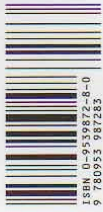


# Ghosting:

The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists' Film and Video



Edited by Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon  
Picture This



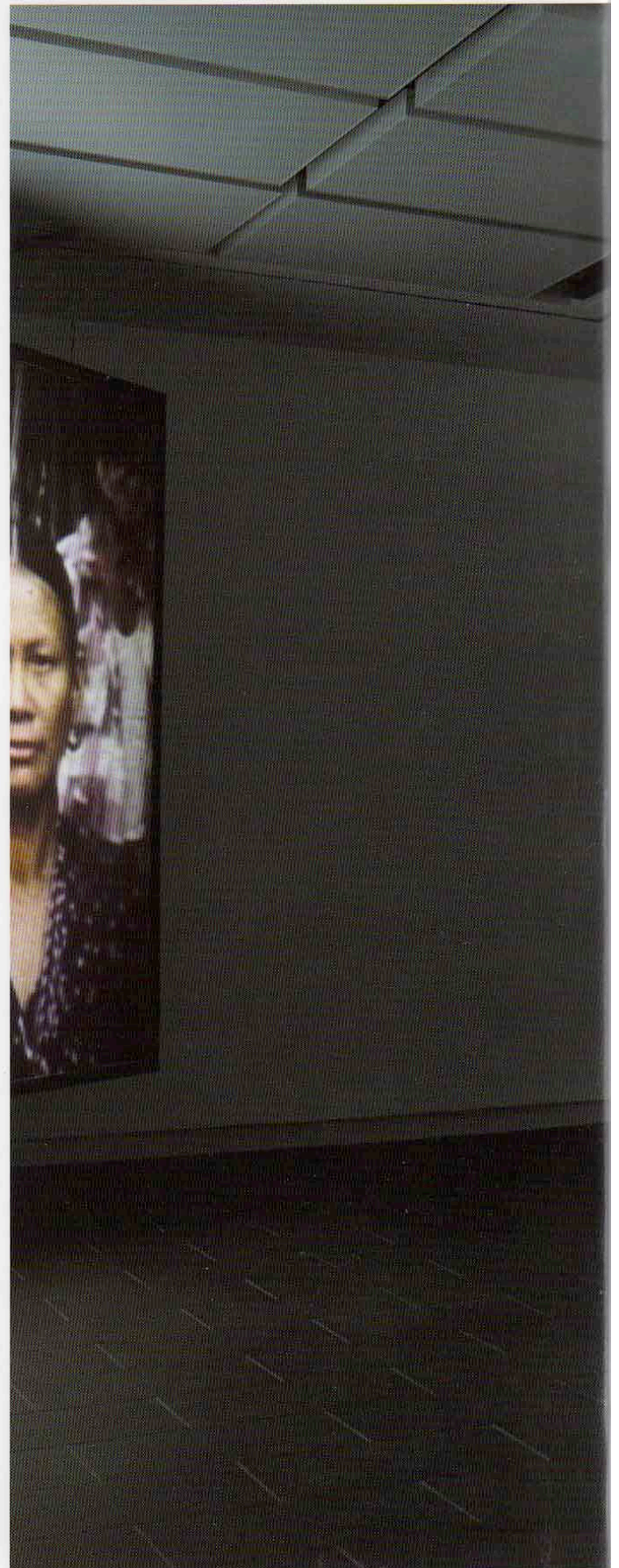
*Ghosting* has developed in response to the growth of artists' interest in archives. The publication explores the ways in which the archive itself, or archival or found materials, have been central to the work of a number of artists whose practice deals with issues of history, identity or memory. Newly commissioned essays, and case studies on individual works draw together a range of voices to reflect upon the relation of the archive to contemporary film and video practice. The publication represents the culmination of a wider programme of research, commissioning and exhibition activity by Picture This, Bristol.

