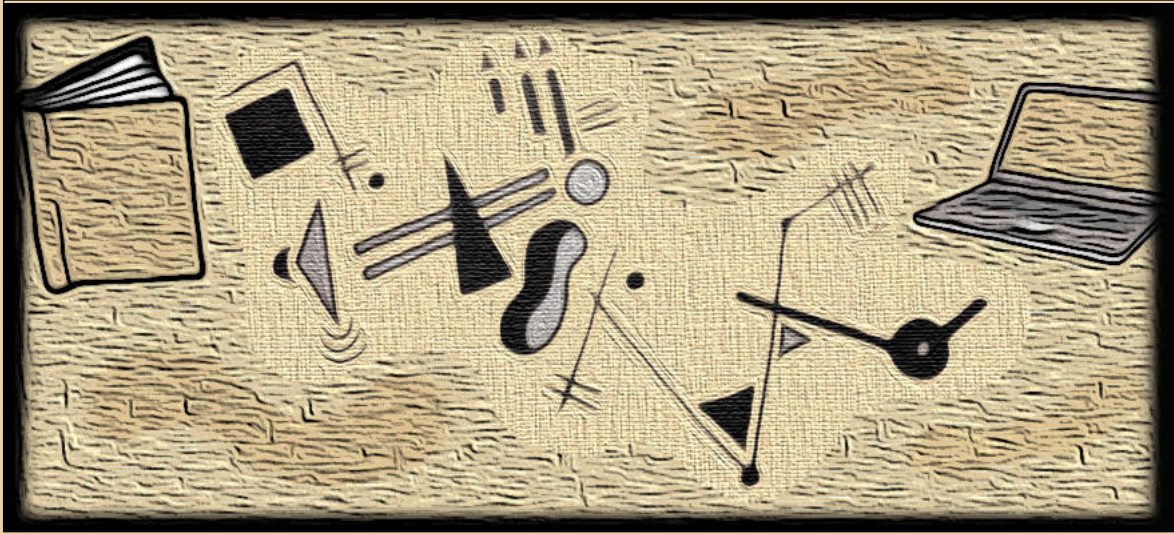


#18

(RE)READING INDEX  
CARDS:  
THE ARCHIVIST AS  
INTERPRETER IN  
SUSAN PUI SAN LOK'S  
*NEWS*

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**Abstract** || Looking at susan pui san lok's projects *News* (2005) and *RoCH* (2013), this paper contemplates the notions put forward by Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Jacques Derrida on the power of archivists, not solely as guardians of documents but also as their interpreters. Taking into consideration that photographic and moving image archives present unique difficulties in their cataloguing processes, I examine silences that might be generated by a thematic classification that is not impervious to archivists' biases. Moreover, I consider if the silences created by manual processes of classification and retrieval might be surpassed through digital technologies, or if it is possible that new technologies simply create different types of silencing.

**Keywords** || Archivist | Digital Archive | susan pui san lok | Google Image | Bias

**Resumen** || Este artículo se aproxima a los proyectos *News* (2005) and *RoCH* (2013) de susan pui san lok, a partir de las nociones propuestas por Michel-Rolph Trouillot y Jacques Derrida sobre el poder de los archivistas, no solo como guardianes de documentos, sino también como sus intérpretes. Considerando que los archivos de imágenes fotográficas y en movimiento presentan dificultades excepcionales en sus procesos de catalogación, examino los silencios que podrían ser generados por una clasificación temática que no es impermeable al sesgo de los archivistas. Por otra parte, analizo si los silencios creados por procesos manuales de clasificación y recuperación pueden ser superados a través de tecnologías digitales o si es posible que estas nuevas tecnologías creen simplemente diferentes tipos de silencios.

**Palabras clave** || Archivista | Archivo digital | susan pui san lok | Google Image | Sesgo

**Resum** || En aquest article ens apropem als projectes *News* (2005) i *RoCH* (2013), de susan pui san lok, tot contemplant les nocions proposades per Michel-Rolph Trouillot i Jacques Derrida sobre el poder dels arxivistes, no només com a guardians de documents sinó també com a intèrprets seus. Si tenim en compte que els arxius d'imatges fotogràfiques i en moviment presenten dificultats úniques en els seus processos de catalogació, examino aquí els silencis que podrien ser generats per una classificació temàtica que no és impermeable al biaix dels arxivistes. A més, analitzo si els silencis creats per processos manuals de classificació i recuperació poden ser superats a través de tecnologies digitals o si més aviat aquestes creen diferents maneres de silenciar.

