DIGGING INTO THE CASSAVA TUBER: ARCHIVING SOCIAL MEMORY IN CYBERSPACE AS SOCIAL DIGITAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests a social digital archeological approach in digital archiving of social memory as a wider cultural mapping in database art. Following new media theorist Lev Manovich's analyses of database as a new symbolic form of the computer age, this paper intends to discuss *Operasi Cassava* as one of this kind of cultural form supported by database.[1] Whereupon then it is appropriate for the authors to consider poetic and aesthetic aspects of the archive that is now being collectively built by the participants. Essentially it might be possible for the project to recast the cultural distinctiveness in the midst of the diversity of people and experiences as a positive integrative force in the sustenance of social identity in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

In the project, the authors outline a vision of online archive that enables storage and access of social memory in the form of still images, sounds and texts related to the cassava[2] plant for its rich cultural history. The authors look at the social and cultural significance of cassava and collect stories and memories related to the evolution of the plant through its migratory process, drawing parallels between diasporas and the dispersal of meaning over the internet. The goal of *Operasi Cassava* is twofold: first, to create cultural narratives corresponding to the living condition of a cassava plant. The second part of the project is the archiving of the social memories related to the plant in an online repository. The digital archiving strategy contributing to these goals will be discussed in this paper.

Operasi Cassava is positioned as a participatory project that invites participants to contribute stories or memories related to cassava. The crowdsourcing approach to solicit social memories emphasizes the collaborative acts of individuals. Participants can use the submission form to upload their data to the online museum and assign attributes to associate with their content. Working through this approach, many peculiar stories related to the subject matter have been collected. The resulted online museum is a public repository that archives social memories on cassava, capitalizing on the networked social space. Despite the digital archive being called a 'museum,' the authors argue that database archive is different from institutionalized narrative of history by addressing the paradigm shift of memory institutions from institutionalized memory to information habitat.

THE MEDIATED SOCIAL MEMORY

Operasi Cassava was inspired by the story of survival during the Japanese Occupation in Malaysia (then Malaya) between the periods of 1942 to 1945, narrated by the author's (Lim Kok Yoong) grandmother (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Screenshot of online museum's main page that randomly display memory submitted by the participant, simulating a flashback of social memory, CC.

From her reminiscences of the Japanese Occupation, she would mention how she had lived through it by eating cassava when food rationing was introduced for essential items such as rice, sugar and salt by the Japanese army. Different ethnic groups in Malaysian society give different accounts of savoring cassava when comes to their memory of the tuber plant. The various ways to savor cassava in the local delicacies reflect the multi-ethnic makeup of the society. However diverse Malaysia's society[3], a common grass roots' narration of Japanese Occupation often revolves around the activities of eating this food. It seems that cassava has assumed a rather grounded and earthy role in the common consciousness of Malaysians' association, perceptions, memories and affinity with it. As De La Mata notes, Vygotsky's notion of semiotic mediation pointed out that the distinctive feature of human memory is its mediated nature. In this context, Malaysians might not remember the event directly, but through the 'intervention of mediational means,' and in this case it is the narrative structure used to remember stories. [1] Using the analogy of cassava migratory history from South America and the migratory history of different Malaysian ethnic groups, *Operasi Cassava* asks how and why diverse people come to think of themselves as members of a group with a shared past. According to French, social memory is a concept used by historians and others to explore the connection between social identity and historical memory. Collective memory is used interchangeably to place emphasis on the internalization of group identity. [2] It is social memory like the memory of eating cassava that becomes mitigation for the heterogeneity in the society and helps weave the nation's historic-social fabric.