Essays by Eddie Chambers, Amna Malik, Uriel Orlow, Lucy Reynolds and Erika Tan. Illustrated case studies on works of: The Atlas Group, Ansuman Biswas, Matthew Buckingham, Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Douglas Gordon, Johan Grimmonprez, Susan Hiller, Patrick Keiller, Marcel Odenbach, Harold Offeh, Uriel Orlow and Ruth MacLennan, The Otolith Group, Erika Tan, Fiona Tan and Mark Wallinger.

Cover: Erika Tan, *Persistent Visions*, 2005  
Installation at the Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, 2005  
Photography: Tim McConville



 **Picture This**



**Respect Des Fonds**  
Erika Tan



**Significant Deaths**

January 2006, Singapore. It's been eight months, two weeks, three days and a couple of hours. I've been back all of two hours and it has not stopped raining. The impact of a dense air weighed down by humidity creates a stickiness that even the fan and air conditioning can't banish. I take another shower and go to the cupboard which houses, amongst other things, a reserve pile of summer clothes for my sporadic returns. The cupboard has a dark mustiness to it tinged with mothball camphor. I try to be single-minded and oblivious to the other contents, the pile of photos, photo albums, a few ironed clothes on hangers, a New Years hat. I need a t-shirt as I haven't brought much luggage. The dense air is oppressive. I pull out a familiar brown cotton top, shake it and instinctively pull it towards my nose. 'Pungent' is a shape and colour, not a smell. It kicks me.

<sup>1</sup> Initiated by Picture This as part of their Ghosting programme, commissioning artists to work with collections/archives to create new work.

<sup>2</sup> World Connections, a South West Museums Council Report summarizing both content and distribution of artefacts with a 'world' connection throughout museums in the South West of England. South West Museums Council (2000).

<sup>3</sup> eg: the report for the Museums and Galleries Commission: Cultural Diversity; attitudes of ethnic populations towards museums and galleries; DCMS publication: Centres for social change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All, policy guidance on social inclusion for DCMS funded and local authority museums, galleries and archives in England.

A silver fish crawls out the sleeve and I resign myself to putting back on the already worn t-shirt I traveled in for sixteen hours and several thousand miles. The pile of reserve clothes comes out of the cupboard and goes straight to the wash.

For three days it has rained non-stop. The washing has not been able to go out on the line; it is hanging up with a fan turned on it day and night. Mosquitoes linger round the dark, cool, damp patches. My shoes kept outside the front door on the veranda have become a temporary house for frogs. The rain is too much even for them. Inside the house, everything has a heaviness to it. The windows can't be opened as the rain is too strong. The book I'm reading has buckled, the glue from the floor tiles is seeping through the cracks and the pillowcase has grown mould. Marooned in the house I return to the cupboard, to the pile of photographs, to the event eight months, two weeks, three plus days or so ago; but the pile is solid. Crystallized photographic emulsion holds sections and waves into a solid block. Stuck. Permanently secured into position. Only the uppermost image remains undamaged. This will be my persisting vision. There will be no more images produced, just a block, encapsulating a life which has ceased.

#### **Finding Aids and Subjectivity**

April 2003 marks the start of this particular journey: an invitation to work within an archive or collection in the South West (England)! Finding this archive became an interesting process in itself, in part informing decisions in the eventual work. Unfamiliar with museums in the region I resorted to *World Connections*,<sup>2</sup> a South West Museums Council report which sought to identify collections in the region with 'world' connections/collections as a response to developing dialogues around social inclusion and 'diversity' issues and initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

The report cross-references museums in the region on an axis of geographical divisions and object classifications. Detailed quantitative listings of objects from Africa [West, East, Central, North, South], America [North, Mid, South, Un-located], Asia [Islam, India, Southeast, East, Central], Pacific [Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, Un-located], Europe [East, Other], Un-located and, 'object categories' such as: Art/Clothing Accessories/Household Objects/Jewellery/Musical Instruments/Natural Objects inc. Human Remains/Personal Objects/Religion & Ceremonial Objects/Smoking & Narcotics/Souvenirs/Weapons. The numbers alone start sparking off interest: why does one museum have seemingly no material on Africa, but an overwhelming amount on Japan? Why is there so little material from Europe? Why is there a large collection of swords in a