**Paraules clau** || Arxivista | Arxiu digital | susan pui san lok | Google Image | Biaix

## 0. Introduction

*Adapting to each set of materials its own indices, whatsoever will be needed we will have before our eyes immediately, without bother, so that it will seem rather to have rushed into our hands by design, than to have fallen there by chance.*

Baldassarre Bonifacio

*When we do our work well, it is invisible to the catalog user.*

Martha M. Yee

In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot points to four crucial moments of silencing in the process of historical production, one of which is based on fact assembly, that is, on the moment in which the archive is created.<sup>1</sup> (1995: 26) As such, might we consider that the methods of cataloguing documents—of cataloguing archival material—are inherently subjective? A subjectivity that might contribute to the silencing—if not erasure—of historical moments? And in which way are archivists more than solely the guardians of documents, but also their interpreters? (Derrida, 1995: 2)

In *News* (2005), British artist susan pui san lok (b. 1972)<sup>2</sup> chose to use as source material, not the archival documents belonging to the Media Archive for Central England (MACE)—composed mostly of independent regional British television shows and news reports from 1956 to 1985—, but rather the index cards and cataloguing procedures that were employed. The majority of the twenty-seven thousand reels of film that make up MACE have yet to be catalogued, being that the existing records mostly consisted of hand-typed index cards, organised alphabetically. Photographic and moving image archives present unique difficulties in cataloguing processes. Indexing pictorial documents, transposing them to text, continuously presupposes the existence of an institution, of an archivist—of a translator—who, despite attempts at objectivity, is only able to offer his or her reading of the facts. In her attempt to go beyond the opaqueness of the archive's contents, lok's decision was to «to engage with the scope of the archive made visible or legible through this systematic yet idiosyncratic process of translation.» (Smith, 2006: 28)

In this paper my aim is to consider two of lok's projects, *News* and *RoCH* (2013), in the light of historical changes in the assembly and classification of archival material. (Duranti, 1993) Moreover, I intend to reflect on the inadequacy of some of these methods for the cataloguing and retrieval of image-based documents. By associating text to images, these are made to be researched—retrieved—not by their visual content, but by words, by concepts. By terms engendered by archivists, with all of their subjectivity, with all of their power as interpreters. Yet, such a process makes way for distinct readings, in different periods, in different contexts. In such a way that cataloguing

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1 | The four moments of silencing in historical production as defined by Trouillot include: “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).” (italics in original)

2 | Born and based in Great Britain to Hong Kong-Chinese parents susan pui san lok's work has been deeply engaged with questions of identity, displacement, diaspora, translation, and nostalgia. Language and text play an important role in her visual practice, where she engages with re-readings and revaluations of documents and archives. Her projects encompass multiple media, from moving image to postcards, from performance to installation, from text to sound. In introducing herself for the brochure—»Notes to Let You Down«—accompanying her first solo exhibition in 1997 at the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester, lok produced a statement that already pointed to the role of language(s) in her oeuvre: «(I am?) a British (-born-girl-woman-) subject who speaks in a Chinese-inflected-English, an Essex-accented-Cantonese, retrieving occasionally her once-good French, decidedly poor German, and mostly-forgotten Latin; a ghost/bamboo child of Hong Kong emigrants, sister-niece-cousin to close-distant family, granddaughter of a Malaysian-born granddaughter, of a woman unnamed to me, betrothed at three to a boy-husband in South China.» (lok *apud* Smith, 2006: 19)

methods, or absences, themselves, may present themselves as starting points for a re-reading of the archive. An aspect lok signals to with *News*:

In *News*, I'm interested in the way mechanical and human quirks are evidenced in misaligned letters and cards, misspellings, and handwritten addenda; but any nostalgia provoked by the charm of outdated technologies and outmoded activities is, I hope, tempered by the terminologies and narratives that emerge. (Smith, 2006: 32)

