



MONETIZING SYSTEMS AND BLOCKCHAIN ART IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGICAL REPRODUCTION

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Monetizing Systems and Blockchain Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction

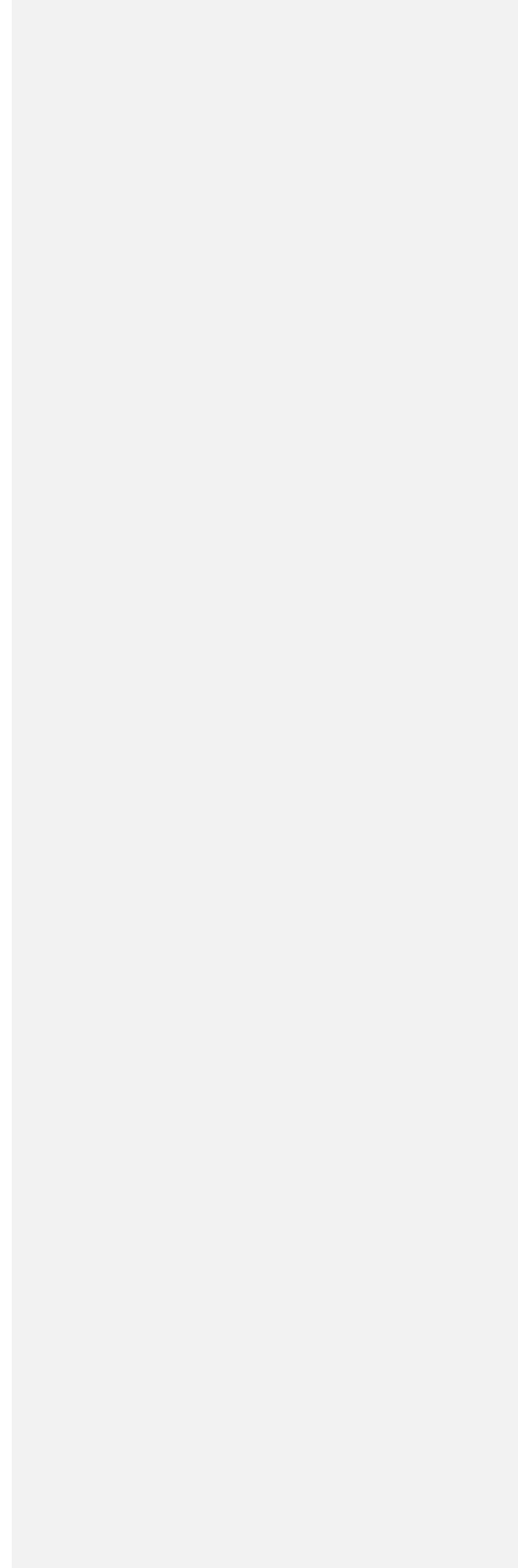


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Introduction

In a New York Times article back in June of 2018, Irish conceptual artist Kevin Abosch was featured for his work in which he attempted to turn his body into a “coin.” A couple of scrolls down the article reveal a shot of Abosch holding up a vial of his own blood, freshly drawn, which he will use for his *I AMA COIN* project. The artist takes one hundred pieces of paper and stamps each with the address code which links to crypto-tokens created for the project. The tokens can then be bought and traded on the blockchain system, Ethereum, and include one million editions. Despite the address code only really pointing the audience to the place where the tokens “live” on the web, Abosch asserts that he “successfully connected my physical body to the virtual works” in such a way that he sees the art “as pieces of me.” The resulting reliquary of blood contains the complexities of the monetizable power blockchain.



(Image) A vial of blood used to stamp blockchain addresses onto paper for a project that Mr. Abosch called “IAMA Coin” (2018). Credit Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

Blockchain offers quick transactions of digital products without the need of government oversight, corruptible intermediaries (hypothetically), import or export taxes. Its system capabilities as a public ledger are considered useful by those who wish to revisit transactional history over a long period of time.

Information input into blockchain becomes permanent unless a large majority of the user base decides to change it (which at this moment stands at an estimated 313,914,414 user wallets globally and approximately 2.9 million users), along with faster

payment processes and money transfers.¹ Blockchain's most sought-after feature is its ability to allow intellectual property mechanisms (i.e. a record of authorship, transactional history, contractual agreements, etc.) to be applied to digital works based on mostly automatic computational system functions.

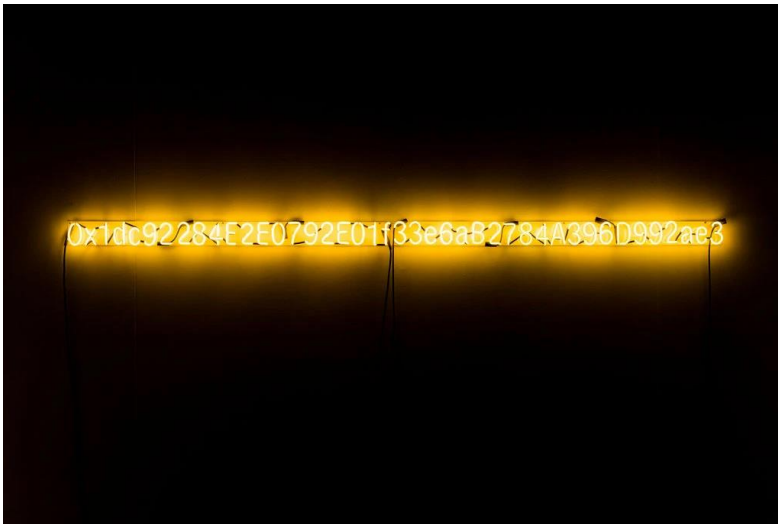
Most of the crypto-market is born out of a rejection of institutional banking and centralized financial power; this is an ideological stance that came out of the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. But the breakneck pace of blockchain being adopted by certain sections of the art world is due to provenance protections that can be provided for digital art. The difficulty of gaining the same monetary rewards of their physical precursors has historically prevented digital art from commercial exploitation. Since docs, jpegs, pdfs are not limited by any built-in protections, copies, pirating, and unlimited sharing is inevitable with many digital objects. However, blockchain creates scarcity in immaterial objects using permanent transaction history. This feature provides an improved record of provenance, allowing for limited dissemination. Blockchain offers digital art the ability to become an "object" as we understand it in the physical world. An example of this is seen in the work *YELLOW LAMBO*, also by Kevin Abosch.

Although based partly in Ireland, Abosch is well-connected in the Silicon Valley and upper echelons of the tech world. Abosch is internationally best known for his iconic portraits of CEOs and movie stars that run in the \$150,000 range for one portrait. The artist splits his time between Boston and Ireland, starting his career working as a biologist with a fondness of technology.² His breakthrough was during the 1990s, when he was working with CBS Records,

¹ "How Many People Own Bitcoin and How They Use BTC?" U.Today. <https://u.today/how-many-people-own-bitcoin-and-how-they-use-btc>.

² Shontell, Alyson. "This Photographer Takes \$150,000 Portraits of Silicon Valley's Most Powerful People, and He Sold a Picture of a Potato for over \$1 Million." Business Insider. January 20, 2016

volunteering his time as a photographer for a shoot of a band. From there, Abosch gained a high-profile clientele, especially after taking a portrait of actor Johnny Depp in 2010. After that, Abosch appears to focus most of his work on his own fine art projects, memorialized in his work, *Potato #345* in 2010; a well-lit photograph of an organic Irish russet potato taken over Abosch's trademark pitch-black background set. The photograph went viral, with numerous articles revolving around its most notable feature being that it was sold for over \$1 million dollars to an anonymous buyer.³



*(Image)
"YELLOW
LAMBO"
(2018), a neon
sculpture of a
blockchain
address
symbolizing
Lamborghinis,
sold to a former
Skype executive
for
\$400,000. Taken
by the artist.
Sourced from
The New York
Times.*

Abosch was later led into blockchain by his fascination with technology, along with his close connections to Silicon Valley. He conceived *YELLOW LAMBO* by taking the address code of the mined block and turning it into a neon sign which he sold to a Skype executive for

³ Munro, Cait. "Potato Photograph Sells For \$1.5 Million." Artnet News. January 27, 2016. <https://news.artnet.com/market/kevin-abosch-potato-photo-414257>.

