# Open End: Re-Tracing And Re-Reading The Substation Archive — A Acuratorial Methodology Of Activation

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**Abstract**

This paper examines OPEN END: Resonate, Re-Read and Re-Trace The Substation Archive as a curatorial and research-led project that reactivates the dispersed archive of The Substation—Singapore's first independent contemporary art space (1990–2021). Presented in 2024 at the Rotunda Library & Archive, OPEN END is situated within the wider context of the archival turn in contemporary art, drawing from theoretical insights by Sara Callahan, Diana Taylor, and Hal Foster, while foregrounding the specific institutional conditions of Singapore's art ecology. Through sonic interventions, textual installations, and performative re-readings by artists Chong Li-Chuan, Urich Lau, and the author, the exhibition approaches the archive not as a closed repository but as an open-ended site of resonance, resistance, and relational knowledge together with artistic production.

The paper argues that The Substation's legacy—like many artist-run initiatives in Southeast Asia—has been subject to partial remembrance and bureaucratic containment, particularly during the era of performance art restriction in Singapore. Recalling the landmark 2001 exhibition Open Ends, which was an exhibition that presented documented performance practices during a period of de facto censorship, this essay positions OPEN END (2024) as a continuation of that curatorial impulse: one that challenges dominant historiographies by activating the marginal, the ephemeral, and the affective. Drawing comparisons with Koh Nguang How's Singapore Art Archive Project, the essay reflects on the potential of counterarchives to reframe institutional memory and proposes curating-as-archival-method as a strategy for ongoing public engagement and historical re-imagination.

**Keywords:** The Substation, Archival Turn, Performance Art, Singapore Contemporary Art, Curatorial research, Counter-archives, Memory.

## Introduction: Archival Revisions & Curatorial Research

Since the 1990s, the archival turn has entered contemporary art discourse by repositioning the archive not merely as a source of historical knowledge but as a methodological and conceptual form. Art historian Sara Callahan characterises this shift as a focus on the "notion of the archive" rather than calling it a "concept." This distinction underpins my own methodology, which I elaborate on later in this paper, where I similarly assert an analytical method of cross-reading to reveal "the complexity of the phenomenon of archive art where notions circulate and reverberate between artworks, theoretical frameworks, texts and contexts" (Callahan 2024, 6). This approach is especially relevant to my research into Southeast Asian contemporary art—and, in this project's case, Singapore's art historiography—where the archive is reimagined as a site of epistemic and institutional critique. In this expanded field, archival practice emerges as both subject and method, aligning with post-structuralist concerns about power, memory, and historical construction.

Against this backdrop, *OPEN END: Resonate, Re-Read and Re-Trace The Substation Archive* is a curatorial project that interrogates the fate of Singapore's independent artistic infrastructures, particularly The Substation (1990–2021), the city's first and most emblematic

independent contemporary multi-disciplinary art space. Formally launched at the National Gallery Singapore's Rotunda Library & Archive in 2024, *OPEN END* proposes a curatorial methodology grounded in performativity, collaborative activation, and the re-reading of archival material.[1] Through sonic, visual, and textual interventions by artists Urich Lau, Chong Li-Chuan, and myself, the project reanimates The Substation's dispersed archive across multiple national institutions.

Singapore's cultural landscape in the late 1980s and 1990s was marked by a technocratic consolidation of state power alongside strategic nation-branding as a "global city for the arts." Cultural policy initiatives—such as the 1989 Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts and the Renaissance City Plan (2000)—sought to legitimize contemporary art within Singapore's economic framework, even as certain forms of expression (notably performance art and political critique) were marginalised. The Substation emerged in this context as a counter-site of experimentation, pluralism, and publicness. Yet its eventual closure of its physical space and the gradual institutional absorption of its archive reflect broader tensions between independent artistic practice and state-managed cultural narritivisation.

*OPEN END* engages these tensions by refusing to monumentalise The Substation as a closed chapter or draw on nostalgic recollections or accounts. Instead, it aligns with what Callahan (2022) terms the conception of discursive contemporary that utilises the archive—an institutionally embedded matrix of selection, omission, and framing that shapes what is knowable, and by extension, what is visible as art (Callahan 2022, 8–12). In this sense, *OPEN END* is not a commemorative exhibition, but a mode of curatorial inquiry that insists on the unfinishedness and openness of cultural memory.

