

Re-THINGing in the Digital Age and the Six Private Objects

Yeo Chee Kiong

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translated by Tan Yen Peng

Preface

The digital tools that exist in our everyday life have changed our living habits and ways of thinking, and have also altered the interface of our daily experiences. When 3D scanning and printing became increasingly popular with its accuracy, adaptability, and high productivity, they further shifted the usual way we think about what “object-making” is, and raised new questions about the primordial practice of sculpture and the traditional methods used in making it. While the history of art and sculpture is established over a long period of time under a systematic, chronological framework, we are now in the digital age facing entirely new ways of comprehending and processing information. We are surrounded by knowledge that has such short “shelf lives” and new words that are coined so quickly. At a time when “upgrading” has become mandatory and constant “replacement” a norm within the short life-cycle of digital products, we are placed in a passive situation. In response, we will eventually have to constantly adjust our bearings in our work and life. At this point, if we look back at the original definition of the word "sculpture" with its implication of carving and modelling through our hands, we will find that it no longer corresponds with the virtual context of the current digital environment, and is seemingly inadequate in facing the new and unknown creative forms that will continue to evolve and emerge in the future. Perhaps, what we need now is in fact an even more primitive and fundamental model or noun that is capable of bridging the possibilities from the past, the present, and the future, while the “physically existing objects” becomes a clear alternative, since its diminishing presence within the cyber world will provide a distinct reverse example.

In *What is a Thing*, Heidegger discusses “thing” as an autonomous subject that resists fixed definitions or repudiates rigid functionalization. Yet, on the other hand, it often becomes an “object” with a standardised functional application determined by a rational subject or our subjective consciousness. Here, Heidegger reveals the distinct cognitive differences between the “thing-in-itself” and the “thing-for-us”. As the medium bearing the various given functions, "objects" are identified as "vessels", "tools", and so on. As they further developed to become transitory forms of “ritualistic” and “decorative” primitive art, precise and detailed categories were eventually invented as the forms extended and deepened in the course of their advancement. Similarly, our life is filled with objects of all kinds, and we give meaning and purpose to their daily existence and routine functions. On the other hand, in contemporary art making, the “active” undertaking of stripping, subverting, and reshuffling the meaning and function of the daily "object" allows us to experience and witness the creation of “new function” - being at the right time with the right opportunity, we are able to create a database where the meaning and purpose of “objects” could be constantly renewed and reinvented.

In this two-part writing, I attempt to distinguish between the discussion of thingness in our everyday life and object making in artistic production. In the first part of the discussion

which focuses on the concept of “reTHINGing”¹ - making reflections on the status of “object” and “thing”, I took a subjective approach, using digital terms such as "upgrade", "reboot", "second life", and so on, to describe the perpetually connectible and transformable “objects/things” and their ways of retention within a digital context. Through the perpetual restaging of the rumination process in the act of “reTHINGing”, I adopt a broad perspective and explore how, in the dialectical discussion within a digital context, the primordial sense of "thing" or “object” continues to have a firm place in our life. At the same time, I also look at how, by consistently evolving new ways and new forms, this sense helps maintain the adaptability of our physical body, our human nature, and our behaviour to “things”, so that they could remain as retention in our consciousness. In the second part of the writing, "Six Private Objects", I will share the creative results of the collaborative sculpture research project between the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the Sculpture Society (Singapore) conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. The project’s theme “ReTHINGing” focuses on the seeming de-materiality of “things” in the digital age and at the same time responds to the unique and evermore profound experience of "object-making" in the artworld under the pandemic. The section takes the sub-topics of "handcrafting", "memory", and "mimicry" as the overall framework, and makes an in-depth analysis and comparison of the repeated retention of “things/objects” in each of the six researchers’ individual lives and in their artistic experiences. In the face of the digital age where a “comfort zone” within “chat groups” could be easily formed, and under the convenience of remaining in a particular thinking logic within the digital world of network connections, this communication setting across different digital generations allows the researchers to acquire a profound understanding of how different creative approaches may come about base on their individual focuses. At the end of the research, six "private objects" were obtained, each a result of their insistent preservation of a “private object” after the ongoing interaction during the research. At a time when mass-production, mass-duplication, and mass-sharing of material experience is prevalent, the production of the six unique "objects" with apparent personal intentions through independent experiences is remarkable, and may be seen as an expression of the contemporary presence of "sculpture".