\$400,000; the price of a Lamborghini that gave the work its title.⁴ Transactional information of the mined block is stored in the address code along with the “terms of service”, otherwise known as the smart contract. *YELLOW LAMBO* has a dual existence. That it can be found both outside and inside the web creates a complicated conundrum. It exists as both a physical manifestation and as an immaterial historical record of events and cultural complexities. The “object” is always what we perceive as an object in accordance to our perception of its recognition (i.e. an image, a moving picture, money, etc.). The “meaning” of an object lies in the societal, historical, and ontological conditions of its being. Digital art made with blockchain exists in limbo; its identity fluctuates between its physical manifestation and its conceptualization on the web. It is my goal to examine these fluctuations and what they mean in the grand scheme of monetizable digital art.

In discussing this topic, it is important to distinguish between digitally made art and digitized art (i.e. artworks that are recorded using technology). An example of the latter would be the vast number of museums and galleries that allow their art to be available on the web, such as the works available on the Metropolitan Museum’s website. But the digital art under examination in this thesis focuses on works made with binary code. It also encompasses material works that interact with digital space by either engaging with technology conceptually or having some mechanism that allows the object to be connected to digital space. However, blockchain-based works and works that include the direct context of blockchain are the focus of this essay. Kevin Abosch’s *YELLOW LAMBO* is a digital art work, for example, because its social and historical origins are deeply tied to blockchain and it can only function with its digital address code. If the address code was the wrong sequence of numbers and letters, it wouldn’t be *YELLOW LAMBO*

⁴ Smith, Oliver. "Kevin Abosch: The Artist Who Became A Bitcoin." Forbes. July 13, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliversmith/2018/06/27/kevin-abosch-the-artist-who-became-a-bitcoin/#64e0aeff647b>.

When analyzing blockchain art, authorship and authenticity are key considerations that are taken into account for true object status. It is to be a valuable, commodifiable entity, that operates as “unique” and “original.” However, with that comes the power dynamics of what counts as having originality and what that may look like with digital objects that are inherently open sourced. First coined by Walter Benjamin in his *Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction*, the theory of “the aura” is the quality from the original work of art that cannot be translated into the technological reproduction. By making its provenance tangible, blockchain enables the ephemeral digital to have validity. As such, the object gains “rewards” for its proof of existence; it is open now to gain capital at a more reassured rate. When authorship and transactional history are being tracked, digital objects become more appealing on a market level to prospective collectors. Without the ID, the digital object maintains its status as infinitely reprogrammable and interactive. This is not useful for monetization. “Aura” is what gives the digital object its autonomy as a singular original. There is no need to differentiate it from its inevitable visual copies, since its aura is easily digestible by the consumer. Aura (in blockchain) is the combination of contributing electronic qualities that is contained in the address code (the record of sale, the contractual agreement, the ledger of price fluctuations, etc.). Aura is also the verifiability of the object’s existence on the web that can be accessed publicly. Its inability to be changed is what highly contributes to these attributes becoming the aura. Since in Benjamin’s view the aura is the qualities that cannot be translated into mechanical reproduction, the aura in blockchain acts in a similar way but with the exception that there is not a transference but a connection. This connection is experienced by each person that views the digital object from a intermediary (computer), but the item remains unchanged, no matter what quality the intermediary is. If the object were to be pirated without the blockchain connection, then that

object's copy doesn't carry the aura. In Hito Steyerl's *In Defense of the Poor Image*,⁵ Steyerl builds upon the "aura" as we understand it in relation to "poor" and "rich" images. The "poor" image as an idea, the "rich" image as a "tangible" entity. The "rich" image, being the image that maintains its status as an object that gains value through its "aura" which is maintained by the blockchain ledger system. On the other hand, there is the "poor" image; a poorly sourced rendition of the original that travels across the web, along the way losing pieces of its quality. The key difference between these two hierarchies 1) is the ability to gain monetary value which is exclusive to the rich image and not the poor and 2) the ability to be proven as authentic through the pieces of evidence that blockchain uses to create its address code.

The application of these theories, however, is complicated by the nature of Blockchain's most popular public ledger, Ethereum. Ethereum allows users to create apps, coins, and programs to create further additions to the infrastructure according to the agreed upon terms of the program by those who use and operate it. These new mechanisms of technology create and expand on already solidified power structures in the digital economy. Value being decided by popular opinion and sometimes obscure rationale is the conditions that makes decentralization the missing link between the art world and crypto-culture. The key difference between traditional art and digital art used with blockchain lies in the application of "artificial uniqueness." In relation to traditional art, the agreed upon terms of authenticity in digital art must be explicitly included with the work due to its immateriality. Uniqueness becomes a streamlined with blockchain through the use of the smart contract and the address code. Revisiting Abosch's *YELLOW LAMBO* briefly, the artist's use the address code as a means of applying

⁵ Steyerl, Hito. *In Defense of the Poor Image*. The Truth of Art - Journal #71 March 2016 - E-flux. Accessed October 9, 2018. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

distinctiveness to the sculpture not only makes the work depend on the code, but also makes the sculpture act as a kind of “mask” for the digital object, which can be considered lying more in the address code and less in the object.

Because digital art’s medium is technology (and because internet technology as a commodifiable material is still being developed), it has been traditionally seen as existing outside of the confines of “hyper-commodification”, away from the high-stakes, high-value bubble of the art market. To gain value as commodity is to forgo being open-sourced and changeable adopt protections as a non-transferable object. This can only be achieved with effective copyright protections. However, any attempt to copyright or employ intellectual property protections is usually unsuccessful, apart from video art. Online platforms like YouTube can, for example, provide something of a parallel. Controlled by algorithms, YouTube’s copyright protections somewhat resemble blockchain (but YouTube does have their own set of false copyright issues, as do most copyright algorithms). If a copyright claim is made, YouTube’s system will disable the video from collecting ad revenue (one of the main sources of income for content creators). If too many copyright claims are made, even if those claims are made unjustifiably, channels can be shut down and creators banned. Claims are mostly made from the supposedly unauthorized use of audio and graphics. This keeps creators from using certain additions to their videos, even if the use of those graphics, audio, or video clips exercise the Fair Use doctrine as outlined in Section 107 of the Copyright Act.⁶

Blockchain, on the other hand, runs digital objects through the ledger system, thus allowing the commercial value of the works to stabilize--and hypothetically benefit the artists. A

⁶ Office of U.S. Copyright. "More Information on Fair Use." Copyright. <https://www.copyright.gov/fair-use/more-info.html>.

benefit of having a public ledger is that the chance of authorship discourse is greatly reduced, allowing a continuous travel of ownership throughout its commercial life. If a record of ownership is permanently attached to the object, then transactions can become smoother as the object transfers from owner to owner. This is also due to price fluctuations being included in the blockchain ledger.⁷ But at the same time, the question appears into whether the algorithmic systems can fairly suss out legitimate copyright violations. The danger of faulty systems of automatic authorship is that those who wish to make transformative works, works that play on existing intellectual properties, will run into a wall made from commercial greed. I argue that blockchain enthusiasts' wishes to monetize these works via IP protection software may lead to unequal power distributions of digital objects in the future. Monetization via blockchain implies a rigid set of rules and conditions of sharing and viewing for digital objects. It also creates an unequal distribution "rich" and "poor" objects on a mass scale. A potential exists to disrupt the balance of power that has typified the internet until now. Work that is made solely for the sake of commodification exists only as such. The available access to provenance is not just for the work's protections but separate the artists from their labor. Ultimately, it turns digital work into an independent entity that is controlled by a set of inhuman, computational functions. However, these mechanisms are implemented in the interest of protecting the rights of the creator and commodification may become an important part of protecting those rights. Without restricted viewing and transmission, the digital object's value increases in its chance of deterioration as it exists unprotected on the web.

⁷ Rossow, Andrew. "With Blockchain Technology, You Gotta' Collect Them All." *Forbes*. August 08, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewrossow/2018/08/08/with-blockchain-technology-you-gotta-collect-them-all/#5a481b011b70>.

But more specifically, the commodification of digital objects allows blockchain to mass produce authenticity. “Authenticity” (in blockchain) becomes a “certificate” that the buyer gets as proof of their purchase. To crank out originality and press it into a set of numbers and letters, I would argue, can become contrived. Often “authenticity” is being sold more than the object itself. The nature of the object is unimportant, so long as it is considered real (as will be later talked about later in the paper). History, social relevance, and meaning are all packed into one string of letters and lines to validate the work. Does “authenticity” produced technologically still carry with it the same properties of authenticity as we understand it to something like a traditional painting? If we see digital objects as their own set of independent entities, what mechanisms allow digital objects to become their own entities; away from their original form as ideas or concepts floating about the space of the internet?

