
iNVENTX Creative Exhibition

SUSTAINAISSANCE IN PRACTICE: Quiet Materials, Loud Meaning

The Hand of Life

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Abstract

The main purpose of this artwork is to reflect on the extent of human influence on the environment and ecosystem. The piece aims to raise awareness of how everyday actions contribute to environmental change. The artwork adopts a pixel-art approach using discarded keyboard keycaps as the primary material, highlighting the potential of repurposing electronic waste into meaningful visual expression. Through this process, the work emphasises the abundance of overlooked materials and the energy required to produce physical objects. Ultimately, the artwork positions humanity as both the cause of environmental degradation and the agent capable of positive transformation.

Keywords: Sustainability; Electronic waste; Pixel art; Eco-art; Digital culture

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Artist Statement

Concept and Theme

The main inspiration for the artwork was a tree, as we wanted to explore a simple and strong visual concept. By choosing a tree as the main subject we played around the idea of the tree being our ecosystem. The hand is inspired by the roots of a tree, symbolising the foundational relationship between humanity and the natural environment. Transforming the roots into a human hand suggests that mankind metaphorically holds the ecosystem within its grasp. This visual metaphor positions humans as agents with the power to nurture, exploit, or restore the environment. Every human action therefore carries ecological consequences, particularly in an era of rapidly depleting natural resources.

The theme "SUSTAINAISSANCE: Emotion, Expression, Identity" helped us narrow down our artistic focus. As humans, we tend to be driven by emotions and our actions from our emotions can impact the fragility of the environment. Expression, we want to express ourselves in a subtle and calm way. Not in a loud way but a more calm and serene way to let people feel the calmness of the piece. Instead of fearing what will happen, we want others to be hopeful. Hope for a better future and world for the next generation to come. Identity, we given that the hand is meant to represent mankind and how it gives us the identity of the ones who can bring change to the world. We can either destroy or let the world grown and that depends on what we do. The impact will come either it's negative and positive is it within our power.

The main part of our artwork is how it made with use keycaps from old keyboards, we want to show how sustainability plays a role with this artwork. Without these keycaps it would just be a flat artwork, and we want to make the artwork pop out, so that it can make an impression to people about how we can make art from medium that we never thought of using. By reusing the keycaps and making it as our palette we get to be intentional with the colours as we want to keep the palette clean and simple. With a soft palette it helps with making an impression to others. It also shows how we as consumer can make a change on our identity, we do not need to just consume but we can reuse what we already have and make it beautiful. It helps us find the identity that we are meant to create rather than just mindlessly consume nonstop.

