

# AiRCAST #8

## FAZLEEN KARLAN

NTU CENTRE FOR  
CONTEMPORARY  
ART SINGAPORE



Fazleen Karlan and Samantha Yap recording AiRCAST, 7 July 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

**Anna Lovecchio:** Welcome to the second season of AiRCAST. On this podcast, we visit the Residencies Studios of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore nestled on the fringe of a vibrant rainforest in Gillman Barracks. In this series of open-ended conversations, we invite different guests to probe the mind of our Artists-in-Residence and unfold some of the ideas, materials, processes, influences, and research methodologies behind their practice. My name is Anna Lovecchio. I am a curator, Assistant Director of Programmes at NTU CCA, and the editor of this podcast.

In this episode, curator Samantha Yap digs deep into the practice of Artist-in-Residence Fazleen Karlan. We are happy to bring the two of them back together, after they first collaborated a couple of year ago on an exhibition titled *Time Passes* (2020-21), to talk about Fazleen's evolving artistic sensibility and sources of inspiration. In this circular conversation that revolves around a shared reading, the novel *Lighthousekeeping* by Jeanette Winterson, Fazleen and Samantha exchange memories, experiences, and thoughts about time, materiality, pop culture, and the vitality of archaeology in Fazleen's work. And they do so with that special kind of fluid intimacy that interlaces persons of the same age.

Just a few words to introduce them.

The practice of Fazleen Karlan weaves together art-making and archaeology to explore matters of time by mapping and reframing physical remains found within the landscape and socio-historical context of Singapore. By engaging the stratifications of a site and by reassessing the chronology of everyday objects through the tools of archaeology, her work generates news records of contemporary life that cast the relation between past, present, and future into a speculative framework.

Shuffling between writing and curation, Samantha Yap nurtures interests in forms of reciprocity, the ethics of care, love, and vulnerability as well as her ongoing exploration of feminist perspectives across literature and visual culture. She has curated a number of exhibitions in Singapore and contributed curatorial texts to several catalogues. Her creative writing is also featured in an anthology of poetry by Asian women titled *My Lot is a Sky*, published by Math Paper Press in 2018.

I hope you enjoy how this candid conversation urges us to think differently about the life of objects and the objects in our life.

**Samantha Yap:** Hi Fazleen, it's so nice to be speaking with you like this on the occasion of your residency with NTU CCA Singapore. I'd like for us to have a conversation on several touchstones of your practice, like your preoccupations, your reflection on your practice thus far, and also your careful and personal engagement with time, objects, and stories across your work. And I think, the funny thing is that the timespan of your residency with NTU CCA Singapore, from April to August is actually just as much time we had together when we were working on *Time Passes*, which was an exhibition at the National Gallery Singapore in 2021. So I'm very glad to actually have this opportunity to do a more thorough kind of catch up with you today. So to start off: How are you doing? And what have you sort of been thinking about watching or reading lately?

**Fazleen Karlan:** Thank you so much for doing this with me Sam. It's been a while since we last, you know, sat down and put our heads together for something. So before we go on to the art stuff... lately, I've been watching a lot of Netflix.

**Samantha Yap:** So have !!

**Fazleen Karlan:** I've been watching *The Umbrella Academy*, and I've also jumped on the *Stranger Things* bandwagon. I think, while looking at the questions that you had in store for me... I realised my affinity with messy timelines and chronology. Yeah, it's starting to manifest itself. So first off, I've been looking at traces of objects and reflecting on the materials that I've been using thus far in my works. During the course of this residency, I have also been building on themes that I've been working with for the past couple of years. Specifically, on reimagining artefacts. This involves shifting the focus from objects of the past, to objects of now, or even in time to come. The theme of reimagining artefacts is one that has resonated with me for quite some time now. I've often found myself taking something that has existed in a particular manner, and then altering its tangible quality to present a new form. This opens up the chance to create something new within the shell of something familiar. Also, another strand of research that I've been looking at is how archaeology is represented in popular cinema, as well as the responses to these portrayals. As you know, cinema forms a large part of our psyche because it's accessible. It's made to attract people to a particular subject, and looking at the genre of films that feature archaeology in it has been quite interesting. I've also been thinking about the different ways of presenting archaeology and the many forms that it could take.

