

# Artistic Processes of Archiving in Contemporary Dance

## Tokyo / Singapore: Archive Box Project (2013-2016)

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### Curating potentiality and latent power (rather than products)

In October 2015 curator and film director Ong Keng Sen presented his engaging concept of 'curating nothing', a term coined in reference to Jean-Luc Nancy, at a symposium held as part of the project *SHOW ME THE WORLD - Curatorial Practice in the Performing Arts* in Munich. Ong divides his work into two categories of curating, 'informal curating' and 'formal curating'. Examples for the former are his *Flying Circus Project* and *Archive Box Project*, while the latter includes his work as artistic director for the Singapore International Festival of Arts. In both cases, 'curating nothing' is a key term in his work as it means to activate processes as a political act, instead of producing or launching products that are prone to political exploitation. He has sparked debate on issues like community, creative commons, and sharing forums. His aim is to empower communities to create the future [The Saison Foundation 2015: 8]. [1]

The *Flying Circus Project* is a multidisciplinary artistic research project, started in 1996, which brings together artists (first from the region of Asia, since 2007 from all over the world). It follows the self-proclaimed goal of not producing any pre-conceived result. In Munich, Ong Keng Sen drew parallels to related subversive practices such as wasting money, or deconstructing value. He considers these practices curatorial resistance against the colonization of the arts by productivity. One example of this strategy was to use part of the festival budget allotted to a specific production point for something completely different, such as digitalizing a threatened film archive in Myanmar. The idea of curating nothing is closely tied to 'curating potentiality and latent power (rather than products)'.

In 2013 Ong Keng Sen, together with The Saison Foundation [2] in Tokyo, Japan, called to life a project on archiving dance, which subsequently became the *Archive Box Project*. In the following years it was realized in three phases oscillating between mediation, collaborative research and artistic practice. Ong Keng Sen links his project to the idea of how to encourage processes:

For me, the 'meaningful' archive is also an 'attractive' archive. Perhaps this is about the potentiality in the archive. [...] The task of this archive project is to activate the potentiality in the artwork that is being archived. I believe that can be both the responsibility of the archivist and the user. The 'meaningful' archive is also related in a sense to community. Which community does the archive address? [...] The 'attractive' archive is one that encourages copyleft ideals, which belongs to creative commons. [...] Being attractive also implies that the archive is not too restrictive for the user. An 'attractive' archive is one that allows the user sufficient freedom, one in which the archivist is not too didactically present. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 60f]

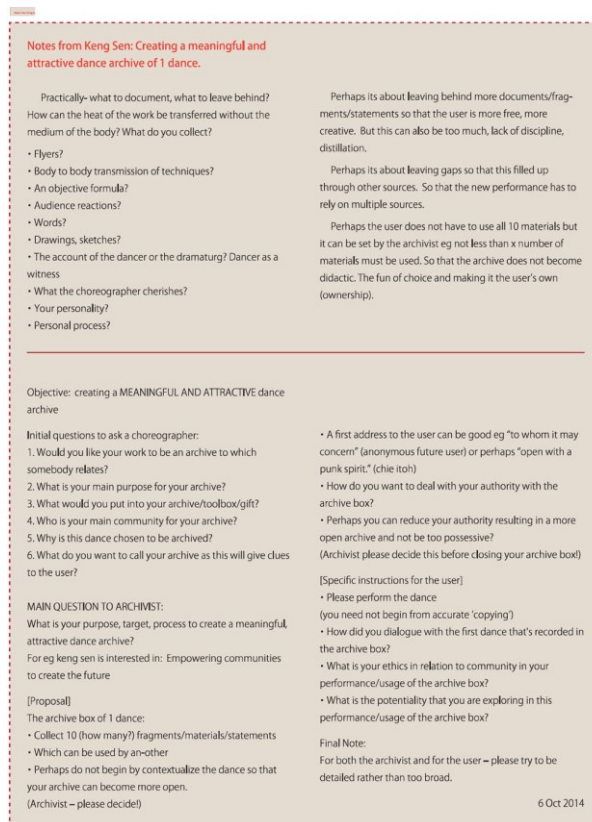


Fig. 1: Notes from Ong Keng Sen, October 6, 2014

[The Saison Foundation 2015: 8]

