'An Exploratory, Irregular Tendency:' Using Digital Gardens in Curatorial Research

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As we grapple with this pandemic-altered reality, institutions seek for new ways to present curatorial research online. With a focus on considered, attuned, and meaningful ways for presentation, this essay will explore the possibilities afforded by presenting curatorial research through the concept of 'digital gardens.' I demonstrate that digital gardens occupy an unusual space between social media feeds and fully formed publications or journal articles. With an emphasis on sampling-ideas and work-in-progress, digital gardens encourage growth whilst expressing a need to be tended. This essay examines how we might lean into the framework of a digital garden in a bid to reify the process-driven and the experimental aspects of curatorial work. It discusses the practicalities of working with and within this framework, and how it might facilitate new possibilities in community building and critical dialogue. It also provides a proposition for resource sharing amongst like-minded institutions considering similar initiatives.

Keywords: communal, curatorial, digital garden, ecologies, experimental, mycology, process-driven, research

The Rhizosphere: Multiscalar Fecundity

> ... better thought of not as a thing, but a process—an exploratory, irregular tendency (Sheldrake 2020: 6).

After showers of rain, the warm and humid climate of Singapore makes the damp soil and leaf litter fertile grounds for the sprouting of mushrooms. The fungi often erupt on the surface as quickly as they fade away, without a pattern or a pathway of growth, seemingly erratic. Below ground, mycelial networks run amok. What we see above ground—the fruiting body of the mushroom—is nourished, sustained, and made tenable by this constellation of mycelial threads. The mycelium, in turn, is the information and resource highway of the underground. When fungal webs and mycelial networks pair up with tree roots, mycorrhizal networks are formed. Through these mycorrhizal networks, trees share with one another resources such as carbon, nutrients, and water (Jabr 2020). In this essay, I expand on this eclectic mycological fun fact, growing it into an extended metaphor for an original research methodology and toolkit.

In offering the digital garden up as a proposition, this essay hopes to nudge practitioners and curators away from linear modes of artistic research, where a single thematic focus or hypothesis leads the way ahead. Research can be process-driven and multi-scalar. On top of that, open-ended research might facilitate play and experimentation. As museums, such as the Singapore Art Museum where I currently work, move towards embracing various forms of exhibition making that sit comfortably with the cacophonous and incomplete, the digital garden can function as a tool. On the one hand, it beckons curators towards a reimagined consideration of productivity. On the other, it extends an open invitation towards museum publics to engage with the museum beyond its physical spaces and with its expanded function.

As will be evidenced subsequently, this essay will draw heavily from my experience of working within non-Euro-American contexts and circuits. It will draw on a range of practices, and some of these predate works or projects that have been considered seminal, such as Bernstein's *Hypertext Gardens*. By moving through the practices of artists such as Lin Hsin Hsin, Debbie Ding, and Xafiér Yap, I locate the notion of a digital garden within these extended histories. In doing so, I propose that we think of the digital garden not merely as a tool for research presentation, but as an ever-morphing entity that responds to, extends from, and reinvents the spirit embodied by these technologically minded yet materially grounded practices.

The Understory: Saplings and Beginnings

Amidst the loopy tendrils and nested portals of the Internet, digital gardens can be thought of as intermediaries. They occupy a liminal space, sitting between the informal setting of a social media feed and the polished formality of a journal article or edited volume. Present day digital gardens find their roots in Mark Bernstein's hypertext gardens and blogging subcultures of the early 2000s. Bernstein's experiment was interested in the digital organization of information, and how users could explore this by way of hyperlinked text. These links functioned as wormholes to another page, another realm, or another textual proposition. The visitor had agency over how they navigated through the garden, how much time they spent browsing through, and the way in which they experienced the site. Since then, digital gardens have experienced somewhat of a renaissance. Today, those who dabble in making digital gardens are more interested in 'creating an internet that is less about connections and feedback, and more about quiet spaces they can call their own' (Basu 2020).