**Samantha Yap:** Yeah, I've had the immense pleasure to actually spend some time with you at the studio and see how all these different threads in your practice are coming together, whether it be the images of memes to screenshots of movies on your wall. And I think we will talk a little bit more about that later. You mentioned a little bit about how we caught on that you are very interested in time and the relationship that we have with time, and the fact that in order to tell time we have to narrativise it somehow. For the NTU CCA Singapore AiR Shares series on social media, where you shared some of the things that were inspiring you, I remember you actually brought up Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping*. And so, [the book] was something that I've also read very recently, to try to get into your mindspace since you shared this book as something that inspired your approach to art. For myself, I think, in the work that I do, I always take cues from books. So of course, when I saw that you were referencing a book by an author that I also genuinely loved, I really wanted to read the book and to sort of see it as a companion text to our conversation or to how I can possibly read your practice.

To maybe give some context to the listeners about what *Lighthousekeeping* is about, *Lighthousekeeping* by Jeanette Winterson is a story about telling stories; about how connections can be chartered across disparate times, places, and people. A large part of our conversation will sort of take after certain lines from this book. The story is centred on the main character called Silver, and Silver as a young child growing up in a lighthouse, who finds herself listening to the story spun by Pew, who is the lighthouse keeper. His stories in turn, cast a web of connections that open up other stories along Silver's narrative. And so you have each character and their lives in *Lighthousekeeping*; they are their own story, and they stand alone, but then they sort of stand alone together. While that's something that we've sort of internalised in the experience of every book, or every film, we know inherently that every character has their own life story, and their own history. In the master narrative of most books and films, these smaller parts, you know, these sort of micro stories, or micro narratives, always end up being subsumed in this grander sort of overarching narrative. But what I really enjoyed with *Lighthousekeeping*, and what I thought resonated well with your practice was the fact that we see Winterson really committing to keeping these fragments as fragments, these micro histories as, you know, micro histories, and so we have very choppy fragments and multiple broken off parts of the book that diverge into something that happens in our time or in another place. And so... how [Winterson] counterpoints these fragments of different stories together, stories of people

who are living different lives in different times with different habits, feelings, and preferences, I think all of that echoes the loose and poetic way that I see you working, Fazleen. I'm thinking of the way that you sort of tend to the sediments of contemporary life, with the curious eye of someone who sees value even in the most banal things, such as a ketchup packet, or a used toothpaste tube. You sort of see in them this record of life. I was wondering, since we're starting off with *Lighthousekeeping*, if you could share a little bit more about why you chose the book, the kind of relationship you have with the book, and some of the things that resonated with you.

**Fazleen Karlan:** I first chanced upon Winterson's writing years ago, and this particular book, *Lighthousekeeping*, actually came to me during a particular period of my life where I was trying to make sense of things that went south, and then realising that they don't fall into neat categories. Somehow, the structure of the book, or the lack of structure, in her writing became very comforting to me. She doesn't follow the conventions of chronology in her storytelling; sometimes it feels quite Frankenstein-ish even. Following along these lines, I feel like it's possible for objects to exist in various periods of time, ranging from a few minutes to millennia. Yet very few are brought back to life as antiquities or recycled products and in the process acquiring new significance and new lives after they are no longer functional. So every other object is eventually discarded or thrown somewhere and most of the time it's left to decompose on its own. These objects have always been considered as material culture which is essentially evidence of social behaviour. I think that's an aspect of archaeology that's pretty fascinating to dig deeper into and I don't think we will ever get to the bottom of it.

**Samantha Yap:** The previous time I worked with you, we didn't get enough time to properly sit down and talk about what inspired us or what informed our practice. So it was really nice for me to reencounter your work in a slowed down pace, a pace where I could actually spend time reading the texts you're reading, and then also reading your practice alongside these texts. It clicked when I saw you reference Winterson because then I thought: Fazleen is very interested in stories because archaeology is all about stories! You're basically excavating objects and these objects will never just be themselves, there will always be a story of a time or person. I think that eventually led me to the kind of questions that I wanted to ask you today about your interest in storytelling, your interest in imbuing or regarding these objects as more than what they were. From here on

out, I would like to reference specific works. I want to start first with your work *#sgbyecentennial*. With that work, you presented the findings of a speculative archaeological dig of our present time as a response to the rather narrow purview of the Bicentennial celebrations in 2019. So the installation was laid out across several long tables outfitted with various tools and familiar everyday objects that were encased in soil and layered with a sense of time passing, very much resembling freshly excavated artefacts. Some of these familiar objects that were presented in your work included things that we use today, and also things that were actually no longer useful at all. So there were household items like toothpaste, packets of condiments that are still useful to us, but then also several lesser used and even obsolete items like a CD, parts of a modem, a laptop charger, and even the deconstructed remains of an old iPhone.