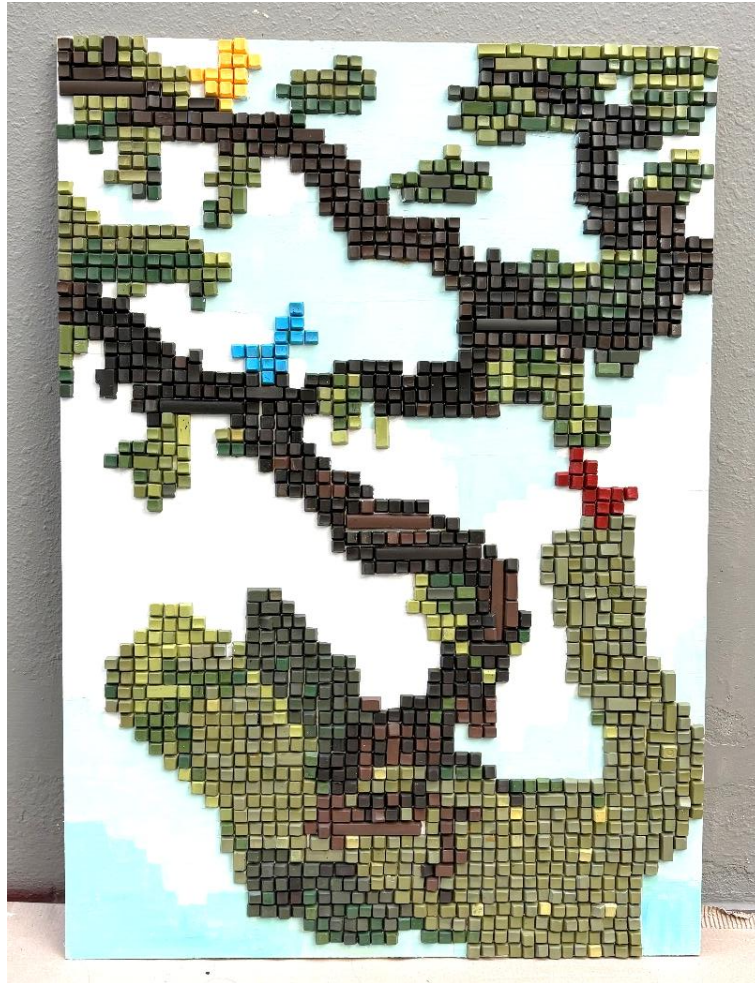


Figure 1. The Hand of Life (2025). Acrylic on Board with Recycled Keyboard Keycaps
Photo by Adriana Halim, Enni Norsyahirah Ramlan and Nik Ahmed Kameel Hanipah

Approach and Process

We began our creative process with a suggestion from our supervisor, Dr. Koo who encouraged us to approach EARTH (E-waste Recycling Company) to obtain discarded keycaps as the main material for our artwork. With this direction, we aimed to repurpose electronic waste into something meaningful, transforming the discarded into a visual narrative that reflects the themes of emotion, expression, and identity in SUSTAINAISSANCE.

During the brainstorming process, we observed that most of the keycaps shared a rectangular shape, which sparked the idea to create pixel art, a style that complemented the uniformity of the keycaps. We explored various illustration concepts and eventually chose a design that best aligned with the themes. Once finalized, we measured both the keycaps and the board to ensure the composition would fit precisely. The illustration was then adjusted accordingly to maintain a clean layout.

As we began preparing the keycaps, we noticed that although the keycaps were similar in size, they varied in height, rather than altering them, we used this inconsistency to create a textural depth, like the irregularity of tree bark. We sanded each keycap to help the acrylic paint adhere firmly, then primed the board with gesso. After painting the background and colouring the keycaps based on our chosen palette, we assembled the pieces using contact adhesive to fix each keycap in place. Once secured, we added a final layer of background paint to bring the whole artwork together visually and sealed it with a glossy finishing spray, giving it both protection and a refined appearance.

Meaning and Impact

This artwork communicates the idea that human society is a fundamental driver of environmental conditions. Everyday behaviours such as patterns of consumption, waste generation, and resource use accumulate into significant ecological impacts. Although individual actions may appear insignificant, collectively they shape the sustainability of the environment. The work therefore encourages viewers to reflect on personal responsibility and environmental mindfulness.

In daily life, people often become detached from the long term consequences of their habits, especially when environmental issues feel distant or abstract. By presenting familiar digital materials in a physical and tactile form, the artwork invites viewers to pause and reconsider their relationship with technology and waste. The intention is not to induce guilt, but to gently prompt awareness and self reflection, suggesting that meaningful change begins with small conscious decisions in everyday life.

Materials and Techniques

The main materials used in creating this piece were keycaps collected from old keyboards. The intention was to construct the artwork in a pixel-like form, which offered a more engaging way to explore the theme of sustainability. The keycaps function as the colour palette of the artwork, where the limited range of colours is compensated by the variation in height and texture of each piece. This creates a sense of visual depth, making the artwork appear rich in colour when viewed from a distance, even though many of the tones are closely related. The background was painted to further enhance this layered effect, allowing the foreground keycaps to stand out and giving the overall composition a stronger sense of dimension and form (see Figure 1).