## Participants and the development of *Archive Box Project*

The first to participate in *Archive Box Project* were the *facilitators* who planned the process, (re-)adapted the project to new developments, and curated and organized events. The team included Ong Keng Sen, dramaturg and dance scholar Nanako Nakajima as well as the two dramaturgs Daisuke Muto (Tokyo phase) and Margie Medlin (Singapore phase). Together with the Saison Foundation, the team of *facilitators* selected the *archivists*, eight Japanese dancers, to join the process: Chie Ito, Ikuyo Kuroda, Ryohei Kondo (who only participated in the first workshop), Tsuyoshi Shirai, Yukio Suzuki, Natsuko Tezuka, Zan Yamashita, and Mikuni Yanaihara. Nanako Nakajima elaborated on selection process in an interview:

These were all kind of mid-career artists, who had a previous history, who were already recognized as successful in a Japanese context. We talked about that if someone is too experienced or old he or she might tend to be authoritarian. Moreover, we were looking for artists who were open and willing to work with us.  
[Nakajima 2016b]

The *archivists* participated in a series of lectures and workshops held between April and December 2014, exploring and discussing the possibilities and methodologies of (dance) archives. The next step was to create an archive of one of their own works. Then they performed the archive material of another archivist before a selected audience. Ong Keng Sen suggested approaching the material

“as if playing a game” [see The Saison Foundation 2015: 60]. Here the *archivists* also took on the role of *users* (phase 1) [3].

Two statements were developed during the seminar: one – that our dance archive in the *Archive Box Project* would go beyond conservation and would instead focus on archive as a site of new creation, two – that our dance archives would move beyond identifying dance–histories, pedigrees and milestones events in the history of dance. [Ong (undated): 1]

The idea of an ‘archive box’ as a tool was developed within the collaborative process, as Ong explains:

It is important to note that the use of the term ‘archive box’ was only a placeholder for the archive. The archive need not be an actual box, it could take any form and for Tsuyoshi Shirai, his ‘archive box’ was a mix of a digital archive and objects in a shopping basket. The term came out of convenience, as I was struggling to get us to the second stage, the workshop. So I decided that we would do something concrete. [...] Overnight I proposed the archive box which had appeared in our first seminar as a toolkit, the archive as a toolkit for the user to create from. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 60]

*Users* were a second group of participants in the project, namely in the phase that took place within the framework of the Singapore International Festival of Arts in February and March 2015. Again, this phase consisted of a brief tutorial followed by a workshop, in which artists performed one of the previously archived works (phase 2). Ong Keng Sen invited the following seven dance artists from South Asia and Southeast Asia to participate: Preethi Athreya, Padmini Chettur, Chankethya Chey, Margie Medlin, Rani Nair, Venuri Perera and Mandeep Raikhy.

Originally, the project was supposed to end in the event *Dance Marathon: OPEN WITH A PUNK SPIRIT! Archive Boxes* at the festival, where *users* performed the works and *archivists* presented their ‘boxes’, thus bringing together all 14 artists. [4] Following Nanako Nakajima's initiative, however, a further series of performance–dialogue sessions between archivists and users, an exhibition and a symposium – titled *Dance Archive Boxes@TPAM 2016* – were held as part of the *Performing Arts Meeting* in Yokohama in April 2016. This third phase also included new dance artists such as Oohisui Hanayagi, a young, emerging dancer and student of Toshinami Hanayagi, who is considered Important Cultural Property in traditional dance in Japan. Hanayagi chose to perform Chie Ito's archive box.