And so bringing it back to the exchange we were having about *Lighthousekeeping*, and even evident in the book title itself where Winterson describes the lighthouse as this known point in the darkness, or as a sort of familiar guide for sailors out at sea who are navigating the waters in the dark or trying to find their way home... I think as an artist, you are sort of like that sailor in the sea, where you're trying to find your way around the pool of possibilities. I was just wondering, what is that known point for you? With *#sgbyecentennial*, looking at the kind of objects that you've chosen to be part of the work, it seems possible to include just about everything that you encounter in modern life, because everything can be ascribed with a kind of resonance or meaning. So I wanted to ask you: what are the parameters for making your work? And how does an object actually make the cut?

**Fazleen Karlan:** In reference to what you said about *Lighthousekeeping*, I feel that creating the work is a way of creating that known point. With *#sgbyecentennial*, the parameters were very broad as it was my first time putting art and archaeology together. Back then, it was intended to be a counternarrative of Singapore's colonial history and also of the Bicentennial celebrations in 2019. While producing the works, I collected objects – specifically objects that people have used – to form an archaeological record from people, instead of accepting the narratives that have been handed to us over so many years. That was meant as a way of opening up the question of what is considered an artefact... Does it have to be shiny or golden? Or does it have to be bound by a glass casing? So I think over the years, the collection



Fazleen Karlan, *#sybyecentennial*, 2019, installation view. Courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

becomes more specific. But of course, you know, objects don't exist in a vacuum. Even with archaeological excavations, you would most likely get an assemblage of artefacts instead of just one particular type of ceramic, for example. So the parameters differ with every work because I'm constantly expanding the definition of artefacts and working on reimagining them.

**Samantha Yap:** I think you're right in a sense that in the conceptualisation of every work, the known point is really the fact that you are making a work and so then everything else sort of follows that instinct or that very loose trajectory. I remember, in [*#sgbyecentennial*], there was a piece that was also exhibited at *Time Passes*... some of the visitors or friends that I brought around, they would always remark about how they noticed all these Merlion-themed merchandise that was part of the installation. Of course, it's referenced because you're talking about the bicentennial. You [and the work] also got me thinking about how I felt looking at these Merlion merchandise now, compared to when we staged the exhibition. Right now I'm looking at it and I'm thinking so much about the pandemic and the travel industry, and whether or not the Merlions as symbols are still even selling as a touristic object, because if we didn't have tourists for a period of time, then the Merlion icon would just dwindle in significance. But of course, this has changed because everything has opened up again. So you know, there is a sort of moving between things that potentially could become obsolete, to things that are relevant in a certain moment or not relevant at all. This particular work *#sgbyecentennial*, it was staged first in 2019 at your graduation showcase, and then restaged in 2020 with *Time Passes*. That's a very short time period between the two, and that means that with these objects, the audience might actually find them way more familiar than unfamiliar. Say if we also do a hypothetical exercise, what if we restage this work 30 years from now? How will you actually feel about the audience looking at it from their own contemporary lens and no longer being able to relate or identify some of these objects?

**Fazleen Karlan:** I think when we restaged the work in 2020, there were so many challenges. There was also the fact that I was bringing it from a school setting to a place that was very public, like the National Gallery Singapore.

**Samantha Yap:** Yeah, and the National Gallery were even concerned about, like, whether or not [the work] would bring in germs, or pests, or anything else to the existing collection that they had in their gallery...

**Fazleen Karlan:** Yes! We had an extremely long conversation about the safety of bringing in that work just because it had soil contained in it. So I think working with you actually opened up a lot of considerations in terms of presenting the work itself. At the graduation show, it was very raw, and as you know, the works were just on the floor for people to squat and scrutinise at if they wanted to, or stand back to look at it if they felt more comfortable that way. But actually having the space and the opportunity unfolded more thought processes towards presenting, and I think it did something to the work. For the Merlion, I think it still remains as something that's very recognizable to whoever grew up in Singapore as a tourism icon. And if we were to re-present the work, in 30 years, yeah... I don't know if people will get it, but you know, it's okay. I think the unfamiliarity is inevitable, and it's okay.