Lin Hsin Hsin's Art Museum went live in 1994—four years before Bernstein's hypertext gardens were launched.[1] At that time, Lin was interested in using the site as a platform to present her works, which included paintings, works on paper, and digital artworks (Abd Rahman 2015). It soon evolved into a repository of information and notes. The site is a work-in-progress—updated from time to time with information that Lin religiously collects on topics such as cybersecurity, blockchain technology, and digital art.
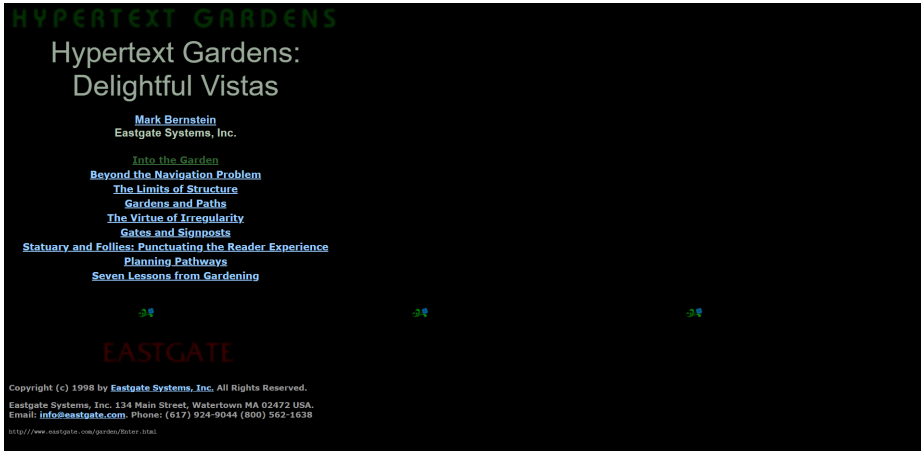
Most pages are kept rather short and can be taken in entirely just with a single scroll. One page is a rabbit hole into another, with bold graphics and texts that are reminiscent of the web aesthetic of the 1990s. We are, as Susan Hazan (1997) describes, 'bounced from image to image, and from word to word,' burrowing through the virtual museum by way of the connections Lin draws together and forms. As the 'First Virtual Museum in the world,' the Internet allowed this museum to oscillate between poles— information could be edited or removed constantly, and nothing was final.

The digital garden is multiplicitous and ever evolving. Broadly speaking, digital gardens can function as a motley collection of sketches, conversations, snippets, notations, and resources. Yet, there are distinct variations to how one might approach this subspace domain. Digital gardens have taken the form of a micro-site, a personal blog, or an ever-expanding Google document. Whilst certain platforms have been set up to accommodate individual digital gardens, varying mutations remain. Are.na is an example of one such platform. The platform describes itself as 'a place to save content, create collections over time and connect ideas' (Are.na / About, 2011). Are.na users can create channels around certain themes and topics on the platform. These channels are then populated by individual blocks. These blocks range from quotes, excerpts from books, images, webpages, to videos. Users can work together as collaborators to build up a single channel together or add blocks from another user's channel to their own. The platform was launched about ten years ago (Are.na / About, 2011), and Are.na's founder later expressed hopes that the platform would serve as a 'slow, nuanced, and intentional tool to contextualize that information that people are consuming' (Gotthardt 2018).
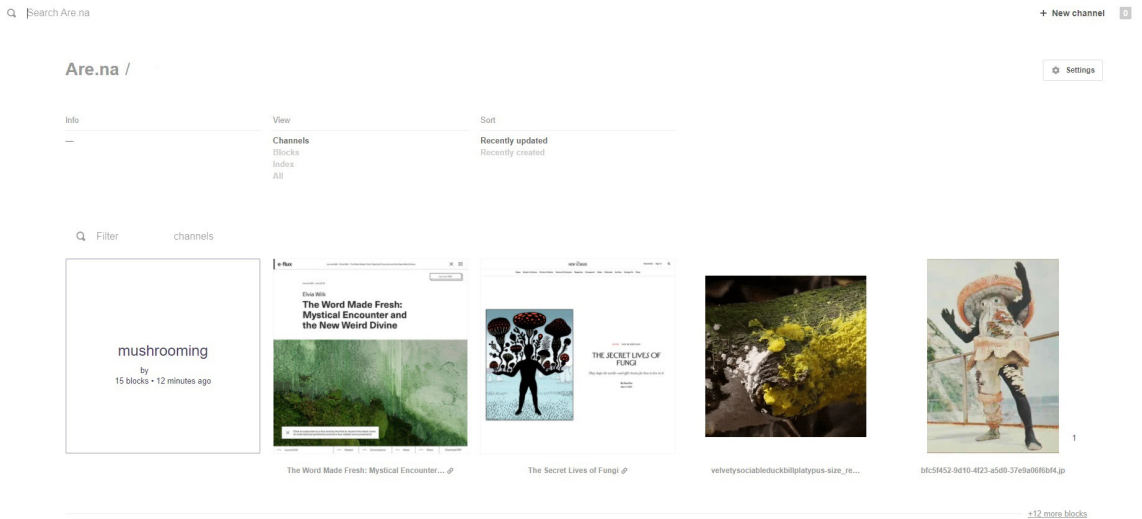

