SOAPBOX 6.0 ON THE USES OF ABSENCE

# Archiving Economic Afterlife: A Dialogue Between 3D Scanning and Drawing

# Ksenia Kopalova & Pat WingShan Wong

#### [Abstract]

The paper explores the afterlife of mass-produced collectibles— Snoopy toys from 1999 McDonald's Happy Meals. Distributed globally, they attracted collectors who believed in their future economic value and fans for whom they held personal significance. Today, after 25 years, these once-coveted Snoopy toys are abandoned and sold in flea markets, car boot sales, and via online marketplaces for second-hand goods. The paper is focused on an artist-made digital archive of 3D scans of these toys acquired from sellers and collectors across Hong Kong, the UK, Russia. The 3D models were reworked through creating custom textures, which attempt to highlight the gaps, mistakes, and absences in the economic environment around these objects and the patchy, changing, irregular, disappearing personal stories behind them. We argue that exclusion of such objects from the mainstream consumerist cycles generates poetic absences that endow these objects with subversive potential. With their existence within an alternative mode of economic circulation, they challenge capitalist consumer behaviours and open up possibilities to reconnect with these objects, re-use them more poetically and more personally, also highlighting the potential of absence, mistake, and glitch in the processes of archive-making.

**194** 



This is an essay about the creation of a number of digital images. To see those images up close, in full colour and detail, please scan the QR code.

# Introduction

What happens when a marketable consumerist product becomes excluded from its original mainstream economic cycles? Few objects survive in the crushing mechanism of capitalist desire production conveyors—especially when it comes to mass production on a global scale. However, not all of those that didn't last end up in landfills—massive graveyards of desire no longer burning. What happens when an object is neither discarded nor continues to thrive as a revenue-generating item? What kinds of absence does it produce in the fabric of capitalist economies? What can we see in those gaps?

We will be looking into a specific example of such an object – 1998 collectables from McDonald's Happy Meals: Snoopy toys from the "World Tour" set. While being successful worldwide, in Hong Kong this marketing campaign sparked an unprecedented level of fanaticism among collectors, driven by various factors such as investment potential, social pressure, and social capital investment. With each McDonald's in Hong Kong selling between 1,200 to 3,000 Snoopy toys daily, some stocks were sold out within an hour, often collected by customers who had waited overnight (Bosco et al).

The Snoopy toys were distributed globally across a variety of countries, attracting collectors who believed in their future value. Today, after 25 years, these once-coveted Snoopy toys are abandoned and sold at much cheaper prices in illegal flea markets, car boot

sales, as well as via second-hand online marketplaces. In this paper, we will focus on such channels of informal secondary redistribution in the following locations: Hong Kong, the UK and Russia, which are informed by our personal backgrounds and relocation histories.

We will be using a mix of technological strategies in our study, combining collective archive-making software like the 3D scanning app Polycam and highly personalised, individual drawing practice – either digital or traditional. We will be aiming towards creating a small, but growing archive of 3D objects to be hosted on a webpage dedicated to the project (.RAW). The archive will be built based on existing collectables, actively exploring absences behind the original objects: technological, historical, and economic exclusions or gaps that, we would argue, are crucial for these objects' (dis)embodiment and inclusion into the archive.

Our process includes finding these collectables from 1998, talking to their owners, and either buying them off to 3D-scan them or asking the owners to do the scanning themselves, sharing a bit of the backstory of the object. Thus, whenever possible, we aimed to buy the story as well as a 3D model, rather than the object itself.

Technologically, this process inevitably produces mistakes and absences of information where the shape is created through extrapolation. Our project highlights these absences as essential for digital archive-making-through drawing practice, appreciating the mistakes, absences, and omissions present both in the point cloud data and in the individual stories. We extract the texture of the 3D object and reinterpret it illustratively, actively engaging with the image that is normally created by a machine for a machine. The resulting redrawn texture is then reapplied to the 3D model, forming a new digital item of poetic qualities: a 3D object capturing both the physicality of the item and the speculations around it. The new object that merges diary-like texts and glitchy shapes—or reinterprets the surface—sits somewhere in between a poetic digital sculpture and a document. These objects of questionable ontological status, glitchy and incomplete, nevertheless highlight some of the patchy and disappearing stories of these objects, as well as their ever-changing economic environments.

Our understanding of the archive is largely informed by Annet Dekker's texts, who conceptualises the digital archive as fragmentary, collaborative, ongoing, and designed for reproduction and circulation, rather than storage and memory (17). Dekker argues that the loss of information is an intrinsic part of digital archiving: "rather than something negative, this loss, in the sense of forgetting, should be treasured, as it prepares for something new to emerge" (19). This idea of absence is a constitutive element of our project, as we try to represent this moving, evolving, and inevitably "forgetful" nature of the archive visually.