I also wanted to share with you about another work that I did. For my previous work, *Hanya Tinggal Kenangan*, I did a second reiteration of it for the group exhibition *Between The Living and The Archive* that was curated by Syaheedah Iskander and Fajrina Razak back in 2021. In that iteration, I had objects procured from Bugis Street that were displayed inside boxes as part of the installation. These boxes were then stacked quite haphazardly. Inside that installation, I also included lights and construction netting surrounding these boxes. During the exhibition, I was chatting with three girls who were looking at my work and they were asking me about Bugis Street. I had to explain to them that Bugis Street was a place to find clothes, to buy accessories, and it used to be really crowded. And then one of them commented: "Oh my God, that sounds like Shopee before Shopee." So you know, I was encountering audiences who weren't familiar with the context of Bugis Street and what it meant to people. They didn't have that experience of trawling through the shops just to find cheap clothes because now they can just do it from the comfort of their own home!

In terms of unfamiliarity, I've sort of embraced it actually. I think it adds another dimension to the work. With *Hanya Tinggal Kenangan*, it was made for people in my age bracket. We spent a good part of our teenage years attempting to forge an identity by experimenting with different clothing styles with the limited spending power of a 15 year old. For me, creating that work was a question of how do we archive or document that experience for 15 year olds today who can buy things with just a couple of swipes on their phone, you know? I also created the work in response to some news coverage of the time about the impending



Fazleen Karlan, *Hanya Tinggal Kenangan*, 2020, installation view. Courtesy the artist.

closure of Bugis Street and the rejuvenation that will eventually happen to the shops in the area. Over time, places like these will become unfamiliar to whoever is living in Singapore.

**Samantha Yap:** Even as they sort of become unfamiliar, Bugis Street and its very personal kind of significance as a setting for our formative years, I think that doesn't dwindle away. And so I feel like your work does straddle a little bit of the sense of this one object, or this one place, having so many different kind of significances or not even being significant to anybody at all. I think that's what might happen if we were to restage any of your works in 30 years time. Likely, they will be unfamiliar... I think, then, maybe your role as an artist, or artist-archivist, will become even more prominent because you will have to talk to [the audience] about these particular objects and how you encounter them. All the audience members will be speculating on the sort of life these objects had before then. This does remind me of *Lighthousekeeping* where Winterson writes a little bit about how stories are markers, guides, comforts, and warnings. So I think for those of us who are looking at these objects with recognition, the stories that

they evoke in our memory would be a guide for remembering, or providing a sense of comfort, because we have this tangible connection and a visual record to recall what was temporarily forgotten.

I think we are actually the same age so we definitely have a similar shared kind of experience, or of similar visual references, growing up. Looking at some of the objects in your work such as the routers, and especially the CDs... I remember, like, collecting and trading them when I was young! For me, it's an object that is reminiscent of friendship, of a carefree kind of obsession. It's also a reminder as well of how something that was so prominent and important to you at a certain point of time, can really recede into insignificance over a passage of time. And so, there are also a lot of other various technological devices in your work *#sgbyecentennial*. Traces of digital habits and lifestyles continue on in your other works like *d3ar succ3ss0r*, which was recently shown at the Esplanade Community Wall, as well as *creation\_myth2.0* [presented in the group exhibition *Pivot Point*, as part of Singapore Art Week 2021]. I wanted you to maybe share a little bit more about your interest in sort of fossilising these virtual interfaces and



Fazleen Karlan, *#sybyecentennial*, 2019, installation view. Courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

symbols like your emojis and notification alerts. You also mentioned just now about this sort of difference between trawling through stores to actually find clothes in person and swiping through listings online to find clothes. So I feel that you're sort of trying to build a bridge between the two and I wanted to maybe have you share a little bit more about that.