4 Examples of institutional practices to incorporate this subjective voice are activities such as oral history projects, where audiences are encouraged to participate with the institution by contributing to its collections with their own lived experiences or collected objects. Other examples are the ways in which museums present themselves, such as the example of the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum's publicity material, entitled 'empire and us'. On the front cover a blonde haired girl of about six years old provides a backdrop to this caption and on the other side a young Hindu woman provides the 'other'. The 'us' here explicitly referencing the multiplicity of post-colonial/commonwealth subjects and the 'shared' histories of both girls.

5 World Connections, (South West Museums Council, 2000).

small South West museum? And on further research, why are they from Japan? The wealth of numerical information in the report gives little away in terms of content, or historical information about these collections, but it does give a sense of a very erratic distribution of material. It becomes clearer on further reading that underlying this distribution is a process of collection, less of design than of default, and one tied to the histories of empire, colonialism and articulations of the economic and power dynamics of the 19th and 20th centuries. The transferred, donated and acquired personal collecting fetishes of key players within colonial histories often become the backbone of particular museums or museum departments. The personally appropriated, becomes public property – publicly accessible, re-appropriated, re-narrativised, re-rationalised. 'Original' histories become opaque, new stories are told.

This 'intervention' of the museum into its collections is currently being re-visited with new agendas of 'social inclusion', 'diversity' and 'audience development'. Concepts and agendas of 'shared heritage' seek to tackle issues of 'access', 'social exclusion', and 'institutionalised racism'. Museums are being asked to be more accountable, responsive to and representative of the multiplicity of British culture and heritage. The processes of re-visiting, re-framing, re-constructing and re-telling history takes many forms; one of which has provided a role for the subjective as a means through which it is possible to 'legitimately' puncture fixed notions of received culture, representations and histories.<sup>4</sup> This subjective space takes several forms and isn't without its problems: questions of *whose* subjective space, the collapsing of the 'subjective' with the notion of 'authentic,' and the difficulties of the power of subjectivity to really shift perception and escape institutional domestication all arise.

With this contextualising, and in some ways framing the *Ghosting* commission, I finally find my site of engagement: the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum, Bristol. Not so much because it has 75 North African objects, 64 East African objects, 36 South East Asian objects and 391 Indian objects,<sup>5</sup> but because it has a moving image archive and I've heard that much of its collection has come from the now closed Commonwealth Institute which had been located in South Kensington, London – the museum in which my sister got her first job many years previously. I remember it as a rather lacklustre museum where the displays were divided into nations; each Commonwealth nation had its own section, with a combination of flags, national emblems, cultural badges, ethnographic objects, socio-economic and cultural facts. I was intrigued how the 'common-wealth' story might be re-displayed. The 'finding aid' within the *World Connections* report had found me a personal connection, a subjective positioning.

### The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum and its Film Archive:

“The [British] Empire and Commonwealth Museum covers a history of British colonialism from 1480 to today. The museum is made up of 16 galleries that trace different aspects of the empire and its effects on contemporary Britain. Alongside the artefacts on display are other collections such as the moving image, photography and oral history archives. There is also a library and a radio production studio.”<sup>6</sup>

The museum contextualises the ‘Commonwealth’ within the trajectory of British colonialism. The museum’s displays make primarily a thematic but chronological journey through history. Gone are the national displays of independence and difference, instead a mixture of perspectives, which shift through the macro to the micro, the critical to the celebratory. The storylines driving the audience’s experience of the museum go like this:

*Britain builds an empire 1480-1800:* Exploration and plunder – who gained and who suffered; trade; plantations in Americas; Britain’s expansion into the Pacific; colonial anthropological collecting; colonial wars and systems of administration.

*The rise of Victoria’s empire 1800-1900:* Expansion and control; who worked abroad; technological developments and the impact on British colonialism; abolition of slavery; humanitarian impulses; empire at home – the effects on popular culture, packaging and advertising; behaviour of British in the colonies.