Figure 3. A screenshot of the author's *Are.na* profile

In many ways, Are.na resembles an ongoing initiative by the Singapore-based visual artist and technologist, Debbie Ding. Ding habitually collects information about architecture, technology, design, and other topics. She started organizing this collection by way of a project she has titled *WikiCliki*. She describes *WikiCliki* as a 'self-facilitating media node' (Ding 2008), and the wiki itself is currently hosted online. As soon as the page loads up, visitors will notice how similar the homepage design for *WikiCliki* is to that of Wikipedia. As a result, visitors might associate the experience

of sifting through Ding's own wiki with that of surfing various Wikipedia webpages—trawling through heaps of information, clicking on hyperlinked texts, and hopping from one page to another. In *WikiCliki*, however, the entries are not crowdsourced. They have been pieced together and collated by Ding alone. The result is not an encyclopaedic compendium of knowledge, but a personal assemblage of ephemera. The amount of research that Ding has compiled is impressive, ongoing work. The wiki currently boasts a total of 783 entries. One such entry, titled *Coping*, consists of just one line:

> 'I saw a documentary about someone's last days. He made a binder for his kids with notes for each year, that the kids could access over time. So thye [sic] could choose how to remember their father' (Ding 2008).

Other entries, such as the one titled Typography, are lengthy posts that comprise annotations and diagrams.

The Canopy: Nurturing Polyspecies Environments

All the examples discussed so far are of personal digital gardens, artistic experiments, or digital gardens of a smaller scale. How might this insight reframe how we approach curatorial work, facilitate international collaboration, or mediate the cross-pollination of ideas? When brought into the context of the museum or the institution, we need to explore a method where the digital garden can be tended to communally. Curatorial teams might provide insight into and chart the process of exhibition-making by way of the digital garden. This might take the form of written curatorial fragments, non-chronological notes from artist studio visits, and reading lists, and would allow audiences to follow the meandering streams that often mark the project of exhibition-making. Curatorial fragments and reading lists could also refer to other projects within a single digital garden—with one curator referencing an in-progress project of another. As these elements and ideas sit alongside and mix with one another, the digital garden becomes a cacophonous incubator of collaborative ideas. As Mike Caulfield (2015) remarks:

> 'Things in the Garden don't collapse to a single set of relations or canonical sequence, and that's part of what we mean when we say [sic] "the web as topology" or the "web as space." Every walk through the garden creates new paths, new meanings, and when we add things to the garden [sic] we add them in a way that allows many future, unpredicted relationships' [sic].