**Fazleen Karlan:** I think for me, because, you know, we're in the same age bracket and then we witnessed...

**Samantha Yap:** We're the same age, yes!

**Fazleen Karlan:** We witnessed a lot of these changes as we were growing up... so in a way, it also extends towards my work whether I realise it or not. And with *d3ar succ3ss0r*, which I recently put up at the Esplanade Community Wall, I had a lot of sculptures that documented these symbols that we encounter every day. You wake up and your phone throws a barrage of notifications from every single social media site you know, and we are just passing through all these actions. We are uploading so much content online! I feel like it's something that was very interesting and mind blowing to consider how it's so easy to us. You could say that it is an attempt to excavate or archive the Internet. I spend way too much time on it. It's developed tremendously while we've been growing up. It encapsulates our lives very well now. This is a characteristic of human civilization in 2020 and all these things happened in phases. So we had web 1.0, which was like the early stages of the Internet, up to the year 2000, with websites existing to just convey information. Search engines were considered as a recent innovation then. It was a very one-way street. Then we had web 2.0, which was all about new ways of socialising, but virtually. It was also more collaborative because people had to participate for it to gain traction. You know, we hopped onto social media and all the algorithms that came along with it. And now with web 3.0, modes of reality are now existing in a virtual plane, you have things like Sketchfab or Sandbox. So I was actually looking at how archaeology, which is something that is typically associated with the past, can coexist with these interfaces or the structures that we have today.

**Samantha Yap:** Yeah, and I think in your work, you are always trying to document this sense of the present... even if that present, as we are talking about it, is slipping away into the past. So it's sort of undeniable that in your documentation



**Fazleen Karlan:** For me they exude this mysteriousness, because, you know... I can't read the script! Yeah, I don't understand what it says but it turns out that these clay tablets were meant for everyday use such as balancing accounts, lending out items, private letters, and there were also unidentified fragments. So when we look at the collection of objects that are present in our lives now, it could be an artefact for someone 5000 years from now, we'll never know. For *#sgbyecentennial*, one of the objects that attracted much attention was the Shrek VCD because people were not expecting it to see it lodged inside soil and paper pulp. I put it inside the work as a joke but I realised that it has been in my possession for the longest time since I was a kid. It's already considered kind of obsolete because we don't really use that form of technology anymore and we have Netflix. So who needs that VCD thing? That is a story of how an object became an artefact. I feel like when creating the works, the thing that comes to me first would be the object itself and then the story would somehow appear, or make itself known later on.

**Samantha Yap:** Yeah, yeah. I think especially because these objects are objects from your personal collection, it's almost like you are somewhat reminiscing. You reminded me of the Shrek VCD? I think you definitely put it in as a joke because there was a running joke on the Internet that Shrek has become this sort of comedic figure. The funny thing though is that especially now, this joke has certainly become more relevant than ever. So if this work were to ever get staged right now and someone who sees the work might assume that you're in on a joke, but the thing is that this work was made even before Shrek has acquired this cultural cult status...

**Fazleen Karlan:** Suddenly he became an icon! I didn't figure out why then, but people were reposting Shrek memes and videos. He just became this face of a sense of humour that's documented in the generation that's after us, or together with us.

**Samantha Yap:** But for us, we were watching it seriously. Since we are of the same generation and being of the same age, I end up doing this compare and contrast of how we feel this way about Shrek and our time shopping at Bugis, to how they view Shrek as a comedy figure...

**Fazleen Karlan:** Vintage!

**Samantha Yap:** Yes, vintage! Or like how they don't know that Bugis existed before Shopee. I guess I should clarify that it isn't so much about placing value on either modes of interaction. How an object lends itself or plays a role in a person's life really changes drastically within just a matter of like, a few years. Something that seems so pivotal to us would just be a backdrop or a fleeting scene in someone else's life. The other thing that I wanted to mention was, in your work, and not just with *#sgbyecentennial* is that it always sort of exists in a collection. That, of course, very much takes from how you have your archaeology digs. But most of the time, your work sort of exists in a collection and they're not just a singular object. It's always a gathering of objects, sometimes alongside your notes, other tools, and other props. I'm thinking again, about the sort of loose and very fragmentary structure of *Lighthousekeeping* and there's a line from the book that goes: "the continuous narrative of existence is a lie. There is no continuous narrative, there are lit up moments, and the rest is dark." I would say that this sense of a very loose, disjointed continuity actually echoes a lot with archaeology where the team attends to these various moments preserved in time. And also with your work too, because you are sort of looking at how a story of a place or a story of people is always a series of perspectives and stories. It's always more than one. On that note, I wanted to ask you about your workshop for NTU CCA Singapore where you've also mentioned to me that archaeology is a team sport and many hands make the work possible. So you've started to involve more people in your work by also doing public workshops, and another collaboration piece that we'll talk about later. With the workshops that you've done for the families, they're called *Relics for the Future*, where children and their families attempt to reverse-engineer and create their own artefacts. I'm just kind of curious, what was the response from the families? What did you notice about how different everyone sort of approached their objects of choice and the kind of meaning did they start ascribing to it?