This essay critically reflects on the curatorial methodology, theoretical frameworks, and institutional conditions that shaped *OPEN END*. It draws on scholarly work within the archival turn—particularly by Callahan, Hal Foster, and Ann Laura Stoler—to situate the project within ongoing debates about the politics of documentation, institutional critique, and the role of artists in reframing and re-reading history. It also offers a comparative reading of artist-run archival initiatives in Singapore, notably Koh Nguang How's *Singapore Art Archive Project* (SAAP), arguing that projects like *OPEN END* operate as counter-archives that contest the logic of closure in official cultural or art historiography, much like how Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* interrogated institutional archives to expose buried histories.

**From Institution to Activation: Locating The Substation Archive**

The Substation opened in 1990 in a decommissioned power substation on Armenian Street,during a period of significant cultural recalibration in Singapore. Conceived by Kuo Pao Kunas a home for the arts—"not a museum, not a theatre, not a gallery, but **something in between**"—The Substation aimed to nurture experimental, interdisciplinary, and develop artistic practices (Wong 2015).

In its early years, it provided critical infrastructural and *symbolic* space for performance art, independent music, installation, and community theatre, many of which existed outside or at the edge of official cultural narratives.

Yet The Substation's formative ethos emerged in tension with a state-driven model of cultural development that prized artistic excellence, economic value, and global recognition.

By the mid-1990s, performance art had become a flashpoint for moral panic and policy intervention, culminating in a decade-long de facto ban on funding for performance-based practices. The Substation, while not oppositional in a confrontational sense, became a site of "radical ambiguity"—a space where competing registers of legitimacy, community, and experimentation co-existed uneasily within a tightly regulated cultural regime (Lee 2019, 204–210).

The archive of The Substation—comprising photographs, correspondence, administrative files, curatorial notes, and video recordings—is now dispersed across the National Gallery Singapore, the National Library Board, and the National Archives Singapore. This institutional fragmentation mirrors the spatial dislocation of The Substation itself, which vacated its Armenian Street home in 2021 and now operates nomadically, without a permanent physical space. I am currently collaborating with The Substation on related research and curatorial projects. As Pierre Nora (1989) argues in his discussion of *lieux de mémoire*, when "real memory" dissipates, societies construct sites of historical reassurance and recollection. Yet such sites often conceal more than they reveal; they offer a sense of continuity while disavowing conflict. It is these recurring memories and mentions of The Substation in my research that prompted me to focus more closely on it—as a forgotten site and an invisible locale.

*OPEN END* was conceived as a response to this state of dispersal. Staged in the Rotunda Library & Archive—a former Supreme Court chamber repurposed as a national memory site—the project unsettled the neutralising effect of the archive-as-monument. Drawing on Callahan's observation that contemporary archival art often emerges from "critical practices that aim to expose gaps, **omissions**, and unpronounced knowledge structures by reading texts 'against the grain'" (Callahan 2024, 77), *OPEN END* deployed artistic strategies that foregrounded disruption, noise, and multiplicity.

In this juridical setting, the project introduced multi-sensorial installations and three days of activation that refused archival fixity and enlivened the static repository. The echoing architecture of the Rotunda was inhabited not by silent reverence but by ambient soundscapes, spoken-word re-enactments, and textual interventions. Archival documents were not presented as evidence, but as propositions—starting points for reflection, interpretation, and activation. This move aligns with what Michel Foucault identifies as the archive not as a record of what was said, but as "the system of enunciability"—the rules that govern what can be said, remembered, or forgotten (Foucault 2010, 130).

Thus, *OPEN END* reframes the archive not as a resting place of institutional memory, but as a site of friction and tension—where past, present, and future orientations of cultural practice meet. It challenges the closure of The Substation as a physical space as a historical endpoint and proposes instead an "open-ended" curatorial methodology attuned to affective residue, structural absence, and discursive reanimation.

**Methodology of *OPEN END***

The methodological foundation of *OPEN END* is premised on a refusal to treat archives as fixed, self-evident repositories of historical knowledge. Instead, the project mobilises a curatorial mode of inquiry that aligns with what Sara Callahan (2022) terms "artistic practice as critical research"—wherein the archive is not merely excavated but re-performed, fragmented, and challenged as a site of institutional authority and cultural legibility. Central to *OPEN END* is the idea that curatorial practice can generate knowledge by staging the archive as a relational, durational, and affective space of encounter.

