Traces of a Corporeal Archive:

Choy Ka Fai + The *SoftMachine* Project

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I. Introduction

In 2012, while studying in London, the now Berlin-based Singaporean artist Choy Ka Fai began working on the *SoftMachine* project after seeing a promotional video for the Sadler Wells' dance series *Out of Asia. The Future of Contemporary Dance*. In the video, a number of well-known choreographers and dancers were featured in the marketing of contemporary dance from Asia. However, as Choy noted:

> Out of ten artists, only two (represented in the video) were actually from Asia.[1] A lot of artists were like (choreographer) Akram Khan who is of Asian descent but is actually British. I became anxious. I wanted to find out what was actually inside Asia, not what came "out of"… I remember Akram Khan saying that the Asian body is inherently spiritual. Immediately I asked myself, what do you mean by the "Asian body"? There are more than 48 countries in Asia![2]

From this initial place of postcolonial anxiety, the *SoftMachine* project has developed into an ambitious and complex archival research project in which Choy

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1. Choy Ka Fai, e-conversation with author, June 2, 2016. Choy sees some misrepresentation in the promotional video. The majority of those featured in the video were those living outside Asia or of Asian descent when about half of the dance artists who participated were living in Asia.

2. Choy Ka Fai, interview in the *Soft Machine by Choy Ka Fai*, October 17–18, 2015, program booklet, published in conjunction with Da:ns Festival at the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay, Singapore.

fig. 1. Soft Machine archives on exhibition at the Impulstanz Festival, Welt Museum, Vienna, Austria, 29 July – 12 August 2015.

proposes a (re)mapping of dance histories in Asia. Choy attempts an ethnographic transliteration that is also a geographical study of movement and moments in dance scenes throughout Asia. *SoftMachine* currently comprises a growing collection of more than 80 video interviews with contemporary dancers and choreographers from thirteen cities in five Asian countries: China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore (Fig. 1). Notably, most of these dancers and choreographers come from cities outside the main urban capitals. Besides the interviews, Choy has also produced four performance works in collaboration with his research subjects, namely, Surjit Nongmeikapam from Manipur, India, Rianto, born in Banyumas, Indonesia and now based in Tokyo, Yuya Tsukahara and the Osakan group Contact Gonzo and the Shanghai-based Chinese duo Xiao Ke and Zi Han.[3]

This paper will focus on two of Choy's *SoftMachine* performance works, produced and performed in collaboration with Surjit and Rianto respectively, to examine how the folding of traditional, local dance movements into these performances has created an alternate archive of performance where the body is a living repository, one that simultaneously historicizes while contemporanizing.

3. Choy Ka Fai, *SoftMachine: A Trailer* (2014); https://vimeo.com/108572515 (Accessed May 16, 2016).

Hal Foster, referring to recent works by Thomas Hirshhorn and Tacita Dean, has described current contemporary artistic practice in the archival field as follows:

> First, it not only draws on informal archives but also produces them, and does so in a way that underscores the hybrid condition of such materials as found and constructed, factual and fictive, public and private. Then, too, this art often arranges these materials according to a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and sometimes presents them in an architecture that can be called archival: a complex of texts, images and objects.[4]

Foster's description is apt for Choy's *SoftMachine* project where the informal archives are the dancers' bodies, i.e. the sequence of physical movements we describe as dance, the patterns in these sequences that give them specific cultural meaning, e.g. traditional, ethnic, as well as the imprint(s) that their daily lives, practice and environment makes on their bodies. The formal archives are traces of these informal archives, processed into filmed footage of performed dances, ambient sound recordings, or even written notes. Yet, these extracts or facsimiles can never replace the live – and lived – experience for both performer and audience.

What then is a corporeal archive? Dance, as with all live performances, is complicated to archive because of its live nature and the presence of the audience.[5] Choy's *SoftMachine* performances are a reconstitution of the original performances, where archival elements are included to contextualize contemporary Asian dances for audiences that would otherwise lack understanding of the original frames of reference, which are often traditional dances specific to local cultures. A corporeal archive is one in which the physical body is the archive and the repository for the contents.[6] Choy's archiving of contemporary dance in produces materials that are time-sensitive commentary on the conditions and contexts of the dance scene(s) in Asia and are particularly valuable in the recording of practices outside the usual urban capitals such as Tokyo or New Delhi. Choy was particularly interested in finding

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4. Hal Foster, "Archival", in *Bad New Days* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2015), 31–62.