**Fazleen Karlan:** As I spend time unravelling my practice with you and other people, it sort of runs parallel with the part on how there are lit up moments, and the rest is dark. Working in that fragmentary manner has been quite helpful in trying to navigate both art and archaeology at the same time. Although, when I first started out, it was more of an individual pursuit. I was really curious about what I could do with these two subjects I noticed and how I could straddle the both of them. Over time, I also had this curiosity about, you know, what if I got other people involved? And the workshop was a way of nudging me towards that different manner of research. With archaeology, there is always the public who is



an important stakeholder too, apart from the artefacts. Most of the participants during the workshop chose objects that they were familiar with. I also provided some options for them from my own collection of everyday items. Quite a few of them picked out candles and my guess on why that is: it's what they associate the candle with from their own experience. We also had a participant who included a 20-cent coin in his relic, so that was quite cute. You know, he was with his mom and he was a little bit shy, but it's okay. All these encounters are actually a moment of research for me and it was really great having the support from NTU CCA in trying to explore these things without the demand of a tangible result.

**Samantha Yap:** Do you feel that when this kid sort of said: "Okay, I want this 20-cent coin to be my artefact," then afterwards, after that declaration, do they start to treat that 20-cent coin differently?

**Fazleen Karlan:** I hope so!



*Workshop for Families: Relics for the Future* by Fazleen Karlan, Artist-in-Residence, 18 June 2020, Residencies Studios. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

**Samantha Yap:** It's like it suddenly becomes precious to them. Thinking a little bit about your other threads of research, which looks at how archaeology is perceived in pop culture, we actually have a lot of archaeologists, curators, and historians in movies. And they always employ a certain kind of, or set of, gestures to show that they are handling an artefact with care. It reminded me a little bit about the fact that this is something that you're looking into... one of the pictures that I saw [of your studio], you've put up a wall full of memes, takes on archaeology, and other sort of film stills where you have people playing the role of an archaeologist. We see them using similar kind of tropes, whether that be very dark, earthy colour palettes, or that they are sort of staring at this object as though it's full of mystery. Yet they're also handling it with a lot of practice and care. So I think there's a certain set of gestures that you can do when you're trying to perform the role of an archaeologist. I would like you to share a little bit more about what you found funny or interesting in your research.

**Fazleen Karlan:** The most interesting find for me would be the use of light and framing of the hands, like what you mentioned earlier. If you look at particular scenes where an artefact is being revealed, there is always this beam of ethereal light coming out. Especially if it's in a sealed box, this light would spill out, which is visually arresting...

**Samantha Yap:** Reminding me of *Indiana Jones* or like, even the *Wonder Woman* movies...

**Fazleen Karlan:** Yes! It's very common, you know! When representing archaeology in cinema, you'll have this light that's coming out and it's really captivating. You, as an audience, are at the edge of your seat with anticipation – what is in there? Also, another element that I noticed was how hands are framed in the movies with regards to looking at nonverbal gestures. So apart from the dialogue and framing, and all that, there are particular shots of hand movements and gestures which attend to the object itself. I found that really interesting to look at. Cinema provides a captivating visual for archaeology and the past. However, these movies represent only a small aspect of what's really out there and it always tends towards the discovery of artefacts. The discipline is actually much more than excavations! Its processes lie beyond what is seen on the screen. So when we look at movies, such as *Indiana Jones*, or *Lara Croft*, or

even *Wonder Woman*, it's actually a small fraction of what the entire process and what archaeological work is about. So, you know, realistically, archaeologists are not out in the field every single day. *Indiana Jones* is actually an example of how a character has greatly shaped popular imagination. It is reinforced by presenting that stereotype of archaeologists being male and white, and [this character] is attempting to 'tame' the strange environment that he has been thrown, or willingly throws himself, into. When it's not being done properly, archaeology has its roots in colonialism and the desire to save relics from being destroyed or being looted for the black market. These are aspects of the discipline that should not be swept under the rug because they actually happened. But practicing archaeology in contemporary times, I have been thinking about how we can approach it differently. Even more so for me because my work focuses on the process after the excavation, and the artistic practice becomes an extension of that.