However, might the silences created by manual processes of classification and retrieval, by the idiosyncrasies of passed technologies, be surpassed through digital technologies? Or is it possible that new technologies simply create different types of silencing? And to what extent are technological limits merely reflecting the limits of their creator—of the people who develop the technology—and of the context in which they are created? (Roth, 2009)

## 1. Archive / Archivist

«ACCENTS/ AERIAL VIEWS / AFRICA & AFRICANS / ALI, Mohammed / AMBASSADORS / AMERICA & AMERICANS [...]» it is with these terms, with this mirroring of the MACE indexes that susan pui san lok begins the 30-postcard book that forms *News*. By selecting some of the index cards—headed by themes determined not by the material itself, but by the various archivists that have contributed to its cataloguing—over others lok assumes the role of the archivist herself.

The notion of the archive—the archive itself—is not a recent one. For as long as there has been the capacity to fix writing in durable materials, for as long as we have gained the ability to exteriorise memory—individual and collective—through characters, (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964) there has been a need to archive, to gather significant documents. Yet, one should consider who decides which of these are significant.

According to Luciana Duranti, some of the earliest traces of archives, in a form that included archival description (i.e. indexes), were found in Nuzi (Yorgan Tepe) in Assyria in 1500 BC. (1993: 48) These were comprised not of perishable materials but of clay tablets. In ancient Mesopotamia these small slabs, piled on one another, were compiled by location rather than content. There were indexes, but these—at times inscribed on the edges of the tablets—were only used as a way to «avoid unnecessary shuffling through a pile». (Schellenberg, 1956: 65)



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Also in Classical Antiquity, the production of indexes was essentially intended to assist in the location of documents, generally ordered not by the date of their creation but by the date they came to be part of the archive. Up until the eighteenth century such a system underwent very little change: the documents were ordered by entry or acquisition date, research was made through numerical indexes that offered no more than titles and locations. Nonetheless, a slight shift had already begun to occur two centuries before, with the ordering of documents by the date of their creation beginning to gain some attraction in the sixteenth century. From this moment on the archive acquired the function of “perpetual memory:” «Perpetual memory is a juridical concept according to which the documents preserved in an archive are authentic and permanent evidence of past actions.» (Duranti, 1993: 49) It would be through perpetual memory that European Kingdoms—and their sovereigns—would be able to validate their authority and authenticate their power over their dominions.

With the archive firmly established as a means of validation, in the Enlightenment its function as a historical and cultural deposit was sharpened. Thus, the cataloguing of documents became no longer defined by date of creation, rather the focus was now transferred to their contents: «The documents were described item by item, and the most important were abstracted, so that their description often served as a “surrogate” for the documents themselves.» (Duranti: 50) Document research and retrieval was now made by themed-indexes, with the help of alphabetically organised index cards that contained entries on multiple texts, and in so doing produced new associations between them.

Up until this point I have described the archive as if it were an independent—almost self-generating—entity, however it is impossible for this ‘entity’ to exist without the presence of something—in truth, someone—else: an archivist. The origin of the term archive itself rests on the existence of an archivist:

the meaning of «archive» [...] comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded [...] the archons are first of all the documents’ guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited [...] They have the power to interpret the archives. (Derrida, 1995: 2)

It is this Greek terminology, and later its Latin adaptations—»archivists (*archivista*), or librarians (*bibliothecarius*), or custodians (*custos*), or guardians of the writings (*grammatophylax*), or keepers of the chests (*scrinarius*)» (Bonifacio, 1632)—that inscribes from the very beginning, power in the role of the archivist. However, as Derrida points out above, this is a dual power: it is the power of the archivist

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as a guardian, but it is also the power of the archivist as an interpreter. It is the archivist who has the power of selection; who decides which documents possess value; who devises the appropriate cataloguing methods; who has the power to silence or give voice to certain historical facts; who, from the eighteenth century onward, has the power to establish and prioritise themes and thematic associations between documents. As Trouillot signalled: «The making of archives involves a number of selective operations: selection of procedures—which means at best the differential ranking and, at worst, the exclusion of some producers, some evidence, some themes, some procedures. Power enters here both obviously and surreptitiously.» (1995: 53)