Our vision of 3D imaging is inspired by Hito Steyerl's conceptualisation of 3D and her understanding of its ideological underpinnings. Particularly, her concept of objectifiction (Steyerl, "Duty-Free Art"), i.e. computational transformation of an object that involves extrapolation, approximation, and artistic interpretation, is of specific relevance to our project. Steyerl argues that the mathematical processes behind 3D scanning interpret missing information, creating a "fictionalised" version of the scanned object. In our archive, we want to further highlight this process and take this missing information as seriously as possible: again, not as something negative, but as an integral and fundamental part of digital archive-making.

We will also try to maintain critical awareness of the digital platforms that take part in the archiving process: the reselling-oriented online marketplaces that take part in the redistribution of collectables. We will largely be referring to Nick Srnicek's work on platform capitalism to examine how global corporations' marketing strategies and ideologies affect the ways in which the toys, articulated as highly personalised archival material, is getting "stripped off" of its personal dimension in the interactions suggested by these platforms.

This critical stance towards the nature of online platforms within the context of capitalist ideologies is further explored in our project through active engagement with mistakes and glitches, which we consider to be active juxtapositions to the mainstream capitalist modes of these objects' existence, rather than aberrations to be disregarded. In the spirit of Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, we treat failure as "active production of the "accidental potential" in any product" (2), seeing digital mistakes as opportunities to understand the functioning of the markets and technologies surrounding seemingly trivial objects. As Rosa Menkman notes, "[t]he accident (and thus the glitch) shows a system in a state of entropy and so aids towards an understanding of the ultimate functioning of a system" (32).

Our visual procedures with 3D model textures were informed by the concept of *operational images* explored by Jussi Parikka in "Operational Images: From the Visual to the Invisual": usually quite "technical" and "purely functional" images that often stay outside of the scope of attention in visual culture studies, but play a crucial role in how they "organise our sense and skills in terms of how we are trained to approach such images, from the photogrammetric mapping of landscapes to pattern recognition, from astronomy datasets to Mars Rover imaging practices".

Trevor Paglen, interpreting Parikka, summarises their role in an even more dramatic way:

Machines rarely even bother making the meat-eye interpretable versions of their operational images... Nowadays operational images are overwhelmingly invisible, even as they're ubiquitous and sculpting physical reality in ever more dramatic ways. We've long known that images can kill. What's new is that nowadays, they have their fingers on the trigger.

In our study we are addressing a specific type of operational image: 3D model textures created by Polycam. These texture files (or UV maps) are not directly accessible, and the user has to export the models to see them (figure 1). They look like flattened maps of 3D-objects, or vaguely 'cubist' representations of them, and often these files distribute the information counter-intuitively, so that the human eye can hardly recognise the object in the texture file. Often the biggest parts of a texture are what the human eye perceives as the least significant information (figure 2). These texture files are a part of the machine-to-machine communication that we will be

198

trying to interrupt, investigate, and question by introducing visual interventions or reinterpretations of these textures. Particularly, we will be focusing on missing information and the discrepancy between the machine-vision and human-vision of the object, the machine's approximations (visible as blurred parts of the image), and the tactile qualities of the texture that are missing in a glitchy 3D-scan of a smooth plastic toy.



# Toy Origin

It is important to outline the process of acquiring the 3D-scans. It started in Hong Kong—a small and highly accessible city, where exchanges often happen face-to-face, bypassing online interaction. The first toy in our archive was found in an illegal flea market in Sham Shui Po, a poverty-stricken area in Hong Kong. The so-called 'Dawn Market' opens early in the morning to evade the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department Hawker Control Teams. The goods sold are primarily collected from bins or are donated by the local community. For instance, when a restaurant closes, it might sell off plates and glasses. The market features an eclectic and unexpected array of items, such as single shoes, branded TV remote controls, toys, and broken backpacks. The place is predominantly run by the elderly and the homeless, offering items at extremely low prices, typically under HKD 20 (approximately £2 per item). Both buyers and sellers tend to keep a low profile. There are only a few streetlights in the area, so the customers bring their own flashlights to search for goods, and while bargaining is common, personal conversations are rare. The market, however, plays an important role in the community, allowing people to exchange necessities and recycle goods, giving unwanted items a new purpose and helping to fulfil the needs of those with limited resources.

This is where four of the toys in our archive were found, the Dawn Market sparking our interest in what we hoped to be comparable offline venues in our respective locations, exploring car boot sales, charity shops, and second-hand stores. However, with the item in question being so specific, it was impossible to not refer to online resources (eBay, Instagram, Avito, Carousell, etc.), which inevitably affected both the communication with sellers and our findings. In this inevitable evolution of the process of finding the toys, we observed how the circumstances of the toy acquisition frame and present the stories of the objects, and how digital and physical environments mediate and affect this process. These are the differences we highlight in this chapter.

In principle, we were aiming to avoid buying the toy to make the 3D-scan ourselves, since it was important for us to attempt to eschew participating in creating additional monetary value for the object and taking part in supporting the platforms that mediate the purchase. We tried to test whether avoiding participation would actually be possible (the simple answer was: rarely), and see in what ways existing platforms would resist it, attempting to understand the ideologies behind their workings.