This methodology is shaped by several interlocking principles: spatial activation, performative engagement, and collaborative interpretation. The Rotunda Library & Archive was not treated as a neutral display venue but as a juridico-historical site layered with colonial, administrative, and mnemonic residues. This was the space where I spent countless hours researching while working on my doctoral studies between the post-covid years between 2020 and 2022. In contrast to conventional archival presentations that rely on vitrines and controlled atmospheres of reverence, *OPEN END* disrupts such museological codes by inserting works that resonate sonically, unfold textually, and animate documents as performative scripts. I was fortunate to have worked with the gallery on various projects and managed to secure an intervention towards the end of 2023. This curatorial strategy if

intervening in the library or archive draws on Diana Taylor's theorisation of the repertoire as a form of embodied transmission distinct from the archive's fixity—"a scenario that exceeds the limits of the document" (Taylor 2003, 19).

The idea of the "open work," as theorised by Umberto Eco (1989), offers another conceptual anchor. Eco's insistence that the open artwork invites co-creation, interpretation, and semantic multiplicity provides a fitting framework for a project that resists closure and finality. In *OPEN END*, the curatorial form itself is open-ended: works are added or removed during the exhibition; audiences encounter different configurations depending on when they visit; and each iteration is accompanied by public programmes, readings, and discursive events that shape and reshape its meanings.

At the same time, the methodology foregrounds the specificity of Singapore's cultural situation, where archives are often treated as instruments of legitimacy and control within state institutions. As Callahan (2024) observes, the archival turn gained traction in contexts where institutions were perceived to be arbiters of knowledge—deciding what enters history and what remains invisible. In Singapore, this dynamic is intensified by a centralised cultural bureaucracy in which national identity, economic policy, and heritage narratives intersect and power is anchored within the state. Against this backdrop, *OPEN END* proposes a countermethodology: one that approaches the archive as a scene of partiality, contradiction, and possibility.

This approach resonates with Patrick Flores's notion of "de-filing" the archive—not in a literal sense of destruction, but in refusing the seduction of the archive's order, its bureaucratic cleanliness, and its claims to historical coherence (Flores 2017).

Instead, *OPENEND* engages with the archive's messier edges: the unfinished correspondence, the marginalia, the misfiled notes, the ambient noise of the past that resists categorization.

These are not treated as peripheral details but as central materials through which to access the lived, affective, and relational dimensions of the layers behind artistic practice in Singapore.

As an artist-curator embedded in both academic and artistic communities, I approached this project through a research-through-practice lens. My own positionality—as someone who has studied, written about, and lived through the transformations of The Substation and its surrounding ecosystem—became part of the curatorial process. Ethnographic conversations with artists, curators, and former staff; the sorting through of labeled folders and unlabeled documents; the interpretive framing of bureaucratic exchanges as performative scripts—all informed a methodology of care, attunement, and listening. This process started in 2023 and is on-going but for the intervention focus was squarely on The Substation.

This research method follows what Ann Laura Stoler (2009) calls "reading along the archival grain," which attends to both the content and structure of archival material—its gaps, emphases, and silences.

The resulting exhibition and its accompanying texts should not be read as definitive accounts. Rather, *OPEN END* is a proposition: that the archive is never complete; that its meaning lies not in preservation but in activation; and that curating itself can serve as an archival method—one grounded in resonance, resistance, and re-reading.




**Figure 1.** *Preparation for OPEN END: Visit to the National Gallery Singapore's storage facilities housing The Substation Archive.*

**Resonate: Sonic Traces and Ambient Memory (Chong Li-Chuan)**

The act of resonance—sonic, affective, and conceptual—forms the first axis of *OPEN END*'s curatorial methodology. To resonate is not merely to echo but to vibrate in sympathetic relation to a prior sound, structure, or silence. In the context of The Substation archive,resonance describes both the lingering traces of past artistic activity and the potential for those traces to produce new frequencies or narratives of meaning in the present. Within the Rotunda Library & Archive—a space marked by colonial architectural symmetry and legal gravitas—Chong Li-Chuan's sound-based work *interstitial* introduced precisely this kind of destabilising resonance.

