Memory Palace in Ruins

Text / YU Wei

Memory Palace in Ruins revolves around contemporary culture's "déjà vu" moments, the materialized manifestation of historical memories, as well as the enduring presence of historical styles and our susceptibility to elements from previous forms and genres. Central to the discussion is the inquiry into the documentation, dissemination, and subsequent transformation of our historical memories through various mediums/means. In the midst of this complexity, we are not just individuals with specific historicity but also the outcomes of the interplay of culture and upbringing. When we reflect upon the past in a manner akin to savoring a tobacco cigarette, we, like the ever-shifting flow of tobacco smoke, are continually being transformed into updated versions of ourselves, marked by references and adaptations. Italo Calvino's description of subjectivity beautifully captures this:

> Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combination of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable. [1]

The exhibition is anchored by two closely connected fundamental concepts: materialization and textualization. On one hand, certain artworks present historical memories in materialized, tangible forms, such as monuments or memorials—objects subjugated to observation and contemplation. These objects act as repositories of time and mediums for reminiscence, through which artists delve into intimate family narratives or investigate significant historical events. On the other hand, some artists capture fragments of historical styles and amplify, repeat, reposition, or alter them through various iterations to evoke the patterns in popular culture that once fascinated us.

Here, artists readily reveal their dual roles as creators and spectators with little hesitation. Much like the rest of us, they are readers, music enthusiasts, film aficionados, and collectors. Many works included in this exhibition pay homage to the vibrant amateur creative cultures, celebrating cultural icons that remain vivid in our memories and simultaneously addressing the decline of media culture. Conversely, some other works approach "historicity" in a self-reflective or meta manner as they deconstruct the emotional experiences tied to nostalgia and transform them into material manifestations.

Numerous artworks, moreover, hint at simple and straightforward documentary attributes. Through mediums such as photography, recordings, scanning, digital prints, and 3D printing, they deliver historical representation that appears objectively rendered. These audiovisual clips function as specific forms of evidence or documentation which crystallize moments when mechanical mediums intersect with reality. Thanks to the indestructible materiality of the crystallization, reminiscence becomes possible. Such an existential connection between a materialized representation of history and the reality it references likely plays a role in fostering a nostalgia fetish. However, the true emphasis of this exhibition lies in "behind-the-scenes" of nostalgia—its contexts, language, and the underlying emotional structure. As evident in the exhibition, artists do not merely focus on a strict indexical representation of history. Instead, they employ diverse artistic strategies to reconstruct historical memories including in-depth diagnostic research on the subjects and analytical approaches in a self-reflective or meta manner. In doing so, they fabricate contents that may seem familiar yet do not perfectly align with our memories.

The Resurrection of Images

The potential for an image to serve as evidence is firstly explored in Toshio Matsumoto's *Engram*. These image experiments, with their profound meta-inquiries, compel us to oscillate our gazes between what is inside and outside the frame and between the past and the present, thereby highlighting the divide between the image and reality. Another work of his, *For the Damaged Right Eye*, is a three-channel expanded cinema projection that reinterprets Japan's turbulent student movements and cultural scenes before 1968. Through the use of collages of images, it presents a fresh narrative that deconstructs various binary oppositions, such as elegance vs. vulgarity, left vs. right, high vs. low, and grand narratives vs. introspective narratives.[2] Some other artists work with potentially evidential images which subtly insinuate indexical references to reality. For example, Simon Liu's 16mm film portrays the daily life in Hong Kong with a touch of magical realism. By interweaving objects left behind by protests, the film conveys traces of political and societal turmoil, whereas Kuo Che-Hsi's naturalistic photographs of colonial pines employ investigative photography and archival techniques, allowing for the tracing of political ideologies within natural landscapes.

Through symptomatic reading of these evidential, indexical, archival representations of reality, an additional layer of symbolic and textual meanings is illuminated. It is not about "what it is," but rather, "what it has the potential to be." Shingo Kanagawa's work serves as a good instance. While it documents moments when his father was present, the narrative predominantly explores the father's absence. Similarly, Hsieh Yung-Cheng's photographic interpretation of archival historical images featuring the Hong-ye Juvenile Baseball Team metaphorically constructs a teenage body as a representation of national identity. Even images considered the most objectively "evidential" among all the works featured in the exhibition—Shimpei Takeda's images of the Fukushima nuclear disaster—go beyond mere documentation of a catastrophe. Takeda's visual elements, reminiscent of imagery associated with a nebula, delivers an illusion of a space billions of light-years away.