Part 1: ReTHINGing - Rethinking and Reflecting on the “Thing”

If we define the "Optimised Reality" of the digital world as a "beautiful reality", we could liken it to an appealing occurrence that is more captivating than the real physical world that we are living in, it stimulates the endorphins in our brain that in turn induces a physiological pleasure response in us, allowing us to actually experience the “happy” reality, and encounter the “subjective existence” of a reality that we have chosen to believe in before it was confirmed by our rational mind. But is the ability to choose "reality" freely a result of the extrinsic means of "commercial temptation", or was it enabled by our inner desire to be “misled” subconsciously so as to transcend the constraints of reality that we are in? In this digital era, we will be able to multiply our experience of things in various contexts through the different notions of "seeing is believing" and repeatedly confirm the practical significance that "reality" brings. Taking the cosplayers as example, in their "reversed simulation" of the real-life version of anime mobile game characters, they turn the virtual

¹ “ReTHINGing” is the central theme of the SSS 20th Anniversary Show Series developed by the show’s curator Tan Yen Peng.

world real so that they could place themselves directly in a reality that is seemingly virtualizable. This is a world of new technology, new platforms, and new digital tech groups. When we have come to be completely reliant on digital interface for entrance into this new and attractive cyber world through the new “digi temple” created by the Digital Revolution, will we be able to restore the “aura” of art discussed by Walter Benjamin? The public’s addiction to “digital technology” has spawned a cult of it, creating a sense of reverence and unapproachability. On the other hand, on digital art auction platforms generated by Non-Fungible Token (NFT) or Cryptocurrency, the collectors who have successfully won the bid will have only gained an “ownership mark” of the NFT artwork that is continuously circulated and shared in the digital network freely. This overturned the ultimate criterion for the acquisition, upsetting the authenticity of the sole collected object and debasing the one value crucial for the conventional collectors. At this point, it seems that we are no longer interested in keeping physical "reality" in our hands.

This is a world where our material experience changes rapidly all the time. It is a time when passive and compulsive "upgrades" are a necessity. In the historical progress of the digital era, the recording and transmission of images, the digital storage of memories and its physical retention in the form of digital devices in our daily life continues to evolve. The life cycle of electronic mediums and digital interfaces are being replaced at an ever faster pace. From vinyl record, cassette, compact disc, blu-ray disc, USB thumb drive, to cloud storage space, etc., not only have the ways of information coding and storage changed, but the specific physical device for info uploading and the related decoding tool for message downloading have also evolved, as these “physical objects” recall exclusive users’ memories and experiences in their new “physical presence”. In our repeated encounters with the regular retention of old tools, the relentless replacement of new ones, and the subtle but contrasting feelings between the times "before" and "after" the switches, a chain of drifting and transient experience of adaptation is formed, together with a sort of dissociated and anxious attitude, we await what is to past and hope for what is to come. We are about to observe the presence of digital “natives” of different periods, being forced into an eternal migration and becoming migrants of multiple digital generations in the human genealogy. What is left behind to witness all these will be the digital “objects” from each of these periods - the deposited physical ramrants, the retention. This “eternal migration” in the digital age gives testimony to the confirmed passing of the various digital generations, their present progression, the predictable forms of their expansion on the advancing trajectory, and the various states in which “multiple options” are synthesised. Building on the basis of individual experiences from singular, dual, and multiple digital generations, the random combination of shared experiences becomes an ensemble of adaptable collective memories that drives its multi-layer composition. As long as we are able to avoid ending up as mere digital form for our final existence, and could advance fully through the digital dimension (one of the imaginable options in the future such as the metaverse) without giving up the atomic, material body, the creation of new digital tools will certainly revolve around connection at the level of human physiological perception. Ultimately, will it lead us into an "upgraded" digital life predicted by digital engineering science, allowing "digital tools" such as computers, mobile phones - those that require instructional “touch”, and so on, to outstrip its mere shells, and makes its entrance into a total digital life fetched by a new, “imperceptible” algorithmic interface? This will be the ultimate cyber era in which "digital devices" will eventually disappear and digital "objects" begin to actively "think" (Gershenfeld; 1999).