Chong, a composer and sound artist who has been involved with The Substation since the 1990s, approached the archive not as a textual resource but as a sonic ecology. Drawing from digitised Mini DV footage of performances, artist talks, townhall meetings and gallery walkthroughs, Chong extracted incidental sounds: murmurings, rustlings, offhand comments, applause, and electrical interference. These non-verbal residues—often omitted in archival processes that privilege visual or textual documentation—were recomposed into a sitespecific soundscape intended to filter subtly through the reading room. However, the library did not permit the sounds to be played aloud. As a result, the soundscape took on a slightly different form: it was made available through a series of closed-back headphones, allowing it to be heard privately. In this format, the soundscape functioned as an ambient auditory field that foregrounded the sensorial texture of artistic memory over its factual content.

This compositional strategy aligns with what Callahan (2024) refers to as "alternative strategies of history-making," where artists foreground the microhistorical and the ephemeral over linear, monumental narratives. Chong's work does not illustrate The Substation's history; rather, it invokes what Diana Taylor calls the "repertoire"—a register of embodied memory that exceeds the archive's claims to permanence (Taylor 2003, 20). By situating sound as both content and method, *interstitial* renders audible the informal, the affective, and the ambient—

those dimensions of artistic practice that institutional archives often fail to preserve or resonate.

In the Singaporean context, Chong's work also pushes back against a prevailing technocratic rationalism in which culture is measured by metrics of productivity, excellence, and policy alignment. Since the 1980s, sound and performance art in Singapore have operated in precarious relation to state-sanctioned cultural norms—especially during the performance art funding ban between 1994 and 2003. During this period, artists working with performance art found themselves excluded from public funding structures, with their work often deemed illegible or transgressive by official standards (Tan 2022). By reanimating this marginalized sonic history through artistic composition, Chong reclaims a space for what philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls "the listening subject"—a mode of attunement that resists the domination of the visual and textual (Nancy 2007, 13–19).

The placement of Chong's sound work within the Rotunda is itself a curatorial act of resistance. The sonic bleeds into the bureaucratic; the ambient seeps into the juridical. The Rotunda—once a chamber for the pronouncement of law—becomes, in this configuration, a space of indeterminacy and affect. As Callahan notes, archival art often destabilises "the archive as law" by rendering visible (or audible) the infrastructures of institutional knowledge production (Callahan 2022, 203). In *OPEN END*, the archive is not displayed as a grid of references but experienced as a field of resonance—a relational space where memory lingers in frequencies beyond the document.

In contrast to archival aesthetics that centre legibility—vitrines, folders, indexes and catalogues—Chong's work invites a mode of archival listening. This act of listening is not passive reception but critical engagement: a call to attend to the murmurs, feedback, and silences that shape artistic and institutional histories in Singapore. In this way, *interstitial* exemplifies the project's broader aim: to reframe archival material not as the past made permanent, but as a set of contingencies vibrating in the present.




**Figure 3b.** Li-Chuan producing a new mix of *interstitial* at the heart of the Public Performance featuring myself, Urich and Li-Chuan in November 2024 at the Rotunda Library & Archive, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore.




**Figure 2b.** Chong Li-Chuan's sound-based work *interstitial* installed at the Rotunda Library & Archive, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore.

**Re-Read: Curatorial Scripts and Performative Reading (Urich Lau)**

If resonance in *OPEN END* registers through ambient memory and sonic traces, the axis of re-reading offers a critical lens into the discursive architecture of the archive—its language, its logic, and its authority. This gesture is enacted most explicitly in Urich Lau's *Casting Call (The Substation Read-Through)*, a multi-channel video installation in which performers restage historical curatorial texts drawn from The Substation's internal records, press releases, and email exchanges. By shifting the function of these texts from administrative

instruments to performative scripts, Lau engages in what Callahan (2024) identifies as "archival art that interrogates its own conditions of enunciation"—an art that asks not what an archive contains, but how it speaks, and through whom.

*Casting Call* repositions institutional documents as scripts to be embodied, dramatised, and interpreted. In so doing, the work stages what performance theorist Diana Taylor describes as the "scenario" of the archive—the conditions and choreography through which knowledge is produced, legitimised, and made public (Taylor 2003, 29–30). Lau does not select canonical texts or celebratory moments; rather, he focuses on the personal, choosing to focus on exhibitions in which he participated in, or curated for.

