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# iNVENTX Creative Exhibition

## SUSTAINAISSANCE IN PRACTICE: Quiet Materials, Loud Meaning

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### Tapestry of Co-Creation

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#### Abstract

This artwork explores SUSTAINAISSANCE through the resilience of nature and the importance of sustainable interconnectedness. What had begun as mere curiosity evolved into a multilayered digital artwork that reflects the pursuit of ecological balance alongside technological advancement, and the redefinition of personal identity anchored in ethnic roots. Using lichens as a living metaphor for sustainability through mutualism and acknowledging its role as a silent record-keeper of environmental health, the work visually contrasts distortion with the vibrancy of life to symbolise the need for balance between technological innovations and ecological fragility. The inclusion of literary expression through the use of Chinese characters adds a personal dimension through the exploration of one aspect of the artist's culture and heritage. Through this artwork, it is hoped that sustainable values are seen by the viewers as a guide for co-creation and perhaps imagine a world where communities collectively agree to thrive together in balance.

**Keywords:** Co-creation; Interconnectedness; Sustainability; Revival; Tapestry

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## Artist Statement

When I first read the theme of this creative exhibition, *SUSTAINAISSANCE*: Emotion. Expression. Identity, my mind went immediately to a photograph I had taken whilst traveling in England circa March 2023. I often find myself drawn to moments where life persists within the cracks of urban landscapes: lush growth of moss tracing a path between well laid bricks or sprouts of greenery bursting through gaps on the sides of a building. To me, these moments often serve as poignant reminders to be more aware of the impact we have on nature and the environment. During my travels, I paused to observe one such instance more closely, capturing it through the lens of my camera. A piece of dead branch lay discarded on the concrete pavement but what caught my eye was the vibrant green plant wrapped around it. To my untrained eye, it was the contrast of the vivid green colours that looked so full of life against the dull grey of the pavement that drew my curiosity. I later discovered, with the help of Google Lens, that it was *Xanthoria parietina*, commonly known as the maritime sunburst lichen. It is typically a bright yellow-orange but can be found in shades of green in the absence of sunlight [1] and indeed I started taking notice of them during my travels (see Figure 1). Lichens, as I quickly learnt, were not plants but a composite of organisms living in symbiosis. A collaboration and partnership between fungus and algae or cyanobacterium, thriving not through dominance but through mutualism. The fungus offers structure and protection, whilst the algae or cyanobacteria provides life-giving energy through photosynthesis [1]. A realization dawned upon me as to how lichens could be seen as a living metaphor for sustainable efforts: a mutual agreement to thrive together in balance. It inspired me to reimagine creative expression as a form of co-creation with the natural world, rooted in interconnectedness and a commitment to sustainable thinking.



Figure 1. Sample Photos of Lichen Captured by the Artist

Interestingly, lichens are also known as bioindicators, sensitive especially to heavy metal pollutants in the air around them as they are without roots and draw sustenance straight from the atmosphere [2][3]. To observe them is to witness a kind of ecological record inscribed on stone and bark, offering insight into the invisible stories unfolding in the air we all share. With that, I realized that the simple gesture of capturing lichens on camera in 2023 will now become the conceptual foundation of my artwork. In my artwork I tried to express the struggle of finding that balance and interconnectedness as a digital creative. I wanted to visually depict the transformation towards innovation and progress, and yet offer a reminder of the importance of sustainable efforts to co-exist in mutualism.

I explored this concept through the use of the lichen photograph I had captured, which I then digitally manipulated in Procreate to distort the colours as an expression of its function as nature’s bioindicator. I then decided to make it look only partially distorted and added a cropped overlay of the same image only this time using blending modes to make it look vividly green as if vibrant with life. The manipulation was done through the use of duplicate layers and experimenting with different blending modes to get the visual effect I wanted. The distortion symbolises a marker of potential destruction and loss if we do not find that sustainable balance. The vibrant green of the lichen represents the bold resilience of nature and transformative power of sustainable efforts. Then through the use of the glitch filter, I layered it with glitches that hint at the entanglement of technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI) which is now very much a part of the creative process of various domains [4]. I then sought to find a balance in which one effect does not overpower the other. Figure 2. shows the aforementioned creative process.