In this world of network where connection is limitless, new barriers and distances are also established following the further extension of new truths and illusions. This is a space of

digital connection without physiological limitations. It is where new physical and material supply chains emerge and where "material disintegration" gains new meaning. Marx's concept of alienation last century has detailed the profound division of labour production and profit in the process of modernization. When a consumer is at the final end of the commodity service chain, they play no part in the production process - a delicious piece of fried chicken could come from a fast food restaurant or from the supermarket freezer, but consumers do not have to participate in the hatching, breeding, or slaughtering of the chicken. They need not go through the various stages of product processing such as classification, storage, and refrigeration, packaging and transportation, seasoning and cooking. It is not even necessary for them to know the initial biological form of the "chicken" except as an end product. Under this new understanding of "material disintegration", the modern manufacturing line with high labour division allows for the emergence of comprehensible terms that describes "objects" and "things" under various conditions other than their original biological forms, and eventually prescribing and defining various ways in which these individual objects/things could be used and consumed. On top of these, the online home delivery service has especially provided an upgraded digital version of new "objecthood" and a new method to "obtain" them. The objects of "home delivery services" at the digital terminal uphold a digitalized world of the Otaku Phenomenon (Sugimoto, 2021), so that a person could get their necessary daily supplies even if they have chosen not to enter the social communities linked by the daily life network. A single click on the digital screen will allow them to be connected with the seemingly unlimited supply of things and materials. An "Enter" command on the keyboard would mean the appearance and the acquisition of an object out of thin air, much like a modern sci-fi version of "magical" click supported by an enormous production line and logistics system that is perfectly hidden. The "ritualistic" act of the command clicking deepens the control of the digital service provider when the consumer becomes highly dependent on such services, and further simplifies or indirectly deprives them of the ability to understand the true form of "things" and their multiple states of being. During the forced stay-home order under the indiscriminate global COVID-19 pandemic, we are allowed a full experience and an opportunity to "compare" and differentiate between voluntary and involuntary home staying. In the face of necessary social distancing between individuals and groups, we entered another parallel universe created by this technological magic. At this point, can we be sure about breaking away from our primordial, physiological needs to touch/contact as social creatures and embrace the ultimate "indoorsy lifestyle" completely? Or are we more eager to appropriately withdraw or return to the real physical/material world on a regular basis?

In the era of digital networking with constant info sharing and retrieval, we are given the power of choice to "forget" and "remember". This drives the production and retention of information within the network memory. Contemporary personal information sharing and uploading systems operate like unique micro-networks within a macro-network. In a decentralised world of information that is made up of numerous monomers that exist on diverse micro-levels, a "past" that belongs to the future generation is being assembled and correlatively constructed by information filling within the mainstream framework (Pessach, 2008). The world-wide mass distribution of similar "objects" and "tools" constitute a standard applied function that forms the global shared user-experience. This in turn creates a "community of joint experience" that transcends the restriction of geological and cultural differences, making it possible for the rendition of the first layer collective memory stored in the shared "objects" and "tools", especially at times of historical importance when the overall users' experiences tend to become synchronised and form one unity. On the other hand, the partial extraction and indirect contribution of personal memory towards the first layer collective memory in general offers an exclusive second layer rendition of personal

experience on the "objects" and "tools". In comparison to the "Error Correction Code" in digital programming that embed "redundant bits" to allow the terminal decoder to obtain a more complete transmission information, does our physiological, bioactive memory have a similar mechanism to carry out the self-correction of latent memory in order to conform to general trends of info sharing or to satisfy some lurking personal desires? Compared to the relic in its primary, physical form that stores information like a "time capsule" faithfully tracing "past-existences" in their original forms, the "present continuous" adjustability and presentness of living memories allows us to further privatise collective memory and turn them into shareable collective private memory, which blurred the boundaries between the "greater self" and the "smaller self". There are many ways to describe the different forms in which the same "things/objects" and "tools" exist or the ways they were experienced, yet there are also commonalities throughout these narratives that do not require explicit elaboration. Through personal and collective memories that cast a shadow on top of one another on the surfaces of the "things" and "objects", the incessantly expanding big data of thingness/objecthood could be established.