The performers in *Casting Call* read these documents not as neutral functionaries but as actors who inflect each line with tone, emphasis, and affect. Their delivery is deliberately stylised, drawing attention to the rhetoric and power embedded in seemingly mundane language. What emerges is a form of "archival fictioning," where the boundary between documentation and dramaturgy collapses. As Hal Foster argued in his foundational essay on the archival impulse, such practices often seek "to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" (Foster 2004, 4). Yet Lau's work extends this further—not only re-presenting the archive but re-performing its constitutive operations. In the context of Singapore's bureaucratised art institutions, where curatorial authority is often exercised through policy language and procedural formatting, Lau's intervention is particularly pointed and inconsequential. The act of re-reading becomes an act of *détournement*—a reversal of administrative speech acts into public and performative countertexts. It reveals the archive's latent performativity: its role not just in recording but in scripting the possible, the permissible, and the visible. As Callahan (2022) notes, contemporary archival practices are increasingly self-reflexive, attuned to their own "aesthetic of administration" and its discontents (Callahan 2022, 151).

Moreover, Lau's focus on The Substation's curatorial voice speaks to the shifting role of curators in Singapore's cultural field. From the 1990s onward, curators navigated dual pressures: to facilitate independent artistic expression and to comply with institutional expectations of professionalism and accountability. *Casting Call* brings this ambivalence into view. The work renders visible not only the texts themselves, but the invisible negotiations and affective labour behind them. It animates what feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2012) calls the "institutional murmur"—the background noise of policy, critique, and compromise that shapes how art is organised and experienced.

Within *OPEN END*, Lau's contribution highlights the archive not as a sealed cabinet of truths but as a script in rehearsal—always open to reinterpretation, never quite final. By performing The Substation's past through the language of its curators, administrators, and collaborators, *Casting Call* enacts a dialogical approach to archival history. It invites viewers not to absorb content passively but to re-read institutional memory as a contested, affective, and unfinished project.

In re-scripting the archive, Lau opens a space where the voice of the institution may be echoed, distorted, or contested—an echo chamber that reverberates with the political conditions of curatorial authorship in Singapore. As a re-reading, this work exemplifies *OPEN END*'s larger thesis: that archives are not monuments to be revered but scripts to be read again—with attention, with doubt, and with care.



**Figure 3a.** Urich Lau's video installation *Casting Call (The Substation Read-Through)* at the heart of the Rotunda Library & Archive, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore.



**Figure 3b.** Urich Lau's video installation *Casting Call (The Substation Read-Through)* at the heart of the Public Performance featuring myself, Urich and Li-Chuan in November 2024 at the Rotunda Library & Archive, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore.

**Re-Trace: Textual Fragments and Bureaucratic Memory (Adrian Tan)**

The third curatorial gesture in *OPEN END—re-trace*—addresses the archive through its textual debris: the discarded, fragmented, and marginal inscriptions that circulate within cultural institutions but rarely find their way into dominant historiographies. In my own installation, *As loose ends, you need not necessarily pick them up*, these fragments—emails, internal reports, performance notes, post-mortem evaluations, and handwritten annotations—were curated as spatial interventions that quietly punctuated the Rotunda Library & Archive. Scaled, repositioned, and inserted into in-between spaces of the reading room, these textual residues invited slow reading, chance encounters, and errant reflections.

This work draws on what Ann Laura Stoler (2002) terms the "epistemic anxieties" of the archive—its attempts to control meaning through classification, and its vulnerabilities when that system is disrupted. By foregrounding the bureaucratic voice of The Substation—the voice of programming teams, administrators, and curators negotiating artist support, budget constraints, and institutional logics—I aimed to expose the archive's underbelly: not the spectacular image of performance or protest, but the quietly conflicted apparatus that sustained those events. As Callahan (2022) suggests, archival art often finds its critical edge "not by monumentalising the lost or the forgotten, but by showing the systems of their forgetting" (Callahan 2022, 83).

The phrase that titles the work—*As loose ends, you need not necessarily pick them up*—was drawn from an email exchange between artist John Low and the late Lee Wen in 2001. The email concerned the setting up and selection of works for the "Open Ends" documentation exhibition of performance art during a period in which performance itself was semi-formally censored in Singapore. The correspondence captured an unease about representation,authorship, and historiography—an unease that persists in how performance practices from the 1990s and early 2000s are selectively archived or excluded. To re-trace these communications was to recognise their speculative value—not as evidence, but as affective and epistemic residue.