We tried to find and contact the sellers and collectors to see if they would be willing to do the scan themselves, and offered to pay for the 3D scan rather than the actual toy. Overall, we interacted with 27 people and managed to get 7 scans: 6 of them were made by us and 2 were actually scanned for us for free by the owners who kept the physical toy to themselves. One collector gave the whole set of 28 Snoopy from the platform Carousel.

The results of these interactions are presented in Table 1 (the instances not mentioned in the table were those when the sellers did not respond at all):

	REASONS FOR REFUSING TO NEGOTIATE	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
: 1: The origin of the toys and 3D scans, and the details of acquisition	additional Information acquired	Texts from the advert, messaging history with the seller	A story of a personal meaning attributed to the toy	The story of the acquisition of the toy and the collector who sold it to the	Secretly trade, after the food and environmental hygiene department staff left	Encouraged to buy more to get cheaper
	PRICE	600 RUB	0	0	20 HKD	10 HKD
	Scanned By US/ Scanned By The Seller	By us	By the seller	By the seller	By us	By us
	PLATFORM/ LOCATION	Avito, a Russian classified advertisement website	Illustrators' group chat, WhatsApp	Instagram	Dawn Market	Dawn Market
table	SELLER'S LOCATION	Moscow, Russia	London, UK	Shrewsbury, UK	Hong Kong	Hong Kong
	SN00PY TOY TYPE	"England"	"Spain"	"VSN"	"Norway"	"Ireland"

n/a	n/a	lo the scan o download s too old, prry, I don't I will try get back]	ılycam, ymore"	73 work load	ne, ose
Encouraged to buy more to get cheaper	Toy industry professional's tips on how to distinguish a good toy from a bad one	"How about you buy the toy and d yourself?" "Sorry, we're not ready t the app [Polycam]" "My phone is so I wouldn't be able to do this" "S have an opportunity to do this"" on Monday" [the person did not	"Don't bother me" "I only got 18 photos for the Pc and I am not in Hong Kong an	"It sounds great but I am and will not lie to you I can my iPhone (just about to up my photos on eBay)"	"I don't have a mobile pho so I don't think I can do th types of scan (sic)"
10 HKD	10 HKD	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
By us	By us	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dawn Market	Dawn Market	Avito	Carousell, a Singaporean online marketplace	Ebay	Virtual museum for McDonald's and other fast-food toys (Else)
Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Russia	Hong Kong	unknown	Australia
'Finland'	"Scotland"	Not acquired	Not acquired	Not acquired	Not acquired

Notably, negotiating via online marketplaces for secondhand goods (Avito, Carousell) was more difficult than any other methods we tried (offline markets, private group chats, direct messaging on Instagram): the response rate was much lower and convincing the sellers to sell a 3D scan was more difficult.

For instance, on Avito one seller asked how much we'd pay for the scan, and when offered the same price as what they wanted for the toy, they responded that they would not be willing to download the app. When offered double price—as an expression of gratitude for supporting the project—they replied that they would "still be interested in selling the toy itself." Apparently, the time that would have been spent on engaging in an unfamiliar activity and the predictability of interaction offered by the platform were more valuable for the person than the money.

Another case involved a seller on Carousell, a Singaporean online platform for exchanging secondhand goods, with negotiations stretching over a month. This seller was the only one on this platform who agreed to download the app and experiment with scanning. After being asked to choose their favourite Snoopy collection, they took 18 photos in an attempt to create a model, but, unfortunately, they weren't able to complete the process and eventually gave up.

Notably, the collectors or sellers who were willing to engage did it for free, which might have in many ways been a result of shared interests: the vintage shop owner used to study the history of design, while the private collector who provided the scan is an illustrator.

Consequently, we decided to adjust our approach and purchase the Snoopy toys to scan them ourselves when it was not possible to negotiate otherwise. Thus, one seller, who turned out to have been working in the toy industry for 20 years, producing iconic toys like Barbie and Hello Kitty, sold a Snoopy toy for just 10 HKD ( $\pm$ £1). By her own estimate, this is only 3 times more than its production cost in Hong Kong. She explained the nuances of toy appreciation and explained how to determine a toy's value, pointing out the quality of the plastic bags not sticking to the toy, the accessory and detail of the toy, the premium colouring methods, and the quality of the materials used.