Shimpei Takeda's cameraless photography, which almost flawlessly "casts/duplicates the reality," can be seen as a prime example of photography's materiality and its metaphorical association with death. This perfectly aligns with Jean-Luc Nancy's analogy of "the photograph itself, as a death mask." The materiality of the represented is further complicated and transformed in Babeth Mondini-VanLoo's work. The piece centers around a ritualized performance involving the making of a death mask, where the poet Jules Deelder produces a cast of his own face while still alive. It explores the adaptation and thematization of the material significance of a death mask and contributes to additional medium-specific connotations of this representation— "an inquiry into the afterlife." This late 1970s performance, now presented as a short experimental film, has assumed another dimension of being "a death mask," echoing the passing of the Rotterdam poet in 2019. Hsu Che-Yu's *Gray Room* can also be viewed as a death mask within this exhibition. The subject discussed in *Gray Room* is the artist's childhood home, metaphorically "cast/duplicated" in a digital representation. Hsu utilizes 3D scanning to capture the imperfect surfaces of the building's material existence, thereby reconstructing fragments of family memories following his grandmother's passing.

In regard to relevant discussions, Toshio Matsumoto's artistic strategies in *The Song of Stone* offer a concise exemplification of something that goes beyond a mere "remake." While the primary content of the film draws from documentary photographs of Masayuki Nagare's sculptures, Matsumoto skillfully utilizes camera movements to craft dynamic moving images imbued with vibrant rhythms and cadences. His "remake" does not merely replicate death, as suggested in photography; instead, it infuses new life into the original photographs—an idea paralleling the words of the mason depicted in the film, who describes sculptural techniques as a way to liberate what dwells within the stone through the act of chiseling. If Matsumoto's endeavor can be perceived as giving voice to stones through images[3], then the works of Su-Mei Tse, contrarily, can be characterized as the fossilization and materialization of sounds. Subtly incorporating the artist's classical music background and her family memories, Tse's works enhance the tactile qualities of sounds. This "home stereo system set crafted from stone," named *Stille Disco*, implicates the artist's intention to enrich the sculpture with linguistic elements. The naming allows for a playful exploration of semantic complexity and invites viewers to engage with the work's symbolic themes of weight and lightness, movement and stillness, as well as loudness and silence.

Expired Indexical References of Reality

Moving from "the evidential" to "the textual," many artists take the discussion a step further by examining the manipulation of symbolic significance. For instance, AKI INOMATA adopts the techniques used in the production of cultured pearls to manufacture sculptural renditions of modern-day currency heads. Here, two distinct time-related perceptions, differing in their length and essence, intersect with each other. This convergence represents a commentary not only on materiality as it showcases the production of cultured pearls, but also on the symbolism as it refers to both historical and modern currencies. Works of Lee Yung-Chih and Hsu Chih-Yu, on the other hand, investigate anachronic projections with a further self-reflexive approach. They appropriate symbols from existing visual culture, with the former focusing on sunset images and the latter looking into archaeological artifacts. Symbolically, both artworks allude to the "past," yet the connections between the symbols and the pasts they reference are consciously fabricated—through an intentional embrace of retro aesthetics or a faithful recreation of antiquated objects. These works do not deal with historical reality; rather, the objective is to explore the underlying emotional structure. The term "historicity" is thus enclosed in quotation marks in order to emphasize that the pertinent denotations and connotations are continually under investigation.

As artists engage in re-editing, remaking, tracing, mimicking, rearranging, and manipulating the representations through various copies in their artworks, what initially appears as seeming indexical references to reality attains multifaceted complexity. This transformation elevates the representations beyond mere evidential objects that passively witness historical memories. Consequently, this exhibition diverges from the practice of nostalgia and steers clear of the canonization or idealization of objects and events from a specific era. A significant portion of the documentary footage in the artworks does not solely function as a conduit to the past. Rather than being a precise index of reality, it accentuates delays, deviations, errors, imprecision, and blurriness during the journeys of reminiscence.

