

## RESEARCH ESSAY

# A Minor Juridical Disturbance in the Global Archive

susan pui san lok's *RoCH Fans*

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In 2013 I curated an exhibition entitled 'The Global Archive' at Hanmi Gallery in Fitzrovia, London.<sup>1</sup> By way of the exhibition, I wanted to pinpoint conceptually and articulate curatorially the idea of 'the global archive' as an organizing principle of knowledges and as a communicative medium of exchange. To this end, I sought out artistic practices that figured interestingly the archive (and the holy trinity of temporality – past, present, future) through global networks, global knowledge systems, and global information ecologies.

This article concerns one of the works in that exhibition, and a tear it cleaved in the very fabric of the time-space continuum of the Internet as an archive, and as archival; or, rather, the minor juridical disturbance that that artwork provoked for the Internet as a global archive or ecology of images.

The exhibition included work by four artists: on the Gallery's ground floor we hung two embroidery works by Young In Hong, a South Korean artist interested in re-working historical documents within the conditions of the neoliberal contemporary. On the Gallery's first floor we mounted an installation by Liverpoolian media artist Tom Corby (with Gavin Baily and Jonathan Mackenzie) of work re-deploying climate models data as 'real time' archives. On the Gallery's second floor we screened a work by Shezad Dawood, a London-born artist-filmmaker of Indian and Pakistani descent, on location, community, science fiction, and archives or archaeologies of the future. On the Gallery's fourth floor, the artist susan pui san lok, also London-born and of Chinese ancestry, installed a multidisciplinary work on notions of translation, diaspora, and, obliquely and perhaps inadvertently, the Internet as a global (creative commons) archive of searchability and distributability without end.<sup>2</sup>

susan pui san lok's *RoCH Fans* (2013–) is part of a body of work in development called 'RoCH Fans & Legends,' which is itself related to a larger project, 'Our Ancestors,' concerned with notions of history, heritage, and language. In the context of 'The Global Archive,' the work's first staging, lok approached the exhibition concept through the mediatized translations of Jin Yong/Louis Cha's *wuxia* novels known as *The Condor Trilogy* (1957–61). From film and television to anime and comic books, the *Trilogy's* periodical adaptations underscore its cultural impact across Asia and beyond. (Alongside Hong Kong and mainland Chinese productions, there are versions from Taiwan, Japan and Singapore, not to mention editions with fan-generated subtitles, fan-fiction extensions and fan-translations into English.) From bootleg videos tapes to digital formats and online streaming media sites, such changing modes and networks of spectatorship enable myriad linguistic and cultural encounters with *wuxia*.

The mediatized translations together constitute a 'global archive,' yet the question of *where* and *how* this archive resides – as a site of storage, generation, transmission, and of the distribution of knowledge, as well as as a place of authority and power, and as a provocation also – is a challenging one.

It took days for lok to install the work on the fourth floor of Hanmi Gallery. This was lok, the artist as curator: making the work by installing the work; installing the work thereby making the work.<sup>3</sup> On the windows, with a marker pen she drew the outline of a condor's wing (**Fig. 1**). On a wall, with a marker pen

<sup>1</sup> 'The Global Archive' ran from Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2013–Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2013. My thanks go to the Gallery's director Heashin Kwak, Alex Warwick and former colleagues (still friends) at University of Westminster, MA students on MA Visual Culture and MA Museums, Galleries, and Contemporary Culture, and especially Emma Brasó and Nina Trivedi who's work as assistant curators was outstanding.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion between lok and myself, see Marquard Smith (2006), 'Journeys, documenting, indexing, archives and practice-based research: A conversation with susan pui san lok.' *Art Journal* 65(4), Winter, 18–35.

<sup>3</sup> On the artist as curator, see for instance Elena Filipovic, 'When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artist as Curator,' Issue #0, *Mousse* #41, 2013–15, and also the series of publications, edited by Filipovic, entitled 'The Artist as Curator,' and published in *Mousse*.



**Figure 1:** *RoCH Fans*, (2013), susan pui san lok, 'The Global Archive', Hanmi Gallery, London, 2013. Credits: susan pui san lok.

she wrote various English and Romanized translations of the second part of Jim Yong's *The Condor Trilogy* (1957–61), widely known as 'The Return of the Condor Heroes.' On two of the other walls she hung scrolls of Google image search results relating to the *Trilogy*. (NB. These 'search results' are what this article is all about; I will return to them before long.) She also screened the popular 1983 Hong Kong TV version of the second part of the *Trilogy*, while further versions could be seen in an online timeline of clips shared by fans. Near the centre of the room, she made origami eagles and placed them in a circle, offering a kitsch rendering of a symbol of strength and heroism that resonates culturally beyond the *wuxia* tradition, and invokes translation as a folding process – with systematicity yet without sameness.