Of course, our process of acquiring the scans was far from a rigorously designed quantitative study, but it pointed towards some of the observations on the nature of online interactions mediated by platforms: similarly to platforms like Airbnb or Uber, second-hand goods selling platforms like Avito eradicate the unpredictability and potential risks of person-to-person interaction (like the absence of a legal bond or documentation of the process). The platform is what takes the risk and guarantees safety, thus automating the process of interpersonal trust-making. Optimising the individual emotional effort also results in these platforms unifying the type of interactions possible, and we would argue that with these platforms being increasingly default mediators of lifestyles, they contribute to a certain rigidity in interactions that initially existed as highly personalised, such as re-selling memorabilia and collectables from childhood. Nick Srnicek, in his work on platform capitalism, asserts that the majority of social interactions are not profit-generating or profit-oriented as such, and "if all of our actions were already captured within capitalist valorisation, it is hard to see why there would be a need to build the extractive apparatus of platforms" (35). However, the logic of profit-oriented data extraction underpinning these capitalist platforms seems to affect these interactions. Thus, in Russia, where McDonald's no longer exists as a brand, these Snoopy toys from 1998 were sold with notes like "a rare thing these days!"; "Toys from the bygone era"-in other words, signifying the local importance, emphasising the lifetime of the object, and pointing towards its more personal dimension, but at the same time, justifying the price and attempting to raise the object's value. However, this personal dimension of the object did not translate into the interaction with the sellers, who seemed to primarily be seeking nothing more than a swift and predictable standardised sale procedure. On the one hand, the second-hand Snoopies in these marketplaces are treated as economic failures, glitches in the malfunctioning economic system that turned these objects into relics of the past—probably more so than in the countries where the brand is still present.

On the other hand, these glitches are being re-commodified: it is the obsolescence, the irreversibility of the past, that is being sold now as having nostalgic value. Rosa Menkman notes that this is the fate of almost any glitch: getting "slowly standardized, commodified, institutionalizing effects, [when] any user can handle a broad range of data types and technologies in predetermined, often retro-nostalgic ways" (49).

The lifecycle of the glitch that Menkman outlines does not, however, make deliberate intrusions into the system meaningless. Our attempt to engage the sellers in a less predictable, new type of interaction involving selling a 3D scan, despite its economic benefits, was itself perceived as a "glitch" by the sellers: a glitch of the economic model behind the platform, a mistake to be eradicated or avoided. For us, however, encountering this rigidity and failing to buy the scans via online marketplaces was in many ways a success, since it exposed the points of tension within these platforms: where they become increasingly "protective" of the interaction rules imposed upon people who use them.

Overall, in contrast to physical or interest-specific online communication, the platform-based interactions lacked the presence of actual people who were selling these toys, their presence replaced by the commodified sign of it. In-person interaction outside of the platforms—during car boot sales, in the flea markets, or when online interaction included a personal point of connection between us and the sellers/collectors—was way less profit-oriented, since spaces excluded from the mainstream capitalist cycles of profit generation were more likely to accept less standardised interactions.

# Polycam: absences of information and physicality

Another layer of technological mediation in this project was introduced with a specific 3D-modelling software: the Polycam app for photogrammetry (the process of creating a 3D model out of overlapping photos of the same object taken from different

205

angles) and Blender for reapplying the texture and rendering 2D-images. We were interested in these mainly for their accessibility, which is relatively rare for 3D software usually requiring either quite a profound skill or significant budget. Polycam aims to be a democratised tool accessible to anyone with a smartphone, while Blender, even though requiring practice and effort, is free. In our project, we were specifically interested in Polycam as an accessible public archiving tool, since it also offers an opportunity to upload the scans and share them with the other users. Polycam archives are notable for their discrepancies in the nature of the models they present: some alluding to the language of public administration, scientific and—as Hito Steyerl shows ("In Free Fall")—more disturbing military discourses, with an invisibly present surveyor.

In our case, however, this invisible presence of the person taking the scan (the 3D model implies a real person walking around the object with their camera on—thus there is a repeating bodily gesture behind each model) is actually at the forefront, since in our case it is the personal dimension of the object that we are interested in. We would argue that in our project we try to use photogrammetry in a way that is contrary to its institutionally embedded implications: instead of implying surveillance and control, we attempt to embrace the haptics—or "haptic visuality", as Laura Marks puts it (18)—of photogrammetry, and actively engage with the absences and mistakes it generates: so, the disruptions of the fabric of omnipotent visual control behind the institutionalised photogrammetry.

Another feature of photogrammetry is that it only works with surfaces, not bodies. Even though it creates a 3D model, the body of the object remains unrecognisable to the technology, thus turning these 3D objects into a set of infinitely thin 'skins' intricately arranged against each other and suspended in space. Like silk screens or make-up, these skins mask, conceal, decorate, separate, and structure encounters. But unlike silk screens or make-up, they do not hold any physicality behind them; they are pure resemblance, stripped of substance.

#### 206

The lack of embodied presence, replaced by surfaces, missing information extrapolations, and weightless suspension in the void could be parts of what Steyerl calls a process of *objectifiction*: the fictionalising process of calculating "leaps of faith through the void between measurements and aesthetic interpretations of data" (202). The objectifiction performed by Polycam may be an extreme example of 3D software favouring consumable and malleable appearances, surface encounters over substantial interaction, which goes very much in line with our experience with classified advertisement platforms.