Still, if in Classical Antiquity the archivist held a highly visible presence—the quality of the archive was dependent even on «the possibility of proving *an unblemished line of responsible custodians*» (Jenkinson, 1922: 11)—his or her role might be seen as having slowly become obfuscated. Let us turn to one of the epigraphs of this paper. According to Martha M. Yee—one of the main researchers in the development of new methods of cataloguing and retrieving moving images at the UCLA Archives—the archivist’s work is at its best when it is invisible for the user. The archivist’s function as an interpreter—the archivist’s presence even—is masked. And perhaps this absence marks precisely an intensification of the power of the archivist as an interpreter. For, if as Trouillot has claimed, “We are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be.” (Trouillot, 1995: xix), it is possible that we are never as steeped in the power of the archivist to interpret our documents, and thus our past, as when we pretend not to see this role.

In *News*, lok reproduced a selection of index-cards, cards that did not describe the totality of each reel of film, but rather, were headed by a theme defined by the archivists, under which multiple entries would be made. Here, even if somewhat concealed from public scrutiny, the archivist’s power was felt: in the terminologies in use, and in the biases these exhibited. What caught lok’s attention when examining MACE was:

the insistent inscription of the “foreign”, implicitly, explicitly, or unrelated to the actual news item—an unsurprising preoccupation, of course, that coincides with a period of mass immigration to Britain, and interesting to me as a series of narratives or narrative hints, embedded often tangentially in relation to the news as a formal record or account of the one-time new, current, curious, strange, or estranged. (Smith, 2006: 29)

Thus, even an unseen archivist will exert a remarkable amount of interpretive power over documents. A power that might be found in the theme that arose not from the themes defined by the MACE archivists, but by the connections established by the artist: the

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presence of the “Other”. This presence is felt in the descriptions made in entries such as those on the Chinese Soccer National Team, recorded when eating in a restaurant—apparently the only newsworthy moment on their visit—under the theme “INDUSTRY—CATERING”. On the emphasis made on an interracial marriage in 1970. On the Vox Pop question put to viewers in February 1966: «Should we have coloured policemen?». On the June 1981 report on nurse Tajwinder Kaur, who, as a Sikh woman, lost her job for insisting on wearing trousers with her uniform. Or on the April 1984 interview with Yellowman (Winston Foster) an albino reggae musician.

But the presence of the “Other” can also be found in absences. In a card on “BI LINGUAL FAMILY” there is only one entry to be found, dating from 1978: that of the Creek family from Coventry whose children have been taught to speak fluently both English and German. If one considers that in the late 1970s Coventry already held one of the largest numbers of Asian immigrants in the UK, one might suppose that more than one of these families was bilingual, and yet no reference is made to this segment of the population. And in this absence, one might consider them to have been silenced.

If it is true that archivists maintain the guardianship as well as the power of interpretation over any archive, some of the barriers imposed by these conditionings might be more easily surmountable by the general public in archives devoted solely to textual documents rather than in those grounded on photography and moving image. As has been mentioned, every archival document is submitted to selection and interpretation processes. There are always choices to be taken. But with visual material these processes are multiplied. To guarantee an effective search and retrieval of documents there is the need to transform image into text. And in the impossibility of registering or describing every second of a film reel, for instance, the archivist selects only certain instants: interpreting—translating—these images.

## 2. Translations / Limitations

Archival knowledges and access are facilitated, mediated, and limited by the observations and evaluations of various third parties, whose indices we rely on to denote something specific and partial of an archive's objects, but which cannot disclose the objects or the archive itself. In the archive-as-index, order and content are unpredictable: nothing is what or where one might assume. (Smith, 2006: 28)

As previously mentioned, in *News* the index-cards reproduced by lok follow the thematic cataloguing initiated in the eighteenth century, where each card includes multiple entries—from diverse reels—that

might be related to the selected theme. What one finds is that some of the decisions taken by the archivists in including or excluding certain entries under the established theme might be considered at times, at the very least, peculiar.