"Objects" exist in our cognitive experience in various forms like space-time capsules. The terracotta warriors, pyramids, stone age tools made of obsidian stones, dinosaur fossils, and living fossils such as the coelacanth that have survived for hundreds of millions of years, are all able to retain the data of occurred "events" in physical forms through retention across time and space. Whether it is the constant climate change, the shifting geographical environment, or the primordial skills and motives inherent in intelligent life, we are able to verify the similarity and difference of their form of existence through the method of "physical comparison". From here, we could then sort out and total up the specific information that we want to confirm. The use of the "reboot" button on the keyboard will get original coding programs to be restarted, this aptly describes original "thingness" and their eternal want to return. In the ambiance of a new generation and with the new "decoding" methods, the objects of retention are placed against current time and space for comparison and reference, bringing new, comprehensive data for new interpretation. At the near annihilation of the "first life form" on earth, the reappearance of new generation "second life" from the old ashes is especially capable of conjuring a contemporary sense of novelty. Amid the process of generations overlapping that is constantly being "rebooted", "objects" and "things" that retain their physical forms in the future generations will definitely continue to preserve the messages containing in them in their original ways, and offer the next approaching era the opportunities to ruminate on what has been conserved, to revisit the subjects and review its contents, to reflect on the decoding approaches of the various generations and consider the ways in which particular subjects could gain resonances, including selective and partially retrieved information based on "personal motive" relatable to the notion of intention described by Heidegger (1967).

Part 2: Six Personal Objects

In the collaborative research project between Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and Sculpture Society (Singapore), the research theme of "ReTHINGing" is about looking at the making of "art object" in the digital age and how this might help us in rethinking whether there is still a necessary connection between us and the physical things/objects. As a reflection on the possible ways in which "sculpture" would or could exist in the digital era, the "reTHINGing"

project not only responds to the sophistication and prevalence of digital technology, but also considers the impact of the overall environment on an individual's life and profession, and how these might alter the way we see things. The following section will analyse the "objects" created by the six researchers in the project. It will examine how different personal motivations lead to different experiences. It will also look at how individuals respond to and actually face an era saturated by things/objects shared by the great masses. Among the three groups of six researchers, two were born in the 1980s and have experienced traditional sculpture training (such as wood and stone carving, ceramic, etc.); Two are under the age of 30 and, in comparison to the former two, they create sculptural objects in relatively "non-traditional" ways. The last pair of researchers are in their early 20s and the youngest among the digital natives. They have just completed basic training in sculpture making and are perhaps more trusting of and relatively more dependent on the digital world. The research plan was for them to proceed with the necessary making of "objects". From the "things" they made, we could examine what "objects" had been retained by them, and further attempt to understand what "object" and "object making" means to them as digital natives of various generations. The following sharing is a summary of the report after the completion of the research project put under three groups with the themes "Daily Handcrafting", "Private Monument", and "New Mimicry".

Group One: Daily Handcrafting (Wang Sihui/Singapore, Nyan Soe/Myanmar)

3D scanning and digital printing technology are perfect digital tools for precise production. They went beyond the inconsistent control of handcrafting and made the precise-reproduction of "objects" possible. In the world of precision, the absolute uniformity of perfection transcends individual emotional fluctuations, there is no room for random, uncontrollable variables that may be triggered by the object maker's physical exhaustion or dissipated concentration. This perfect, homogeneous "object" exudes a new sort of glory and venerability, and stands aloof from the imprecision of the human senses. As the practical function of handcrafting in object production is completely subverted by the precise digital tools and its high speed, we are allowed to rethink the interdependent relationship between "objects" and "handcrafting". At this new turning point, we could renew our understanding of how the abstract sense of the primordial body, the object's mass, our touch, and even our sense of aesthetics, are dependent on the materiality of things and the hand-made tools that crafted them. By putting the delicate skill of making into practice and connecting it with the cumulative experiences in production refinement, the unique information object and its making is combined in exclusive ways, resulting in the one and only object that is ultimately acquired. At this point, we could perhaps ask ourselves whether it is still possible to return to a world that is characterised by unique personalities and occupied by unique, private "objects" where the outward expression of inner feelings is allowed by this unique interconnectedness between the person and the object, and then from the person to the people. Will we be able to see beyond the arbitrary basis of "rapid mass production" and "precision reproducibility" in contemporary making?