Digital objects are considered objects by a few factors. One, the digital work (the binary code) is translated into a way for the human mind to register. Two, the physical form that the digital work is shown on allows for interaction to occur between the digital work and the viewer. Three, the digital object can be used for a variety of ways just as a material object would. As a physical object, it possess an aura. The aura is not diminished by the reproduction process (per Benjamin) but is enhanced by it. The enhancement of the aura in digital objects depends on the object being imbued with special values that mark it as valuable. It is similar in the way someone encounters a work that is well known rather than a work that is not due to the limited reproductions available.

Systems

The blockchain's popularity is especially striking because it was created so recently. Developed in 2008, the platform was developed up by an anonymous user under the name of "Satoshi Nakamoto." Furthermore, it was first conceptualized while Nakamoto was developing bitcoin. Nakamoto made bitcoin out of existing cryptography first described in a paper by Stuart Haber and W. Scott Stornetta in 1991.⁸ Since then, blockchain was popularized, developed, and adopted as a method of managing digital currency without the oversight of government or larger corporations. The ledger system means that all transactional data is stored and published publicly for anyone's future reference.⁹

⁸ Oberhaus, Daniel. "The World's Oldest Blockchain Has Been Hiding in the New York Times Since 1995." Motherboard. August 27, 2018. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/j5nzx4/what-was-the-first-blockchain.

⁹ Ingraham, Michael, and Trinh Thanh @trinhthanh. "What Is An Ethereum Token: The Ultimate Beginner's Guide." Blockgeeks. January 01, 2017. <https://blockgeeks.com/guides/ethereum-token/>.

In its simplest terms, blockchain is a database maintained by users. Information is added to the cryptography and is coagulated in “blocks,” which act like containers for the mined data. Each block receives an ID or code that differentiates the block from the rest. Bitcoin is one example of a mined block used specifically as currency. Bitcoin is one product of the blockchain interface, just as Facebook is a product of the internet. Blockchain offers many applications to be developed, one of those being Ethereum, a distributed public network that runs the program code of any blockchain application. It is a giant mass of nodes (computers) connected to one another and all transactions are recorded on a distributed ledger.

Blocks and miners (developers of cryptocurrency) are kept working on the same page through a series of simple circumstances. Miners stay to work for a type of crypto “token” called Ether. This fuels the Ethereum network as payment for transactions fees and services on the network. But the network also offers smart contracts, which is a series of instructions initiated with one or more people for a transaction. This uses a series of instructions that follow an IFTTT (if this then that) type of logic, until the end of the contract is reached. Thus the chain of blocks fulfills its duty in a chain reaction sequence. Every one of these actions is recorded in the ledger, keeping everyone theoretically accountable for their actions. The idea is to reduce dishonesty in the system and all transactions are “irreversible.” Each block has its own value in its respective system. With some tutorials and configuring the install of the Ethereum Wallet (which enables apps and currency to be created), someone with a background in programming or system management can utilize the technology.

A collective distrust for government controlled institutional infrastructure characterizes the entire system. This stance has lead crypto-users and developers to build platforms around

sustaining the autonomy of transactions.¹⁰ The “Bitcoin Whitepaper” by Satoshi Nakamoto is the initial sacred text that is recommended as an introduction to cryptocurrency. It outlines a complex series of claims, essentially arguing that the trust-based model of institutional banking renders transactions subsequent to fees, errors and corruption due to mediation.¹¹ In this way, the Whitepaper asserts that the third-party model is fundamentally faulty. Instead, it insists that

Commerce on the Internet has come to rely almost exclusively on financial institutions serving as trusted third parties to process electronic payments. While the system works well enough for most transactions, it still suffers from inherent weaknesses of the trust-based model. Completely non-reversible transactions are not really possible, since financial institutions cannot avoid mediating disputes...What is needed is an electronic payment system based on Cryptographic proof instead of trust.”¹²

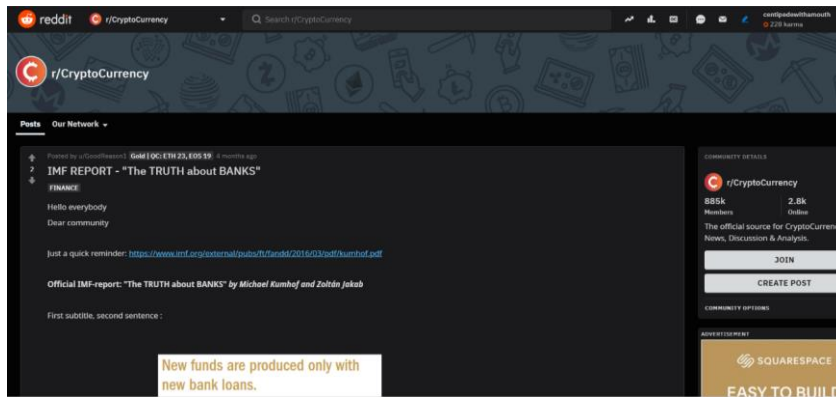
A similar rejection of institutional power also infuses the cultural ecosystem of blockchain. Most of the users unsurprisingly communicate in small tight-knit websites and discussion boards.¹³ For example, the sub-reddit “Cryptocurrency” (which has a user base of over 800,000 members) will often post topics about the functions of cryptocurrency and the flaws of institutional banking. One of which is a post from 2018 by user *GoodReason113*, who reblogged an IMF Report article entitled “The Truth about Banks”, which outlines the common regulation issues that contributed to the 2008 financial crisis that perpetuate even after the event... *“Problems in the banking sector played a critical role in triggering and prolonging the two greatest economic crises of the past 100 years: the Great Depression of 1929 and the Great Recession of 2008. In each case, insufficient regulation of the banking system was held to have*

¹⁰ Noogin. “The Financial Crisis and History of Bitcoin.” Medium. May 15, 2018. <https://medium.com/@noogin/the-financial-crisis-and-history-of-bitcoin-27ebdb932b99>.

¹¹ “Crypto Whitepaper: The Ultimate Guide for Beginners.” Blockgeeks. <https://blockgeeks.com/guides/crypto-whitepaper/>.

¹² Nakamoto, Satoshi. “Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System.” May 24, 2009. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140320135003/https://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf>

contributed to the crisis. Economists therefore faced the challenge of providing policy prescriptions that could prevent a repeat of these traumatic experiences.”^{14 15}



(Image) GoodReason1. "IMF REPORT - "The TRUTH about BANKS" Reddit.

In the face of this de-centralized system, developers manage system triggers to allow for optimization of automatic notarization and timestamping of generated objects. An automatic trigger limits the number of coins mined to a few sets, for example, therefore artificially creating scarcity in order to manage the total amount of objects produced. Controlled scarcity ensures that the objects are inevitably given a value based on the specific identifications located through the address code given to each object mined in blockchain. The code is one part of the intermediary for which we understand the object's uniqueness. What makes something unique is its signifiers as being differentiated from all other objects and its physical traits that make it valued from a social and historical perspective. For example, bitcoin's value and usefulness lie in its ability to

¹⁴ Kumhof, Micheal, and Zoltán Jakab. "The Truth about Banks -- Finance & Development." March 2016. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2016/03/kumhof.htm>.

¹⁵ GoodReason13. "IMF REPORT - "The TRUTH about BANKS" Reddit, January 29, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/CryptoCurrency/comments/al1xjg/imf_report_the_truth_about_banks/

be decentralized yet still capable of transferring material from person to person in a matter of minutes. Theoretically, it is difficult to hack into.

The code is extremely malleable, allowing it to be assigned as a work of art in its own right or as a reference point to a system made to track the movement of currency. However, as we revisit digital art, we see that value lies in the power to limit circulation. Because blockchain can assign address codes to objects, this problem is effectively solved. In this case, the original is the information in blockchain is what signifies that the digital work is an original. Hypothetically, if one were to design a work on Illustrator, print it out in high-quality layers, and successfully destroy the original file, then it would ensure rarity, not value.

The uniqueness of *YELLOW LAMBO* originates from the historical and sociological implications imbedded in the address, along with the computational factors that afford the digital object exclusive intellectual property rights through blockchain. Previously, digital artists could not control intellectual property. Their work was forever transmutable and mostly open-sourced. That digital art could be endlessly copied means that its monetary capabilities are limited, therefore its value lies not at a monetary level but at the level to which it is distributed across the web.