The digital garden could also be configured and coded to include discussion boards. This would allow and invite visitors to leave comments, suggestions, and further links in response. One might, for example, allow visitors to add suggested readings to a curator's reading list. These suggestions could help with locally situating what might otherwise be an overtly theoretical reading list. This is where communal gardening is most prominent, as audiences can probe at or nudge curators along in their research process.
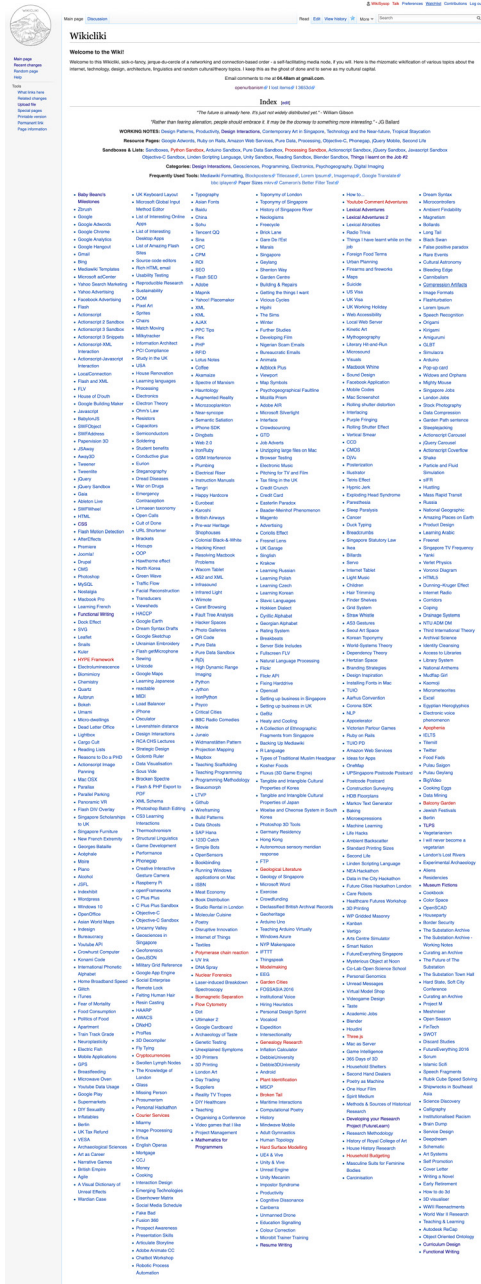
Figure 4. A screenshot of the homepage of *WikiCliki*, an ongoing project by visual artist and technologist Debbie Ding (courtesy of the artist, 2021)

Whilst social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or Reddit allow for similar commenting functions, the space of the digital garden is such that discussions might ensue about how certain suggestions might be incorporated. Instead of encouraging one-off reactions, the digital gardens' discussion thoughts might be better thought of as mini town halls. Going back to the example of the reading lists, whenever a reading list suggestion is received, it can be noted and added immediately. Those who express interest in the reading list posted could also be invited to a reading group.

As the ideas take root, curatorial research directions might shift, resulting in capsule presentations or programmes—maybe even outside of the museum itself. In locating these small-scale satellite presentations around the neighbourhood, in public gardens, or even in transit areas, new audiences might be enveloped into the fold. This is just one example of how a single initiative that the digital garden enables might grow incrementally and maybe even establish communities. The experience of engaging with a digital garden will be interactive, but it is also cooperative and horizontal.

When working and thinking through the maintenance of digital gardens, the words of artist and writer Annika Hansteen-Izora (2021) are pivotal. As she points out, 'digital gardens get messy. They rot, and they have different spaces that can interlock. Digital gardens are prepared for that mess and can adapt around that' (Hansteen-Izora 2021). Digital gardens can be worked on in seasons—cultivated sometimes, pruned sparingly, and left to fallow or rest when necessary. Drawing on texts about care and caregiving helps frame the importance of this seasonality. Regarding the stewardship of ecological lands, María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) writes that 'the temporal pace required by soil's ecological care as a slow renewable resource might again be at odds with these conditions of emergency, running against the accelerated linear rhythm of intervention characteristic of technoscientific futuristic response, traditionally straddled to a productionist pace' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 173). In disentangling digital gardens from capital-driven notions of productivity, we can work towards alternative forms of knowledge sharing that are less rigid and more generative. In this arrangement, the onus does not lie on a single individual to tend for or cultivate the garden—it becomes a shared commons.