5. Dance is typically archived through choreographic notations, references to the musical score, breakdown of the technical structure in terms of sequenced movements, and historical conditions surrounding its staging. For further discussion on current state of dance research and discourse — although more specific to Western ballet — see Melanie Bales' "Touchstones of Tradition and Innovation", in *Dance on Its Own Terms: Histories and Methodologies*, eds. Melanie Bales and Karen Eliot., Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2013, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199939985.001.0001 (Accessed June 1, 2016).

6. Also see Stephen Barber's references to the corporeal archive in his discussion of the relationship between film, archive and performance in *Performance Projections: Film and the Body in Action* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2015).

dancers and choreographers from less well-known Asian cities.

In the gathering of these informal materials, Choy also takes on the role(s) of ethnographer and participant-observer. During the interviews, there are no standard questions and Choy begins by introducing his own work before asking each subject about his or her dance background, local history, current practice, towards finding a suitable line for developing these conversations further.[7] The interviews move between the personal and professional, with personal accounts and anecdotes woven in, some parts of which are later reused in the performances. When the chemistry is good, as in the case of the interview subjects who later become performance collaborators, Choy also undertakes more extensive filming of the everyday context surrounding their dance practice, including their personal and family lives. These materials are both historical archive and resource for the creation of the performance works that are developed later, which blend new choreographed dance sequences, segments of scripted theatrical dialogue and multi-media effects.

Choy describes himself as a "performance maker" rather than choreographer[8] ; by reconstructing and recontextualizing selected dance movements in a new performance work, what is taking place on stage is not a reenactment of a traditional dance within a contemporary context, or a designing of new dance sequences, but a(n) (re)authentication of tradition through movement. In the performances, we thus find traces of the corporeal archive in the reconstituted works.

II. Performing the Archive

In Choy's collaborations with Surjit and Rianto, the nature of the archive, the process of archiving, and the concept of the archival are intertwined. The multi-media performances take place in a black box and include a scripted dialogue between Choy and the dancer, interspersed with demonstrations of movements and sequences from his classical and contemporary dance practice. A mini documentary video of the dancer at rehearsals and in his daily life, is shown midway through the performance.

Choy's collaboration with Surjit was the second work in the *SoftMachine* project (Fig. 2).[9] Surjit is a contemporary dancer and choreographer who is trained in classical

7. Choy Ka Fai, interview by author, *October* 19, 2015, at the Gilman Barracks, Singapore.

8. Choy Ka Fai, interview by Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay; https://www.facebook.com/EsplanadeSG/videos/696278830509707 (Accessed May 16, 2016).

9. Choy's first collaboration in the series was with Yuya and the Contact Gonzo group, which he developed

Fig. 2. Choy Ka Fai and Surjit Nongmeikapam demonstrating dance movements during the *SoftMachine* performance. Photo by Law Kian Yen.

Indian dance and martial arts. Surjit emphasizes that he is from Manipur (rather than from Bombay or New Delhi) where there are active and long-established classical and contemporary dance scenes. For the most part, Choy has deliberately chosen to work with choreographers and dancers from cities outside of the capitals, to examine the relationship between the center and margins.

Surjit is a physical repository of traditional dance movements and martial arts moves. He has studied India's eight official dances, absorbing the physical patterns and rhythm of the movements into his body's muscle memory. On stage with Choy, he shows how these movements are available on demand. This archive is not neutral or objective though; we can only access the contents of such corporeal archives when the dancer (agrees to) demonstrates the movements. In that sense, the nature of such corporeal archives run contrary to more conventional public archives which are meant to be accessible by the widest possible audiences. This form of transmission of dance history is one of the most faithful – a facsimile that is a transference from the physical to the visual experienced – when physical movements are demonstrated by the dancer and seen by the audience or demonstrated from teacher to student in a corporeal tradition.

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during a dance residency program in Kobe, Japan.

Fig. 3. Surjit Nongmeikapam dancing in Manipur, video still from *SoftMachine: Surjit Nongmeikapam/The Seventh Season*, 2014.