So, apart from examining these representations of archaeology in cinema, I have also been studying the responses that have been generated in relation to these tropes. Most of them actually come from the sentiment that they have been misunderstood and that these films do not accurately reflect the reality of being an archaeologist, or working in that field. There are people who are creating spoofs, parodies, or satire to challenge assumptions derived from these films. In this current age, anyone can just upload content online and share their responses to something. I have a particular favourite, which is the 'onestararchaeology' account on Instagram. It's run by a group of archaeologists who comb through Google reviews of historical sites or monuments, and they repost bad reviews of these places. People leave comments, such as "you have to guess how the building could have been" or they will say things like "pigeons defecating everywhere." So I feel like these satire accounts, you know, create a kind of response towards what has been said by archaeology in cinema. It was very interesting to see the dynamics of this forming in recent years.

**Samantha Yap:** Yeah, and in some sense, it personalises what in cinema is a very impersonal thing, where a grandmaster of artefacts appears and is that civilizing element that rescues everything from perishing, and doing the whole world a favour by taking these artefacts into his good hands. Obviously, it is a very kind of, like, problematic dynamic. But on top of that, I think it doesn't fully encapsulate the whole problem of how do you take something that isn't necessarily your

possession and how do we trace these lineages of ownership as well? I think what pop culture does best is that it always glosses over this sort of thing. It just sort of sweeps them under the carpet. At the end of the day, how archaeology is used in pop culture is that it is just a plot device. It's supposed to be a stand in for a kind of secret knowledge of power. *Wonder Woman* gets this special, shiny object, and then the whole world either falls apart or comes together. I mean, it's the same with the latest movies, but we still continue to watch and consume them!

This also reminds me of this fraud that I came across recently in another book, where we have the account of the Piltdown Man. It's a fraud that's orchestrated by amateur archaeologist, Charles Dawson, who is not to be mistaken as Charles Darwin. He was actually taking after the theory of evolution, and was trying to claim some credit and fame by alleging that he had found a part of a human skull which served as the missing evolutionary link between apes and humans. He alleged that he found this missing link that could support the theory of evolution. His discovery was actually initially accepted in good faith before it was debunked 30 plus years later, when they actually had better dating technology. Apparently, Dawson and his co-conspirator filed down the teeth of the skull that they found so that it appeared more human, and then they artificially stained it. And because I'm not someone who has working knowledge in the field, I found myself very fascinated by this account of how Dawson orchestrated this fraud. There was no known proof of the evolutionary link, so he found a prop, dressed it up, and told a story that was believed for quite a while. It certainly had its ramifications in the scientific community. Meanwhile, I was just thinking, "wow, this man is an artist, not an archaeologist!" You know, if he had just changed his entire trajectory, things would have been so different. I was also thinking about how there's actually some kind of resonance with what Dawson and Fazleen are doing, especially when he mentioned the filing of teeth and artificially staining them. But the motivations are obviously completely different because you're not as motivated by trying to prove something or add to a truth-telling discourse... I think you're interested in amplifying some of the stories drawn from your own memories, as well as the memories of other people and what they leave behind. As we're sort of slowly rounding up, it's good to bring it back to the start. I'm just curious about how you started seeing the potential of archaeological processes as artistic methods, like how do you start employing or exploring them?

**Fazleen Karlan:** I wouldn't go as far as to file down teeth... I don't think I'm skilled enough for that! But the interest stemmed from viewing objects as having their own narratives. The question of what future archaeologists will unearth from us, this has been my primary line of inquiry regardless of the work I've produced through the study of material culture up to this point. I'm merely speculating as to what the answers might be. The actual excavation of the year 2000 performed by humans in the future could very well appear to be extremely different. So my encounters in archaeology have led me to the realisation that it is quite crucial to reflect on the methods, rather than solely focusing on the discoveries. Could it be that archaeology is also concerned with the path that is taken, rather than the goal that it tries to achieve? Could it be that archaeology is also a meaningful exercise of remembering, which allows each of us the chance to better understand where we are at in this moment?

