony is disturbed as politics arises. In Rancière, noise is a kind of "excess of words" (1994) that produces predicament by speaking too much and cannot stop speaking. The process where noise turns into sound, in other words, when abstraction becomes representation, also determines the political nature of human animal (Chambers, 2013: 114). Similar to the way in which the visual creates its regime of *police*, in which, for Law, the "visual artist will not shoot people's footsteps only" (interview with Law, 2016), a sound project like "The Day After" also "makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse that which was only heard as noise" (Rancière, 1999: 30).

The archiving of sound "images," which are not the main body of memory carriers during the movement, speaks to what Rancière has observed to be one of the major forms of contemporary critical art, namely, the *inventory*, by which he means "traces of history: i.e. objects, photographs or a simple list of names testifying to a history and a world in common" (2009: 54-55). To form this inventory, he writes, "The encounter of heterogeneous elements no longer aims to provoke a critical shock or to play on that shock's undecidability [but instead to] repopulate the world of things, seize back their potential for the shared history that critical art dissolved into manipulable signs" (Rancière, 2009: 55). The repetition and reenactment collected and invented in this case allow the artists to become "at once the archivist of collective life and the collector/witness of a shared capacity" (Rancière, 2009: 55). In the case of "The Day After", the special media materiality and the non-representational nature of sound form a dynamic body where the ephemeral sensibly finds its topos for reappropriating and reevaluating nonsense and sensibility in an unfamiliar situation of the urban space since the occupation started.

SEACHINA Project: Making a Digitally Auratic Archive

Officially starting in 2014, the SEACHINA Project was initiated by Chinese artist and scholar Zheng Bo and his team. Back in 2012, Zheng was teaching a course related to socially engaged art in the China Academy of Art. Soon, he found that accessing case studies or relevant materials for reference was very difficult for him and his students. Discussions on socially engaged art in China and their influence are disseminated across academia, media, and social media both within China and beyond. However, existing information is extremely scattered and limited. The lack of basic teaching materials for students interested in learning about past experiences in making socially engaged art urged Zheng to create a "database" for the convenience of reference.
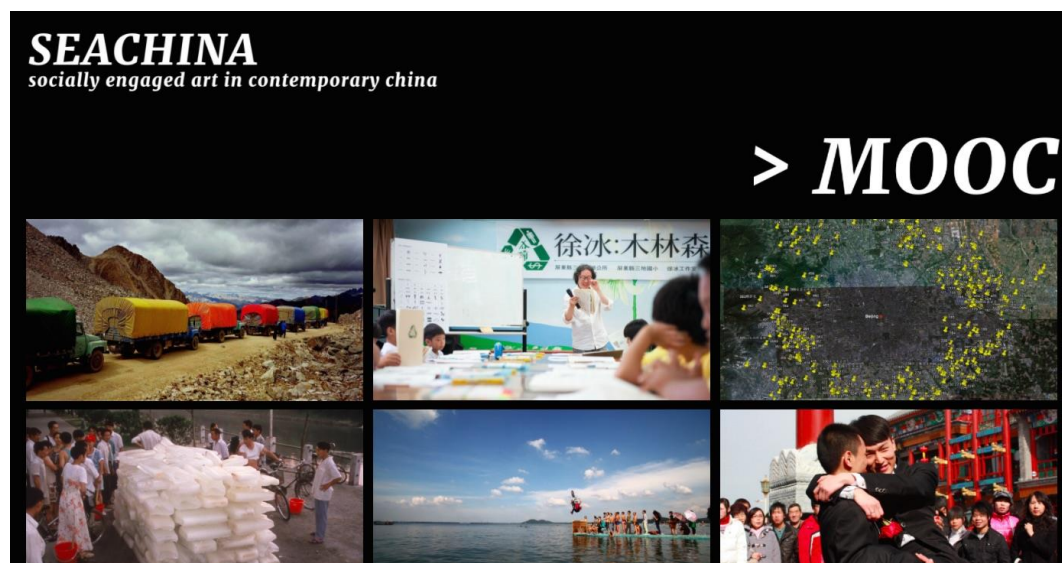

Figure 6: SEACHINA Project Overview Interface. Courtesy of Zheng Bo.

Initial funding for the creation of a digital art project was obtained from a foundation in the UK, and research funding was obtained from the Hong Kong Government's Grant and the City University of Hong Kong, where Zheng began teaching in 2014. The online project currently collects and displays 16 samples of socially engaged art realized by Chinese artists in post-1989 Mainland China, with the initial goal of having 30 samples in the future. According to Zheng (2017), one key criterion in selecting projects is seeing if the project has reached a point of maturity, that is, if the topic has been thoroughly explored in terms of length of time, number of

participants, scale of influence, and so on. Various forms of socially engaged art are included in the archive. These include artworks concerned with nature preservation and environmental issues in China, with human rights and the working class, and with the resurrection of community-based art interventions against the backdrop of China's rapid economic development and urbanization. The archive also includes one case entitled "Yiyouxiangli" (New Public Art Journeys, 藝遊鄉里). This was a public educational collaboration between Zhejiang Art Museum, a state-owned art institution, and university student groups to promote traditional art forms in rural China. The cases demonstrate the major motivations of socially engaged art in present-day China. As summarized by Wang Meiqin, "the social practices of artists have closely responded to the Chinese context while also demonstrating many commonalities with the socially engaged art circulated in the Euro-American settings as well as in neighboring Asian regions" (2017: 15-38).