The authors also draw on the ongoing digital archiving aspect of *Operasi Cassava* to examine the context of technology in the mediation of social memory. We can begin by looking at the usage of computer (this includes smart devices) by the participants to capture data in multimedia forms, archiving and sharing material in ways that are deeply personal and yet instantly collective through

being linked to a global memory scape of the World Wide Web. [3] This digital take-up, resulting in communicative memory being transformed into cultural memory is not to be treated as personal, temporal or easily erased. Appadurai made an interesting analogy for Internet-based archives to prosthesis of individuals' private existence. In his text, Appadurai advocated archiving as part of some sort of collective project. [4] Specifically in the context of this project, the online museum is prosthesis of co-existence of multiple ethnic groups in Malaysia. From this perspective, memory is considered to be a mediated socially constructed process. The enabler for this possibility is cyberspace, with its increasingly networked structure bringing to the increasing user generated content and database system that provides the storage and retrieval of these digital contents.

DATABASE AS INFORMATION HABITAT

The online Cassava Museum in *Operasi Cassava* is a database designed for storing, retrieving and managing content submitted by the participants. Besides contributing data to the database, the participants also contribute to how the data are remembered with the technologies of remembering, for instance by assigning the metadata that helps the data to be organized thematically or contextually. Cassava Museum leverages the contemporary participatory culture on the internet emerged from Web 2.0 by inviting participants to contribute stories or memories in the form of image, text and sound that are related to cassava. With Web 2.0, we experience something called "user-generated content," which means that beholders also deliver the content. [5] The resulting online museum is a public repository soliciting contents from the crowd that benefited from the Web 2.0's democratic promise. The distinctive Web 2.0 features of Cassava Museum employed by *Operasi Cassava* are social tagging and social sharing. Social tagging allows participants to classify and describe their content using their own vocabulary for easy retrieval in the future (remembering). (Fig. 3)

Social sharing allows participants to popularize or share the content via social networking platforms namely Facebook and Twitter. (Fig. 4, 5) Participants can posts content from the online museum to their individual social network timeline.

Fig. 3. Online museum's hashtag display fed by the participants, viewers can filter and access the submissions associated with a particular hashtag from this page.
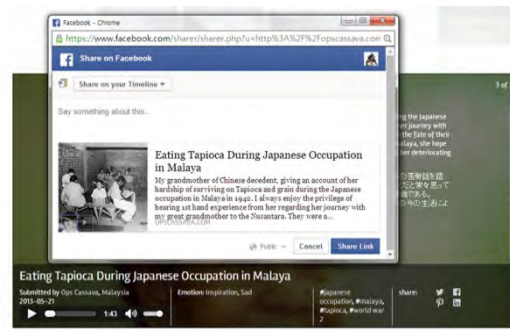

Fig. 4. Social tool - 'share on Facebook' feature embedded in the online museum.
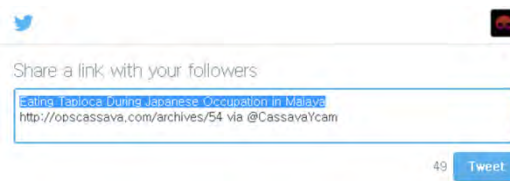

Fig. 5. Social tool - 'share on Twitter' feature embedded in the online museum.

This "bottom-up" type of knowledge capture (compared to hierarchies, which are "top-down") is the new social memory paradigm emerging out of an interconnected information environment of networked data and user involvement – an information landscape Jannis Kallinikos refers to as the information habitat[4]. On the contrary, memory institutions such as museums call for the formation of a canon consisting of cultural heritage artifacts. Marton describes canonization as the selection order and preservation of cultural artifacts, which are deemed valuable for a social formation – be it a group, collective or society; a faith, nation, artistic tradition or scientific discipline, to name a few. [6] By the same token, Weibel criticizes museums as having mercilessly followed the Darwinian model of selection. Culture has become therefore the embodiment of this selection, the expression of selection. [7] To further distinguish the "bottom-up" oriented database system from the "top-down" institutionalized narratives of memory institution, Manovich says, "As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies." [8]