Expired indexical references to reality introduce a mediation between historical representations and what is represented. In CHE Onejoon's recreation of diplomatic objects, for example, glitches and distortions that occur during the scanning of original images are deliberately preserved, through which the artist conveys the challenges inherent in obtaining the historical documents. Also noteworthy is Lee Tek-Khean's series of prints depicting the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement (2019–2020 Hong Kong protests). Lee's prints constitute a reinterpretation of protest images that circulated online during that period, which can be viewed as a form of delayed activist art. Unlike immediate images captured at the protest sites, the intentional delay and mediated interpretation imply an alternative aesthetic politics. Such an approach also provides a more nuanced and sophisticated historical perspective. [4]

Comparably, a form of cultural activism with a temporal delay is evident in *The Parthenon* by Liao Xuan-Zhen and Huang I-Chieh. The two artists invite individuals who participated in the 2014 Sunflower Movement protests to collaboratively reconstruct a slanted cardboard architectural model that had been left at the protest site. They achieve this by constructing a temporary architectural structure in the Political Warfare Building Square. This outdoor space also functions as the venue for a series of public events held in conjunction with the exhibition, including talks, screenings, and music performances. Through its artistic and architectural activism, a community is brought together and its potential amplified, which also signifies reflections and analysis of the collective mindset in the "post-Sunflower Movement" era. Meanwhile, the contemporary adaptations in dj sniff's work, incorporating elements such as music theories, instrumental performances, sculptures, and documents, manifest the artist's reinterpretation of the audio archive of the Second World War. In this work, saxophonist Masanori Oishi's drone renditions offer a deep sense of profundity. What is implicated beneath the seemingly figurative audio imitation is a commentary on weaponized sensory disciplines during wartime and the unattainable nature of fully representing audio reality.

Surpassing Pastiche

In Memory Palace in Ruins, there are abundant references to genre-specific artistic vocabulary across different works. They not only remind us of our cultural memories but also bring to mind Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche, as mentioned in his discourse on postmodern culture in 1980. Once again, instead of being mere products of pop culture nostalgia, these artworks illustrate profound inquiries into a perspective that cleverly and self-reflexively deconstructs the mechanical production of nostalgic cultures.

Artistic strategies that revolve around this perspective manifest in various forms. One of the strategies employed here involves "extracting" elements from widely recognized typical styles, exemplified by Polina Kanis' efforts in *Formal Portrait*, where she aims to refine, mold, and transform the ritualistic language of an authoritarian era. And, in *Printed Sunset*, Andrés Baron reconstructs the clichés of romantic films through shot/reverse shots, skillfully presenting binary oppositions in a seamless manner that does not disrupt the audience's viewing experience. Similarly, Jack Burton intriguingly repurposes elements

commonly found in typical road movies by blending scenarios of continental European road trips, tourist experiences, dreamscapes, and fantasies, reconstructed in Art Space I, the canteen of the former Air Force Command Headquarters. What's noteworthy is that the person "on the road" is not even the artist himself but rather his digital alter ego. [5]

Another artistic strategy includes the creation of "pirated copies" of historical memories, wherein artists redirect their focus from the original to the replicas and from the real person to their alter ego. This approach places the audience's perception, especially that of devoted fans, in the spotlight. A notable example is the documentary film by Jeremy Deller and Nick Abrahams which sheds light on the unique rituals developed by ardent fans of Depeche Mode. Through various imitations of their idol, these fans reinvent the cultural icon that captured the world's attention at the conclusion of the Cold War era. Meanwhile, Rutherford Chang's reinterpretation of the Beatles' music by employing 100 copies of *The White Album*, sourced from second-hand markets, introduces a post-minimalistic sound sculpture deeply rooted in fan culture. While discussing music enthusiasts, it is also important to recognize the relevance of film aficionados. Lee Kan Kyo's ever-expanding platform of DVD mock-ups and streaming videos presents a novel, autonomous universe of audiovisual memories, where hand-drawn replicas take on a distinct identity independent of the originals.

Positioned between the replicas and the originals, Yu Araki tells a story about a tribute band WISS. This narrative stands for an attempt to rewrite the historical texts of KISS and critically discuss a certain "tribute band creativity" within cultural production. Much like its name, which hints at paying tribute to the band KISS, WISS also signifies a bootlegged version of historical memories. Whereas this two-channel video is evidence to authenticate one of KISS' "original" albums, some other works addressing "pirated copies of memories" reveal how historical remakes can blur and manipulate authenticity. For example, in Andrew Norman Wilson's *In the Air Tonight*, the use of allegory reframes the historical context of Phil Collins' departure from Genesis. By intertwining the narrative with fragments of different urban legends, it extends the discourse to further contemplate the artist as the creative subject. Finally, Slater Bradley's *The Doppelganger Trilogy* recreates three tragic idols in the history of modern popular culture—Ian Curtis, Michael Jackson, and Kurt Cobain—through fabricated "fan edits." Despite being entirely fictional, these scripted, choreographed, directed images bring to mind historical memories that appear remarkably authentic.