Whilst digital gardens might invite individual museums or institutions to hold space for the amorphous and nebulous, they will look very different when we move beyond thinking of this within the remit of a single institution, but a collective impetus. Tenets that are central to the way in which we have been thinking about the digital garden—a platform that is process-driven, experimental, and invested in the distribution and sharing of resources—lend themselves towards thinking outside the confines of a single institution and its needs. To this effect, museums that are interested in laying bare or approximating the underbelly of curatorial work and research might engage in modes of collaboration and network building themselves. This could include building and utilizing open-source codes, and the international synchronization of resources—in terms of research framework, web design, or cross-disciplinary expertise—towards asynchronous implementation

within local or hyperlocal contexts. A code that was first made in Singapore, for example, might find its way into another institution halfway across the world. For smaller or more local institutions, this method of resource sharing might facilitate the crucial dissemination of their research online.

In co-creating digital gardens—or the framework of a digital garden—together, museums and institutions can engage in shared programmes that are hosted on the Internet. This might take the form of artist residencies, where artists are paired up with one another across geographies. An artist-in-residence based out of the Singapore Art Museum, for example, could be placed in conversation with an artist-in-residence with another partner institution. Within the context of the digital garden, both artists could work towards tending a plot together by marking out the contours of their common research interests, sharing information with one another, or gathering resources for future reference.

As a resource and tool, the mere fact that an institution establishes a space such as the digital garden might lure one into the simplistic argument that it directly results in inclusivity and accessibility. Yet it is important to continue interrogating and examining the realities of uneven access through the digital garden. Beyond the ensuring that the garden's basic infrastructure is configured for screen readers and alternative (alt) text, institutions can use the space of the digital garden to rethink an encounter with the visual arts. How might differently abled audiences encounter an institution's collections or exhibitions by way of the digital gardens? Museums could consider, for example, allowing for open source sharing of the 3D printing files on their digital gardens so that people can print out tactile versions of collection works. Granted not everyone has immediate access to 3D printers, but these efforts should be complemented by a suite of functionalities and content that cater to different audiences. Ultimately, curatorial departments do not work in cocoons. Thinking alongside colleagues in the educations, programmes, and partnerships departments will ensure that the design, tone, and voice of the digital gardens remains accessible to various publics—including students and families.

The Emergent: Pollinating with the Winds

The ideas that this essay fleshes out are not new, and it is important to note that cultural practitioners across geographical spaces and contexts have been mulling over this for some time. The work of Trust, a Berlin-based collective, comes to mind.[2] Described as a network of support that comprises, in their own terms, 'co-conspirators,' part of their efforts towards community building and self-organizing can be described as an incredibly sophisticated form of communal digital gardening. Through a variety of platforms, including Twitch and Discord, Trust hosts discussions and presentations around topics such as ecologies and stacktivism. Open discussions often operate with certain frameworks in place, and the collective

has noted the important and ongoing work of moderation (2021, personal communication).[3] Whilst discussions have been kept civil, this is—in no small part—the fruits of the collective's labour, time, and energies. In ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all participants, Trust enforces safeguards in the form of membership fees, and enlists the help of community moderators as well.