Temporality of Archive

I now want to consider two aspects of time, and to demonstrate their importance for understanding the SEACHINA Project. First, the simultaneous visibility of these projects, which are delivered through a digital format, makes the archive a contextual space rather than merely a storage space. In an interview, Zheng acknowledged that his original plan was to build a database that exclusively collects documentations of cases. The idea of an archive, which he considered to be more of a closed system, only occurred to him as being important much later. The essential difference between archive and database lies in the different temporalities to which they are associated: databasing is linear and focuses more on the completeness of data, whereas archiving is more like a curating practice of nonlinear constellations of images and text. On this definition, the "archive" can become an artwork (literally so, as Zheng mentioned that funding from the UK was originally for completing a digital art project) that disrupts the temporal and logical order of a database. Aesthetically, the resulting archive that Zheng produced, which was originally named "A Wall Project," resembles an exhibition space where various texts and images are "hung" on a wall for display.

Figure 7: The "Exhibition Wall": Vertical Browsing. Courtesy of Zheng Bo.

Unlike the fine arts, socially engaged art is anchored in time. The examples in question take the form of events and happenings that may be repeated. In long-term community-based projects, the boundary between life and art is also porous. Boris Groys (2008) has described both art documentation and exhibition as a process of making the artificial become alive. Given that the living time of an event is unrepeatable, the documentation of art, in other words, the artificial repetition of the living time, is made natural through a narrative replayed by technical re-presentation (Groys, 2008: 53-54).[7] The archive creates such a narrative for socially engaged art in China in a virtual exhibition space, and therefore in a space marked by juxtaposition. In fact, some cases in the archive do not fall into the category of being "art," including the community-based project "Dinghaiqiao Mutual Aid Society," which refers to a long-term experiment with new ways of engaging young activists, artists and their knowledge with the needs of the local community. Another example in this regard is "Qianmen Wedding Photo Shoot," an event mainly organized by LGBT activist groups in Beijing to raise the visibility of sexual minorities in China, and provides an opportunity for self-organization, reflection, and communication. The process of "archiving" itself becomes a rehearsal for telling the story, in which networks are established through contingencies and everyday practices. If the production of artistic aura is more of a topological matter than a material matter, the SEACHINA Project creates a context that endows a new aura to events, practices, and life happenings with new meanings and significance.

The Passiveness of the Archive

Zheng (2017) has expressed that the major characteristic of his archive is that it collects only first-hand materials and cases for studies, rather than interviews and documentaries *about* such cases. However, I believe it also serves as a platform where projects and artists can see and influence each other. Recently, an interactive platform further strengthened the possibility for an archive to become a point of ongoing collective and cultural negotiation. In 2017, the archive incorporated a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) component, a free online course about socially engaged art in China. MOOC serves not only as a public education project, currently being popularized among many higher education institutions around the world, but also as an introductory note to the archive itself.
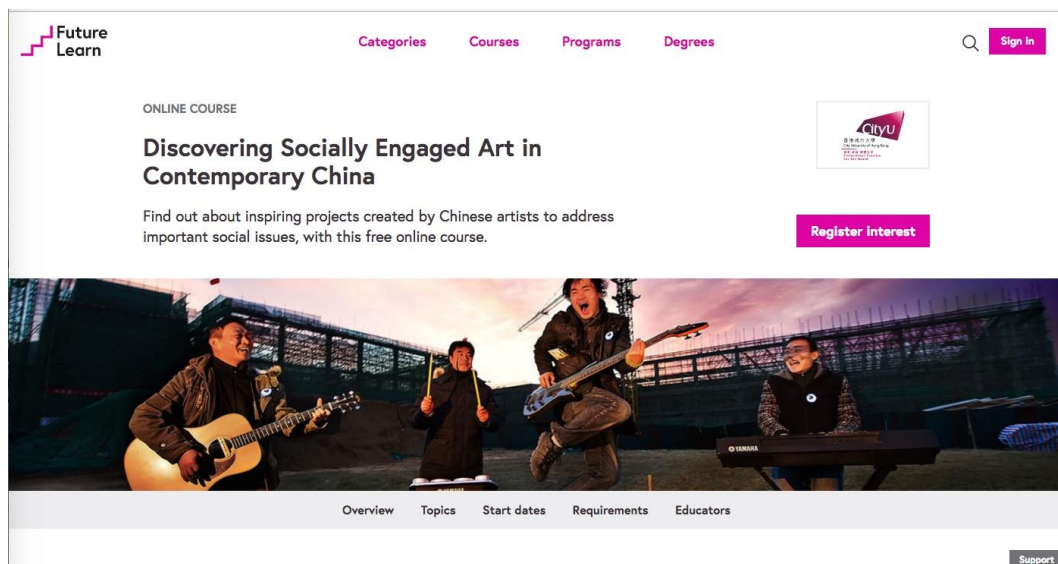