YELLOW LAMBO's uniqueness is artificial. The data (represented by the address code) that measures that uniqueness is mass produced and then given whatever meaning, history, and social context that the artist chooses or is given to it by additional circumstance (such as instances of viral fame or fraud). Sources that are agreed upon by the participating group (Crypto-culture, the art market, scholars, etc.) can help it achieve success or be written off as more commercial nonsense; the same as traditional objects of cultural value that do well commercially. A consensus is always made as to what meaning is more relevant to an artwork or if that meaning

adds anything to the work. In the case of *YELLOW LAMBO*, the meaning that Abosch claims to have been inspired by was the prevalence of the Instagram tag #lambo. He mentions this in an interview with Robin Wauters of Tech.eu at the Tech Open Air conference in August of 2018 where he states

...Anyone that's spent any time on social media looking at Crypto-chatter will see #lambo...so the Lamborghini automobile has become a symbol for success identity for "Crypto-bros." It is this deceleration to the tribe that "we're involved in this crazy period...look back a year from now and think this is insane" ...I use proxies to distill these emotions. I use blockchain addresses as proxies. In the same way that people use symbols, I use these 42-digit alpha-numeric. So, with Lambo, I said to myself if the Lamborghini is already a proxy for success identity and #lambo is another proxy, I decided to create a token called YLAMBO. Not as a piece of art itself, but as an intermediary proxy for the last proxy with was the neon sign I created which is YELLOW LAMBO. The reaction was as effective as I had hoped"¹⁶

The apparent gag among Crypto-enthusiast is that if they make it big on cryptocurrency, they will buy a Lamborghini (albeit the gag has been turned into a meme of sorts online).¹⁷ Kevin Abosch sees this cultural signaling as a declaration of their "success identity" (as he calls it in the interview).¹⁸ The historical context, on the other hand, is indicated through the ways in which the image is distributed. Outside of the official sell of the digital object; unauthorized copies which exist outside of the blockchain program can attest to the popularity and value of the original. Its circulation gives it context. A subsequent archive of information may be traced in the news reports, articles, and other accounts generated. A photo of Yellow Lambo featured in an article (like the one in the digital issue of SOMA or Business Insider) counts as a copy of the original that enhances the value of the original by way of the circulation. Moreover, additional information is shared with the copy, providing a wider spread of distribution and increasing

¹⁶ Tech Open Air "Bleeding for Blockchain - Kevin Abosch #TOA18" YouTube (31:35 mins). August 13, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiJiwSiMgBo&t=1405s>

¹⁷ Ali_Montag. "This Crypto-millionaire Bought a Lamborghini for \$115 Thanks to Bitcoin." CNBC. February 07, 2018. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/07/bitcoin-millionaires-are-buying-lamborghinis-with-cryptocurrency.html>.

¹⁸ Tech Open Air. "Bleeding for Blockchain."

audience engagement.^{19 20} These connections give a context to the work that attaches the meaning inevitably to the art from a purely commercial lens. It is my view that by connecting symbols of power and wealth to the digital object, it may point to a desire for the work of art to have those same attributes.

Additionally, the monetization of the digital image through blockchain means that, , whatever fluctuations of its price that can be converted in to money can hypothetically go directly to the artist.²¹ Blockchain allows the conditions of the object's proof of originality to act as intellectual property protections for digital objects. Of course, this then creates a hierarchy that otherwise wouldn't exist without the use of technology; any judgement of the work is based not on aesthetics, conceptual innovation, or social relevance, but on its financialization properties, the quality of intellectual property protections, and exchange value.

There is nothing groundbreaking in this. However, this feature can be monetized on a massive scale, transcending any equivalent for physical objects. Value lying in the concept of originality creates a hierarchical structure this is formed from the existence of some works having better monetary protections than others. Commercial scarcity breeds hyper-commodification. This phenomenon is illustrated by the success of the online platform Monegraph, which began offering a service of IP protections for digital artifacts in 2014. Monegraph offers a space where creators, owners, and collectors have access to the ledger technology of blockchain to trace and track the movement of their works. In this way,

¹⁹ Bernard, Zoë. "The Artist Who Once Sold a Photo of a Potato for \$1 Million Just Sold a Cryptocurrency-inspired Artwork Called 'YELLOW LAMBO' for More than the Price Of an Actual Lamborghini." *Business Insider*. April 30, 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/kevin-abosch-cryptocurrency-artwork-yellow-lambo-2018-4>.

²⁰ Leah, Tassinari. "SOMA Magazine » Archive » Kevin Abosch (The Art of Yellow Lambo)." *SOMA Magazine RSS*. <http://www.somamagazine.com/kevin-abosch/>.

²¹ Barsotti, Scott. "The Art of Blockchain." *Carnegie Mellon University*. April 3, 2019. <https://www.cmu.edu/news/stories/archives/2019/april/art-of-blockchain.html>.

Monegraph is moving digital art into the high-stakes nature of the global art market by way of bringing digital art into the intellectual property spectrum. And while this means that digital artists potentially gather more agency over their work, the lines between cryptocurrency and art are blurred; they are now tradeable, artificially unique, and virtually unforgettable while being forever tied to blockchain.

Rich Image, Poor Image

When considering that digital art (as they are without blockchain) has a very limited amount of monetizable authority, it can be difficult to truly see as “objects” or something of

value. Therefore, when digital art is run through blockchain, its value lies on its proof of existence and less on aesthetic function. Aesthetics matter in the way that the quality of the image will be one of the keys to determine its value. For digital objects, quality can depend on 1) the intermediary it is shown through 2) accessibility that someone can process the binary code through 3) the quality of the intermediary 4) the restrictions and consequences set forth by the system that allows the binary code to be accessed from the intermediary. If you try and view a streamed Netflix film from a Dell Inspiron 7000 from 1998, the screen quality differentiates greatly from a newer laptop. The quality of the source code did not alter, but the way it is received by the viewer is affected. For example, a gif or jpeg cannot be on the same level as a limited edition film. That film has value due to scarcity and demand which makes the object truly be an object. Additionally, there are conditions of viewing it which in any other setting would make it difficult. An issue that may come up, however, is if the desirable frame rate is downloaded, the quality, etc. If that is the case, the value of the object may be questioned. The “verifiable” aura of the blockchain digital object leaves no question as to its authenticity; authenticity is just part of the object. The aura attached to the open-sourced, non-IP protected digital object is imbedded differently; it exists as an idea rather than a protected object with financial power.

Another one of Abosch’s works, *I AMA COIN*, points to the need for an object to have any history behind it to further legitimize its existence. *I AMA COIN* is a series of works featuring 100 physical editions and 10,000,000 digital objects generated by Ethereum. On the physical works, Abosch drew six vials of his blood and stamped one hundred pieces of paper with the address code. Keeping in mind that the address code is the proxy for authorship, its irreproducibility and the terms of that irreproducibility classifies it as an “aura.”

I AMA COIN illustrates the justification of value, based on the assumption that the body also has value. In an interview at the Tech Open Air conference in 2018, Abosch says the work and the artists are intrinsically connected. If the work is commodifiable, so is the artist. Abosch is treats himself as the object that he controls the distribution of. Each print is made in his own blood of the blockchain address code, which links to the tokens he created. Abosch attempts to control the commercialization of his own work through this link between the body and the object. Since blockchain works as a cryptographic algorithm, each token exists as its own entity with its own value. For example, a private key is given to those opening cryptocurrency “wallets” to manage their accounts. The private key is used to sign off on transactions as proof of ownership and will match the Bitcoins being spent. Without the key, the wallet address cannot be accessed. If you have the wallet address, you cannot deduce the private key; it exists only in the wallet. The token can exist on its own within the blockchain sphere, but the artwork cannot have this same level of “meaningful existence” without the creation of the digital works in tandem. Abosch claims that, if he decided to stamp a piece of paper with numbers representing blockchain (i.e. a fake address), the existence wouldn’t be as “meaningful” as he describes in his Tech Open Air interview, “...the token could’ve existed on its own (in blockchain), but the physical art couldn’t have had a meaningful existence had it not been for the virtual work.”²²

In this context, “meaning” refers to the value of the work (which is the function of consensus of a group). Because the technological reproducibility of the art object as it relates to blockchain, the value is continually reproduced. Therefore, aura determines the value of the work as in accordance with blockchain art. In Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in The Age of Technological Reproducibility,” the aura is a quality that cannot be conveyed through

²² Tech Open Air. “Bleeding for Blockchain.”

technological means. Benjamin describes two types of reproduction: reproduction of art using technological methods and technological reproduction as art (which would be film in his essay). Due to the conditions of reproducibility, Benjamin posits that the nature of artwork transforms. When, for example, photographing a painting or filming a movie we change the ability for art to be reproduceable through the camera or other means of technological reproducibility. This process negates authenticity in a work of art.

