

Aura & Transvestment

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Abstract

Aura & Transvestment consists of a series of images based on public domain photographs of various western paintings created between 1900 and 1935 that have been visually transformed through simple, yet resource intensive algorithms. The resulting generative pieces have been tokenized using the blockchain-based non-fungible token technology and put up for sale on a digital marketplace. When purchased, each piece gives you access to a high resolution original that contains the key to a corresponding video-essay designed for individual consumption in mobile devices.

Through storytelling, the work explains its own mechanics. By describing its own powers and contradictions, it explores notions of value, ownership, artificial scarcity and abundance in the digital realm. The essay is an analysis of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) used for digital art, taking Walter Benjamin's concept of aura as a starting point. It argues that, for tokenized art, cryptography serves as an artificial source of auratic power that reverts the political potential of reproducibility falling back to a magical and ritual notion of aura. This time around the ritual performed is that of property, authenticity, ownership, markets and commodification. Finally, the essay speculates on alternative uses of Distributed Ledger Technologies to support artistic labor and proposes transvestment as a temporary counter-action for the reallocation of value from capitalist forms of production and into commons-based models of social coordination.

Aura

In 1935 Walter Benjamin's renowned essay: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* was published. His writing continues to reverberate each time technology transforms the essence and presence of media. This time is no different, and under the RGB light emitted by a tokenized digital image, Benjamin shines again. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the concept of Aura is introduced; A metaphysical understanding of authenticity rooted in the presence of a work in time

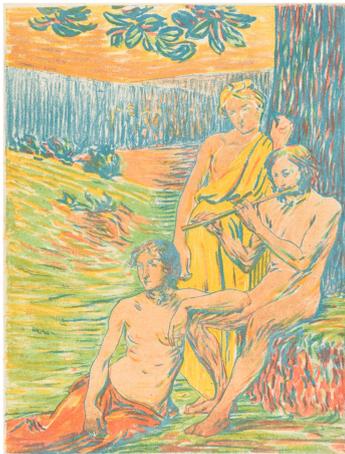
and space. Through mechanical reproduction, Benjamin identified a vital shift in the substance of art:

*[...]the earliest artworks originated in the service of ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. [...]mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.*¹

*In the age of mechanical reproduction, and the absence of traditional and ritualistic value, the production of art would be inherently based upon the praxis of politics.*²

*[...]the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. [...]the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.*³

Benjamin recognized the potential for abundance and urged for art to be designed for reproducibility. In this new paradigm art should be made accessible to the many and its auratic force redirected towards the political.



Digital Reproducibility

This image⁴ is a photograph formed by more than 10 million pixels that lie in representation of the original painting. A specific moment in time and space was captured, visible in the unique configuration of cracks and imperfections of the canvas; this image is nothing but a glimpse of a continuous succession of moments that the original piece has endured.

Having no intention of substituting the physical, with its digitization, the painting is rendered onto a new realm to become a new media object in and of itself. The new numerical data can be interpreted as digital image, effectively inhabiting two parallel worlds: the computational & the cultural⁵. Now subject to algorithmic manipulation the file becomes malleable, expandable, nimble and active. Subsequently, each

¹ Benjamin, W., 2008. *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin Books.

² Notes on Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", a commentary by Gareth Griffiths, Aalto University, 2011

³ Benjamin, W., 2008. *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin Books.

⁴ Pan IV (Arcadia), 1900. By Hippolyte Petitjean (1854 - 1929) Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.

⁵ Manovich, L., 2010. *The Language Of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

modification on a numerical layer will have a repercussion on its cultural interpretation. No longer constrained by the tyranny of matter, bits become a source of virtually infinite wealth.

Being in the public domain, with negligible computing power, this digital image can be transformed, resampled, reimagined and made available for the many at broadband speed. Further copies of the image will be indistinguishable from their antecedent file. Digital files are abundant by nature, but beliefs from our materially-restrained past are blocking the potential of this intrinsic wealth. By imposing measures of artificial scarcity, prosperity is being systematically denied...

Artificial Scarcity

At the onset of the financial crisis in 2009, an anonymous entity under the pseudonym of Satoshi Nakamoto published a poetic implementation for a decentralized electronic cash system⁶. In Bitcoin, a distributed ledger acts as a unified, monolithic perspective of the truth where transactions, once verified, are rendered permanent. Today, thousands of computers located in cost-effective locations around the world add blocks to chains by crunching hashes to achieve algorithmic consensus. As heat is released, the computational work that produces it acts as a proof that the immutability of the ledger is protected by immense amounts of electric energy that make it extremely costly to coordinate an attack on the network to revert a past transaction.