These techniques were chosen to emphasise the pixelated aesthetic and to communicate the idea of hope in a subtle and approachable way. The pixel style gives the artwork a playful and friendly appearance, making the message easier to connect with across different audiences. By referencing visual elements commonly found in video games, the work becomes more relatable to contemporary viewers, especially in a digital generation where gaming and virtual environments are part of everyday

life. Video games often shape how people imagine worlds, identities, and possibilities, and this artwork draws from that familiarity to suggest that just as digital worlds can be built and redesigned, our real environment can also be reshaped through conscious and thoughtful actions. People today increasingly find personal identity and meaning through digital environments such as video games. This artwork pays homage to that experience by adopting a pixel-based aesthetic that mirrors digital visual culture. By referencing gaming visuals, the piece connects environmental awareness with contemporary digital identity, allowing the message of sustainability to resonate with a broader and younger audience.

Artistic and Design Influences

We explored existing e-waste art practices and encountered several examples through online articles and documentation. These references inspired us to consider how waste materials, particularly electronic waste, could be transformed into meaningful artistic expressions. Observing the increasing culture of overconsumption, especially through online shopping, reinforced our intention to highlight the growing problem of waste and the lack of sustainable disposal methods.

Beyond environmental concerns, we were also fascinated to learn how discarded objects carry hidden histories and emotional traces of everyday use. Each technological object once served a purpose in someone's life, and by reassembling these materials into a new form, we attempt to give them a second narrative. In this sense, the artwork becomes not only a visual statement about sustainability, but also a quiet reflection on memory, value, and how easily functional objects are forgotten once they lose their immediate utility.

We took inspiration from the colourful works of Tom Deininger and sought to translate similar visual richness into our own composition. The use of colour and material is eye catching. The more we studied his work, the more we were impressed by his ability to manipulate texture and colour to generate visual depth. Another artist we looked inspiration from was Peter Mcfarlane. He played around with computer motherboards mainly and we noticed how limited it is especially when it comes to colours. We played around a lot with the composition as well as the negative spaces so we can let the artwork pop out more, not just by colours but also in its form.



Figure 2. One of Tom Deininger's Artwork



Figure 3. One of Peter McFarlane's Artworks

Conclusion

This artwork reflects the efforts we put to change our environment for the better. Small habits or actions we take can always bring a larger impact in our lives and our surroundings. An art piece made with discarded materials that symbolize new life by changing waste to reusable resources. When looking into the artwork itself, it gives a sense of familiarity with the combination of technological view with nature's perception. In a digital age, keyboard keys are devices used by people in a daily basis that resonate with modern society. This creative work is a fusion between the digital culture and eco-art. Eco-art practices using electronic waste have become increasingly common (Revivn, 2014). We hope that this work can inspire many people from environmental activists, art enthusiasts, educational institutions and even students from colleges to continue their journey for better solutions taking care of our collapsing environment.

References

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We received multiple boxes of old keyboards from EARTH.

Authors' Bio

Adriana Binti Halim is an aspiring comic artist currently pursuing her studies in animation at Multimedia University. She actively participates in local art conventions and creative events as a way of engaging with the wider artistic community and connecting with fellow creatives. Her personal work focuses primarily on character and background design, and she aspires to work as a character designer upon completing her degree. While she mainly works with digital media, she also explores traditional techniques and has a strong interest in translating her artwork into merchandise such as charms and printed materials.

Enni Norsyahirah Binti Ramlan is an animation student at Multimedia University with a strong passion for illustration and 2D animation. She is committed to developing her artistic skills through continuous practice in drawing and storytelling, often drawing inspiration from everyday experiences and personal narratives. Her work is characterised by a warm and expressive visual style, and she aims to create illustrations and animations that are engaging, relatable, and emotionally resonant with audiences.

Nik Ahmed Kameel Bin Hanipah is a creative practitioner with a diverse skill set and experience in various software tools used in digital and visual production. He is currently focused on strengthening his abilities in 3D and visual effects, while also exploring drawing and sketching in his personal practice. In addition to his technical interests, he values teamwork and leadership, and strives to contribute reliably and responsibly in collaborative creative projects.