

Methodology of OPEN END

The methodology of the OPEN END series is rooted in a pedagogical approach that combines archival research with artistic collaboration, fostering a continuous dialogue between history, site, and artistic practice. Central to this methodology is the exploration of archives as dynamic, living entities rather than static repositories. The projects are developed through in-depth research of specific archives or cultural sites, which are reinterpreted and reimagined through artistic intervention.

Key aspects of the methodology include—

Archival Research: Each iteration begins with extensive research into the chosen archive or cultural site, uncovering historical narratives, documents, and materials that inform the project's conceptual direction.

Artistic Collaboration: Artists, curators, and researchers are invited to collaborate, bringing diverse perspectives and practices to the project. These interdisciplinary collaborations are essential to creating a multifaceted interpretation of the archive's materials.

Site-Specific Engagement: The physical and historical context of the archival site plays a crucial role in shaping the project. Artists respond directly to the space, using it as a platform for their creative interventions, allowing the site to inform the work's thematic and aesthetic outcomes.

Public Interaction: The project is designed to engage the public, turning the archive into an interactive, participatory space where viewers can engage with historical narratives in new and unexpected ways.

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2021–2022: Initial Research Phase

Theoretical underpinning (Osthoff, Taylor, Widrich): Archival institutions have expanded their scope, shifting from traditional repositories of documents to dynamic and participatory spaces that actively engage with contemporary art and its historical contexts. A broadened understanding of archives not just as custodians of the past, but as platforms for critical inquiry, collaboration, and artistic production.

Fieldwork to significant archives in Asia that focus on contemporary art practices including INDONESIAN VISUAL ART ARCHIVE (IVAA) and the ASIA ART ARCHIVE (AAA). A key idea emerges from these institutions that are dedicated to documenting, preserving and making accessible the histories and narratives of Asian art, playing pivotal roles in reshaping the way archives function and behave.

Conducted archival research at the ROTUNDA LIBRARY & ARCHIVE, focusing on Singaporean artists such as Amanda Heng, Tang Da Wu, Lee Wen, and artists grouping The Artists Village. Ongoing conversations with archivist-artist Koh Nguang How on the Singapore Art Archive Project.

Began formulating the idea that archives, typically viewed as static repositories, could instead serve as dynamic, living entities when activated through artistic collaboration. This concept shaped the eventual methodology for OPEN END, which sought to turn archives into participatory and evolving spaces.

2023–2024: Interviews/Conversations With Archive Visits

Between 2023 and 2024, a series of interviews and conversations were conducted with cultural workers in Singapore's contemporary art scene, including Debbie Ding, Woon Tien Wei, John Low, Lee Weng Choy, Audrey Wong, Matthew Ngui, and Susie Lingham. These dialogues served as a contextual component of the research process, providing diverse perspectives on the evolving landscape of Singaporean art and culture.

Engaging with these artists, curators, and scholars helped inform and enrich the conceptual development of OPEN END, enabling a deeper understanding of how historical narratives intersect with contemporary practices.

The emails provided valuable insight into the interpersonal dynamics between artists, curators, and administrators, revealing how collaborations and creative projects were conceived, debated, realised (or not realised). These visits to the archive were not mere academic exercises but functioned as catalysts for creative inspiration. By engaging directly with the archive's physical and digital remnants, Urich Lau and Chong Li-Chuan began to conceptualise ways in which

these historical materials could be reactivated through their respective sound and video practices. This process of archival excavation, therefore, became a foundational element of the OPEN END project, linking past narratives to contemporary interpretations and allowing for a rich dialogue between memory, art, and institutional history.

October 2023: Proposal Submission

Introduction to OPEN END

Drawing on Birkin's (2015) discussion of performativity and the techniques of production, OPEN END expands on the idea that archives are not passive repositories but active sites of cultural production. Birkin emphasises that the ways in which archives are curated, organised, and engaged with are performative acts themselves, shaping how historical narratives are constructed and understood. In OPEN END, this performative aspect is reflected in the reactivation of THE SUBSTATION ARCHIVE through artistic practices, where both the creation and interpretation of archival materials become part of the project's evolving narrative.

In *Archive, Photography and the Language of Administration* (2021), Birkin highlights the bureaucratic and administrative processes behind the creation of archives, which often go unnoticed but play a pivotal role in shaping how memory is preserved and accessed. This idea resonates with the exploration of administrative files and digital records in OPEN END, where the hidden processes behind THE SUBSTATION's operations are brought to the forefront, revealing the complexities of cultural production and how art institutions document their histories.

OPEN END: Project 1

OPEN END Project 1 emphasises site-specificity and engages with the ROTUNDA LIBRARY & ARCHIVE as more than just a repository of Singapore's art history. The space is transformed into a dynamic, participatory environment that disrupts the quietude typically associated with archives. This approach echoes my desire to make the library an interactive and discursive space, reflective of THE SUBSTATION's experimental ethos. The project serves as a foundation for future iterations, each engaging with distinct sites across Singapore. Each site offers new opportunities for artistic interpretation, with collaborators contributing critical perspectives in performance, sound, video, and interdisciplinary mediums.