In Singapore's cultural milieu, where the institutional archive often seeks to stabilise national narratives and cultural legitimacy, the idea of re-tracing offers a counter-epistemology. It insists on returning not to grand origin stories but to the minor, the fragmented, and the procedural. Following Patrick Flores's provocation to "de-file" the archive—to disorganise, disaggregate, and deconstruct it—this work approached bureaucratic language as an ethnographic artefact, one that reveals the cultural field's operational contradictions (Flores 2019).

The formal strategy of scattering these texts throughout the Rotunda further challenged the spatial norms of the archive. Rather than centralising documentation behind glass, these excerpts invited embodied movement—reading while standing, pausing, doubling back. This approach responds to Michel de Certeau's (1984) idea of "walking in the city" as a tactical disruption of imposed order. The spatial reading of the archive becomes itself a form of wandering—a dérive through institutional memory.

Moreover, the content of the texts underscored how The Substation's ethos of openness and support was continually negotiated in the face of shrinking budgets, staff shortages, and shifting cultural policy. These negotiations were often left undocumented in official accounts but surfaced in informal notes, drafts, and post-event reflections. The recurring motif of the "messy mailing list," the lack of time for post-mortems, or the improvisational programming of artist residencies—these were not signs of failure, but of a dynamic and precarious infrastructure that prioritised care and process over polish.

This installation thus repositions bureaucracy not as dead weight but as a form of lived labour in a poetic and metaphorical manner. It attends to what Sara Ahmed (2012) has called the "non-performative speech act"—the institutional language that gestures toward inclusivity

and support but may not materialise those promises. By magnifying the contradictions embedded in The Substation's administrative voice, *As loose ends* becomes an invitation to reconsider how institutions are remembered—not just for what they did, but how they did it, and what they left unsaid.

Within the broader framework of *OPEN END*, this act of re-tracing affirms the curatorial thesis: that the archive is most alive at its seams—where fragments slip out, where speech falters, and where memory is neither linear nor complete, but errant, affective, and always in motion.




**Figure 4a.** [Close-up] Adrian Tan's text-based installation *As loose ends, you need not necessarily pick them up* at the Rotunda Library & Archive, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore.



**Figure 4b.** Adrian Tan's text-based installation *As loose ends, you need not necessarily pick them up* at the Rotunda Library & Archive, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore.

**Comparative Reflections: Artist-Run Archives and Counter-Institutional Memory**

While *OPEN END* is grounded in the institutional archive of The Substation, it findsproductive resonance in artist-run initiatives such as Koh Nguang How's *Singapore Art Archive Project* (SAAP) and Lee Wen's *The Independent Archive* (IA). These informal, independently sustained collections offer alternative models of archival practice—models that challenge institutional authority by privileging relational, embodied, and processual engagements with cultural memory and private archives. Together with *OPEN END*, they constitute what Callahan (2022) refers to as a "micro-historiographic" response to the dominant forms of art historical narration: one that is specific, partial, and consciously unresolved (Callahan 2022, 84).

Koh Nguang How's SAAP exemplifies an archival impulse that is deeply entangled with artistic practice. As an artist, archivist, and former Substation collaborator, Koh began documenting Singapore's contemporary art scene in the 1980s—long before there were formal institutional frameworks to do so. His collection spans newspaper clippings, exhibition catalogues, personal correspondences, and artefacts salvaged from gallery closures and discarded artist studios. The archive is maintained in his home and studio, where it is made accessible not through curated exhibitions or public programming, but through intimate, dialogical encounters with researchers, artists, and students.

SAAP's structure runs counter to the logics of preservation and access that govern institutional archives. There is little formal cataloguing, no consistent digitisation, and few protocols of conservation. Yet it is precisely this informality that grants it its epistemic value. As Stoler (2009) reminds us, the colonial archive was never a neutral storehouse but a "bundle of epistemological and political anxieties"—its order betrays the very power it seeks to stabilise (Stoler 2009, 233). By contrast, SAAP's lack of order due to the lack of space and constant movement of its storage sites reflects the messiness of cultural life itself, resisting the extractive tendencies of official history and instead foregrounding the rhythms of everyday cultural labour.