Site-specific and site-responsive, lok's activity in the Gallery is practice-led research, in that the research into history, heritage, and language is embodied in and articulated by the artistic and curatorial work;



**Figure 2:** *RoCH Fans*, (2013), susan pui san lok, 'The Global Archive', Hanmi Gallery, London, 2013. Credits: susan pui san lok.



**Figure 3:** *RoCH Fans*, (2013), susan pui san lok, 'The Global Archive', Hanmi Gallery, London, 2013. Credits: susan pui san lok.

and that the work comes into being in the process of its realization.<sup>4</sup> Practice – both artistic and curatorial practice – is inquiry, and methods of practice – both artistic and curatorial practice – are methods of inquiry. This is research as practice, as praxis even, in which such acts engage with, shape, and look to change the world.

Research is always and already praxis. Etymologically, from the Old French, *recercer*, in its verb form 'research' is both 'to search' and 'to search again.' It is thus bursting with all of the instigating and reiterating that this implies. As a verb, research is 'to roam while digging' and 'to look for with care,' and what is stressed etymologically is *the very act* of searching and researching.<sup>5</sup> (These are the reasons, I am sure, why so many practice-led PhD projects are archival.)<sup>6</sup>

It is lok's *ways of doing* (research) that renders possible words imaginable. Her activity. Her acts. It is her practice, as a practice. Her labour. Her sensibility. Her choices and decisions. Her compulsions, fixations, obsessions, and repetitions; her cravings, longings. It is her curiosity. It is her curiosity as a will, as the root of inquiry, as the desire to learn and know. It is curiosity as a modality of encounter driven by a will-to-learning and a will-to-knowing which also indicates the reasoning behind her very desire to be curious, linked as it is to a sense of wonder, the excitement of discovery and the pleasures and dangers therein. lok's coming-to-know by way of her practice-led research becomes an invitation to further curiosity, wonder, thinking, and change. This is why curiosity, as Michel Foucault writes, 'evokes "concern" . . . the care one takes for what exists and could exist.'<sup>7</sup>

In her curiosity, lok is self-reflexive, self-conscious of her own subjectivity as an inescapable (and perhaps even welcome) starting point for research. She is aware of the extent to which this impacts upon her approach to and engagement with her visual, material, spatial, and textual cultures, her primary and secondary sources, her documents and archives, and the 'theoretical' questions that they might engender. Likewise, she is attentive to the challenges of how to make out and describe such encounters, and why it is so vital to attend to the specificities of such encounters in their singularity. For it is the distinctiveness of such interests which offer up narratives, and alternative structures of narrative, that tell us something interesting about the order (and disorder) of things, of our arrangement and re-arrangement of such documents, images, objects, and environments, of their relations to us, and thus of ours to the world. In all of this, latent questions, documents and archives, primary and secondary sources, visual, material, spatial, and textual cultures emerge.<sup>8</sup> Such particular convergences are not determined in advance. They do not belong to anyone. They emerge as they come into being, as they take shape, and are enacted. Such particular convergences – lok's *Roch Fans* is such a convergence – are distinctively 'institutive'.<sup>9</sup>

We might also like to note, following this etymological free-form one step further, that research (as an act of looking for with care) and curiosity (which evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist) are both in turn tied to the etymology of curate, from the Latin, *curatus*, past participle of *curare*, 'to take care of,' which, interesting enough in and of itself, must also surely underpin and uphold the discourse of the idea of the exhibition as medium.

lok's installation at Hanmi Gallery featured, as I've noted, a series of prints (scrolls of Google image search results) that reflect the specific and generic iconography of *The Condor Trilogy*, and its uneven, overlapping visual linguistic circuits of transmission and translation. This is Google's archive of *The Condor Trilogy*, as a

<sup>4</sup> On site-responsive artistic-curatorial practices see Joanne Morra, 'Introduction', *Inside the Freud Museums: History, Memory and Site-Responsive Art*, London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming 2016.