Technological reproduction makes the original work widely available and emphasizes aspects of art not available to the senses. This is true, for example, when the camera reaches beyond the normal realm of human senses in film. In the case of digitized images in a database like Artstor, the technological capabilities show fine details in paintings and artworks. Besides its program capabilities, Artstor also illustrates Benjamin's point regarding the decay of arts' authenticity. It's circulation extends far beyond the reach by the original. The fact that a clear digital reproduction can and will outlive the original (and the other aforementioned attributes of mechanical reproduction) is what devalues the work of art, as the numerous iterations of the original overwrite it by its mass existence of its replicas.

The aura in physical work stems from practices of ritual and worship. To take a statue from a chapel and copy it removes the work from its context, which is steeped in its social value and its history as long as the work stays where it is. What this points to is a connection to the place of origin and how it was used. It's about the work being uniquely present in time and space for which it is exclusive to. A reproduction lacks the ability to be present since it is removed physically and contextually. To copy is not to just destroy the aura, but also to devalue the work. Benjamin thinks that authenticity cannot be reproduced through a reproduction and that the

original is depreciated because of reproduction being that it is no longer unique. And yet, according to art theorist Michael Betancourt, quoting economist Hans Abbing:

Walter Benjamin predicted that the technical reproduction of art would lead to a breaking of art's spell ('Entzauberung'). Art became less obscure, more accessible and thus less magical because of technical reproduction. ... Benjamin's prediction is not difficult to grasp. Technical (re)production enables a massive production of artworks at low prices. It would be very strange indeed if this didn't reduce the exclusive and glamorous allure of art products. ... But thus far, this hasn't happened; [the composer] Bach and his oeuvre maintain their aura. In general, if one observes the high, if not augmented status and worship of art since Benjamin's essay first appeared, his prediction was either wrong or it is going to take longer before his predictions are borne out.²³

The artwork's aura isn't necessarily diminished by reproduction. Instead the aura of the original is shared with the reproduction. In light of Benjamin's arguments, what is not shared is the authenticity of the artwork which is tied directly with its physicality. From Abbing's theory, authenticity is only called into question when there are reproductions and question of aura is a result of the reproduction process. The aura that is shared in the reproduction is both historical ("the particular history that an object has experienced") and symbolic ("the relationship of that object to the tradition that produced it").²⁴ This idea differs from Benjamin's conception of aura. For him, it is something singular; Abbing's conception is more suited for digital technology. Applied to digital works, aura results from an art work's relevance to its audience on a sociological level. With digital art, the significance is drawn less from authentic physicality and more from its conceptual relevance.

²³ Abbing, Hans. *Why are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004, p. 307.

²⁴ Betancourt, Michael. "The Aura of the Digital." *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement*. Accessed November 1, 2018. <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14485/5328>

Digital art and film are both mediums where technological reproduction is the art. Film is entirely reproducible; in fact, it depends of reproducibility in order to be seen. As film can be edited and modified to make alterations and improvements, film never claims to be eternal. This is especially true overtime, as films often overgo a “remastering” to preserve the contents. For Benjamin, film is not a replication of everyday life, but rather a window to see into other worlds. Film’s aura, it can be argued, lies in an actor’s performance, which is recorded in a studio. Sets are made, and direction is given behind the camera. The result can be shown continually, in multiple places. Reproduction occurs on multiple screens, dissolving the aura of the actor’s performance, due to it being originally given in a studio.

The concept of the aura relating to the digital shows its relevancy in the inherent nature of digital works being widely reproducible. With the example of Artstor, the digital art available on this platform are reproduced to be available across various screens, formats and programs. The works viewed on a device are both replica and original. They are always rooted in the present. The only thing that really changes is the intermediary used to view the digital image, which can become obsolete at any moment. Additionally, digital art on Artstor cannot be easily copied, as the program allows for certain conditions of viewing (including an account, updates to the program, etc.) Even though the art there is a copy of physical works, the picture of the work becomes the original. But, as a picture on the program, it has its own conditions of viewing. The quality of the image is what makes people use Artstor. Fine details that otherwise cannot be seen otherwise legible. Therefore, the technological reproduction of the original has its own “aura” as defined by the conditions in the program which it is viewed.

Not only does blockchain art have unusual conditions of viewing, but it also has a tangible aura that becomes part of the object. This extends beyond the regular consumption and

modification of internet images. One easily can copy and paste an image for any reason without thinking about the “aura” of the original. A digital object doesn’t exist without a computational pecking order, and this depends on what kind of image is viewed and what value that image can generate. Because digital art on blockchain works on a neoliberal capitalist basis, it is valued as a commodity and its value comes from its proof of value.

Most images on the internet are “shared” repeatedly through different subcultures, forums, and message boards, all for personal use or a collective meaning. In “In Defense of the Poor Image” (2016), Hito Steyerl argues that images have hierarchies. In this hierarchy, the poor image, that is a copy whose physical quality has been deteriorated over time by the distribution process of internet sharing, does not have an aura. The more an image is shared beyond its use, the more it becomes a “ghost of depletion.” That is, it follows the image’s continued, unattributed use.²⁵ As it reaches beyond the confines of viewing, the image begins to gather internet debris, loose pieces of itself, and along the way it becomes unrecognizable.

In this context, the high-resolution of these images, making its visuals clearer and more pristine, is important. Here, resolution is fetishized and held to a higher standard. In fact, it is coveted for its perceived scarcity, and kept in the confines of its original state (usually with a program). Special circumstances must be in place to both show and care for these “rich” images, and this makes their nature even rarer to behold. But a rich image is not permanently in the state in which it appears. Photos can be leaked and shared repeatedly, often without the context of its original status. Even with its protections, a level of vulnerability is characteristic of the rich image. What matters, in that case, is how those protections are enforced. As previously stated,

²⁵ Steyerl, Hito. *In Defense of the Poor Image*. *The Truth of Art - Journal #71* March 2016 - E-flux. Accessed October 9, 2018. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

copyright claims are often important for media artists, and programs like blockchain is significant in this context. These programs aim to not only maintain the authorship of the work, but the aura of the object. Revisiting Benjamin, the aura (as it relates to digital art) also encapsulates the “ritual” of viewing. That is, it enforces the ritual of seeing the object in its original state. Of course, Benjamin originally associated this with a religious subtext. However, the religious aura is meant to maintain the spirit of the object, belonging to the chapel of its “god,” with the object acting as a reliquary of spirit. The internet ritual evokes the same mechanism. Programs act as the chapel and the congregation as the user base. Its god is the coveted capabilities of the computational system, magically operating in a way that benefits the worshippers. Aura is not just originality, but rests in how the “god” of the work shines through the object and is seen by the viewer via repeated conditions of viewing.

According to Steyerl, in the contemporary image or work of digital origin, aura is what is gained in the visual matter, but lost during the circulation process, especially as it becomes the poor image. Taken from its temple, its context barely matters anymore. The poor image is often dug up from the archival grave to be revived as a Frankenstein bastardization of its former self; repurposed from its original use for a new context for a new generation, and therefore the original meaning is often lost, melded together with a new context, or ignored. The opposite terms are, of course, applied to the high-quality or “rich” image. A rich image is based in a time, place and meaning. It is “reactionary” in the way it reacts to the context it is steeped in. Its conditions of exhibition must be optimal therefore it is unique.²⁶ The poor image, however, is much more accessible. It allows for its existence to be adopted to a multitude of ideas (as it

²⁶ Steyerl, Hito. In Defense of the Poor Image. *The Truth of Art - Journal #71* March 2016 - E-flux. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

forgoes being tied to ownership or IP protections), none of which can be inherently contemplative nor exact from their original.²⁷ The rich image has its status as a commodity in the hierarchy of its market. Relating this back to blockchain, the poor image exists without an address code attached, without a place in the hierarchy, as a blockchain work does not simply float about the web without context. It exists exclusively within a specific context. If an image of blockchain art exists without its code readily available, the poor image simply reflects an idea; it is no longer an object.