Possibly the most notable peculiarity of Polycam is its lack of precision, which, as some professional 3D modellers claim, makes it "useless as a 3D model for reverse engineering... or anything else" (Roopinder, "3D Scanning for Everyone?"). In our study, however, it's exactly this lack of precision—in a way, a digital failure—that is of interest to us. We actively look at the opportunities to disrupt the smooth functioning of operational images—with the glitches, stretches, and mistakes—and engage with them through drawing as a learning tool. The process of drawing allows us to draw attention to what is technologically excluded or masked—imperfections or personal stories—and understand some of the political decisions behind a "purely technical" process of 3D scanning.

In a volume on *The Technical Image*, writing on the nature of noise, one contributor notes: "Ideally, the medium used to render the object visible is present only as an absence; image noise occurs when it becomes visible" (138). This applies not only to analogue noise, but to digital glitches as well: as ephemeral as they are, they, at the same time, make the viewer/user aware of the functioning of a given digital environment:

The deliberate negation of technical instructions forces the technology to speculate, and from these speculations, we get a glimpse of the technology's decisions and how it constructs the images. This reveals how 3D media imagery is mediated and constructed using automation, although this is often disguised or unclear until the point of error ("Ephemer(e)ality capture") In our project, these errors—absences of information—are masked by smudged approximations that create a seemingly congruent, continuous smooth surface. This smoothness, typical for plastic—a material iconically associated with consumerism—is the same smoothness of an ideal, flawless body, sold through the commercial gloss of advertising cliches.

Halberstam points out that "failure is not a bad place to start for a critique of both capitalism and heteronormativity" ("On Behalf of Failure"), and argues that failure can be a conscious radical artistic practice aimed at disrupting capitalist modes of existence. With this in mind, we aim to question this illusive congruence, continuity, and flawlessness: certainty, in our work, is deliberately flawed, solid, and tangible. In the case of hand-drawn textures, we juxtapose the problematic perfection of plastic to the coarse texture of paper; the fast pace of consumerist production to the painstakingly slow process of redrawing the texture by hand, which is full of 'mistakes' and misaligned elements. It makes the objects look imperfect, aged, worn out: just like what their actual histories suggest.

The time spent on drawing was important since it was about investing human attention into a piece of machine-to-machine communication, interrupting the communication that's usually invisible to humans with human effort (figure 4). This also is an effort in understanding the machine through the mechanical replication of machine-to-machine dialogue. This effort is destined to fail, like an attempt to "speak" a language by simply repeating the sounding of a phrase in a language that one does not know. This failure to speak the language of the machine is what orchestrates an affective encounter with it; with its otherness. Confronting this impossibility, or failure, is our attempt at facing and contemplating the collapsing point of a capitalist order that seeks to present itself as continuous, stable perfection. This project is a meditation on failure. Its main goal is to encounter the impossibility of embracing the machine's otherness, and encounter the economic failure of an object.

208



figure 3: A texture of Snoopy scan taken by Pat (left), and Ksenia's drawing of the same texture made with a pencil (figure 4 shows the 3D model created from this redrawn UV map).

# Visuals

KSENIA'S PROCESS. The procedure of artistic manipulation of the 3D scan was slightly different in each particular case, since the scans and the circumstances of their acquisition were different and it seemed organic to respond to that.

The first Blender render (figure 4) was created by 3D-scanning a toy purchased from an individual collector in Moscow via Avito, a Russian classified advertisement website. The texture from a Polycam scan was redrawn by hand in acrylics on paper, with notable misalignments and colour mismatches. Fragments of the Avito posts, messaging history with the collector, and the history of McDonald's in Russia were included into the texture in diary-like fragments, forming a patchwork-like new texture for the same model.

Notably, in this case, the collector rejected the offer to keep the toy and sell the scan instead of a physical object, possibly just clearing the clutter in the attic rather than selling a collectible. This partly mirrors the whole ethos of the Avito platform, a conglomerate of "absent" personalities: individuals operating with highly individualised goods and services in a depersonalised economic environment.

209



figure 4: Ksenia Kopalova, 2024. Reworked "British" Snoopy found on Avito and purchased from a seller in Moscow (left) and the 3D scan with the original texture. Texts in the image on the left:

"Condition: used; Description: 1999; Peanuts Snoopy – 600 roubles; Detailed photos available";

"I suggest that you buy a toy and make a scan yourself :)" "It was from a Happy Meal, bought for me at Maccies" "Unfortunately, I would not be willing to share that kind of information"

"From 1990 to 2022, the American fast food chain McDonald's operated and franchised McDonald's restaurants in Russia."

This original texture (figure 4, right) already envelops a dented model, with the dent and further minor inaccuracies being the results of lo-fi 3D scanning process, but the most notable transformation happens when smooth and shiny plastic is turned into coarse paper, looking as if it was a patchwork of pieces or a *papier-mâché* model (figure 4, left). This reflects the patchiness and fragmentary nature of the geographies and stories behind the toy reflected in the texts featured in the UV map. Possibly more importantly though, the less polished, coarse texture of hand-painted paper is juxtaposed to the slick polish of mass produced plastic. Smoothness, perfect flatness of surfaces, as noted by Barry Higman, is associated with capitalist economic efficiency: reducing costs, maximising profits, increasing speed; but at the same time, has connotations of monotony, homogeneity, absence, and lack (10).