<sup>5</sup> For some key texts on research, practice-led research, and artistic research see Fiona Candlin (2000), 'A Proper Anxiety? Practice-based PhDs and Academic Unease,' *Working Papers in Art and Design*, Volume 1. [<http://herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol1/candlin2full.html>]; Tom Holert (2009) 'Art in the Knowledge-based Polis' (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-in-the-knowledge-based-polis/>); Paul O'Neil and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating and the Educational Turn*, London/Amsterdam: Open Editions/de Appel, 2010; Irit Rogoff, 'Turning', <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/turning/>, 2008; Henk Slager, *The Pleasure of Research*, Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2015; and my own texts, Marquard Smith, 'Why "What is Research in the Visual Arts?: Obsession, Archive, Encounter"?' in Michael Ann Holly and Marquard Smith, eds., *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008, x-xxvi; and Marquard Smith (2013) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History: The Work of Research in the Age of Digital Searchability and Distributability,' *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol 12(3): 375–403.

<sup>6</sup> All four of the artists in 'The Global Archive' have completed practice-led PhDs. This is telling, and while I knew beforehand that each of them had done so, I did not register this alliance until after the exhibition's installation.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, Michel, 'The Masked Philosopher' (1980), in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961–1984)*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, New York: *Semiotext(e)*, 1996[1980], p. 305.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion between lok and myself, see Marquard Smith (2006), 'Journeys, documenting, indexing, archives and practice-based research: A conversation with susan pui san lok.' *Art Journal* 65(4), Winter, 18–35.

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,' trans. by Eric Prenowitz, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, where he writes about archives as 'institutive' and 'conservative.' (p. 7)

repository, an inventory, a source and a resource from which to draw the archive's authority and power as a provocation to transform, fictionalize, fabricate, re-enact, re-stage history differently. Such re-activating practices are similarly 'institutive.' It is, at the same time, lok's archive, our archive, a collective archive made by us, owned by us. A collective (commons) archive, an open access archive. Such an act, a Google search, every Google search is, then, both ubiquity and experimentality par excellence: it is lok's searching and re-searching; it is discriminate, it is unanticipated; she knows what she's looking for, she just doesn't know what she'll come across or what form it will take.

It is these prints, these scrolls of Google image search results, that interest me. Or, rather, if not the scrolls, then the Google image search results themselves. Or, in fact, the results of a Google image search per se. And it is an interest that was provoked by lok's *RoCH Fans* itself as it made the transition from its first iteration on the fourth floor of Hanmi Gallery in 2013 to its second iteration which promised to be an image-led contribution to a themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* I was co-editing on archives.<sup>10</sup> This was to be a further mediatized translation as the work made the transition from the gallery to the academic journal. But who knew that this transition (from three dimensions to two dimensions, from scroll to codex, from unrolling to turning) would also mark a passage from the relative autonomy of a semi-derelict exhibition space to the hyper-regulated exhibition space of a peer-reviewed academic journal in which the Internet, and the Internet as archive and archival, underwent a marked change: from a self-governing global (creative commons) archive of searchability and distributability without end to a networked regime of enclosure, control, and ownership.

lok's contribution to the themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* – an image-led presentation of the Google image search results – was completed and submitted to the production team at Sage, the journal's publisher. Then silence. Then a distant rumble. I received an email from a very competent (and patient and reasonable and accommodating) senior production manager at Sage with whom I've worked for many years. She wrote that the publisher's rights department felt that they weren't able to find a way to publish the contribution because the 'Google research thumb usage' contravened UK copyright law, and even US copyright law where there exists the fair-use sub-category, 'transformative use.' That is to say, their concern was that the copyright holder of each and every image on each and every page of lok's contribution could, in principle, exert their rights over each and every one of those images, which, given that the contribution was constituted wholly by these images, didn't bode well for its prospects.