Artists Urich Lau and Chong Li-Chuan, both contemporaries with a deep and keen recollection of THE SUBSTATION, bring their shared experiences and insights into the project, enriching the dialogue with their understanding of its legacy and significance in Singapore's contemporary art scene. Both artists engaged (differently) with the archive to explore the intersections between art, memory, and cultural identity. Their respective approaches—Lau's focus on videography and performativity, and Li-Chuan's exploration in experimental music and sound art—provide a rich, interdisciplinary lens through which the archive is reimagined. Divergent inquiries arise when artists bring distinct perspectives, leading to a multifaceted exploration of the archive's narrative layers, while

convergent approaches allow the artists' practices to harmonise around shared themes, such as the tension between personal and collective memory or the role of archives in shaping cultural identity.

In the project proposal to NTU CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART in October 2023, titled OPEN END: A Window To Re-Tracing And Re-Telling THE SUBSTATION ARCHIVE, Lim Tzay Chuen's decision to transform THE SUBSTATION Gallery into a small window in 2003 as part of his conceptual artwork *Alter #8* proved to be compelling. This act represented a provocative rethinking of the role and function of gallery spaces. Lim, known for pushing the boundaries of perception and institutional critique, challenged the very nature of how exhibition spaces functioned and how art was presented and consumed. For the artist, this small window became a compelling gesture, requiring viewers to engage with the gallery in a fundamentally different way. Rather than allowing free movement through an open space, the audience was restricted to viewing through a narrow, controlled aperture, thereby altering their engagement with the artwork.

One of the earlier concepts for OPEN END was to "take over" the library space, transforming it and redefining it not as a quiet, isolated domain of polite self-abnegation, but rather as an interactive, de-hierarchised, and common space for discourse.

When OPEN END is staged at the ROTUNDA LIBRARY & ARCHIVE, in 2024, viewers who enter the former judicial site look up the dome with its intricate detailing and classic proportions, in itself an evocation of timelessness and authority, a constant reminder of the building's original judicial function. Instead of being captivated by the grandeur of the circular space, sound artist CHONG LI-CHUAN and video artist URICH LAU imbue the space with a fraught tone of underlying ambivalence, grappling with the loss of a faculty from the past. For the next hour and a half, the Live Performance of "Sounds from/in the Archive" takes them back to The Garden, Fat Frog Café, THE GUINNESS THEATRE, the running around, the playing of various musical instruments, the cacophony. With all the continuous low-level peripheral noise and activity in a largely convivial space, combined with multiple viewing positions that flatten THE SUBSTATION into a horizontal plane, it is often difficult to identify what took place and when, let alone who is speaking or singing.

During the performance, the viewer's attention is radically dispersed, not just because sonic and visual interference is embraced as a feature of the space. Duration mattered, as does the free-flowing structure. At no point is it expected that the audience watches the performance in reverent silence. Conversations and observations take place within and alongside the work, as does our photography of the library. We need to be noisy and to be heard. Beneath the dome, the library is lined with bookshelves that curve around the circumference, holding an extensive collection of books on the upper level, historical records, and art-related documents on the ground level, reflecting both the building's past as a centre for law and its present role in preserving Singapore's art history.

I break this silence by reading a feeble poem, our relaxed distribution of focus has gone beyond the strands of art. The performance is now punctuated and characterised by de-hierarchisation, where its site specificity (allowing the work to be permeated by its site, situation, and context) and duration (as a research project spanning more than one year) remain crucial in the reading of THE SUBSTATION in 2024 as nomadic, an OPEN END.

I wrote the above prior to the performance as a way to envision and to hope that the project will be critical, open-ended, and unapologetically noisy. OPEN END emerged from my own process of rethinking what an archive could be. For me, it's important that there is this shift away from preservation or academic historiography—it's about moving beyond those boundaries and returning to the core of art-making, to fostering genuine dialogue and creative interventions. Rooted in the concept of indeterminacy and drawing from Umberto Eco's *"The Open Work"* (Opera Aperta, 1962), this framework allows the project to be continuously reinterpreted by both artists and audiences, reflecting the evolving and open-ended nature of the work, extending beyond archives and creating something living and dynamic.

My research for OPEN END grew out of my doctoral dissertation, where I explored THE SUBSTATION's role as a "significant starting point for contemporary art" in Singapore, a description aptly captured by T. Sasitharan when I spoke to him at a conference in NANYANG ACADEMY OF FINE ART earlier this year (2024). THE SUBSTATION played a critical role in nurturing experimental practices, such as performance art, video art, and installation art, which were once considered radical. The goal of the project is to foster interdisciplinary dialogues between artists, curators, and researchers, with collaborators emerging organically as the project evolves.

Future iterations will continue this pattern, creating fluid, collaborative, and multidisciplinary projects that push the boundaries of how archives are engaged with artistically. By centring each iteration of OPEN END on specific sites, I aim to create site-specific responses that draw from these locations' historical and cultural contexts. The ROTUNDA LIBRARY & ARCHIVE, as the setting for OPEN END Project 1, reactivates THE SUBSTATION's legacy by turning the archive into a living, evolving space for artistic experimentation and public engagement.

Artist and Curator, Adrian Tan

