

by Sabih Ahmed

## **What Does the Revolt of Sediments Look Like?**

### **Notes on the Archive**

### **III**

#### **Algorithms and Geology**

In the year 2013, it was recorded that carbon dioxide passed the signature threshold of four hundred parts per million in the atmosphere for the first time since the Pliocene era about three to five million years ago. Although the gas is not visible to us, it is regarded to have set in motion an environmental change of catastrophic proportions. This change took place in the wake of another change of perhaps equally significant proportions, i.e., the coming of the Age of Big Data. There is little concealed about the fact that it is big data that now tells us the pulse of the planet as much as it plays a role in shaping everyday life for billions of people. In 2012, Google reported an average of 110 billion searches per month worldwide. By the end of 2014, an estimated three billion people around the world were online and had uploaded one trillion photographs in that year alone. In the words of Nicholas Mirzoeff, the global photography archive increased by some 25% in 2014. [\[iv\] \(issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n4\)](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n4) With enough data processing and storage capacity already established, a new regime of real-time “computation” is in place along with predictive analysis both of planetary behavior as much as of human behavior.

Going back to memory and geography where this paper had started off, with big data and the current status of the Anthropocene, both memory and geography are

increasingly being felt to release themselves from human control now. On the one hand is a fear in society of not being in control of the scale of data being generated around it, and on the other a growing realization that cities are submerging under rising waters. With machines becoming more and more autonomous, there is almost a panic that both nature and machines are equal threats to humanity now. This temperament stands in sharp contrast to the long prevailing ideals of Enlightenment and the firm belief in humanity's conquest and containment of nature for well over three centuries. Geological forces on the one hand and algorithms on the other are producing a condition today where the eyes that are seeing and the ears that are hearing are not just of human beings. Likewise, the maps being drawn and the memories recorded and accessed are no longer only by human beings either. Practically every field is being impacted by the rise of this stratum of big data and the simultaneous rise in temperatures. Geology and machinic intelligence could not have been more closely intertwined. The archive's sediments could not be more firmly embedded in planetary ones.

These were among the few points of departure for me when working on an Infra-Curatorial project titled "Striated Light" in the 11th Shanghai Biennale. Titled "Why Not Ask Again?," the Biennale was curated by Raqs Media Collective and ran over a period of almost three months after its opening on November 9, 2016. The Biennale attempted a revisiting of some of the most basic questions about what it is to inhabit the contemporary moment when relationships between the human, nature, and machines are being realigned in ways that beckon a rethinking of all our concepts. The curatorial propositions that the Biennale made were also at the level of exploring new concepts and premises that bring different practices and knowledges together today, and this was done keeping in mind a complete avoidance of thematic categories in the exhibition. One of these premises in the Biennale was the "Infra-Curatorial Platform." Seven individuals from different fields and different parts of the world were invited to present ways in which they would stage the *infra[v]* ([issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n5](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n5)) structures of their practices and inquiries. And to explore this, a new imagination for curatorial thinking was being asked of each one, which would preoccupy itself less with (re)presenting developed works and ideas and more with what kind of networks come together between methods, forms and archives. Basically, what would the scaffoldings for new infrastructures, knowledges, and practices look like in the rapidly changing parameters of world-making? The proposals were invited to bring together the thinking process behind their own practices into an emergent force that curatorial practice could express.

In response to these propositions emerged the Infra-Curatorial project that Raqs invited me to bring around my own practice of archiving. "Striated Light"[[vi](#)]

([issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n6](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n6)) redeployed Ha's personal archive to draw out over 3,000 digitized contact sheets as a way to explore the changing optic of the archive in the 21st century. The passage of light that ran through a hand-held camera, into the dark room, then locked onto the surface of contact prints, stored in dark boxes in a studio space in Hong Kong, re-illuminated some four decades after with scanners, enlarged on high tech computer monitors and reprinted onto new undulating surfaces 40 feet wide, resembling thumbnails on our personal computers, and re-circulating in further unpredictable environments and forms, is the journey of the archive as it comes into our age. Ours is the age of pulsating screens and virality of thoughts, where the substratum of the analogue beneath the digital erupts to form new striations that might not lend themselves as much to genealogies as to topographies and geological formations. Time stretches, scatters, and pixelates the archive rather than perhaps inscribing itself upon it. The familiar is likely to be rendered unfamiliar and uncanny, and we may find ourselves more at home with the unfamiliar that the archive throws up.

I am reminded of late Svetlana Boym's "Notes for an Off-Modern Manifesto" where she wrote:

It turns our attention to the surfaces, rims and thresholds. From my ten years of travels I have accumulated hundreds of photographs of windows, doors, facades, back yards, fences, arches and sunsets in different cities all stored in plastic bags under my desk. I re-photograph the old snapshots with my digital camera and the sun of the other time and the other place cast new shadows upon their once glossy surfaces with stains of the lemon tea and fingerprints of indifferent friends. I try not to use the preprogrammed special effects of Photoshop; not because I believe in authenticity of craftsmanship, but because I equally distrust the conspiratorial belief in the universal simulation. I wish to learn from my own mistakes, let myself err. I carry the pictures into new physical environments, inhabit them again, occasionally deviating from the rules of light exposure and focus.

At the same time I look for the ready-mades in the outside world, "natural" collages and ambiguous double exposures. My most misleading images are often "straight photographs." Nobody takes them for what they are, for we are burdened with an afterimage of suspicion.[vii] ([issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n7](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/what-does-the-revolt-of-sediments-look-like.html#n7))

In conclusion, coming back full circle to Said's essay, the burgeoning interest in memory and geography that it identified was one among several calls of an

epistemic shift in the technologies and paradigms through which memory and geography functioned under colonialism. If the archive and maps were the technological base for the way we understood memory and geography in an older era, data and rising tides gush out in their stead like a torrent through the floodgates.

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## Notes

i “Landscape Perspectives in Palestine,” held in the Birzeit University in the West Bank in 1998, subsequently published two years later in the form of an essay titled “Invention, Memory, and Place.”

ii One that was firmly established under the colonial apparatus and then becoming only more sophisticated in the course of the 20th century.

iii The Ha Bik Chuen archive came to light in 2013 when the Ha family invited Asia Art Archive to do a pilot project to map, assess, and selectively digitize the collection in stored in his studio. Led by Researcher Michelle Wong, the project has unfolded into various iterations of archival, artistic, and exhibitionary platforms since the pilot. Among the collection are over 100,000 photographs, 3,500 contact sheets, exhibition ephemera, and periodicals collected by Ha from 1960s onward. For more information, visit <http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/excessive-enthusiasm-activating-the-ha-bik-chuen-archive/> (<http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/excessive-enthusiasm-activating-the-ha-bik-chuen-archive/>)

iv Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, Pelican Books, London, 2015.

v “Infra” as in that which lies beneath, such as infra-red light that remains invisible under normal light conditions.

vi Striated Light drew from Ha Bik Chuen’s archive digitized by Asia Art Archive. The structure that became the armature and form for the project was designed in conversation with the 11th Shanghai Biennale architects Rupali Gupte and Prasad Shetty, with assistance in design from Aarushi Surana.

**vii** Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgic Technology: Notes for an Off-Modern Manifesto,” in *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York, 2001. Also available on <http://www.svetlanaboym.com/manifesto.htm> (<http://www.svetlanaboym.com/manifesto.htm>)