Epilogue

While there is not a specified order to view the works in the exhibition, Slater Bradley's fabricated Kurt Cobain portrait can be regarded as the exhibition discourse's conclusive point. This portrait has the potential to transport the Gen Y audience back to the 1990s because it reminds one of the collective or personal memories linked to the popular culture of that era. Nonetheless, this portrait can be a deceptive indexical reference to reality with its complicated multi-layered performativity. Indicated by its original 2003 title, it creates the illusion of history repeating itself even though the narrative is entirely fictional, which stirs our distant yet intimate cultural memories. Twenty years later, the artist produces a new edition for this exhibition and alters the title, seemingly affirming the cinematic immortality of the rock singer who tragically took their own life at a young age.[6] This transition from the evidential to the textual indicates that images are not only resurrected, but also granted immortality within fictional histories.

As the audience gazes upon this enigmatic portrait, the ghostly three-piece rock music waft from behind the wall. However, the historical scenario to which they belong remains shrouded in mystery. This ever-repeating epilogue within the slightly skewed, time-delayed, and fictitious portrayal of historical memories exists almost like a prologue to the exhibition: upon entering the exhibition space, visitors are greeted by manufactured ancient artifacts, images emitting a sense of déjà vu, a bewildering monument overlooked after its apex, cultural homages of amateur creatives, a Parthenon temple featuring tilted columns, two versions of sunsets, and an array of pirated DVD mock-ups. The exteriors of these apparently outdated yet profoundly significant mediums bear the imprints of history; however, they remain susceptible to deterioration in the physical world. Much like Cheng Tsun-Shing's eloquent portrayal in *The Anxiety of Silver Halides*, a palace of memories is destined to crumble into ruins. [7]

Notes

1 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Translated by Qiancheng Wu. Taipei: China Times Publishing Co., 1996, pp. 161-162.

2 The original installation of *For the Damaged Right Eye* involved three projectors simultaneously displaying the three-channel video. However, the version presented in this exhibition is a single-channel version provided by Postwar Japan Moving Image Archive (PJMIA).

3 Composer Kuniharu Akiyama was entrusted with composing the music score for *The Song of Stone* in early 1963. He made an intriguing choice by incorporating the sound of striking stones into the composition. It was during a banquet that he had a serendipitous encounter with a type of tone-stone known as "Sanukite," which was abundant in the Takamatsu region. The stone produced a remarkable, clear, beautiful, and sustained sound that deeply impressed Akiyama. Consequently, he used Sanukite to compose the film's music score. This experience also inspired him to create environmental music for the Tokyo Olympics athletes' village in October of the following year. In this instance, the sound was delivered through stone horns crafted from a pair of Sanukite stones.

4 The mediation in Lee Tek-Khean's prints is evident, even in his role as a Malaysian artist in Taiwan, which, in terms of lineage, does not place him in the same fate and reality as the Hong Kong protesters.

5 The digital alter ego created by the artist, known as the "Fake Jack Burton" handle, continues to generate images through AI. These images depict an artist's career in a parallel universe that seems more glamorous and successful on all fronts compared to reality.

6 In 2003, Slater Bradley created a photographic work titled after Nirvana's 1993 single, "I Hate Myself and Want to Die". When Kurt Cobain wrote this nihilistic song, he intentionally played into the stereotypical image imposed on him by the mass media, imbuing the song with an implicit message. Slater Bradley used this title to recreate the imagery associated with Cobain, adding an additional layer of meta-performativity. Twenty years later, this work was included in the exhibition Memory Palace in Ruins. For this occasion, the artist made a significant revision, presenting it to the public for the first time with the new title, "I Love Myself and Want to Live".

7 Cheng Tsun-Shing. "The Anxiety of Silver Halides", *Silver Halide Rush*. Taipei: Flaneur Culture Lab, 2011, pp. 136-137.