Figure 8: The MOOC Component. Courtesy of Zheng Bo.

The archive and MOOC mutually enhance their visibility for users of either. In fact, according to Zheng, MOOC's passiveness compensates for active efforts in searching for information required by the archive. Zheng thus argues that the strength of MOOC lies in the fact that it encourages passive rather than active participation from the viewer/user. This passiveness is also integrated into the archive's visual design. That is, the horizontal wall-like interface creates a visual simulation of an exhibition space and, as Zheng hopes, allows for more accessible human viewing and mnemonical habits than a vertical layout. On this basis, the passiveness of the archive speaks of a Benjaminian distraction in which users are free

to absorb the content of the archive (that is, the technical reproduction of an event, be it art or not), leading to further contemplation on the visitors' side. To put it another way, the publicness of the archive is not solely realized by a law-making archivist, but also by users through their passive participation.

Conclusion

Archives combining socially engaged activities and artistic creation do not merely try to monumentalize or centralize the past as a static inventory of unchangeable collections and recollections monopolized by those with power, but also to become a mediator between the individual and the public. In all three cases I elaborated above, the non-linear temporality of the digital archive provides individuals, institutions and communities with new tools for self-organization, reflection and communication.

In their own specific contexts and with their distinctive archiving methods, the three archives urge us to rethink how an archive can be animated and enriched by the participation of producers and visitors alike. As demonstrated by all the projects described in this paper, the archive is no longer merely a storage house of consignations, but comprised of living memories of families and cities, contingent sensory observations of a social movement, and virtual platforms of public education that open up new possibilities in art history writing. With their diverse forms of media presentation and representation, the archives thus no longer deal with visual inscriptions and written texts only, but also with moving images and sounds, which may even be produced by the user themselves. Quoting Wolfgang Ernst, the new temporality of the archive, based on immediacy and ephemerality, allows the archive to become "an exile from history," and thus removes "a kind of archival resistance against complete mobility which is the signature of modernist discourse" (2016: 15). The archive in motion, finally, also eliminates a major power of the traditional archive, including "its secrecy, its informative temporal difference to the immediate usage and consumption in the presence" (Derrida, 1995: 10).

Socially engaged art/visual archives create new possibilities for defining the public through visual and artistic tools of disruptions and redistribution of time and space of practices of people who were previously invisible to one another. All three archives form a context that endows new aura to events, practices, and life

happenings with new meanings and significance, weaving among sites of art, media, life, and exhibition space.

Notes

[1] My own interpretation on the translation of archive in the Chinese language applies a similar methodology of etymological exploration. Two major Chinese terms are interchangeably used in contemporary Chinese society and art world in referring to the Western concept of archive: "wenxian," a term used in Confucius' "The Analects," means documents and the interpreters' hermeneutic side of archive; "dang'an" is a relatively young word coined after the Manchurian takeover of Ming China in the 17th century. The word combines the Manchurian "dangse," wooden chips to record Manchurian tribal memories, and the Chinese "wen'an," meaning official documents and files (Pan, 2017).

[2] See "Record, Expression and Medium Organization": http://www.remo.or.jp/ja/2008/0101-6.html

[3] "Artist pick up" (2006--) features new media artists' works from Japan and abroad. "Alternative Media Gathering" (2004--) gathers ordinary citizens to discuss the status quo of using media as a new way of learning and expressing. "remoscope" (2004--), a collaboration with local communities such as schools, zoos and museums, organizes workshops for beginners of all ages to shoot 1-minute haiku-style videos with fixed cameras. The participants must follow certain rules when they are shooting and contemplating on their image-making process, which is followed by viewing and discussion sessions.

[4] See "Setagaya Lifestyle Design Center": http://setagaya-ldc.net/program/308/

[5] I use the neologism "mediumability" as no appropriate direct translation of this Japanese term exists.

[6] For details on "Soundpocket," see http://www.soundpocket.org.hk/v2/

[7] See more in Groys 2008, p.54. "Art documentation, by contrast, marks the attempt to use artistic media within art spaces to refer to life itself, that is, to a pure activity, to pure practice, to an artistic life, as it were, without presenting it directly. Art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere documentation of this life form."

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