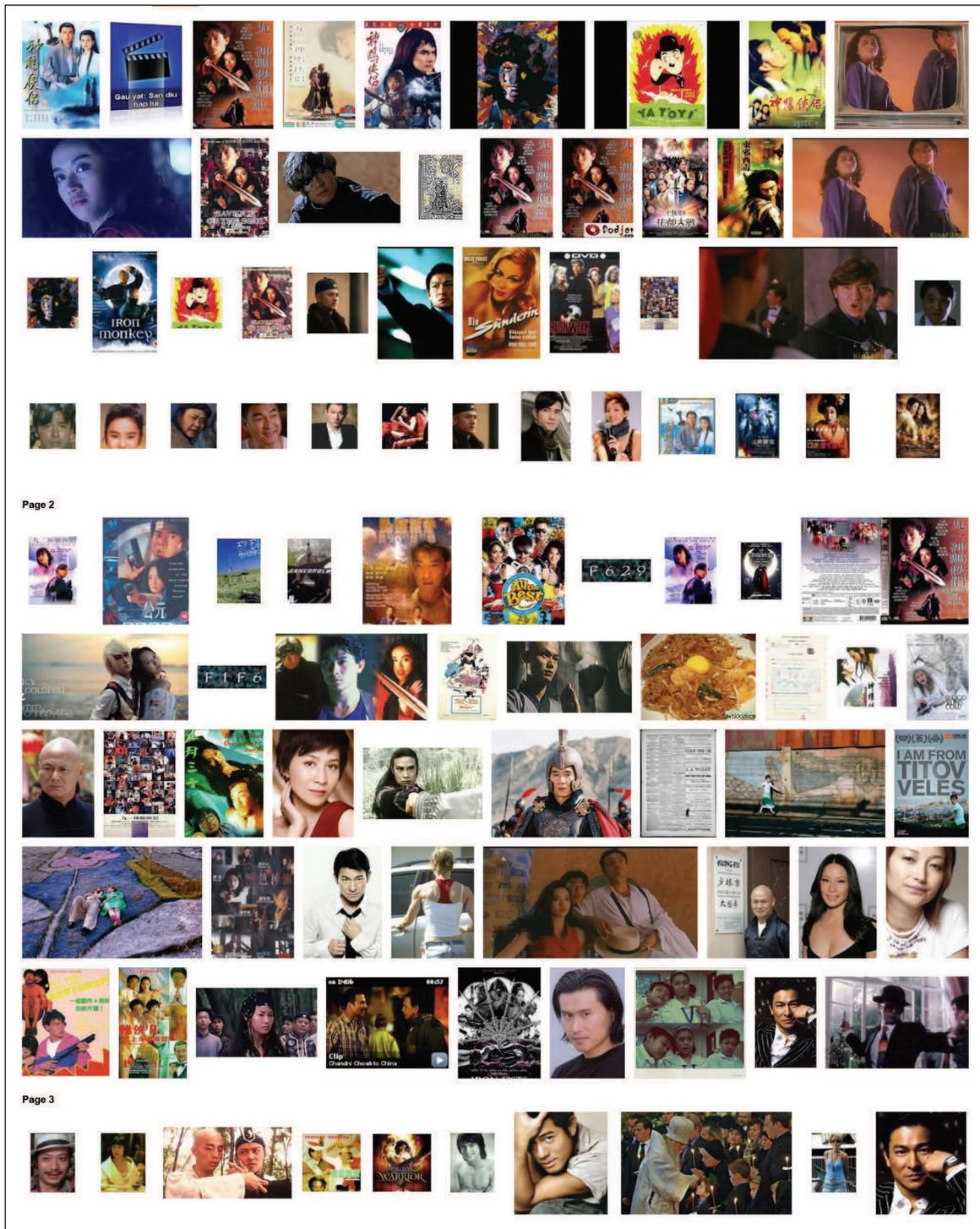
An email exchange ensued. My position was that the rights team shouldn't be thinking about the situation in terms of 'Google search thumb usage.' Instead, and rather than not being able to see 'transformative use' in each and thus all the images, it was both each page of the contribution and the contribution as a whole, the contribution as an art work, as a work of art, that evidenced the 'transformative use.'<sup>11</sup> And further, the images weren't merely being used for an artwork, they were the artwork. And further still, neither the 'original publication' nor the 'raw state' of these downloads was relevant, and this is one of the operations of 'transformative use'; what it does, shows, enacts. Ultimately, it is *in the search* that the work is constituted, *by way of the search as such*, and this is why it is distinguishable from the business of the copyright holders' ownership of the images.