**Samantha Yap:** I think with every act of remembering, we are basically telling ourselves that we are trying to neaten our memories into a story, a kind of intelligible story that we can understand. I mentioned a lot about stories, but I feel that another aspect you mention a lot in your work, between the present, and the past, and remembering, is actually time. Although I wouldn't say that you are going to the extent of filing down teeth to pass off as artefacts, I do think you are working with time, or actually that time is a kind of manipulated material in your practice, because you're alluding to its passing by simulating the effects of time wearing down and accumulating layers on an object. So the present is narrativised into the past in the form of objects that are stylised as artefacts, and then you have the speculative perspective of a future viewer, or an archaeologist, or the narrator of your work. And so it is a form of storytelling, but specifically of telling time and lives. You are also, I think, beginning to see the affinity with storytelling, especially with the new video work that you are making. As we wrap up, I wanted you to share more about this new upcoming collaboration that you're working on.

**Fazleen Karlan:** So I am in the midst of a collaboration with two friends Izzad Radzali Shah and Redzuan Salleh. Izzad works primarily with paintings and video, whereas Redzuan is a motion graphics designer, and he's also done music videos for a couple of local musicians. Up until now I've admired their work from afar. Coming from completely different backgrounds, I wanted to see where

this collaboration could take us. Our project is titled *Obat Batu*. We have been studying objects that relate to traditional medicine, and how there has been proper archival documentation for certain types of medical artefacts, yet in terms of traditional medicine, that is something that is lacking. We are looking at traditional medicine as an archaeological artefact, creating that narrative for it. At the same time, it's also drawing on research with regards to tropes and characters in archaeological movies. So do come down for the Open Studio on 20th August, if you're curious to see about how this collaboration would take shape!

**Samantha Yap:** What's very interesting in this collaboration is that it brings to fruition some of the ideas that you have been thinking about, such as how one plays into the role of an archaeologist? But also, how does one tell stories, and what kind of stories deserves to get told? What are artefacts, and what falls under the category of artefacts? So I think it'll be very interesting to see the video when it does happen. As a sort of summary of what we've discussed so far, I think that with most of your works, it's not just the objects that we encounter, but specifically how these objects are inundated with the associations from our own lived experiences and memories. These objects, symbols, and references are in our lives, we interact with them, use them, and live alongside them, even if we don't always notice them. Something that I think you've mentioned before, is that an emoji can sometimes say very succinctly what one hopes to convey and a certain brand of toothpaste that is casually preserved in your work may be one of the items in someone's childhood. We will always continue to attach these thoughts and feelings to these relics from the future. It's this anachronism of it that enables us to feel the poignancy of the works that you are making. So to wind up the conversation, I wanted to close with our last quote from Lighthousekeeping: "We are here, there, not here, not there. Swirling like specks of dust, claiming for ourselves the rights of the universe. Being important, being nothing, being caught up in lives of our own making that we never wanted. Breaking out, trying again, wondering why the past comes with us, wondering how to talk about the past at all". So thank you very much Fazleen, and to NTU CCA Singapore for this very lovely chance to catch up.

**Fazleen Karlan:** Thank you so much Sam for being here with me and I hope that this would inspire others to look at objects differently as well!



Fazleen Karlan recording AiRCAST, 7 July 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

**Anna Lovecchio:** You listened to AiRCAST, a podcast of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national research of Nanyang Technological University. To find out more about our programmes, visit our website at [www.ntu.ccasingapore.org](http://www.ntu.ccasingapore.org), you can sign up to our newsletter, or follow us on your favourite social media platforms. And of course, if you'd like to hear the voices and thoughts of our other Artists-in-Residence, do subscribe to this podcast. AiRCAST is produced by NTU CCA Singapore with the support of National Arts Council Singapore.

This episode featured artist Fazleen Karlan in conversation with curator Samantha Yap.

I am Anna Lovecchio, the editor of this podcast.  
The Programme Manager is Nadia Amalina.  
The Audio Engineer, Ashwin Menon.

The intro and the outro were composed by our previous Artist-in-Residence Yuen Chee Wai with field recordings of our non-human neighbours in the beautiful forest around us.

This episode was recorded on 7 July 2022.  
Thank you for listening.