The scripted banter between Choy and Surjit unfolds to reveal the tensions between the traditional and the contemporary, the contested definition of Indian contemporary dance, and the fraught relationship(s) that dancers have with multiple audiences, domestic and international, for the numerous different national, regional, and local dances in India. As he performs, Surjit also provides helpful cultural annotations on the history of contemporary Indian dance in India.

The distance between the center and margins in India's dance scene is measured in the comparison of the martial dances from Kerala and Manipur. Surjit explains the differences in the types and amount of weapons involved, noting, "When I look at the Indian contemporary dance scene, there are many choreographers who use Indian classical dance and martial art forms to do contemporary work. But no one uses Manipuri dance and martial arts to create contemporary work so as a choreographer from Manipur, I feel I should use it for my contemporary works."[10] When Choy comments that Surjit's performance of Kathak dance movements are much slower than versions he has seen in Europe, Surjit replies with some disdain, "Of course. I live in India, I know better than people living in Europe. I am the original."[11]

In the mini documentary video, *The Seventh Season*, that is shown midway through the performance, Choy films Surjit going about his daily life in Manipur,

10. Choy Ka Fai and Surjit Nongmeikapam, *SoftMachine* performance at the Da:ns Festival.

11. Choy and Nongmeikapam, *SoftMachine* performance.

interacting with other fellow dancers during rehearsals and lush views of the physical environment in Manipur(Fig. 3).[12] These scenes from Manipur are projected on a large screen as a backdrop to Surjit's real body as he performs, in effect importing the local context. This assemblage of motion and visual layers provides a Framework of self-reflexive authenticity to Surjit's performance now taking place outside its original context.

Of the four performances in the *SoftMachine*, Choy's collaboration with Surjit deals most directly with post-colonialist concerns, most likely it was one of the earlier performances to be produced after Choy saw the Sadler Wells video. Their collaborative relationship began when Choy was commissioned to create a new work for a European festival, with the specific mandate that he had to work with an Indian artist. Choy pointedly notes to Surjit, "Good, you have an Indian passport", explaining why that is a bureaucratic advantage.[13]

In this resulting *SoftMachine* performance, Choy also wanted to make transparent the influence that various funding institutions can have on the creation of art works. In their short exchange on stage, Surjit highlights the utilitarian value that cultural and national affiliations have in directing the flow of institutional funding and marketing: he begins the performance with introductions that make clear the artists' national and territorial affiliations, "Hi, my name is Surjit. I am a dancer, choreographer from Manipur. This is Ka Fai, a Singapore artist from Singapore; we met in New Delhi in 2012."[14]

Read together with the interviews that Choy has made with other Indian dancers and choreographers (Not shown during the performance), Surjit's account of his experience as an Indian dancer and choreographer becomes more representative than singular. Other Indian dancers and choreographers also share Surjit's exasperation at their experience of the "persistence of exoticization" from foreign audiences.[15]

III. Moving Across Liminal Spaces

Choy's collaboration with Rianto, on the hand, reveals a different kind of corporeal

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12. Choy Ka Fai, *SoftMachine: Surjit Nongmeikapam/The Seventh Season* trailer; https://vimeo.com/58779367 (Accessed May 16, 2016).

13. Choy and Nongmeikapam, *SoftMachine* performance.

14. Ibid.

15. Choy Ka Fai, "India Interviews" from the *SoftMachine* project, private access on May 16, 2016.

Fig. 4. Rianto performing the Topeng Sekartaji, a traditional Javanese dance during the *SoftMachine* performance. Photo by Law Kian Yen.

archive, one that is unexpectedly strong and lucid in raising issues about gender and identity. Rianto is a dancer and choreographer originally from Banyumas, Java. He is based professionally in Tokyo where he teaches and choreographs. While dancer-choreographers like Surjit and Rianto who are born outside of the capital may often be conversant in the mainstream dances as well as those local to their birthplace, this is not always applicable for dancers who were born and practiced all their lives in the capital cities.