In a card headed with “HOBBIES – COWBOYS & INDIANS” we find a single entry on the Perry family of Kings Norton, who, at the time the news report was made in 1981, spend their free time «emulating the life styles of Indians as closely as possible» (lok, 2005). Another single-entry card, “INACCESSIBLE ISLAND”, provides the description of a botanical expedition to Inaccessible Island in the South Atlantic by students and staff from Denstone College in 1983. Such a theme, indeed such an expedition, harks back to the expeditions undertaken in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and to the «rationalistic and classificatory mindset» reflected in much of the thematic archives of the period. (Duranti, 1993: 50)

Nonetheless, at times a theme might include such a vast number of entries that multiple cards must be filled. Such is the case of “LOVE & MARRIAGE”, where one might find such distinct records as: an interview to two elderly couples in December 1969; the marriage of a Vietnamese couple in Birmingham in January 1970; a “June Bride” wedding later that year; or the marriage of «coloured P. C. Yunus Darr and Woman P.C. Cynthia Willbond» in September 1970. (lok, 2005) What one finds in this small card are multiple instants, connected by their mention in news reports, by their temporal proximity, and by their inclusion by the archivist under this particular theme.

Although thematic cataloguing has evolved from 1985—the last entry date in the MACE index-cards—onwards, arguably, it is still one of the preferred methods of classification, particularly in regards to television reports and newscasts. Still, different moving image documents present different cataloguing needs. Needs that yet remain anchored to the archivist’s subjective reading of the materials.

In her moving image cataloguing norm guide, Martha M. Yee, begins with the three essential procedures for the correct register of a moving image document. The first comprises the transcription of the production details, i.e.: the history of the document. The second involves a written abstraction of the document, as well as the establishing of connections to other documents. The final procedure consists of normalising terminology: «catalogers will *normalize* the name used for a person, work, or concept by choosing a *preferred* term to be used in the heading fields of bibliographic records.”<sup>3</sup> (Yee, 2007: 4)

It is understandable that these procedures are necessary to simplify the search and retrieval of any given document, however all of

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them entail selections determined by archivists. Selections that, at least in regards to the second and third procedure, can never be truly objective. The preference and normalisation given to a term in detriment of another carries with it a subjective power of interpretation by the archivist. In this, Trouillot's question «who has the power to name what» (114), becomes significant. This procedure rests not only in the selection of a given term, but also in the exclusion of all others, and thus it might be understood as a process of silencing. (Trouillot: 96)

But might the use of new technologies not provide objective cataloguing procedures and thus eliminate these silencing processes? Perhaps. Yet it is also possible that it might simply generate new kinds of silencing: «computers cannot differentiate between the most minute and insignificant variation and another variation that actually signals something important.» (Yee, 2007: 14) And in forgoing a selection process there is a risk of hyper-objectivity, in which every instant — relevant or trivial — is placed at the same level, making any efficient retrieval or reading impossible, for: «If the account was indeed fully comprehensive of all facts it would be incomprehensible.» (Trouillot: 30)

Moreover, some aspects of manual cataloguing are being perpetuated in digital cataloguing. Images continue to be, for the most part, associated to textual concepts, and the use of search engines still depends on the input of terms. And if in *News susan pui san lok* focused on the idiosyncrasies of past technologies —the archivist's selection procedures, their use of unusual themes and terminologies—in her project *RoCH (Return of the Condor Heroes) Fans & Legends*, begun in 2013, the artist explores the peculiarities of digital technologies, particularly those of Google Image.

The point of departure for *RoCH* is the writings of Jin Yong (*aka* Louis Cha), a prolific *wuxia* (martial arts) author, particularly his 1961 novel *Return of Condor Heroes*, the second instalment of *The Condor Trilogy*. First published in Hong Kong in serialised form between 1957 and 1963, Yong's trilogy found widespread popularity both in Asia and with the Asian diaspora, having been translated from Cantonese into multiple languages, including Mandarin (in traditional and simplified characters), Vietnamese, Indonesian, or, more recently, English. Such wide acceptance led to numerous film and television adaptations of the works, with well over 90 titles having been catalogued by lok in her ongoing-project (lok, 2014), yet few gained more popularity than the 1983 Hong Kong-produced television series starring Andy Lau and Idy Chan, *Return of the Condor Heroes*. It was through this series that lok and her family maintained a bond with a mythical China:

*The Condor Trilogy* arrived at our doorstep ... Bootleg videos in plastic bags, delivered to our home, via a local network of first generation Chinese immigrants who maintained regular connections with Hong Kong. So these videos were being flown or shipped over weekly and we would get our weekly fixes of the latest popular Hong Kong drama. (Animate Projects, 2015)

More than being informed by these videos for her project, lok was drawn to the fan community that had developed around Yong's novels and adaptations. A community that had expanded exponentially with the advent of online forums.<sup>4</sup> Exhibited between 24 January and 9 February 2013 at Hanmi Gallery, London as part of *The Global Archive* exhibition curated by Marquard Smith, in collaboration with Emma Brasó and Nina Privedi, *RoCH*'s first iteration featured multiple elements.<sup>5</sup> On entering the large fourth-floor of the gallery the viewer would find a television set playing excerpts from the 1983 adaptation subtitled with fan translations. The book's title in its multiple translations—Shén Diāo Xiá Lù / San4 Diu1 Haap6 Leoi5 / San Diu Hap Lui / Sun Diu Hap Lui / Sin TiauW Hiap Lui / Shin Chou Kyou Ryo / Shin Cho Kyo Ryo / Thàn Diêu Hiệp Lu / Kembalinya Sang Pendakar Rajawali / Divine Eagle, Gallant Knight / The Legendary *Couple* / *Return of The Condor Heroes* — had been written on a wall. Colourful origami condors were placed in a circle on the floor, and the wing of a condor had been drawn in black marker on the window. But, arguably, the most remarkable element one would find would be the Google Image search results printouts covering the walls of the gallery space from top to bottom, and, for the purpose of this paper, it will be this element that will now be in focus. (Fig. 1)



Fig.1 - susan pui san lok, *RoCH Fans & Legends* (2013), Hanmi Gallery, London, installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.

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4 | One of the most popular, English-language online forums for the discussion of Jin Yong's novels is [www.spcnet.tv](http://www.spcnet.tv). The website is dedicated to the review of Asian drama (particularly film and television series) and has over 60.000 active members, 770.000 posts, and 16.000 threads.

5 | Since this first exhibition, elements of the project have been published in the *Journal of Visual Culture*. (lok, 2013) The project has also been developed into *RoCH Fans & Legends* for an exhibition at Derby QUAD (Derby, UK) (19 September – 15 November 2015).

Taking into account the technological limitations of Google Image—in the association of specific images to terms only used in certain languages, for instance—lok used the various titles of the book and its adaptations as search queries, printing the first page of the results obtained on 11 January 2013. (Fig. 2) In the printout of a search using the English translation one would find for the most part stills from the 2006 Chinese television adaptation, as well as photographs of the cast, in and out of costume. In the printouts in which the Romanised Cantonese title was searched, *Sun Diu Hap Lui*, images of the 1983 adaptation, produced in Hong Kong, prevailed. The Malay version, *Sin Tiauw Hiap Lui*, on the other hand, showed a greater variety of results, including stills from both adaptations mentioned above, as well as book covers, posters, and even photographs of the author himself. By covering the gallery walls with rows upon rows of minuscule images, lok displayed the distinct retrieval possibilities for the same reference—Jin Yong’s novel—in just one day. What one found was that in this small cross-section of *RoCH* one could already discover an endless and mutable online archive, constructed by its users and contributors. And here one might consider two functions in the role of the contributor: that of the uploader, adding, sharing and propagating images; and that of the metadata descriptor, the one that associates specific terms to specific images. It is in this moment—in this dual function—that one might put forward the possibility that contributors take on the role of archivists, a role in which the power to interpret and/or silence is still present. For, if one considers that both the algorithms in use, as well as the terms associated to each image depend on parameters designed by people, what one finds is that ultimately machines think how we make them think. (Paul, 2015: 150).



Fig.2 - susan pui san lok, *RoCH Fans & Legends* (2013), Hanmi Gallery, London, installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.