[...] This project should continue to be open to the world and circulate. Only through circulation can a dance history be truly shared with other communities. Therefore, this time, I inherited the project and became a ‘user’ of the project itself to curate and realize presentations in Japan. [Nakajima 2016a]

## PHASE 1

### Kontemporari dansu (contemporary dance) in Japan

How did the decision come about to archive the contemporary dance scene in Japan? To mediate its works, to make them accessible to a broader audience? Nanako Nakajima explains that in Asia, Japan was the first to have an independent, innovative contemporary dance scene [Nakajima 2016b]. She also detects a political context in Ong Keng Sen addressing aspects of community and access to contemporary dance in Asia. In the Saison Foundation report, she notes:

The process of archiving inevitably entails some kind of political agenda. Decisions regarding 'to whom, for what purposes, and by what means' are inextricably linked with the archive's political aspects. The dance archive project started from a question by Ong Ken Seng about how the legacy of Japanese contemporary dance, supported by The Saison Foundation, could be passed on within Asia. This reflects the theme of the 'post-colonialism' that Ong proposed for the 2014 Singapore International Festival of Arts. Ong's query led the Japanese dance-makers to think about communities and audiences of their archives and issues of how and what to archive from their repertoires. Through this process, the artists became more aware of their sense of belonging to (or antagonism towards) communities and their relations with the societies within and outside Japan. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 51]

The idea of archiving Japanese contemporary dance [...] can also be seen as the issue of how to understand external pressure from abroad in the context of Japanese dance. This idea involves the never-ending process of linguistic and cultural translation within the global circulation of knowledge between the English-speaking worlds. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 65]

Nakajima also explains that there is no archive culture in Japan comparable to western traditions. In fact, traditional performing arts are ruled by strict hierarchies, often including secret forms of passing on knowledge taking place within family-like, closed structures.

Discussions on communities and a sense of belonging highlighted the disparity between the traditional way of passing down *Gei* (techniques)—perceived without differentiating a dance and a dancer—in Japan and the methodology of 'archiving' predicated upon democratic principles of modern societies in the West. This discussion also raised the issue what is 'traditional' or 'contemporary' in dance. The act of archiving, in which an individual's legacy is shared with others, can be considered as the democratization of dance works. This aspect of dance archiving may manifest as emotional challenges for the Japanese artists during the concrete processes of handing over their own works to third parties in other communities. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 51]

At the beginning, I was critical to the ideas of archiving dance. The concept of archiving is also not Japanese, the concept comes I would say from European Enlightenment ideas. The Japanese dancers have their own way of archiving, which is more about Pupil-Master-Relations, oral histories within communities. This is actually deeply rooted. Even if artists are contemporary, which means they are financially and communally independent from the previous dance system, they still share this kind of sensitivities. But this project was also different, promoting

alternative, creative ways to archive dance. Not by an existing method, but by artistic explorations. [Nakajima 2016b]

Dancers are connected in a global network; they contribute to contemporary discourses and shape developments, by addressing themes such as the practice of reenactments, or by following the debate on how to deal with the legacies of dancers and choreographers like Pina Bausch or Kazuo Ohno. Daisuke Muto, dance scholar and university lecturer, points out another important aspect of archiving contemporary dance in Japan:

Though *kontemporari dansu* / contemporary dance is now being taught at universities, students cannot even gain access to works from just a few years ago. Past works do not necessarily have to be put on pedestals as ‘classics’ or inherited as repertoires. However, it would surely be regrettable to see all the ideas, discoveries, and critical awareness—accumulated over the history of *kontemporari dansu*—disappear without a trace. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 68]

### **The boxes: The archive as a toolkit**

The seven participating Japanese artists, who each created an archive of their own works, developed individual, often contrary concepts of the archiving process. Thus their resulting archive boxes vary greatly. [5] Chie Ito, for example, was the only one to make an actual box, which she wrapped in gold, and in a later version in blue paper and adorned with trinkets and small bells. She also attached a note encouraging the user to “Open with a punk spirit!”.





Fig. 2–4: Chie Ito's gold and blue versions of her box. Fig. 2: Courtesy of the artist,  
 © The Saison Foundation, Fig. 3, 4 © Chie Ito

In her box, she archived several costumes and props, an instruction manual, a stage plan, a drawing, video documentation (DVD), a soundtrack (2 CDs) and flyers. Ito notes:

I myself would like to create the work again by using my archive box. It is easy to become preoccupied on the 'form' when thinking about re-production or repertory. However, an archive box could perhaps give me a sense of meeting with myself from just a while back. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 12]



Fig. 5–7: Pictures of the material inside Chie Ito's box. Fig. 5 © Chie Ito,  
Fig. 6, 7: Courtesy of the artist, © The Saison Foundation

In the report, Mikuni Yanaihara reflects the aspect of time and how the box may be used:

I felt it must have been very difficult to turn my archive box into a dance. Most of the choreographers, including myself, presented works that were closer to improvisation than dance created with plenty of time. I realized that making dance from an archive box would indeed take time. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 28]

Tsuyoshi Shirai, on the other hand, created a website, which can only be accessed with a particular password. This key is his archive box.