In the end, suddenly and inexplicably, the matter was resolved. While this incident might have apparently come to nothing, for me lok's *Roch Fans* functions in point of fact as a productive, fractious counter-dynamic through the flows of our épistémè of re-search's late capitalist global algorithmic knowledge economy with its distinct operations of searchability and distributability. By way of its mediatized translation from the Gallery to the academic journal, lok's *Roch Fans*, in highlighting the operations of our épistémè of re-search, becomes a provocation (or, perhaps, provokes a minor juridical disturbance for the Internet as a global archive or ecology of images) that compels us to:

- start from the premise that the protocols and processes of searching and searching again – that is to say, of research as praxis – are always and already incendiary;
- grasp that the power and authority of the global archive, and the Internet as archival, resides not in its content per se but rather in its operations of searchability and distributability;
- appreciate that the Internet as an archive, and as archival, as open, and of and for the commons, as site of possibility, is challenged by our contemporary distributive condition in which the needs

<sup>10</sup> This themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture*, co-edited with Juliette Kristensen, appeared in December 2013 (volume 12, issue 3), and contributors were: Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme (in conversation with Tom Holert), susan pui san lok, Marquard Smith, Uriel Orlow, Chris Horrocks, Shezad Dawood, Sas Mays, Nina Lager Vestberg, Gary Hall, and Trevor Paglen.

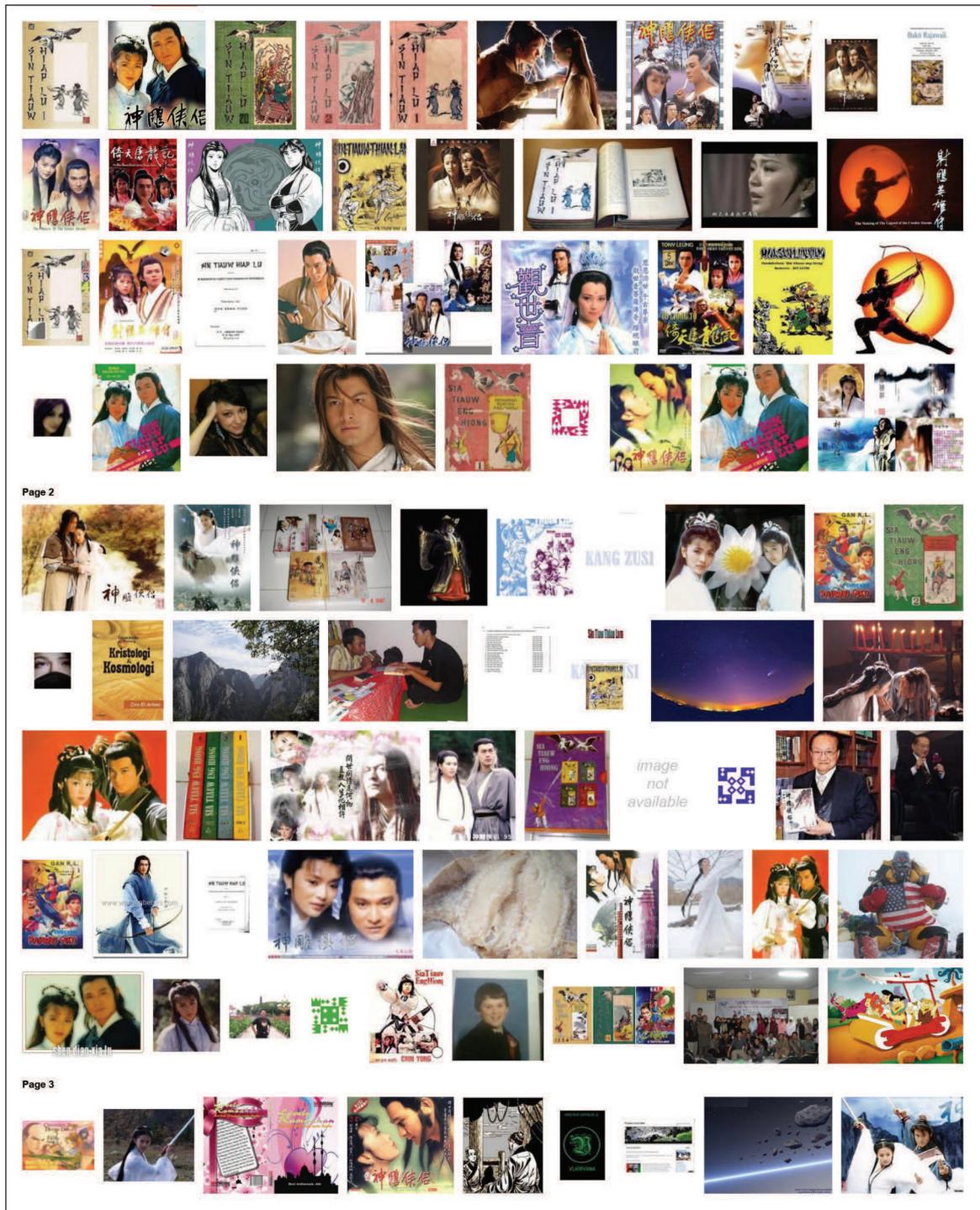
<sup>11</sup> For recent discussions on the arts and copyright law see for instance Kembrew McLeon and Rudolf Kuenzli, eds., 'Cutting Across Media: Appropriation Art, Interventionist Collage, and Copyright Law,' Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.