Image: courtesy the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum, Bristol

<sup>7</sup> There are over 800 entries in formats ranging from 8mm, 16mm, to VHS, Beta SP etc.

*End of empire 1900-today: How did it end?; shift from Empire to Commonwealth; changing colonial attitudes; response to nationalists' demands for independence; legacy of empire today – immigration and the 'Commonwealth comes to Britain'.*

The articulation of the Empire and Commonwealth 'story' relies on material artefacts to support, illuminate and animate these histories; the very objects may, in themselves, have interesting stories about their makers, or of proprietorship and provenance, or could potentially support alternative readings. However in this instance, the object's existence and public visibility is on condition that it tells 'the' story. Like most other museums, only a small percentage of the overall collection is actually on display. The wealth of material is still invisible to the public, hidden away in stores, preserved in archives. Whilst accessible in theory, as with most archives and stores, the unearthing, sorting, structuring and cataloguing of the material is often yet to take place. A huge vat of un-interpreted matter; vaults of stored material culture lying across the country in storerooms, container units, secure pre-fab buildings or basements, often full of the acquisitions gained through Empire. Dilemmas of how to preserve, safeguard, create access, catalogue and store, often overshadow the dilemmas and questions of how to interpret and how to use the material.

One of these 'hidden' collections is the moving image archive of the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum. Similar to many of the other collections in the museum, the film archives are primarily based on material donated by individuals living in the South West of England (or their families) who had lived in the British colonies during British Rule or its immediate demise. The footage comes from personal collections, filmed as recordings of individual colonial experiences and covering both private and public life, 'out in' the colonies and 'at home'. In addition to the amateur home-movie footage there is a range of material, from documentary to propaganda; such as government produced informational films, commercial documentaries, news footage and Christian missionary films.<sup>7</sup>

Such material has value to a museum of this kind if the meanings and messages 'inherent' in / excavate-able from / project-able onto the footage can support, animate and depict the storylines unfolding in the museum – or be put to commercial use. In this instance the amateur material throws up anomalies and ambiguities. The content of these works is eclectic and diverse, but recurring themes run through them – families, children, home life, pets, gardens – familiar despite, and at times because of, the non-English backdrops. Travel by ship, by plane, by helicopter, by Land Rover; journeys across vast distances to new lands and 'exotic' people. Military parades, official functions, royal visits, celebrations of the Queen's birthday. Working life, constructing roads, mining, logging, plantations, farming. Whilst

<sup>8</sup> Artist's description of film clips.

in some footage, such as the various military parades, the grander histories of the processes and structures of empire are supported, in other instances these overarching histories tend to obscure and overshadow the personal and subjective, and the use of the medium as a process of subjective memorising. Not all of the footage seems of immediate 'relevance' – but then should all footage only be viewed through the framing of Empire?



Category entry: Picnic.

Artist's description of film clip: UK? A family with campervan cooking sausages and beans on a small fire. Different members of the family look to camera and smile. It's summer-time. Approximately 1950-60s.

Category entry: Picnic.

Artist's description of film clip: Kashmir? A big occasion, 50 people dressed in summer white, walking and chatting. Next shot: Sitting on rugs in the landscape drinking tea and eating cake off china plates. In the background a flurry of Kashmiri servants pour tea, tidy up and are later seen carrying the numerous baskets back down the mountain, after the group. Approximately 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst these two examples exist as similar entries in the archives catalogue, viewing the clips provides a polarity of readings: while one seems only to have a comfort of personal memory or a slight ache of individual nostalgia, the other cannot escape sociological critique and immediately becomes symbolic of, evidence or confirmation of, the inequalities propping up Empire. Existing together however, bound by the context of their location in the same archive, readings of one clip start seeping through to the other. Tensions between foreground and background imagery in Kashmir slips into the readings of life in England, an England which is central to the structuring of Empire. The historical 'evidence' in the Kashmiri clip underscores the seeming 'naivety' of the other clip despite thirty years separating the