Unpolished, sketchy, rough work is hard to sell, since it resists the very fundamental logic of economic efficiency: it creates friction. Both in this model and in the others in this project, we have tried to introduce this friction through drawing practices, deliberately slowing down the process of image production, creating interruptions and relishing the mistakes and glitches.

The next 3D-scan (figure 5) was taken by Pat using Polycam. Ksenia redrew the texture in pencil on paper, incorporating bits of Pat's story behind the purchase and quotes from Joseph Bosco's article on the Snoopy craze in Hong Kong. The text got mirrored when the texture was applied to a 3D-model, reflecting the limited accessibility of the commodified object's backstory and the effort required to acquire it.



People here are panic-buying a toy" (Hong Kong Standard 1998, quoted in Bosco et al). Snoopy found in a Hong Kong illegal night flea market. Texts inserted into the image: "In other countries there is panic-buying of rice. igure 5: Ksenia Kopalova, 2024. Reworked "Norwegian"



211



figure 6: Ksenia Kopalova, 2024. Reworked "Spanish" Snoopy from a private collection in London.

Yet another 3D-scan (figure 6) was taken by the owner of the toy, illustrator from London Nick Peill, who also shared the story behind its acquisition: "The Happy Meal toys were bought at Chiswick car boot sale. They were being sold for £1 a piece and I had £2 left to spend. The stall owner kindly let me have 3 for £2 as I couldn't decide which ones I wanted."

The text in figure 7 is placed into the gaps in the texture that emerge as by-products of 3D-scanning and do not actually form parts of the object. These gaps feature either the parts of the background that were dismissed by Polycam when creating the model, or calculated approximations (blurry parts) between various surfaces. These gaps present lost/invisible pieces of information about the object, which is why the owner's story is placed into the gaps. Thus the more personal, cherished, and inaccessible dimensions of an object are only revealed through *phygital* (physical-digital) scrutiny and interpersonal communication. The texture file with the text can only be accessed if the model is exported, thus reflecting how operational images exclude human participation.

212



figure 7: Ksenia Kopalova, 2024. The hand-drawn acrylic texture for the 3D-scan from Nick Peill, incorporating the story of the acquisition of the object.

213

PAT'S PROCESS. Pat's experiment primarily focuses on the gaps and data loss in the 3D-scan of the Snoopy model.

In the first texture drawing (figure 8), Pat aimed to show how machines and humans define the borderlines between the texture segments. She traced the colour sections of the original texture, circling each shape to form independent abstract shapes, ultimately creating a new UV map. Pat numbered all shapes to determine how many sections make up the 3D model's surface. Then, Pat coloured each shape to match the original texture, adding a golden texture to some. This symbolises how Hong Kong consumers in 1998 anticipated the future value of Snoopy when buying the Happy Meal toy. The resulting 3D model showcases how the gold fills the shape and ambiguous gaps through personal perception, presenting an ironic outcome, since in the past, Snoopy has been speculated over to have a higher value as an investment.



figure 8: Pat WingShan Wong, 2024. Reworked "Ireland" Snoopy from Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong.

Building on the previous attempt, we explored defining the shapes further, shifting the focus to undefined edges. Revisiting the UV map, we analysed how the 3D scan splits into segments reflecting the moments of scanning. Due to varying scanning conditions, the segments' number, size, and arrangement differ, highlighting human involvement in this AI-driven process. Pat expanded and highlighted the original UV map segments' edges in gold texture, then applied them back to the model (figure 9). The final 3D model highlights the uncertainties and absences of information as particularly valuable and meaningful.

214



figure 9: Pat WingShan Wong, 2024. Reworked "Ireland" Snoopy from Sham Shui Po.



In the next work (figure 10), the texture is defined by two components: the coloured shape (the area within the yellow dotted line in figure 10, right) and the unseen or lost shape missed during the 3D scan (green area). The gap between the coloured shapes (green and blue areas) results from AI-calculated colour expansion. The aim is to introduce human touch by highlighting the green area and matching it to the coloured shapes of Snoopy in the texture. In the final outcome (figure 11), the colour strips act like masking tape, repairing and covering Snoopy's "wounds" like band-aids.

215



figure 11: Pat WingShan Wong, 2024. Reworked "Ireland" Snoopy from Sham Shui Po.

rom Sham Shui Po



Segments from the texture maps are highlighted to show how AI expands the texture and how the 3D camera divides the models based on various conditions. For the subsequent 3D sculptures (figures 12, 13) Pat uses watercolours, a very personal material, in the sense that it bears a very tangible trace of the artist's hand. Additionally, the watercolour influences blurring, and the colour spread produces results similar to the original texture's blurring; both equally unpredictable. The final texture was overlaid with a layer referencing the UV map segments to highlight the breaks in each Snoopy figure.