The continuous, retained experiences of stone carving and repeated encounter with the medium in the process of making has given Wang Sihui her bearing when facing the absolute advantages of digital technology. As new experiences and old ones collide, the experiences are also constantly being reconfirmed and re-integrated. The similar yet different approaches of production method and various making endeavours, interweaved with a deep personal, first hand experiences, have engendered a more profound level of expression that manifest as unique interface connecting the viewers and her art, allowing her to further

question the relationship between the person and the objects on a primal level, and to develop perspectives and think about her selection of the production method, the state of her being, and how these sublimate in the end. In the work *1/32 Spherical Net*, fine tangential planes are created through simple and unpretentious carving skills with basic hand tools. It combines great techniques with trained experiences and pays attention to every detail, and these details honed from each of the working steps speaks of her "devotion". Through repeatedly cutting and reorganising the dissected pieces, a perfect sphere is carefully divided into its 32 parts. The work exudes a quiet, unassuming sense of calmness that would lead the viewers into a state of minimalist contemplation. As they gradually experience the continuously rolling out of intended details, imagination about the anatomy and the possible deconstruction of this spherical mass is formed, followed by the speculation on the procedural sequence and decision of the cuts made, as the carve-marks on the material surface of the object would subtly suggest. In fact, the art object here carries in it a certain operational rule that articulates the relation between the material, its tool, and the skill involved. In the repeated execution of this rule, there might even be sparks of aura induced by this "post-refinement" moment. Between the displayed diagram, the foam board models, and the finished product of marble, the boundary between the primary and the secondary key reference is blur, while the final presentation includes all three components that may indicate a creative process from drafting to finishing, it is no longer necessary to determine which is the draft model and which is the finished work. What we have here is the execution of an idea, the delivery of a process, and furthermore, the implementation of an attitude in sculpting and carving. It is a total presentation of a complete set of artistic behaviour and aesthetic thinking. Much like a rolling rock acting in accordance with the pull of natural gravity and returning to the low point of the ground where it belongs. As an artistic validation of handcrafting, *1/32* is an affirmative response to the rapidity and precision of digital tools. With its own slow and minimalist pulse, it lends a narrative of the dismantling and mending of what is perfect and what is incomplete. It provides different groups of audiences from the handcrafting generation and the digital generation to deliberate on the not-quite-similar ways in which "objects" are produced and are comprehended and experienced.

Having also gone through the profound experience of handcrafting, Nyan Soe chose to dwell on his daily life that is connected by the creative materials in his hand and his personal memories. The making of objects has become his daily life, while this "daily object" is also indirectly regulated by his day-to-day work habits and time space routines. *The Shadow of Memory* was originally a "work station" set up in the corner of his bedroom that is now transferred to an exhibition space. Under the artificial moonlight, we see the reflection of the prototype of the artist's dream studio and the austere silhouette of his everyday life. It is also a poetic record of the constant materialisation of remote memories that continues to expand and overlap over time. The halo around the contour traces the city skyline that the artist had experienced in Singapore. The multiple, sliced spaces are filled with "objects" that are like the trivial fragments of the artist's memory and thoughts. Here, there is no grandeur, little novelty, and nothing digital but something "handmade daily", something we could call "private object". If we equate inertia behaviour in everyday life with a sort of unceasing retention of lifeless, indolent custom, a kind of random, behavioural response that is not driven by self-consciousness, we may be able to understand it as a depthless and inorganic response that lacks careful afterthoughts capable of bringing out the organic experiences in artistic production (Dewey, 1980). But could the subconscious, reflexive "muscle memory" obtained through active and repeated refinements go beyond the intervention of "consciousness interface" and allow the artist and the viewer to enter an organic, pure state of mind? In the past ten years of Nyan Soe's artistic career, his daily routine and life has

shaped his thinking and creative habits. The overlapped space of his narrow studio and the bedroom, the available choices between the easy-to-obtain creative mediums and the simple and convenient tools, the careful obedience and observation of suitable creative working time to avoid disturbance to the neighbours, etc., are situations he needs to face and constantly make adjustments. In the process of dealing with these, the artist knows clearly what are the limited options he has at hand. Within the scope of what is already known in terms of concept, materials, and techniques, he chose to acknowledge and confirm the possible existence of a state of purity and sublimation that is yet unknown with a positive attitude. He treats the objects in his hands with simple honesty, carrying out recurring drills in attempts to filter the non-essentials, while constantly making careful amendments and self-examinations where necessary. The mutual stimulation between the person (the artist) and the object and between the hand and the mind ensues a symbiosis, and allows the artist to maintain his daily imaginative association between himself, the things, the objects, the space, and the city.