Socially speaking, what the address code means socially takes on two different perspectives. There is the absence of the aura and the generation of the aura through dispersion. The absence of aura (as seen through the theory of Benjamin) creates a loss of appreciation and contemplation. The reproduced work of art becomes a distraction, for which the audience absorbs instead of the art absorbing the audience. The removal of art from its ritual diminishes its aura. But at the same time, removes its attachment to a specific person or place, making it easier for situational consumption for the audience. This disconnection from the past brings it to a status where the audience can create their own narrative. Therefore, the liberation of art from ritual gives the art a new function which becomes more collective in its responses. However, in the case of film for example, the aura is also diminished by substitution of the machine for the audience. The actor performs for the camera, not the audience and the image of the actor is commodified. Speaking of the earlier example of YouTube, creators are turned into commodities by way of their illusion they portray to the camera. In that way, everyone can be reproduced. If

²⁷ An obvious example would be memes. Which combine ideas of high and low culture by appropriating images to communicate different conceptual ideas into jokes and irony. Memes can also comment on analyses of the origin of the artwork taken.

[we relate this to Abosch's IAMA COIN, its Abosch's desire to own his own commodified image.](#)

The nature of this value was demonstrated on OpenSea, for example, when the “CryptoCelebrities” coin series was featured at an auction. OpenSea is an online blockchain marketplace that specializes in storing and selling “digital collectibles” made by artists.²⁸ Digital collectibles are referred to as “non-fungible” assets. Here, a poorly sourced image of Elon Musk sold for the equivalent of \$54,000.²⁹ While the image is probably just a copy-pasted screenshot from Google, it existed in the blockchain space as an “original” if only because someone decided that monetizing the image could provide the same results as having the original. In that case, the image being monetized “is” the original. That is, it’s the original of that particular time in space; its aura (that is, the address code) legitimizes it as such. Furthermore, the platform of OpenSea doesn’t discourage the monetization of any particular image. Doing so would go against the platform’s mechanisms, which are enable the free buying and trading of digital objects. While OpenSea is best known for the popular item CryptoKitties (an interactive game that the player can collect virtual cats via blockchain and then sell them for higher prices)³⁰, this is mostly due to their high market value. The creators of CryptoKitties raised \$12 million in venture funding to ultimately go out on their own, but this case helps demonstrate how the picture of Elon Musk sold at such a high price; it proves the legitimation of value in the mainstream market place. The code is there so that monetary value can be applied, giving the work meaning. This is not to say that art that doesn’t also have large amounts of money attached to it. It’s simply easier to value

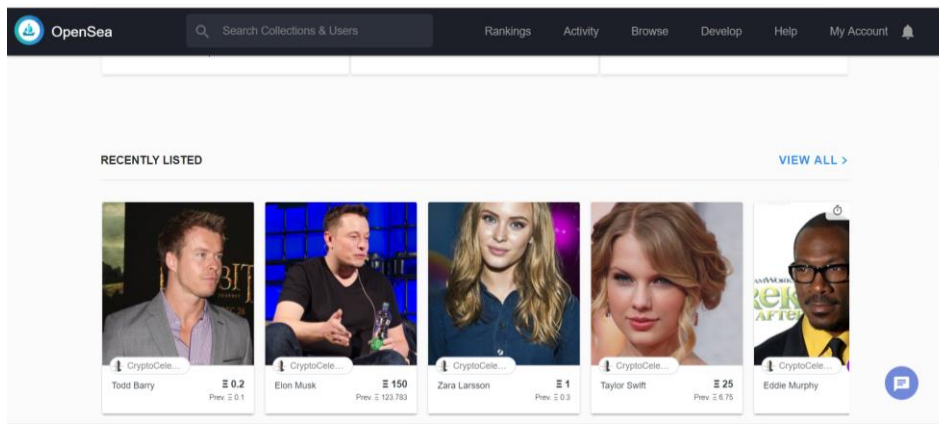
²⁸ OpenSea. “Buy Crypto Collectibles, CryptoKitties, Decentraland, and More on Ethereum.” OpenSea. <https://opensea.io/>.

²⁹ Hines, Zach. “The Weird, Wild and Expensive World of Blockchain Art.” Engadget. August 30, 2018. <https://www.engadget.com/2018/08/30/cryptokitties-gods-unchained-blockchain-art/>.

³⁰ Sean. “The Problem With Digital Collectibles.” Hacker Noon. September 28, 2018. <https://hackernoon.com/the-problem-with-digital-collectibles-e67b0c51f2e5>.

something as open sourced and changeable as a jpeg when there's a dollar amount attached to it. As mentioned before, commercially, digital art lacks the mechanisms to yield monetary rewards. Having a platform allow those rewards also requires it to prove that those rewards can provide large sums of money. This also legitimizes the platform. In, short it's not enough to just apply a hash ID to an image when it comes to blockchain. Culturally, the image protected under the code must fulfill some function. In this case, that is defined by a gain in monetary value. Without this, the image would simply be the equivalent of a verified, appropriated Google Search image.

Of course, there is nothing new in the concept of appropriating the poor "image" and converting it into one that conveys a greater context about how we determine value. Works like Duchamp's *In Advance of a Broken Arm* champion taking the shared and reproduced and gifting it a new identity; all of this is done simply because an "artist" has chosen to do this. The poor image, for example the copied image of Elon Musk, might be considered a digital "readymade." It is not only an image that deteriorated through sharing, expanding beyond its own context. Its ability to be shared over and over becomes one of many tools used to express an idea, very much like Duchamp used an ordinary shovel rendering it into an artwork. But, even if it is not coveted for its visual value, this doesn't mean it has none. Value is not simply something that can be given. It's not always logical nor is it entirely calculated. Furthermore, value is not a matter of subjectivity. It's an amalgamation of things: nostalgia, irony, intent. Value, in the case of blockchain, depends on a set of rules and analytics. Additionally, value exists in a variety of iterations; it is a prism which gleams into nostalgia, irony, and intent. As with the portrait of Elon Musk, simply uploading the image into a program doesn't mean that anyone is going to care. However, the intent in which the work is understood (and the virial spread of that intent) gives an initial cultural value which in turn can lead to monetary value.



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(Image) Recently listed CryptoCelebrity digital collectibles. OpenSea

This dynamic has been open to criticism. In an article on the website *Engadget*, the author, tech writer Zach Hines, laments how a picture of Elon Musk gains value, insisting that

“There is zero artistic embellishment added onto this: A Crypto Celeb is just an ugly pic, and all you can do with it is horde and trade it. All there is to Crypto Celebrities is the pathetic honor of being the only person to own the Carrot Top card...”³¹

The poor image’s relevance is transformed from an ordinary object into “art.” Since the poor image reflects an idea and is not an “object”, the identity of the image is fleeting and non-transparent. There is no one identity for the poor image. Therefore, its open-endedness makes it subject to a variety of uses. For this reason, digital art needs IP protection. It is also why, at least in IP terms, blockchain has value. Taking a substandard image and giving it an identity can turn the work into a kind of “digital readymade.” Furthermore, the blockchain authenticates and gives value to the digital readymade, adding to its aura and legitimizing it. By using codes and addresses it only becomes “one of a kind” through its agreed assignment in the digital sphere. It is one of many reproductions of the original image that becomes an original because it is chosen

³¹ Hines. “The Weird, Wild and Expensive World of Blockchain Art.”

out of all the other reproductions. If we compare the distinction between digital objects and physical objects, their natures are intrinsic. For example, physical currency is marked with symbols that designate its value as “real.” This varies according to what the society dictates as the material’s worth. Since digital objects lack physical form, they must be presented through a technological channel and transformed into an object. This is a way for both users and makers to grasp the interpretation of an object. For digital objects, there will always be an intermediary to deliver symbolism in a way that the human mind can grasp. The symbolic worth, the address code applied to digital works, however, ensures its worth.

But, in the case of the digital collectible, authenticity and value (much like *In Advance of a Broken Arm*) lie almost exclusively in a concept. The picture of Elon Musk has no intrinsic value. There is, in fact, a kind of irony in the situation. A “poor” image can be sold for thousands of dollars. This even challenges our understanding of “buyers” of “digital collectibles” and the idea of authenticity. It brings into question what is really being bought, which arguably is the case for most contemporary art objects. Additionally, whether it is a readymade or not, it is still a digital asset. To return to the idea of the dual nature of the aura, the digital ready-made’s objecthood lies first in its assigned value to a dollar amount. This is determined by the code (sociological; as in the social conditions that the code carries that contribute to its value). But it also gains an aura through the irony behind its notoriety that can be seen in articles, post being shared about it, and its own sale in the digital ledger.