216







figure 13: Pat WingShan Wong, 2024. Reworked "Scotland" Snoopy (Sham Shui Po). This time the texture is applied to a 3D scan of a toy sealed in a bag, since the seller always kept it that way, never getting it out of its package, and emphasised the quality of the well-maintained plastic.

217





# Customisi<sup>n</sup>g a digital archiVe

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault argues that, being discursive entities, archives are "a distribution of gaps, voids, absence, limits, divisions" (134). The speculative archive we have started in our project can be an illustration of this seemingly contradictory idea, as it attempts to make these absences visible.

Another juxtaposition at the core of this project is the juxtaposition of collectively created archives (such as the Polycam "Explore" section) and curated digital archives, such as the one that we are working on. But what is a digital archive as such? Sven Spieker's definition refers to the contrast between the physical and the digital archive, attempting to define a digital archive through its modular structure which allows flexibility and a less hierarchised mode of usage:

The principal difference between databases and archives lies in the fact that databases are modular—all their elements can be regrouped in any way—whereas the [principle of provenance]-based archive promotes the idea of an original order that the archivist adapts and preserves (137).

This modular system, implying that the elements of the archive can be added, regrouped, and retrieved according to each user's individual need similarly to a Google search mechanism, seems to be at the core of archives such as Polycam's, which can be characterised both as "chaotic" and "accessible". Moreover, as Jaimie Baron mentions, these archives "can be viewed in a variety of orders, none of which necessarily corresponds to how they were ordered in their "original context," whatever that might be" (184). In other words, in a digital archive, there is a disconnection between the creator of the archived object and the viewer/ user, the "curation" of the viewing experience is defined (and unified) by the institutional and technological limitations of the platform, rather than individual or collective curatorial decisions of some archons.

Moreover, as Annet Dekker notes, recalling Derrida's Archive Fever, "technology changes the content of what is archived" (11–26). Polycam's public archive is not limited to recognised objects of valuable heritage carefully selected by curators. They can feature someone's cats, smashed cans found in the streets, or—Snoopy toys. This seems to point towards the egalitarian, bottom-to-top nature of Polycam archives, but is this really so? Looking at its purely visual attributes-isolation/suspendedness of the models in undefined technological void, accentuation of surfaces (appearances) rather than bodies (content), blurry masks of the digital approximations aimed at beautifying the object, making it seem better than it is—suggests that of all spaces, in its underlying logic a Polycam archive is most similar to a digital marketplace like Amazon—a space which allows retrieval of physical objects out of a grey (or white, like on Amazon) computational void, spitting out idealised consumable objects upon the user's request.

In contrast, our archive is curated by just two artists—in collaboration with some of the people who provided the 3D scans— who are focused on flaws and absences, as well as their own biases and imperfections in this curation-creation process. In our process, the drawbacks of individually curated archive-making with all its skews and imbalances are juxtaposed with the idea of the Amazon-like consumerist perfection of the public archive of 3D scans.

# Conclusion

In our project we attempted to create a speculative archive of 3D objects that would reinterpret the existing physical toys that no longer participate in the original economic life cycle. We have tried to trace the "economic afterlife" of these objects and argue that they hold traces, glitchy and blurry "scars" of the local and personal histories that we tried to reveal through the process of 3D-scanning. Through this process and dialogue, the unseen becomes visible, opening new discussions about speculative value, social heritage and consumer behaviour. This invites the public to view these Snoopy toys not only as objects of design/marketing history, but also as a repository of collective memories within the city and the larger community.

We have also attempted to highlight the ideological connotations behind 3D scanning as a technology. Photogrammetry, being based on photography, not only inherits its biases and history of being associated with the idea of scientific truth, but also has its own biases specific to the particular types of operational images it uses—UV maps (texture files). Interrupting the machine-to-machine communication performed through redrawing these UV maps allows us to better understand the biases of photogrammetry-specific processes. In particular, we noted that the blurriness of the texture can be treated not merely as a technical attempt to create a believable approximation, but can also be a metaphorical representation of a capitalist striving for the "ideal" which can not tolerate errors, bumps, gaps, and splits. The imperfection of human decision in photogrammetry is replaced by automated approximation based on generative processes of AI.

In our project, we, on the contrary, sought to embrace imperfection and introduce a human element into the technological procedure that seeks to eliminate, or hide, the human touch. Our goal was to create meaning and convey messages through revealing the mechanisms and pipeline of texture mapping. The outcome becomes an assemblage of the personal stories and contexts of each object that critically repositions the value of Snoopy toys under marketing-controlled consumerism. Instead of seeing these objects through their reselling value and through the prism of a failed investment, reinforced by the platforms of recirculation of such second-hand goods, our project attempts to highlight their value as repositories of collective and individual histories, with mistake and loss being at the core of these histories.