SOCIAL DIGITAL ARCHEOLOGY AND DIGITAL ARCHIVING

Social digital archeology is understood as the usage of digital media and digital information to acquire a clearer picture of the society that uses them. [9] In his installation work '*Digital Archeology*,' [5] Bartosik finds the simplest way to define digital archeology as the process of revealing lost and forgotten data. [10] Other definitions of digital archeology usually associate with digital preservation of digital culture or digital representation of archeological information. However obscure the definition of digital archeology remains, the authors put forward digital archeology as a strategy for recollecting the specific types of

media that we rely on to aggregate our understanding of our past: text, sound and still image; digital archiving as an extension of our memory processes thus the information habitat for future retrieval or studies. Hence social digital archeology can be understood as a communal effort to accomplish these tasks. Drawing a connection between archive with memory, Dekker defines an archive as a collection of documents and records such as letters, official papers, photographs, recorded material or computer files that is preserved for historical purposes. As such, an archive is considered a site of the past, a place that contains traces of a collective memory of a nation, a people or a social group. [11] Thus the authors suggest the act of remembering can be understood as a process of recalling or recollection, comparable to excavation in archeology to uncover archeological remains. This process fits in logically with the retrospective nature of digital archeology, which is to find the root from which memory grows.

What relevance might this project have as a wide interest in media art emerges throughout the practice of digital archiving? In general, creating a work in new media can be understood as a construction of an interface to a database. [12] Manovich generalizes the underlying database structure of new media object manifested as larger scale assemblage of different media elements. This is the 'modularity' principle of new media, among the five principles put forward by Manovich in his book *The Language of New Media.* [13] World Wide Web is a classic example that demonstrates the modularity of new media. This project epitomizes the same mechanisms through which varying media elements are archived into a database system and appropriately gives the author's disposition to online museum, the absolutely central role of interface that facilitates the storage (collection) and assemblage (recollection) of a specific social memory. Essentially, it is also this interface that facilitates dispersed participants who come together under the interdependencies of geographical, physical, logistical and cyber network. All in all, *Operasi Cassava* is examining the role of memory and database in creating a new way of experiencing if not making art. In her introduction of a generation of German artists who have taken memory under their wing, Assman comments, "It is almost as if a memory that no longer has any cultural form or social function may have to find its last refuge in art." [14]

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ENDNOTES

1. Operasi Cassava project was initiated by Lim Kok Yoong and Yap Sau Bin in the year 2012 to archive social memories related to cassava. at the Media Art Living Laboratory (MALL), Multimedia University, Malaysia. The online museum can be viewed at www.opscassava.com. This website was created in Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media [YCAM] together with Lim Kok Yoong and Yap Sau Bin for the food laboratory in the exhibition "MEDIA/ART KITCHEN YAMAGUCHI: Open Call Laboratory - An Exploration into Social Anthropology in Asia."

2. Cassava, Manihot esculenta, also called 'Ubi Kayu' in Malaysia, is a woody shrub of the Euphorbiaceae (spurge) family native to South America, is extensively cultivated as an annual crop in tropical and subtropical regions for its edible starchy tuberous root, a major source of carbohydrates.

3. Malaysia has a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. The demographics of Malaysia are represented by these multiple ethic groups: the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Bajau, Kadazan, Iban, the indigenous and others.

4. Jannis Kallinikos calls this emerging socio-economic environment, marked by the ubiquitous presence of the internet, information-based services and software-mediated culture the habitat of information. The navigation through the information habitat is guided by the search results page, which is created, based on algorithmic calculations, for a specific user every time a search query is processed. The term indicates that the growing involvement of information in society, economy and culture is associated with important changes in the ways institutions operate as well as shifts in behavioral, cognitive and communicative habits.

5. For his project titled Digital Archeology, Pawel Bartosik used the open source program Photorec to demonstrate how it is possible to recovered deleted memories in a used SD-card that he bought and he printed the unearthed digital photos on 5 posters.