**Figure 4:** 'RoCH Fans and Legends (Entries)', susan pui san lok. Credits: *Journal of Visual Culture*, December 2013 (volume 12, issue 3).

of and tensions between the Internet, academic publishing, artistic practice, law, and conviviality clash irreconcilably;

- worry away at the pressure points between academia, publishing, and the Internet (not least because there's nothing unconditionally unrestricted, nor necessarily *gratis* or *libre*, about the future for Open Access);
- know that in the freedom and control that dictates this ecology of images, we must keep to hand the devices in the toolbox of experimentality;
- utilize archives as sources and resources, and the archival as a tactic to locate and challenge the logic, the structure, and the nature/status of data, information, and knowledge in ways that might undermine from within the ambitions and operations of such systems and its networked



**Figure 5:** 'RoCH Fans and Legends (Entries)', susan pui san lok. Credits: *Journal of Visual Culture*, December 2013 (volume 12, issue 3).

- cultures of accumulation, circulation and dissemination all in the service of multi-national, corporate capitalism's global algorithmic knowledge economy;
- interrogate critically and to disruptive ends and means by which (and why) data and metadata are gathered, accumulated, aggregated and distributed;
- interrupt data and metadata's logic, its rhythm, its ubiquity – as it creates, shapes and pervades the informational, the communicable, the environmental, the searchable, the distributable, the historical, the archival, and the knowable as they are constituted by data and metadata;
- grasp how datasets might function beyond their original location and purpose, and how their transformation by the utilization of languages visually and poetically might articulate an aesthetics of system-ness as criticality;

- conduct research that is made up entirely of the Internet as a living archive – of blog fragments, GPS locations, online photosharing communities, Google images, and so on – to render differently the creation, organization and presentation of data and metadata.

In concluding, susan pui san lok's *RoCH Fans* (2013–) as practice-led research is a prototype of 'experimentality.' As etymology further tells us, 'the experiment' is the model for testing, trying, and experience-based knowledge, and while it might have its origins in science, it is of course hugely beneficial for thinking and generating new knowledge in art, design, and the humanities.<sup>12</sup> By way of such experimentality, research as praxis is productive of new or different kinds of knowledge – for it is the experimental nature of art practice that produces particular kinds of new knowledge, that this new knowledge is articulated by that practice, and that it is conveyed and interpreted by its audiences. We must, then, be attentive to how it produces knowledge, produces new knowledge; and how its research utilizes (and invents its own) models and methodologies of the experiment as integral to its practice. Thus we need to be attentive to the kinds of knowledge that art and design practices produce, the ways in which they do so, and to what end. Here research is 'embodied in' and 'articulated by way of' art and design visually, materially, and spatially. The 'experiment' as methodology includes methods of/for the experiment such as: testing and trying, curiosity and speculation, investigation and inquiry, creativity and *techné*, process and practice, and risk and failure. Lok's *Roch Fans* is a case study towards this nascent taxonomy, cartography, and morphology of experimentality.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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<sup>12</sup> Etymologically, experiment is from Old French *experiment* (*practical knowledge, cunning, enchantment; trial, test, proof, experiment*), < Latin *experimentum* (*trial, test, proof, experiment*), noun of action < *experiri* to test, to try.

For an indicative bibliography dealing with the experiment in both art, design, and humanities research, and history of science and technology see: Arends and Thackara, 'Experiment' (1998); Daston, 'Histories of Scientific Observation' (2011); Dunne and Raby, 'Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming' (2014); Edwards, *The Lab* (2010); Galison, *How Experiments End* (1987); Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* (1992); Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1988); Jones, and Galison (eds.), *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (1998); Kastner, *Nature* (2012); Latour and Weibel, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (2005); Macleod and Holdridge, eds., *Thinking Through Art: Reflections on Art as Research* (2005); Turkle, ed., *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (2007).

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