Images: courtesy the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum, Bristol



9 Robert Edwards. 'With Respect to Original Order: Changing values in archival arrangement'. AABC Newsletter, Volume 11, No. 1, Winter 2001. Web source 19.1.06 [http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/newsletter/11\\_1/with\\_respect\\_to\\_original\\_order.htm](http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/newsletter/11_1/with_respect_to_original_order.htm)

10 *ibid.*

recording of these events. The associations of one, become impossible to isolate from the other. Now even a clip of the monkey on a chain drinking from a beer-bottle starts to take on different meanings. What also becomes clearer is the transient relationship between both interpretation and intention, and that of the physical material. I return to the archive itself for answers.

Catalogue search findings:	Names and dates:	Picnic:	Aerial shots:
white: 0	Bryan, 60's, Lusaka.	In Bombay	Uganda and Sudan
black: 0	Crouch, 50's, Yemen.	In desert	British Honduras: overhead spraying of plantations and ocean voyage
indigenous: 0	Dalyell, 30's, Bahrain.	India- game shoot	Brazil: civilian soldiers and helicopter
local: 29	Gifford, 30's, India.	UK	Aerial view of large official building in Brunei
natives: 44	Gill, 50's, Nigeria, Cameroon.	Tanga	Helicopter
african: 31	Gregory, 50's, Rhodesia.	Jekko Dam	Aerial Delhi mountains
european: 32	Hartgill, 20's, India,	Gabon	Pacific ocean flight from UK to the Islands, aerial view of east coast airport
flag: 8	New Zealand.	Gilbert Islands	Military parade, aerial view of mountain and scenery
march: 8	Hawley, 60's, United Arab Emirates,	Kashmir	City views of Salisbury: Central Africa.
procession: 12	Brazil,	South Africa, beach	Aerial Japan
celebration: 17	Malaysia.	Uganda	Aerial Hong Kong
military parade: 27	Kendal, 30's, India.	Ghana	Aerial view Himalayas, Khyber Pass
royal visit: 30	Knowles, 50's,	Egypt	Aerial view of plains, herds of gazelle
surveying: 11	Marsh, 60's, Africa.		Egypt: aerial of a square
aerial view: 15	Smith, 50's, Africa.		Helicopter flight Singapore and Sabah
flight: 27	Tait, 50's,		Malaysia helicopter man in camouflage
dead: 29	Walker, 60's, Malawi.		Kinabalu air shots
picni: 47			Military action in Malaysia, helicopter in royal navy
			View of Zanzibar and sea views

### Respect/Dis-respect Des Fonds: The Death of Significance

One of the primary or most central methodological principles governing the ordering and preservation of archival material is that of '*respect des fonds*' or '*provenance*'. It is a principle which references the concerns to create a methodological objectivity by maintaining, respecting, and reflecting the archival materials' origins and their existence as "discreet bodies of documents associated solely with their creator."<sup>9</sup> The original state of the material and its relationship to the history of the maker or collector provides the foremost value to be preserved. Some would argue that if this documentary context in which it was created were changed, then much of the actual value of the material might be lost. So much so, that *respect des fonds* dictates that records of different origins must be kept separately so as to preserve their context.

It is this focus on the material's connection to its maker, which is of interest to me. The archive begins to appear less as a "society's collective memory",<sup>10</sup> than a mausoleum or columbarium of sorts, housing a repository/depository of individual testimonies to something/ someone, already gone, passed, superseded, but not forgotten. The fundamental connection between record/artefact/document and its maker/collector has in reality, or real-time, been severed. Entry into the archive at once creates this severance, as it acknowledges this process through the insistence on principles such as *respect des fonds*. The significance, or *original* significance between author and object is now displaced, leaving room for the process of archiving or the crystallizing and mummification processes of creating collections, indexing, and cataloguing.