Whereas *OPEN END* unfolds within the rotunda of a national monument, SAAP remains at the periphery—spatially and institutionally. And yet both projects share a commitment to archival activation as a living practice. As Callahan (2024) notes, contemporary artists and curators engaged in archival work frequently operate "against the closure and authority of the archive, staging it instead as a space of openness, relationality, and contingency" (Callahan 2024, 79). This is particularly urgent in Singapore, where cultural memory has often been formalized through the language of "heritage" and "nation-building," leaving little room for minoritarian, dissident, or experimental practices to be archived on their own terms.

In this light, *OPEN END* can be seen as a bridge between institutional and counter institutional modes of memory-making. While embedded within the infrastructure of the National Gallery Singapore, it adopts the ethos of projects like SAAP by privileging informal documentation, collaborative authorship, and iterative presentation. The archival material activated in *OPEN END*—emails, soundscapes, curatorial fragments—may not meet the criteria of "important records" in a heritage context, but they are precisely the materials through which alternative histories can be imagined.

Such comparative reflection also prompts critical questions about sustainability and precarity. Artist-run archives like SAAP operate without institutional funding, often relying on the personal labour and resources of individual artists. Their long-term viability remains uncertain, yet their intellectual and cultural contributions are profound. As scholar Susan Best argues, "what matters in archival art is not just what is archived but who archives, and for whom" (Best 2006, 149). This question is central to the curatorial politics of *OPEN END*:

who activates the archive, whose voice is centred, and how can this labour be shared, recognised, and supported?

Finally, these independent archival practices resonate with broader decolonial efforts in Southeast Asia to recover art histories from the margins. As Flores (2019) asserts, the archive in postcolonial contexts must not only collect but contest—must not only preserve, but critique the conditions under which preservation becomes possible. In this sense, both *OPEN END* and SAAP are less about documenting the past than about creating frameworks for its re-interpretation. They offer not closure but openings: material, conceptual, and curatorial spaces in which to reframe what counts as art, as memory, and as history.

## OPEN END AS METHOD AND PROPOSITION

As this paper has shown, *OPEN END* is not simply an exhibition about The Substation's archive—it is a curatorial methodology that reframes the archive as a site of resonance, rereading, and re-tracing. Through collaborative artistic practice, spatial intervention, and critical historiography, the project proposes a curatorial response to the epistemological and institutional constraints that often define how cultural memory is preserved, accessed, and interpreted in Singapore. It embraces, rather than resolves, the complexities of working within and against the structures of national heritage.

In a city-state where cultural institutions are often caught between bureaucratic rationalism and nation-building imperatives, *OPEN END* offers an alternative approach: one grounded in affect, incompleteness, and speculative method. It draws from Sara Callahan's articulation of the archival turn as not merely a return to the past, but a turning of attention toward how the past is framed, by whom, and to what ends (Callahan 2022, 3–5). In this sense, *OPEN END* is a proposition for a different kind of archive—one that remains open to reinterpretation, vulnerable to recontextualisation, and attentive to minor gestures.

By focusing on the fragmentary and the performative—whether through Chong Li-Chuan's sonic interventions, Urich Lau's re-reading of curatorial texts, or my own engagement with bureaucratic traces—the project insists that memory is not static but negotiated, embodied, and always under construction. It questions not just what we remember, but how, and why.

As Hal Foster (2004) observed, the archival impulse in contemporary art often emerges from a desire to "make sense of cultural memory," especially when that memory is endangered, dispersed, or repressed (Foster 2004, 21). In Singapore, such conditions are deeply shaped by postcolonial governance, technocratic cultural planning, and the spatial reorganisation of public life.

The closure of The Substation in 2021 exemplifies these broader pressures—and *OPEN END* responds by keeping its legacy alive not through conservation, but through reactivation.

As a curatorial research project, *OPEN END* contributes to the field of archival art by demonstrating how artistic collaboration, site-specific practice, and minor forms of documentation can function as modes of critical inquiry. It aligns with artist-run archives like Koh Nguang How's *Singapore Art Archive Project*, while operating within institutional frameworks in ways that test their limits. It blurs the boundaries between curator, researcher, artist, and participant—foregrounding the dialogical and propositional nature of archival work. Ultimately, *OPEN END* calls for a curatorial practice that is not about closure, mastery, or resolution, but about opening up new forms of listening, reading, and relating. It asserts that archives are not only about the past, but about the futures they make possible—and about the public, pedagogical, and political imaginaries we bring to them. As a method, it offers resonance. As a proposition, it remains open.

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