Like Surjit, Rianto is also conversant with traditional and contemporary dance vernaculars, though in Indonesia. He is a master in various traditional Indonesian dances, notably the Banyumas Lenggar which is a kind of local Javanese folk dance. The Banyumas Lenggar has more in common with the Indonesian *wayang kulit* or shadow play than the Javanese classical dance, in terms of how it is performed in a public space as the audience members come and go (Fig. 4). The Banyumas Lenggar is a free form genre in which the lead dancer takes on multiple roles, regardless of gender. The performances usually take place on a makeshift wooden platform and are open to everyone in the village. People stop by and stay as long as they wish. As Rianto puts it, "When the music starts, everyone can move to its rhythm."[16] There are variations in the choreographed movements every time the dance is performed. The power and ability to capture the attention of the roving audience thus depends on the charisma and wit of the lead dancer.

The Banyumas Lenggar dance that Rianto has mastered is rarely seen outside its traditional staging. In the production with Choy, Rianto demonstrates his virtuosity in a more classical dance vernacular by beginning with an extract from the Javanese

16. Choy and Rianto, *SoftMachine* performance on *October* 18, 2015 at the Da:ns Festival, Singapore.

Fig. 5. The makeshift performance stage in Rianto's village in Banyumas, Java, Indonesia, video still from *SoftMachine*: Rianto, 2014.

Topeng Sekartaji, a traditional story dance based on the Panji epic, an old Javanese tale along the lines of the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana.[17] During the performance, Rianto moves fluidly between the roles of the princess and her male lover, through the use of simple masks and the timely addition or removal of pieces of clothing (Fig. 5). The gender issue is a particularly intriguing in how it came to be foregrounded in the performance without any explicit discussion. As Rianto coyly confides to the audience, he feels that he identifies with the Javanese princess who believes that love and pain comes together since he had a similar experience with his lover.[18] Gendered pronouns are carefully avoided in this first part of the scripted dialogue. The archival video footage and subsequent dialogue between Choy and Rianto reveals twists and turns. Rianto's performing of the Banyumas Lenggar and Topeng Sekartaji, his easy immersion into the different gender roles would appear to hint at a transgendered fluidity. As the performance progresses, we are shown very domestic scenes of Rianto at home with his Japanese wife, which would appear to address any doubts about Rianto having less than conventional gender position. But this is followed by

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17. See Ronald Jenkins' essay "Topeng: Balinese Dance Drama", in *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (Autumn 1978): 39—52. Jenkins describes the staging of Topeng dance practices on Bali, Indonesia, in detail; there are useful parallels for understanding the local contexts and histories surrounding Rianto's dances.

18. Ibid.

Choy's reveal of Rianto's secret forays into Tokyo's (often gay) bath scene "just to relax" in the video footage that is filmed while he is shadowing Rianto around town. The performance on stage becomes increasingly charged as the separation between the dancer's real and stage selves dissipates. Rianto ends with a contemporary dance piece that is masculine and highly erotic, a complete counter point to the gentle flirtation of the traditional Javanese dances that he began with. Even so, in both cases, in Rianto's seduction of the audience there is no distinction as to whether the dancer is addressing male or female members of the audience.

Rianto and Choy's collaboration has produced important archival materials that document an Indonesian folk dance not often seen outside of its local context. In particular, the interaction and participation of the local audience in Choy's filmed footage of Rianto's performances in Banyumas makes them valuable records. During the *SoftMachine* performance, Choy interjects Rianto's live dances with filmed footage from the latter's life in Tokyo and Banyumas, to great effect. In Tokyo, Rianto is part of a more international contemporary dance scene whereas in Banyumas, his dances have a community-building value for the village. This contextual framing to Rianto's performances nuances the idea of the dancer as an individual and not just representative figure of a cultural form. The composite of these different materials gives a rich and complex picture of a contemporary Indonesian dancer who moves between different dance forms, between different physical and cultural environments, while adding very personal nuances to his interpretations. The assemblage and juxtaposition of the various archival materials, dances, and conversations within a single performance creates powerful crosscurrents between truth and fiction, myth and reality, the traditional and the contemporary, the gender binary and alternatives to heterosocial norms.