Choosing the format of a website—a digital platform that could contain an infinite amount of information—prompted me to think about the necessity to set a limit for myself. I realized that ‘limit’ was an important keyword when thinking about ‘archives’. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 18]

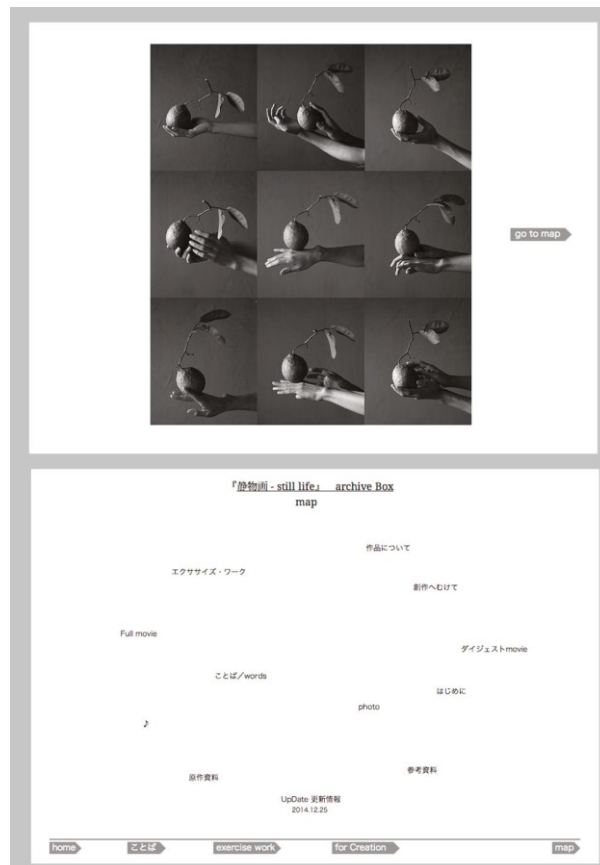
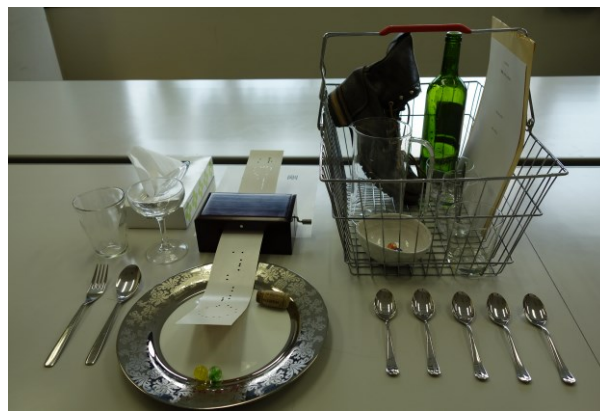






Fig. 8, 9, 10: The ‘box’ of Tsuyoshi Shirai. Courtesy of the artist,  
© The Saison Foundation

Natsuko Tezuka decided to utilize language/writing: She wrote a “greeting letter (including a self-introduction and message to those geographically, culturally, temporally, and spatially distant from my own circumstances)”. She also added an instruction manual and a set of “supplementary cards (that may provide hints if a user has difficulty in the process of creation)”. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 25] Zan Yamashita’s archive box comprised technical and playful material: 1 cassette tape recorder (for playing purposes), 1 AC power plug, 1 USB cable, 5 cassette tapes (no. 1–4, 10 Minutes each, no. 5, 20 Minutes), 1 page with text (A4), 1 bag of balloons (15 balloons in 6 colors) und 1 bag of lozenges (strawberry flavor).