Figure 2. Process of Editing and Manipulating the Lichen Photo in Procreate

While creating the artwork, I then thought about using typography to add a layer of literary expression. And in considering the concept of “Identity” within the theme, I also sought to challenge myself by reconnecting with my ethnic roots — in this case through Mandarin, in hopes of stirring up renewed creativity and expression of identity in myself. Given my elementary level of Mandarin, I

relied on online translation tools to find the words to best express my message. “復活” (fùhuó) carries the meaning of resurrection and revival, often used in religious, personal, or metaphorical contexts when combined with other words. While the word “復興” (fùxīng), is derived from the phrase “文藝復興” (wényì fùxīng) which refers to the renaissance period and the general concept of artistic or intellectual resurgence. On its own, it can mean revitalisation or reconstruction of something that was damaged or lost. The beauty of the Chinese language, as I explored through the creation of this artwork, lies in the poetic and multi-layered meanings of each character. Both words are closely related in that they convey the idea of restoring or bringing something back to life and hence I took the creative liberty to place them together to express the idea of a revival of creative renaissance ideals through sustainable practice. The use of traditional Chinese characters was deliberately done to anchor the artwork in the culture, heritage and traditions I come from whilst the use of a modern font type (known as “黑體” (hēitǐ) which can be loosely translated as “Sans-Serif” [5]) was done to position the artwork within a current context.

I played around with several layouts and ideas, thinking if I should build the words through imagery, through the use of negative space, or clipping masks. In the end I decided to overlay the text on the lichen image using a simple layout where the words can be read from left to right and up to down and laid the Chinese characters out in a square format reminiscent of traditional Chinese seals (see Figure 3). I also used blending modes to visually combine and “connect” the text with the image. Figure 4 shows the process in which I experimented with the initial 4-character layout and even tried to rotate each of the characters.



Figure 3. Chongzhen Emperor’s Signature and Seal.  
Source: [5]

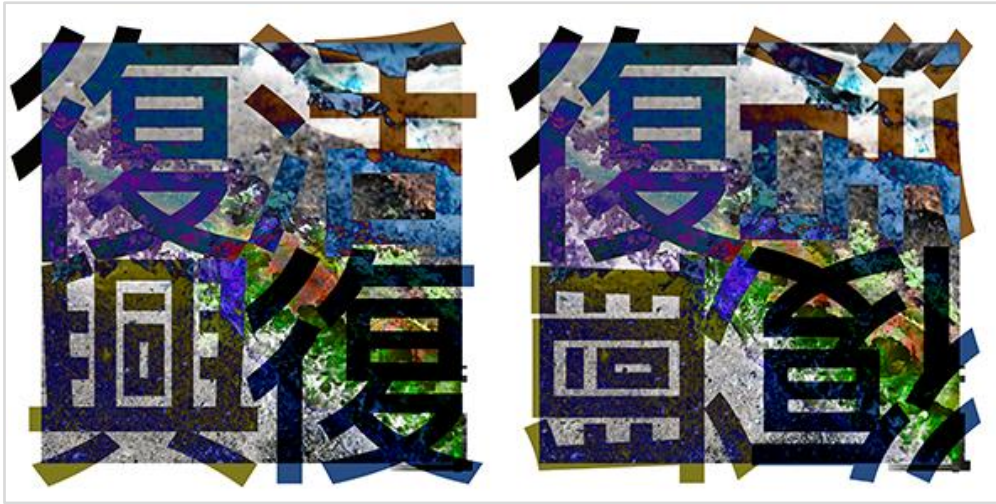


Figure 4. Exploring Different Text Layout Options

Eventually, I felt that the text had now become the domineering feature of the artwork and the lichen imagery had become lost in the background. In the spirit of wanting more of a balanced coexistence between text and image, I removed the 4th character from the text layout to allow the lichen imagery to come to the foreground and fill up the space. I also played around with the layer positions of both text and image to illustrate the idea of interconnectedness. The final outcome is a multilayered digital artwork reflecting the ideas of finding ecological balance while embracing technological advancement, and redefining personal identity anchored in cultural heritage and roots (see Figure 5.).



Figure 5. "Tapestry of Co-Creation"

## Conclusion

Where do we draw the line in sustainable co-creation? How do we strike the balance between environmental responsibility and the pursuit of future possibilities? Perhaps true equilibrium may always seem just out of reach, but I hope this artwork invites introspection of our creative practices in

an ever-changing world, that sustainability can co-exist with growth and innovation. Like lichens, we might imagine communities that choose to thrive together through mutual support in a woven entanglement; a vision that could inspire a revival of creative renaissance shaped by sustainable values.

## References

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## Authors’ Bio

**Heidi Tan** is an Assistant Professor in the Advertising Design department of the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University. She has a PhD in Creative Multimedia focusing on authentic problem-solving learning environments. When not focusing on research and teaching, digital art is her form of therapy and in those moments of creating she gets some much-needed respite.