IV. Speculative Notes on Performance History in Singapore

Choy's *SoftMachine* project also obliquely reflects on the history of performance in Singapore. Some influences on *SoftMachine* can be traced to his involvement in Theatreworks' Flying Circus Project which was conceived by theatre doyen Ong Keng Sen in 1996, only a couple of years after a no-funding ban on performance art was instituted by the National Arts Council (NAC). After a couple of controversial performances by the local collectives Fifth Passage and The Artists' Village in late 1993/early 1994, the NAC had decided that it would no longer fund performance art

unless a script was submitted for government vetting. The no-funding rule was only lifted in 2004, though the applications for public performances still required scripts to be cleared by authorities.[19]

In retrospect, the decade-long ban has had several related long-term effects on the uneven development of the scene in Singapore, beyond the stifling of the growth of performance art in Singapore.[20] For one, local artists of Choy's generation who may otherwise have developed a performance art practice in the visual arts field appear to have turned to experimental theatre as a more conducive environment to nurture their early practice. Choy held the position of associate artistic director at Theatreworks from 2007 to 2009.[21] The Flying Circus project initiated collaborative projects in art scenes all over Asia, notably in the Mekong region, and developed new works with influential contemporary dance choreographers like Jérôme Bel and Pichet Klunchun who regularly perform in Singapore.[22]

After the ban, Singaporean performance artists actively sought opportunities to collaborate and perform their works overseas; among the most well-known were artists like Lee Wen, Tang Da Wu, Amanda Heng and Vincent Leow. Other important platforms for Singaporean performance artists include the early iterations of the Asia-Pacific Triennial and the Gwangju Biennale. Showing works that responded to local situations (in Singapore) but were only seen primarily by foreign audiences was an unfortunate reality that these performance artists had to work with. It can be assumed that the participation of the overseas audience would ultimately have affected the form of the works themselves, given that their performances often took place in public spaces.

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19. Scripts are vetted in advance of public performances by the Media Development Authority in Singapore, regardless of funding sources.

20. Ray Langenbach, "Representing State Desire and the Sins of Transgression", in *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity and the State in Southeast Asia*, ed. Yao Souchou (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001)

21. Theatreworks, *From Identity to Mondialisation: Theatreworks 25* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2013).

22. Theatreworks website on The Flying Circus project from 1996 to today, http://www.theatreworks.org.sg/international (Accessed May 16, 2016). Bel and Klunchun's influences can be seen in Choy's *SoftMachine* project. For more about Bel's collaboration with Klunchun in his work, *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2004), developed as part of the Flying Circus project, also see Yvonne Hardt's "Staging the Ethnographic of Dance History: Contemporary Dance and Its Play with Tradition", in *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (Summer 2011): 27–42.

V. Conclusion

SoftMachine is an important project that adds several new dimensions to the field of contemporary Asian art, raising key issues about the complicated status of dance and performance in relation to the visual arts field. For example, when Choy films the dancer performing locally and then re-inserts/edits selected sequences into the choreographed performance, the nature of what we consider "content" shifts from live dance to film-as-archive to video projections within a multi-media/dance performance that is in turn documented as a visual arts project. This evolution in turn compels audiences who may or may not have followed the project through its various incarnations, to reconsider his or her relationship to the content and the experience as the frame(s) of reference shifts, moving across the fields of contemporary dance and visual arts and shifting between performance and archive. It also innovates in terms of working with archives and audiences. There are diverse motivations for artists who undertake archiving and archive-related projects; *SoftMachine* also brings with it complications and ethical concerns that come with artists adopting ethnographic and other cross-disciplinary practices.

The role and impact of institutions are very different from those of individual artists like Choy. How do we distinguish between the institutional, the communal and the personal drives with this broad archival turn? Is it possible to distil the personal and individual from the collective, regional or national? How are such projects built on the specific histories, cultures and anxieties of the regional and/or national? Do they in fact reflect a collective and regional urgency or should we beware of the flattening effects of such labels? The nature of archival tendencies can be very different; for critics and scholars examining recent art produced out of an archival impulse, it is crucial to contextualize the works and projects so that they are not simply accepted as assemblages with no hierarchical value.[23] Archiving is not always neutral, benign or restorative. It can also be a way of mapping, territorializing and co-opting …

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23. Matthew Reason proposes that archives of live performances be seen as "detritus" rather than reconstitution of the memory. See Reason's "Archive or Memory: The Detritus of Live Performance", in *New Theatre Quarterly* 73, Vol. 19, Part 1: 82–89.

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