If we were to compare *I AMA COIN* and *CryptoCelebrities*, the aura of the work is in the address code and its specific place in the blockchain system. It lies, therefore, in the timestamp of when the work was registered, in its sale, and collection from buyers. The community that buys into its authenticity registers it as an object of value due to the sets of rules and procedures

that society agrees give meaning to the object. In this way, it gains authenticity. These procedures distinguish between the image as an object and a non-object. It depends on whether or not the images' status lies in its status as a coveted commodity with IP protections, or is openly modifiable.³² However, the authenticity and originality of CryptoCelebrities, the platform where the portrait of Elon Musk was sold, operates on a exploitative framework. The system builds on the star-power of established cultural personalities to justify its value. The copy and paste formula are still here. The digital collectible on the OpenSea platform reveals the current owner, its verification status (celebrities can choose to officially associate themselves with their card), and a biography of that figure (although it was almost certainly taken from an open source like Wikipedia). Ultimately, what is being monetized here is the “terms of service” and not the object. This used the artist’s blood as medium and connected it to himself. The reproductions of his paper work barely matter in the grand scheme of blockchain, as the intermediary is there to transmit what can’t be seen into visual space. A standard is being set for the “haves and have nots” for digital works on the internet.

³² Author last name. Publication title.

Distributions of Power

In many ways, blockchain offers an entirely new platform for creating artistic value. Nevertheless, the risk here is that artwork using the blockchain address code as a means for IP protections becomes inadvertently dependent on the code for its identity. The code is not independent from the physical object and doesn't exist as its own object unless there is a socio-historical significance to it. Once that requirement is fulfilled, the address code becomes its own independent "object." My question then becomes "if there is already an object in the digital world (being the code), what difference does it make to even craft and physical 'copy'?"³³

A critic might say that the address code operates from a purely neoliberal capitalist standpoint. Effectively, it could be argued, the address code is an advanced monetization tool that operates in the world. Its only function is to gain "rewards" from the "free" market. Simply put, copies generated are only there to advance the "original" object, generating press, interactive intermediaries, and conceptualizing the ideas of blockchain to pull others into the culture. On the

³³ "Copy" here is a limiting term, meaning that its original is identical to it. But I use copy here as reference to the digital object's aura and role in plays in society. Arguably, a physical work's copy of the blockchain address is just taking the address's meaning and making it physical. To the viewer, the meaning could be the same as if they were looking at the blockchain address on the computer.

other hand, creating physical objects from digital space is no different (in some ways) than grasping an idea from the mind and putting it down on paper or reading on a screen. The intermediary that digital objects use to be translated into understandable images and text is where we assign the most value. A line of arbitrary code wouldn't mean anything if it didn't have a use or something to translate it in a way that human perception can easily grasp. Therefore, the identity of digital art made with blockchain is tied not just to the address code, but the validity of that ID's image translation in the larger sphere of society.

Nevertheless, if the artwork is dependent on the code, it is also at the mercy of the rules and restrictions of the system it is tied to. When the image becomes a "rich" image through blockchain (or when the code is applied), it loses part of its original ability to be transformative beyond its commercial aspects. In his work, "Digital Art as 'Monetized Graphics'", Martin Zeilinger analyzes blockchain protections on digital art as "fencing creative expression" through the use of intellectual property computational financial technologies. Digital protections offered on blockchain gives the object the perceived ability to "stand on its own" in terms of authorship.³⁴ However, according to Zeilinger these computational protections also incentivize financialization over creative expression, which disrupts the original nature of digital art as uncommodifiable and dynamic entities of artistic production. Zeilinger believes that blockchain operates on an "art of money's sake" basis, in which the code is used as a method of valuing the object as a commodity.

An example of this is seen in the creation of Monegraph; an online blockchain platform that "links digital artifacts to unique blockchain hashes."³⁵ Furthermore, the program allows the

³⁴ Zeilinger, Martin. "Digital Art as 'Monetised Graphics': Enforcing Intellectual Property on the Blockchain." SpringerLink. November 24, 2016. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13347-016-0243-1#CR13>.

³⁵ Zeilinger. Digital Art.

creators and collectors to verify the provenance of their digital objects and track their virtual movement across the web so that the commercial value can be controlled. This is achieved by linking creators to their media that already exists on the web (which includes social media) to verify identity of the artist and the work created.³⁶ Creators Anil Dash and Kevin McCoy conceived of the idea while working on project as part of the “Seven on Seven” symposium held at the New Museum to pair artists with technical professionals to build a new project (whatever they want for whatever purpose) within one day.³⁷

A common characteristic of cultural transactions (sharing post, sharing photos, etc.) on the internet is the ability to “copy and paste”, “re-blog”, “re-Tweet”, etc. To “get the word out” about your work or gain an audience, is to subject it to the destructive nature of digital interactions. Creativity in the digital age comes at the expense of making original art vulnerable to pirating. Muso, an antipiracy consulting firm for music, television, and film estimated that in 2017, there were more than 300 billion visits to piracy sites for music, television and film, with a 1.6 percent increase from 2016.³⁸ Television being the most pirated content with 106.9 billion visits.³⁹ As pointed out by Hito Steyerl in “In Defense of the Poor Image”, as the image is shared, unregulated throughout the web it “deteriorates” and becomes “...a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted

³⁶ Cawrey, Daniel, and Daniel Cawrey. "How Monegraph Uses the Block Chain to Verify Digital Assets." CoinDesk. May 21, 2014. <https://www.coindesk.com/monegraph-uses-block-chain-verify-digital-assets>.

³⁷ "Seven on Seven 2014." Rhizome. May 3, 2014. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/may/03/seven-on-seven-2014/>.

³⁸ "Global Piracy Increases throughout 2017, MUSO Reveals." MUSO – DISCOVER, PROTECT, CONNECT. 2017. <https://www.muso.com/magazine/global-piracy-increases-throughout-2017-muso-reveals/>.

³⁹ Spangler, Todd. "Global Piracy in 2017: TV and Music Illegal Activity Rose, While Film Declined." Variety. March 21, 2018. <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/piracy-global-2017-tv-music-film-illegal-streaming-1202731243/>.

into other channels of distribution.”⁴⁰ In a way, the image is devalued not only from a monetary standpoint, but from a technical standpoint as well. Monegraph aims to change that by establishing a system that treats digital art as instruments of financial gain by providing proof of authorship based on the intellectual properties already existing (a Twitter post indicating ownership, for example). According to an article written by co-creator of Monegraph, Anil Dash, in order to verify digital art on Monegraph one would need an original work, a public declaration of the artist’s creation of the work (like a Tweet), and an entry on the blockchain platform.⁴¹

The issue with using blockchain as IP protection is that on one hand, blockchain wishes to act in accordance with the protections of the creator, while on the other hand acting as a financialization tool. The “rewards” that digital art gains with blockchain, according to Zeilinger, is not just monetary control, but the assumption that creative expression in general is subject to private property claims, and that this view goes against the nature of creative works that are bound in intangible expressions.⁴² Programs like Monegraph aim to change the cultural normalcy of digital creative expression and dissemination by utilizing IP laws that are meant for private property on physical objects. These original policies are for works that are not bound in intangible expression and therefore their nature of being requires different approaches to ownership. By the nature of digital expression being reproducible, IP laws have emerged to legally protect digital property and prevent the erosion of the commercial value of culture (or diminishing of the aura if looking through the Benjamin perspective). But IP laws have not been able to create the kind of change to digital works that would protect the interest of creatives. As,

⁴⁰ Steyerl. In Defense of the Poor Image.

⁴¹ Dash, Anil. "A Bitcoin for Digital Art." Medium. May 09, 2014. <https://medium.com/message/a-bitcoin-for-digital-art-8c7db719e495>.

⁴² Zeilinger. Digital Art

illustrated with the previous mention of the YouTube videos, the algorithm it runs to check for copyright violations assumes that any use of non-verified IP protected creative expression is invalid, even if it meets the proper requirements of fair use laws. Without the human component of fair judgment, it is unlikely that algorithmic financialization IP protection systems can make the judgements necessary for fair creative expression.