Group Two: Personal Monument (Wong Gin Ming/Singapore, Chen Yanyi/China)

When we think about how mountains and rivers are bestowed legends and given names, and ponder on what possibilities and meanings could be behind these descriptives, we often forget that their existence has crossed over the distant past before humans were in the early state of becoming the conscious, intelligent species that we are today. These legends and names will also become a retention and stay in the future for a long period of time. There is a high probability that they will witness the disappearance of another intellectual civilization. By means of the length of the limited life we have as human beings, we measure the meaning of time and the sum of the life experience we might have acquired during the given period of time, this includes any closely related meaning of existences that may have arisen under the same experience. Light gives us colours, the volume of the body creates a sense of space occupancy for us, and the living environment that maybe harsh or kind regulates the daily memories of an individual or a certain regional group. After countless things have changed and zillion stars have moved, the mountains and rivers are what that remain eternal. Like the enduring monuments in the ancient past carrying memories in the thickness of time in memory, they allow people of different generations to return to the same place where they could trace, share, keep, and reminisce about the memories of groups and individuals that once existed in the past, and that is still chained to the current present - what we have here is the perpetual accumulation of "so-and-so **was here**". In the era of convenient travelling before the COVID-19 pandemic, a spot for the "I was here" stamping is often provided for travellers and tourists. Unlike the colossal and long-existing mountains, rivers, and landscapes that are naturally there, the accumulation of thick layers of centuries old memories of man-made objects such as the streets, buildings, sculptures, etc., that had been left in ancient towns as a form of retention, are enabled by the solid materials that made them. On the other hand, new and rising cities that lack historical memories have to, within a limited time and space, create exclusive travel memoirs and invent sites as destinations for experiential travelling. Furthermore, they must, with "digital speed", instantly establish brand new "classic hotspot" on the internet so that netizens may make their follow-up travelling by scrolling through the screen and make their "like" and "share", and then they too, "was here". The short and topical travel memory is a contrast to ancient legends attached with cross-generational memories, which allows us to inquire on whether the digital age is still in need of the deep connection between individuals and objects, and between the past and the present. Perhaps what we need now are just some digital images that allow us to register our existence in the online world constantly. Or more

likely, deep in everyone's heart, there is a longing for a private monument that will remain forever in our memory, so that we could return to that place where the memory is retained at the moment of necessity. Perhaps this is where we could rediscover the possible connection between the past, the present and the future.

Geo-Palmistry is a memory exploration project that involves making renewed visits to the artist Chen Yanyi's city of origin, allowing her to examine from a reverse angle about the "was here" moment, and to once again compare everything familiar in her memory with what is left in the present. Following the research project's theme to "re-THING", Chen conducted an "act of memory collection" instead of doing mere video recordings, and managed to retain the on-site memories by simply doing clay stamping. The street corners, the roads, the trees, etc. that she encountered during the trip, are all imprinted onto slices of clay slabs as different types of textures. They were then brought back to the studio for silicon casting and reproduction. Vestige of materials from the sites are still trapped in the clay moulds. Under the light, they overlapped one another to give the sculptural-reliefs the silhouettes of mountains and rivers like those illustrated in a map, or like the reversed interpretation of memories similar to palmistry reading. By configuring and structuring the fragments of subjective memories, audiences are led through an objective visual patchwork gathered from something similar to memory archaeology, where they could reorganise and backtrack the private "was here" route map that could now be recounted. Having lived overseas for a long time, Chen was able to interpret the attributes of the cities she lives in from perspectives dissimilar to the locals. In her work, we could see a display of the scenes projected from the overlapping beams of her life memory, the revelation of empathy and psychological replacement as a result of dealing with objects co-existing in her life, and the presence of a two-way ambiguity between leaving and returning to a place.