An artwork that interfaces between petal and pixel and traverses across flesh and fibre is *Miss Q* by Xafiér Yap (2020). In many ways, it embodies the possibilities and essence of the digital gardens. The work comprises five solar-powered screens that have been arranged in a petal-like formation. Drawing in the sun like a botanical flower, the work references the national flower of Singapore, the Vanda Miss Joaquim. *Miss Q* comes to us from a future where gender fluidity is not only accepted—it is the norm. It queers botany and extends beyond the limitations of biology. When the centre can no longer hold, alternatives must be sought out. Symbols must be updated and reclaimed. The work was featured in an exhibition by independent curator Seet Yun Teng in 2020 titled *Immaterial Bodies*. Over the course of the exhibition, *Miss Q* inspired speculative conversations, poems, and creative writing—microbes and organisms that continue to bind themselves to the sticky embrace of *Miss Q*'s ever-undulating membrane.
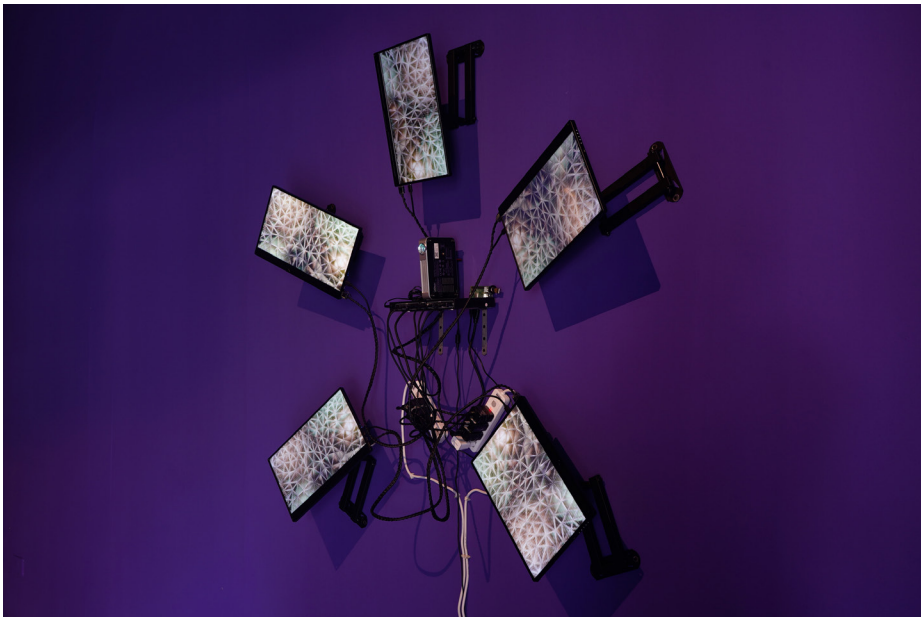

Figure 5. *Miss Q*, Xafiér Yap, Installation View at Objectifs (courtesy of the artist and Objectifs, 2020)

In a way, the fact that this essay revolves around a garden—albeit digital—is tinged with some irony. Most Singaporeans live in apartment blocks that stretch upwards, and each unit is stacked and compressed above the other.[4] As such, many of us do not have access to front or backyards where physical gardens can be nurtured. As I have shown throughout this essay, digital access is not a smooth and frictionless affair. Yet in increasingly dense

urban environments, perhaps the flourishing garden can exist as a pixelated, utopic imaginary in spaces such as the Internet.