But what if we turn to a different option of cataloguing and retrieving images, one not based on terms—on textual translations—, not on what is known as concept-based retrieval, but one based on the visual qualities of an image, on content-based retrieval? In this method each image is analysed and catalogued for its visual contents—colour, shape, outline, texture, etc.—, and ideally one would only have to feed the search engine a similar image to that which one would like to retrieve to achieve a result. A result that hopefully would overcome the subjective interpretations still found in associated text. Nevertheless, in an extraordinary resemblance to the themes and terms defined by the MACE archivists, new content-based image cataloguing and retrieval technologies seem to continue to be infused with the biases of their creators. Facial recognition technology in particular has been found to be skewed towards lighter skin faces. For instance, a Google application used to tag and catalogue users' photo libraries, Google Photos, came under attack when it was found to misidentify and label a black couple as "Gorillas". (Kasperkevic, 2015)

Such problems are not solely a reflection of technological limits, they stem from biases and power hierarchies still in existence. Much of the code used in facial recognition programmes learns to identify human faces through example images, or training sets. These images «impact what the code recognizes as a face. A lack of diversity in the training set leads to an inability to easily characterize faces that do not fit the *normal face* derived from the training set.»<sup>6</sup> (Buolamwini, 2016) One might speculate that were there a greater racial diversity in the people associated to these projects, these limitations would have been more swiftly identified. The lack of representation of people of colour in technological developments work to create issues similar to those found by susan pui san lok in MACE, by the silencing of segments of the population. A silencing that might be found even in the inception of certain technologies.

In examining the development of emulsions and chromatic properties of analogue photographic films, Lorna Roth identified the predominance of light-skinned women in the skin-colour balance card in photo labs between the 1940s and the 1990s. Colour calibration was made by using a norm reference card featuring an image of the model usually in colourful or high-contrast clothes, a card that came to be known as the «Shirley» card. By using this standard, darker-skin people appeared less detailed, particularly in photographs in which lighter-skin individuals were also featured. As Roth signals, the images of Shirleys «reflect the prevailing norms of skin colour beauty in the period in which the labs were using them [...] They reflect and reveal an order of domination.» (2009: 115) It was not that the technology was deficient, it was simply that when designing the film emulsions only one group of users was taken into consideration:

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At the time film emulsions were developing, the target consumer market would have been «Caucasians» in a segregated political scene; their skin tones would have been less likely to be the basis for thinking about dynamic range, because most subjects in a photograph would either have been all light-skinned or all dark-skinned. (Roth: 118)

That there might be a market where various skin colours would cohabit in one photograph was not a factor that was pondered. It was a market whose existence was unthinkable for its creators, for: «In the unthinkable of an epoch, there is all that one cannot think for want of ethical or political inclinations [...] but also that which one cannot think for want of instruments of thought.» (Bourdieu *apud* Trouillot, 1995: 82)

What this paper has tried to demonstrate is that classificatory and cataloguing methods in archives are strongly influenced by the biases of the people who shape them—the archivists—and by the period in which they are established, or even read. Here, what is absent becomes as significant as what is present. The archival procedures in use continue to bear a layer of subjectivity. The use of thematic classifications harks back to a rationalistic mindset of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, a mindset in which, arguably, subjective interpretations were promoted. Although applying new technologies might in theory establish more objective descriptions and cataloguing, what has been found is that, in reality, technologies stem from the people that create them, carrying their preconceptions and their blind-spots. To establish parallels between these two moments of archival procedures and technologies, I have turned to two projects by Susan Pui San Lok, *News* and *RoCH Fans & Legends*. In the first, based on the analogue material of MACE, the artist strove to illuminate silences, to reread an archive through its index, by examining the role of archivists as interpreters and defining an unthought-of theme within the Archive, that of the presence of the “Other.” In *RoCH*, by appropriating image results taken from Google Image queries, Lok offered a glimpse into the conditioning of the material retrieved, by putting forth the distinct results found through concept-based image retrieval, revealing the dual role of the contributor — in adding and sharing the images, and in associating them to specific metadata — to these results. And whilst one might contemplate the possibility of overcoming the subjectivity imbued in concept-based retrieval by turning to content-based systems, what one discovers is that much of the biases found in analogue photographic and moving-image archives persist in new technologies.



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