Blockchain programs like Monegraph aim to stabilize the identity of the digital work by way of connecting it to a set of recognized identifiers; the most notable being social media. This “proof-of-existence” forms the aura by tying the works the code, which contains a set of subscribed ideas that will always circle back to the author. The work’s identity then becomes virtually inseparable from the author, their intentions, and the technology itself. However, with this attachment to the technology and the author, a transformation into the rich image occurs and the work is treated to privileges of monetary gain and creative protections. Of which are decided by a monetary entity that runs on algorithms and not the trust of “corruptible intermediaries.” This trustless system creates an authoritative entity that is the blockchain program (even though it is a *diffused* network intermediary which is controlled by no one person, department, or institution.)⁴³ The trust is transferred away from the human component into the capabilities of the machine and the terms of the smart contract drawn up by the creator and the collector.

On a technological level, this view assumes that if a digital object has a blockchain address code, that work is on the same level as a scarce artifact. As indicated by the licenses offered to artists when they want to upload a work of art on Monegraph. The first example is the Snapshot license which “is a commercial agreement that gives virtually all rights over to the

⁴³ Scott, B. (2014). Visions of a Techno-Leviathan: the politics of the bitcoin blockchain. E-International Relations. <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/06/01/visions-of-a-techno-leviathan-the-politics-of-the-bitcoin-blockchain/>.

buyer”, allowing the collector to exclusively use the digital work in a unlimited amount of projects, but they can’t make any derivative or transformative works.⁴⁴ This contrast with the more restrictive license, which is for “...non-commercial use and personal enjoyment... allows the Licensee to exclusively display a registered Digital Work on any device owned by the Licensee and in non-commercial public exhibitions.”⁴⁵ The first option clearly has the most strict commercial terms of use, while the later has more options for commercial use. However, it is not clear that these modes of being for digital objects and tangible artifacts are on the same level. The abstract nature of the digital works is conceptually stabilized only by the proof of creation that is the address code; the commercial value acts as one indicator that the object’s status as an “object” is any more stable than before. And by that value indication, the object becomes “rich.” So, it may be more accurate to say that blockchain creates the financialization for digital art rather than creating a new system or reconceptualizing the commodity type to fit in traditional systems of capital exchange.⁴⁶

Returning to *YELLOW LAMBO*, the works acts as an example of an identity steeped in the interest of wealth, both by its own transactional nature and correlation with the preexisting symbol of wealth being the Lamborghini. Abosch’s crafting of sculpture makes it glow with an unavoidable aura of its wealth symbolism seen in separate phases and pieces that create its wealth identity. These pieces (like the example of Monegraph’s terms of authenticity) are the original work, the declaration of the work made available on his website or on social media, and the blockchain address, of which contains the aforementioned requirements. The development of the work’s cost and transactions can be traced through its development over time. The first phase

⁴⁴ Monegraph. Terms of Service. <https://monegraph.com/tos>. November 19, 2015

⁴⁵ Monegraph. Terms of Service

⁴⁶ Zeilinger. Digital Art

was its sale to the former Skype COO Michael Jackson at the San Francisco art fair for \$400,000.⁴⁷ At this time, the immaterial address, it might be argued, was crystalized into a physical work by the artist. The signifiers (the shining yellow neon and the fact that the piece sold for the same price as a Lambo) completes its “wealth identity.” Even the title *YELLOW LAMBO* describes the emotionally charged activity of a particular group of cryptocurrency traders who use ‘#lambo’ in social media as a declaration. This expresses not only a desire to own such a fine motorcar but is also a way to communicate how immersed they are in their quest for crypto-billions. As artist Abosch notes, “I use proxies as emotional distillates. If the Lamborghini is a symbol of success-identity, then the car itself is a proxy. The crypto-token YLAMBO is a proxy of a proxy. Finally, *YELLOW LAMBO* in all its neon splendor is yet another proxy—triple-distilled value.”⁴⁸

Nevertheless, if the art is simply the means to which the meaning of the code is transferred, Abosch is still assigning the value and meaning to what he is translating from. In the work *IAMA Coin*, for example, Abosch connects his physical body to the physical and non-physical works on blockchain. By stamping the hash ID of this work in blood on limited editions of his works on paper he is changing the nature of this process.⁴⁹ Abosch mentions that these works revolve not only around the identity of the object, but it is also enabled through what he terms “stamp of identity” and the “consensus of value” that he describes in his Tech Open Air

⁴⁷ Haigney, Sophie. “When Crypto Meets Conceptual Art, Things Get Weird.” The New York Times. June 05, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/arts/design/cryptocurrency-blockchain-art-kevin-abosch.html>.

⁴⁸ Haigney. “When Crypto Meets Conceptual Art, Things Get Weird.”

⁴⁹ Smith, Oliver. “Kevin Abosch: The Artist Who Became A Bitcoin.” Forbes. July 13, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliversmith/2018/06/27/kevin-abosch-the-artist-who-became-a-bitcoin/#64e0aef647b>.

interview.⁵⁰ For him, value is little more than what a group assigns the object; nevertheless, that value is ephemeral and due to many kinds of changes.

Abosch makes the distinction of his work being a transference of meaning and the code as a intermediary in an interview on Tech Open Air festival panel where he describes his use of the blockchain address code as a way to distill emotions that we as a society collectively understand (like the desire for wealth) and uses his works as proxies for those emotions. In this way, he insists, "...the Lamborghini is a proxy for success identity and #lambo that everyone uses as another proxy, I will create a token called YLAMBO"⁵¹

Regardless of how Abosch chooses to characterize his art, the aura of *YELLOW LAMBO* is embedded in the code, with the physical manifestation acting as a "wrapper" for the actual object. Thus, the physical work copies the original code. It is mass producible, referencing the rich image in the Ethereum database (which is theoretically coded in forever). The car, neon lights, are just symbols of value to the actual value in the object, the code. Very much like the Elon Musk trading card, the image is not the key determinant of the art's value and status as objects. Art has the potential to no longer be art on the blockchain system, but currency that can alter the way the public interacts with digital art going forward. And while these ideas still need to be fleshed out better going forward, it is not unreasonable to assume that the outcome of monetized creativity will not be to the detriment of art on the internet. Algorithms seem to not have the level of sophistication at the time of this essay to adequately judge the fair use of digital objects.

⁵⁰ Tech Open Air. "Bleeding for Blockchain."

⁵¹ Tech Open Air. "Bleeding for Blockchain."

Conclusion

The coin that the code is referring is bound by a smart contract; that decision ensures that the parties in agreement with the transaction but offers little more. Except the artist and the buyer, no one has access to that smart contract. Even if the work did belong to the buyer exclusively, what he/she bought was just the code. The neon is just an intermediary and a literal sign to advertise the level of value the code carries. The sign is still an object, but it is a

reproduction that ensures the aura of the address code is carried out in the world. The materials making the sign will deteriorate. Maybe a new sign will take its place. Maybe not. But at least he/she has some free advertisement for their token.

The code made by machines marks a specific place inside the ether that can be accessed with the permission of the developer. By having access to this code, any user has access to the information the code possesses. But that is all. The intellectual property still belongs to the maker, the artist.

In addition, the digital artists and collectives that engage with blockchain are very few. The projects that use this platform claim that its decentralization allows every work to be commercialized and every token created is a potential ticket to prosperity. This points less to a program useful to digital artists, and more to a community who prioritizes private property markets. In order for the program to be of benefit to all, there needs to be emphasis on collective cultural ownership. Instead, it remains little more than a computational algorithmic verification for monetary gain. Blockchain's anti-authoritarian culture encompasses monetary systems; users want societal rewards while rejecting the institutions that put those rewards out in the first place (the traditional art market and financial world). The danger to tying digital art to this new kind of market is that it will disrupt the ontologies of digital art and creative expression.

The dichotomy of rich and poor images claim authenticity while really generating inauthenticity in art. As seen in the case of CryptoCelebrities, the merits of the work depend on exploitative gestures that emphasize the glorification of bland celebrity culture. Programs like Monegraph and the attachment to the code shown in works like YELLOW LAMBO are reassured to be able to collect financial gain. However, it is unclear if blockchain will benefit artists in the long run. This is all not to say that the facilitation of IP protection programs have no

interest to artists. However, with the development of the proof-of-work system may prioritize digital artworks as what Zeilinger calls “quasi-autonomous artefacts.”⁵² With the use of blockchain, it is likely that these new technological mechanisms will shift the rights from the creator’s rights to the work as the entity with the most important conditions, with the artist acts simply as one of many owners of the work.

⁵² Zeilinger. Digital Art

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