Images: courtesy the British Empire  
& Commonwealth Museum, Bristol



12 This reflects my decision in making *Persistent Visions*, not to include biographical and personal details of the film-makers in my research and to rely solely on the material artefact, the super 8 silent footage, itself.

12 By the museum, by political agendas, by governments etc.

13 *Persistent Visions* – title of commissioned work, also a reference to the film term for the production of moving images from still pictures. The process of creating a moving image is dependent upon the eye/brain's persistence of vision, whereby the memory of the image is retained by the viewer.

This unhooking that takes place during the transference, decontextualising and dislocating of material creates a gap, a void, a space. It leaves way for the processes of interpretation and intervention. The 'inherent' information or story told by the document is detached, relying now on the principles of structuring information to maintain its integrity and original order (and therefore its 'value') rather than the actual connection with its maker, which has already ceased to exist. Whilst *respect des fonds* exists to give respect to the original creator as the focal significance, it inevitably replaces the creator by a system of ordering hierarchies, which while providing 'access' and preserving the 'original order' and 'provenance', also creates a new archaeology of sorts, embalming a past, and potentially obscuring new connections.

It is this 'gap', created by the 'death' of significant connections, which I find of interest. The 'gap' becomes a contested space, one I am interested in propping open, maintaining the breach; not solely through an irreverence to the principles of *respect des fonds* (and by implication the original creators of the material I am sourcing), but through emphasizing the role of interpretation and the role of the viewer in relationship to the concept of the archive's value and significance.<sup>11</sup> I'm also interested to expose the way in which this 'gap' becomes appropriated;<sup>12</sup> new authorities are established and constant pressure is evident for the closure and fixing of meaning, over the multiplicity, ambiguity and ambivalences of personal explorations is evident. For me the activity of 'dis'-respecting the original order gives the archive possibilities of new, changing, and alternative purchases on 'truth'. The realisation of this underpins the way my research develops in the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum archives and eventually results in the work *Persistent Visions* which re-orders the archive based not on the narratives and intentions of the colonial filmmakers, nor on geography, chronologies or grand histories of empire, but instead, the medium and language of film itself becomes the structuring principle of the work.<sup>13</sup> Pans, tilts, tracking shots, fixed-frames, shooting from moving platforms, subjects looking to camera, a.) with familiarity, b.) with ambivalence, establishing shots, arrival and departure shots become my new indexes of classification and storage. The archive is no longer about a priori evidence, but connectivity as subjectively performed by the viewer(s) through the medium of moving image.

### The End?

I'd like to finish this journey by way of returning to/starting another....

Date: May 2005

Title: mum-bali-ashes

Shot

List: 0.00.24.13 VARS jungle path. early morning?  
VARS river, waterfall, surrounding hills,

vegetation. small group of people by river edge.  
 0.06.45.13 man with bag lighting incense sticks- making offering?  
 0.07.13.18 younger man arranging flowers in a basket, woman takes flowers to river side, older man removes cardboard box from bag.  
 0.11.55.19 group discussing something by river, looking up and down river, pointing.  
 0.14.38.00 VARS CU of flowers in basket.  
 0.15.26.31 group moves to waters edge. older man carrying metal container wades into river, women throw flowers into river, man empties contents of metal container into river.  
 0.20.12.03 younger man takes container, continues emptying contents.  
 0.24.27.44 washes metal container  
 0.26.30.01 group washes flowers off near by rocks  
 0.29.20.06 cardboard box thrown into river  
 0.30.02.04 CU woman holding large leaf with offerings (?) of flowers / incense stick- puts this in river.  
 0.34.28.05 VARS offerings (?) floating down river, wisps of smoke, stream of flowers, CU of cardboard box disappearing into rapids, LS of other objects floating downstream.  
 0.39.26.35 more offerings (?) sent off.  
 0.44.20.01 VARS of river, flowers in water, flowing water, tilt to sky, sun now up.  
 0.50.23.04 young man throws metal container into river.  
 0.52.35.06 VARS river. end tape.



Image: courtesy Erika Tan