I had a conflicting desire to somehow archive the inexplicable aspects of the work, rather than its explicable parts. Thus, I came up with the idea of recording my voice on cassette tapes. Characteristics unique to a cassette tape recorder—including the air noise that would otherwise be completely removed in a digital recording and the inconvenience of its operation such as pressing play, fast-forward, and rewind—provided a clue on how to archive something that essentially could not be archived. Nonetheless, I regret that I could not use this media beyond the realm of metaphor. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 31]

Yukio Suzuki drew up a contract with the *user*:

I decided to customize [my original work] specifically for the archive. I first created a contract for the performance of my work. This is not a business contract, so to

speak, but a set of instructions on how to perform the archive. The contract specified the method of using the box, such as what to prepare, how to condition the body, and how to proceed within the process. I also stipulated in the contract that the user had the right to request a workshop from me, if they wished to further understand my work. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 21f]

Suzuki also drafted a script, which he then recorded: “I attempted to choreograph the user’s way” by instructing the user to listen to the script with headphones throughout the performance. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 21f]



Fig. 11: Yukio Suzuki's 'box'. Courtesy of the artist, © The Saison Foundation

The rigidity of Suzuki's rules stand in direct opposition to Ong Keng Sen’s original outset—creative commons, copyleft. Ong thus describes Suzuki’s execution of the archive box as an “extremity” [The Saison Foundation 2015: 61]. And yet his approach is similar to the practice museums or collections follow when acquiring performances. The institutions usually make a contract with the artist, confirming the right to perform the piece and closely defining how the performance should be executed.

Zan Yamashita translated the archive box performatively: He “pushed into an extreme physical use, following very obediently all the instructions of the archivist. This discipline was important for him”, Ong elaborates, “Perhaps what is immediately unattractive can also become compelling when both archivist and user become joined in the same spirit on insisting on a very specific approach”. [The Saison Foundation 2015: 61].



Fig. 12, 13: Presentation by Zan Yamashita. Courtesy of the artist,  
photos: Koichiro Saito, © The Saison Foundation

## PHASE 2

### Performing the boxes—Does the word *user* necessarily indicate a lack of loyalty? [6]

Remarkably, the second phase of *Archive Box Project* also began with contracts. By handing over the archive boxes – translated into English – to *users* at the Singapore International Festival of Arts, a contract was confirmed between *archivist* and *user*. Questions of ownership, copyright or copyleft, and the “emotional challenges during the process of handing over” Nanako Nakajima spoke about played a key role during this second phase of the project.

The process did not always run smoothly or straightforward; in an interview, Nakajima called some pairings of boxes and *users* “perfect matches” and confirmed her belief in an artistic instinct that guides the artists in their choice of box. She also conceded that some were “complicated matches” and that there was a “heavy box” with “dark material”.

Padmini Chettur, a well-known and established dancer from India with more experience than the other *users*, felt quite critical towards the entire project and publicly performed her criticism by not attending group events or taking part in working processes:

Padmini did not stay with our team and her archivist Ikuyo Kuroda in Singapore after she finished her own production, even if that week was the only time for us to work together. She came back from India to Singapore a week later to present her response to Ikuyo Kuroda's archive box. [Nakajima 2016b]

As part of the festival's *Dance Marathon*, the *users* presented their performances of the boxes. The *archivists* were also invited to explain their archives, and text descriptions and photographs of the project were also exhibited. Nanako Nakajima, who was responsible for the development of the second phase of *Dance Archive Box*, found it important to also give the *archivists* enough time and space during this phase. The *users*, however, felt that by scheduling the archivists to perform and present their boxes before them created a sense of secondary performance for the audience, so the whole team subsequently adjusted the program's order.

All in all, the second phase is not as well documented as the first phase in regard to the working process. The festival's blog includes some statements by *users* and a series of conversations between *archivists* and *users*.