In this time of quantitative mass production, the number of products manufactured may equate with the number of its users in the same period of time, and we may all be one of these people who shared similar user experiences. Together, we are a huge "community of joint experience" created under this quantitative production scheme. In the work *Something Like You*, Wong Gin Ming have assembled some household appliances such as the oven and the vacuum cleaner to make a DIY version of the industrial thermoforming machine, and used it to produce a series of singular reverse copy of private objects such as her grandpa's dentures, the bones of a deceased pet dog, a divorce ring, etc.. In the face of the established reality of mass production, Wong responded by consciously employing ritualistic handiwork in her art, including the application of plain and simple crafting processes and the use of everyday household appliances. The light projected on the object moulds penetrates the clear plastic casings that are engraved with different surface textures, reflecting the shadows of the once-existing objects that have now been elongated or obliquely deformed. In the absence of the original objects, the illusory inner cast shadows are abstract metaphors for each of the once-existing memories that are now attached to the cases. At this point, we seem to be able to respond in our minds, this is "something like you, but not you." Wong managed to quantify and represent private memories owned by a group of people by reproducing many singular replicas of a series of private objects. Under the context of quantitative memory, this work aptly presents a broad collection of individual memories. It is a demonstration of collective memories being privatised, or an example of personal memories becoming collective. It is a two-way, ambiguous recollection of object memories.

Group Three: New Mimicry (Ang Xuening/Singapore · Subashri Sankarasubramanian/India)

A quarter century ago, the digital pet “chicken” Tamagotchi took the world by storm with its minimal, easy three-button operation. The basic electronic program simulates a simplified hatching and feeding experience and a game-halt setting after the rearing failed. There is nothing novel or superior in terms of its technology in comparison to the handheld video games of similar or earlier time. The mobile game "Angry Birds" features a simple slingshot operation in which players can bash freely at targets set within various digitally synthesised scenes at different game level settings. This is an upgraded, digital version of the classic pinball game popular before the advent of the digital age. While we have moved on from doing daily handiwork to performing digital routines, we seem to be still using the game prototypes from the handiwork era. If "novelty/inventiveness/shocks/bewilderments" means absolute appeal, then why do we still fall into the deep addiction that the same video game may have caused? In the "game-over, restart, replay" game cycle, the sense of “novelty” is actually continuously being consumed. Yet the "restart" button that is forever capable of bringing us back to the starting point seems to promise a sort of “perpetual revival” which happens to contradict the feeling of “novelty”. This is what really keeps our expectation and maintains our commitment to the video game world. This gives us more reason to figure out precisely where the entry point for “novelty” is, and further use it as the main basis for the study of addiction and what causes the lasting attraction. Suppose we have a game that is set for participants to do ingredient swapping while cooking. In such a game, the ingredient’s new material structure (i.e. molecular construct of deliciousness) is discovered or invented through the specific culinary processes. Through our bodily sense organs, we will be able to synthesise and feel the texture of the food we are chewing in our mouth, the taste and the warmth of the food between the tongue and the teeth, and the aroma in the nasal cavity. Together, these feelings inspire the definition of deliciousness. By repeatedly tasting food prepared with the same “delicious formula” (i.e. the recipe) over and over again, the profound experience will eventually help us to develop a more delicate taste bud, allowing us a greater sense of the deeper and more complex delicacies, and bringing forth new feelings along with all these. It seems that we understand things through the experience of continuous interaction with the familiar. From there, we may reach out further to possibly existing things on a new, unknown level, rather than arriving at mere surface novelty which is simply about things we have not experienced before - a “novelty” that one is addicted to time and again.

In this digital age that is filled with new options, changing and switching choices has become the norm. As the digital native of the current generation, Ang Xuening has become accustomed to wandering in it. In the work *Toggle Boggle*, the "mouse" could be seen as a symbol of "object" across different interfaces. It appears in the various intermediary surfaces in different forms as a kind of link, while performing repeated acts of mimicry that are rather surreal. The mechanical mouse simulates "rat" in its biological state, as the gadget "mouse" is given sensible heartbeats. The gadget "mouse" in the hand is then digitised and put into the digital space through the computer screen. As the arrow of the "mouse cursor" responds to the operating gadget mouse in the hand, we see the digital mouse roaming freely in the video game. Interestingly, in the second, third, or fourth instances of the "mouse" mimicry, the existential form of the real, first "mouse" has disappeared. At this time of information booming, we have endowed the mouse with multiple symbolic meanings beyond the fact of it being a living thing with specific survival habits. What we have is a “mouse” whose original biological “content” has been swapped; it is fulfilling our imagination about how it should be visually represented and satisfying our expectation of its “digital habits”. The information explosion in the digital age and the convenience of remote video communication keep us in a state where everything seems familiar and comprehensible, while at the same time ensuring that we “keep a distance” from the real world. In comparison to the mice that exist

in the real world, these symbolic digital links are better at intervening and becoming part of our daily lives. The personal experience and the neglected reality that are suppressed by the "digital distance" allow us to make up our own stories at will without the need for any form of personal verification. Every form of the "object" that we care about could gain their existence through the digital interface, and they could be swapped to allow new possibilities.