At the Singapore Art Museum where I currently work, these initiatives are a necessary adaptation. Whilst we are only a couple of hours away from colleagues and collaborators in places such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, our pandemic-altered reality means that air travel is no longer tenable—at least for now. These concerns have pushed the curatorial team towards identifying aqueous yet rigorous frameworks that might serve as intermediaries—how might we prompt generative conversations whilst experimenting with new fora? As we work—in tandem with colleagues from the National Gallery Singapore—towards a platform where we can enact some of these ideas, it is this underground network of references and resources that will nourish and support the eventual fruiting body.
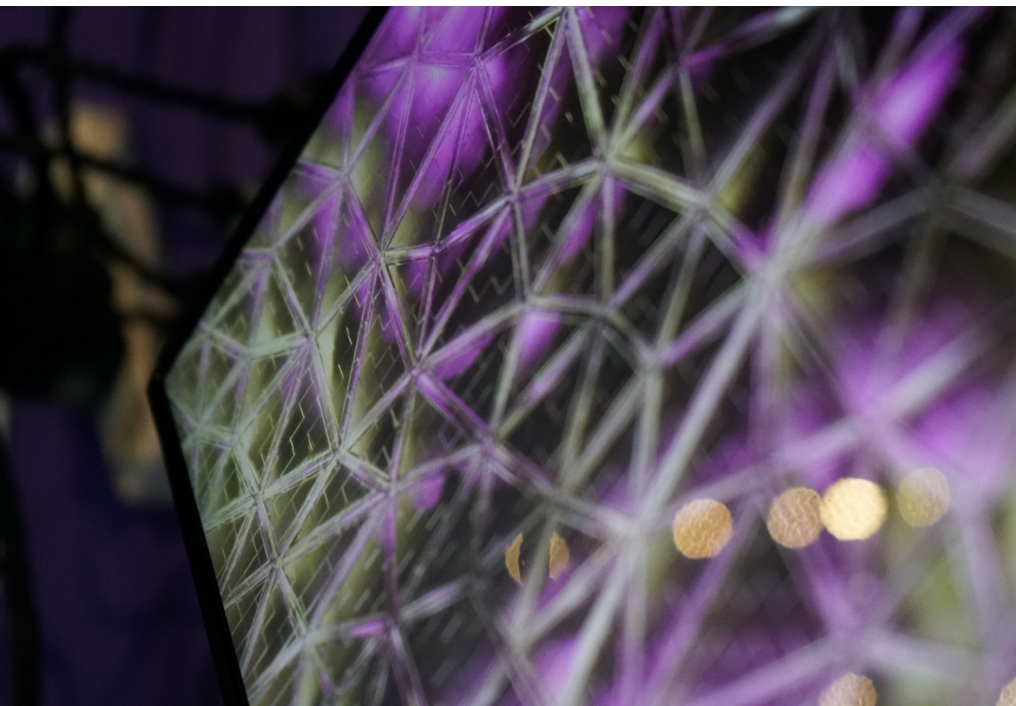

Figure 6. Miss Q, Xafiér Yap, Installation View at Objectifs (courtesy of the artist and Objectifs, 2020)

1. Lin Hsin Hsin's Virtual Art Museum has been online and running for 26 years. The full site can be experienced at https://www.lhham.com.sg/.
2. Trust is organized by Arthur Röing Baer and Calum Bowden, and hosts public events, residencies, discussions, reading and research groups. More information about the collective and the work they do can be found on their website: https://trust.support/.
3. Trust (2021, March 9) Personal communication, closed door curatorial workshop with the Singapore Art Museum curatorial team.
4. According to official government data, 81% of Singapore's population lives in public housing flats built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB). The data set can be accessed here: https://data.gov.sg/dataset/estimated-resident-population-living-in-hdb-flats?resource_id=a7d9516f-b193-4f9b-8bbf-9c85a4c9b61b.

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12. Sheldrake, M (2020) *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures*. London, Penguin Random House.
13. WikiCliki (2008) http://dbbd.sg/wiki/index.php?title=Wikicliki (25.03.2021).

Author's bio

Joella Qingyi Kiu is a curator, editor, and art historian based in Singapore. Her practice examines contemporary art making processes and ecologies both in Singapore and the wider Southeast Asian region. She also has a deep interest in the arts of Iran and Central Asia. Joella is currently Assistant Curator at the Singapore Art Museum and Founding Editor of the art historical online platform Object Lessons Space. Her previous curatorial projects include to gather: *The Architecture of Relationships* (2021, Singapore Pavilion at the 17th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia) and *The Deepest Blue* (2018, DISINI Festival). She is also the host of Mushroomed, a podcast about the visual arts produced in collaboration with Singapore Community Radio. Joella holds an MA in History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art (2017) and a BA in History of Art from the University of York (2015).

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