The *Archive Box Project* allowed participants to explore the possibilities and potential of dance archives as “meaningful and attractive” tools for new creation. Following the idea of “use it as if playing a game”, the *users* reflected the concepts of copyleft and creative commons in a range of productive approaches. Factors such as time, quality, quantity, and openness were central issues. The archive became visible as a process of creating distance or even detachment from the artist's own work: archive as a gift, archive as a ‘message in a bottle’, archive stuffed into a shopping bag; archive as a friendly letter, a personal diary recorded on tape or as a contract and rigid set of rules. The concept of passing on all the “ideas, discoveries, and critical awareness” of contemporary dance within the frame of ‘curating potentiality’ led to the questioning of ownership, loyalty and ethics. A further aspect Nanako Nakajima introduced by addressing post-colonialism is cultural exchange. How can specific forms and individual works of a local dance scene (even if the only common denominator is the national funding they receive) become accessible?

## PHASE 3

### This project should continue to circulate

Nakajima went on to realize a third phase of the project as part of the *Performing Arts Meeting* in Yokohama in April 2016. Once again, mediation, collaborative research and artistic work were juxtaposed. A symposium was held to newly reflect aspects and questions raised during the project. It included international scholars such as the German dance scholar Susanne Foellmer from FU Berlin, who presented her DFG research project *ÜberReste. Strategien des Bleibens in den darstellenden Künsten* (On Remnants and Vestiges. Strategies of Remaining in the Performing Arts). [7] Participants had the opportunity to reflect and discuss the project from a new, temporally distanced perspective. Nakajima also invited some of the users and presented two performances from Singapore. Furthermore a new set of artists from Japan were invited to work with the archive boxes.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERVL6SQmcYU&feature=youtu.be>

Short video documentation of *Dance Archive Boxes@TPAM2016*, TPAM in Yokohama 2016

At the symposium in Yokohama Atsuko Hisano, director of Saison Foundation, emphasized “it was a goal to create an archive of a foundation”. [Nakajima 2016b] Comparable to the situation of the ‘Freie Szene’ in the German-speaking region, there is no continuous institutional framework that could allow a long-standing archive for freelance artists: this process is solely the responsibility of the artists themselves. “It was the interest of Saison Foundation to make their own archive”, Nakajima elaborates, “not an ordinary one, but to create an artistic archive together with and for the artists”. [Nakajima 2016b] She believes that it was a productive decision of the foundation to leave the results of the archiving process up to the artists instead of forcing the boxes into the foundation’s archive.

Step by step videos and lectures on the *Archive Box Project* are being published and made accessible. In January 2017, an essay by Nanako Nakajima on the project will be published in the anthology *Moving (Across) Borders. Performing Translation, Intervention, Participation* (Brandstetter / Hartung 2017). Some of the dance artists are set to continue working with the archive boxes, or to create new ones. The project is continuing to circulate.

*Translation: Margarethe Clausen*

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[1] I attended *SHOW ME THE WORLD* and participated in Ong Keng Sen's workshop. For more details on the project, see: <http://spielart.org/showmetheworld/>

(last accessed January 2017). The website also provides video documentation of Ong Keng Sen's lecture from April 2014 in Mülheim/Ruhr: "Curating resistance, intellectual and emotional ownership, opening up public space to the individual".

[2] The Saison Foundation is one of the most prominent Japanese dance foundations and has promoted contemporary dance in Japan for 25 years. Ong has worked closely with the foundation for many years. <http://www.saison.or.jp/english/> (last accessed Jan 2017).

[3] The working process was fully documented in a comprehensive report, including statements from most participants. It was then published online. The Saison Foundation 2015

[4] The second phase of the project is not as concisely documented as the first one. There is a blog on the project on the Singapore International Festival of Arts's website. Further information on this part of *Archive Box Project* were obtained in the author's conversation with Nanako Nakajima.

[5] Also see the extensive documentation of the seven *archive boxes* alongside short descriptions of the archived works as well as *archivist* and *user* statements in the report by The Saison Foundation 2015, p. 9–37.

[6] This quote by Ong was taken from a panel discussion held in Singapore. A recording can be found on the Singapore International Festival of Arts's blog.

[7] For a detailed program, see <https://www.tpam.or.jp/2016/en/?program=dance-archive-boxes> (last accessed January 2017).

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announcement: Youtube channel (trailer): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERVL6SQmcYU>;

Facebook (mainly Japanese): <https://www.facebook.com/DanceArchiveBox/#> (last accessed January 2017).