Using food as a means of intervention in the arena of creative art has always been Subashri Sankarasubramanian's subject of interest. Her personal experience of living in different places allows her to become aware of the similarities and differences between the food culture in other places and her own food culture. This prompted her active exploration about food that could transcend nationality, ethnicity, and cultures, thereby building a joint community of food experience. Compared with the clear purpose and result of the raw ingredients "before" and the cooked food "after", the switchable, indeterminate state of "in-betweenness" allows Subashri to carry out her imagination that art and food together may bring, and to establish a connection with the viewer for glimpses of their food memory. From here, viewers are further led into a new experience that has been swapped with what they were familiar with. In *Eat My Smelly Flowers*, the artist has observed that the onion, a "common ingredient", has purple venation on its skin layers that is similar to the orchid petals. In the work, the layers of the peeled skins of an onion are trimmed one by one to look like the contour of the orchid petals, and then carefully stitched together to become stalks of mimetic orchid flowers. In silence, a pot of gorgeous orchid flowers was placed in the hall like a still life for the audiences to watch. By recreating with and mimicking the actual physical part of an object, Subashri has created a different form of "real contact" unlike what we might have experienced in the virtual, digital world, while the illusion of the real "object" corresponds to the digital fantasy that is more real than the real. As the exhibition space is filled with the good old aroma of an ingredient that we are familiar with, it seems that there is some amazing food event going on, maybe a "pop up restaurant", or could it be a tv show hosted by Heston Blumenthal from the Fat Duck restaurant? Here, there is no need for paradoxical questions such as "can food be art"? "Is cooking art"? "Is this food art (or art food)", etc. Eventually, this mimetic work gets an interesting twist. Due to the outbreak of the pandemic in the city in India where the artist is staying, the physical artwork could not be delivered to Singapore in time, and was therefore reprocessed and rendered as digital images to be displayed on the digital screen instead of being exhibited physically. As the screen replaces the physical work, we are returned to the digital parallel world during the pandemic, while it becomes an optimised physical mimicry in the form of digital images that is more real than real.

Epilogue

How do we determinately clarify the myth of "new objects" created by digital technology, or confirm the assumption about the inevitability of the "de-objectification" trend in the future virtual life scenarios? And how did the fact of our physical experiences in the past become passively subverted? These are questions that need to be vigorously pursued. The even more important question is, how do we reaffirm whether there is still a necessary connection between us and the objects in this digital age by means of the construction of

"art objects"? As a necessarily existing "hardware", the human body is bound to face the natural laws of biology and physics. We are susceptible to the basic elements that maintain life, and will eventually need a balanced and healthy spiritual life. Assuming that we will eventually live in an ultimate digital life where "digital tools" are no more necessary, everything could be done through "non-perceptive" digital commands, all the trivial things in life could be completed by simply passing through imperceptible, default digital programs, will we lose the joy of life? Then, should we keep digital tools "perceptible"? This question is the same as whether we need to retain skills in handicraft and maintain the fun of object making. From "object perception", "digital perception", to the future of "imperception", we could continue to find out what "perceptibility" means to personal existence and what defines an interesting life. In a constantly forward-moving digital age, the just upgraded "new experience" will soon become a retention, that is, a reference and comparison to the future "new experience". We must carry out appropriate examination of the important experiences that individuals have continuously accumulated and the profound experiences that have been verified. In the process of transmitting and inheriting these important experiences, we must also further identify the cognitive blindspots destined to appear within different digital generations that are always in processes of rapid evolution. By doing so, we could then acquire the ability to go beyond the blind spots and to make new and better interpretations, so as to open up more opportunities for understanding what actually lies between different digital generations and the profound "retention experiences" that it provides. As the crucial differences between the truth and the illusion, the virtual and the real are proactively revealed by the art objects, we are bound to perpetually face the question about the essence of art, to think about what answers the "contemporary" could provide, and eventually, to determine what is the contemporary "reality" that we are trying to grasp and control. After all, under the different focuses of the various generations, this so-called "reality" will always be justified and validated in ultimately dissimilar ways.

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