With 3D scanning technologies, the process of collecting and archiving scans allows individuals to view and interact with archived items from anywhere in the world. This democratises access to cultural artefacts and narratives, overcoming geographical and physical barriers. At the same time, we have tried to look into some of the controversies and complexities behind this accessibility and challenge the less obvious sides of photogrammetry as an archiving process.

In this project we attempted to use drawing as a learning tool, as a way to understand something about a seemingly simple object that embodies complex geographical, economic, and political histories. In this respect, the archive we are making is process-, rather than outcome-oriented: we are not seeking to create polished 3D models. Instead, we are interested in exploring and using slightly different strategies for each toy and each story we come across, using drawing as a research tool to understand something not related to drawing itself, thus opening up opportunities for a dialogue of illustrative practices with other disciplines.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank illustrator Nick Peill, Oddeyes Vintage store owner Emily May Anscombe for providing the 3D scans of the items from their collections and sharing their stories, and all the sellers and collectors who helped us in finding the toys. Kachi Chan and Leo Wong have provided support in the texture mapping for the Snoopy model.

#### REFERENCES

**.RAW.** Mapping Economic Absences, 2024, http://rrraw.work/economicab-sence. Accessed 6 October 2024.

**Baron, Jaimie.** The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History. Routledge, 2013.

Besseling, Dave. "When McDonald's Asked Hongkongers to Eat Junk Food Once a Day for a Month to Collect Snoopy Toys, and Fights Broke out." South China Morning Post, 23 September 2022, https://www.scmp.com/ magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/ article/3193488/when-mcdonalds-askedhongkongers-eat-junk-food. Accessed 6 October 2024.

**Bosco, Joseph.** "The McDonald's Snoopy Craze in Hong Kong." *Consuming Hong Kong*, edited by Gordon Matthews and Tai-lok Lui, Hong Kong University Press, 2001.

Bredekamp, Horst, Vera Dünkel, Birgit Schneider. The Technical Image: A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery. University of Chicago Press, 2021.

**Dekker, Annet.** "What it Means to Be Lost and Living (in) Archives." *Lost and Living (In) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, edited by Annet Dekker. Valiz, 2017, pp. 11-26

**Else, Nicole.** Virtual museum for McDonald's and other fastfood toys. https://esperantowebdesign.com/fastfood/. Accessed 6 October 2024.

Foucault, Michel. The Archaeology of Knowledge. Routledge, 2002.

Halberstam, Jack. "On Behalf of Failure." *IPAK Centar*, YouTube, 2 October 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-P086r\_d4fc. Accessed 6 October 2024. Higman, Barry. Flatness. Reaktion Books, 2017.

**Lotringer, Sylvère, and Paul Virilio.** *The Accident of Art.* Semiotext(e), 2005.

Marks, Laura. "The Haptic Critic 2." *The Journal of Images and Culture: Framework*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1996.

**Menkman, Rosa.** *The Glitch Moment(um)*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2011.

**Milnes, Tom.** "Ephemer(e)ality Capture: Glitch Practices in Photogrammetry." *Journal for Artistic Research*, no. 24, 27 September 2021.

**Paglen, Trevor.** "Operational Images." *e-flux*, vol. 59. no. 19, November 2014.

**Parikka**, Jussi. "Operational Images: Between Light and Data." *e-flux*, vol. 133, February 2023.

**Peill, Nick.** Personal Interview. 15 August 2024.

**Roopinder, Tara.** "3D Scanning for Everyone? Not Yet." *Engineering.com*, 11 January 2023, https://www.engineering.com/3d-scanning-for-everyone-not-yet/. Accessed 6 October 2024.

Sekula, Allan. "The Body and the Archive." *The Archive*, edited by Charles Merewether, The MIT Press, 2006, pp. 70-5.

**Spieker, Sven.** *The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy.* The MIT Press, 2008.

Srnicek, Nick. Platform Capitalism. Wiley, 2016.

**Steyerl, Hito.** Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War. Verso Books, 2017.

Steyerl, Hito. "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective" *e-flux*, vol. 24, April 2011. Accessed 6 October 2024.

# [Biography]

in Illustration at the Arts University Bournemouth. She is a founder of .RAW, an online magazine drawing cross-disciplinary connections in the arts and humanities. Ksenia's current professional interests revolve around the idea Ksenia Kopalova is an illustrator and a researcher with a background in sociology, currently working as a Lecturer of illustration as knowledge-making. Her personal projects mainly explore memory- and place-making strategies, as well as intersections of the digital and the physical.

ঙ

Pat WingShan Wong (aka Flyingpig) is an artist and researcher whose research-led projects explore the interplay between people and urban transformation, particularly in the context of capitalisation and its impacts on both the real and digital worlds. She founded @spread\_pages, a contemporary illustration platform that explores illustration as a research method, and she is part of the artist duo @foreseen\_agency, which creates speculative narratives through cross-disciplinary research in art and technology. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the Academy of Visual Arts at Hong Kong Baptist University