Blockchains foretell the possibility of a future where distributed ledger technologies liberate humans from nation-state monetary policy and centralized fiat currencies. Money had become natively digital and soon, with additional sophistication, “smart contracts” made it possible to deploy software that dictates the rules for the transfer of various other abstractions of value. It is the promise of a future without middlemen. Unnecessary bankers, bureaucrats, lawyers, regulators, certifiers or other forms of centralized, corruptible authority will be replaced by software, agency and user interface. The immutability provided by the consensus algorithm declares freedom by default. In this new sovereign era “Code is law”.

But lurking underneath the y(earnings) of freedom, the entrepreneurial ethos has systematically served Capital by precarizing labour, eroding democracy, exploiting identity and denying privacy. From the eyes of eager investors and crypto-bros, every

⁶Nakamoto, S. (2009). *Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System*. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf>

digital interaction can be coded as a transaction, every asset tokenized, every click monetized, every second enumerated and every word recorded on an immutable ledger, forever.

If we design distributed ledgers following the values and processes of 'methodological individualism,' then we also end up generalizing and socially reproducing these neoliberal mechanisms.

"What kinds of subjectivity do we want to algorithmically inscribe into our systems?"⁷

This (video) essay deals with a particular type of blockchain-enabled phenomenon; that of the Non-Fungible Token. A cryptographically secured asset where each token is unique or limited in quantity. Enabled by a specific type of smart contract, this type of cryptographic configuration appears to realize a strange artifact; that of a trustless, artificially-scarce digital file.

Distributed Ledger Technologies can provide a form of encoding for property rights. This has proved especially relevant for the art industry and particularly for native digital works. With the initial noble pretense of allowing digital artists to profit from the selling of their artwork, all these initiatives seem to dismiss a non-trivial decision: Imposing a form of artificial scarcity that subjects art to a permanent record with intrinsic monetization mechanisms.

By proposing micro-monetization structures for cultural goods, blockchain developments also seem to suggest that all contributions to a cultural good can and should be readily identified, traced and remunerated...

Not only does this business model seem to contradict the open source and free distribution model developed by many digital artists, it also attempts to impose a quantified economic standard onto something that was previously organic, not measurable and socially produced.⁸

⁷ O'Dwyer, R., 2015. *The Revolution Will (Not) Be Decentralised: Blockchains - Commons Transition*. [online] Commons Transition. Available at: <<https://commonstransition.org/the-revolution-will-not-be-decentralised-blockchains/>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

⁸ Catlow, R., Garrett, M., Jones, N. and Skinner, S., n.d. *Artists Re:Thinking The Blockchain*. O'Dwyer, R. *Digital Culture Want to be Free? How Blockchains Are Transforming the Economy of Cultural Goods*

But these smart contracts do not restrict the possibility of others downloading a copy of the digital object, taking a screenshot, or sharing the link to where the media is stored. What is being sold is not the file itself but a provable claim of ownership towards it; A private key that allows the holder to display the correlated asset on a platform as their property and ultimately sell this access to others. At its core, the whole ecosystem revolves around the imposition of property rights and the existence of a corresponding platform where those claims are enforced. It is the narrative of scarcity, the performativity of individual ownership and the establishment of markets which mediate all interactions in this ecosystem. It is no surprise that the same technologies are being explored to add supercharged forms of Digital Rights Management Software and other pervasive expansions of copyright for digital files.

Seduced by the soaring prices, the crypto-art community is reproducing mechanisms of a constrained past. NFTs, in their most common implementation, are not only blatantly embracing a capitalist paradigm, but pervasively expanding it towards the digital realm that had, in many ways, escaped and resisted commodification.

The physicality of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of property.

[...]for the first time in world history, digital reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ownership.

[...]to ask for the “authentic” copy makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of limitation ceases to be applicable to artistic production the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ownership, it begins to be based on another practice – everyday life.

In data files, use value begins to displace commercial value all along the line. But commercial value does not give way without resistance.⁹

For these digital files, cryptography serves as an artificial source of auratic power rooted in the properties of physical works. Driven by a desire for authenticity, the ritual

⁹ Michalis, P., 2019. *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Digital Reproducibility*. [online] Buypichler.com. Available at:

<<https://www.buypichler.com/pichler-michalis-work-art-age-digital-reproducibility-2019-0>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

performed this time is that of property, ownership and commodification. Monetary value emerges as a result of the imposition of scarcity, yet, these files remain intangible.

Exuberant tokenization promotes a culture of fast-paced, impressionable, atomized art. Thousands of Blender renders, latent space of convolutional neural networks and processing's sketches are minted every day in the hopes of standing out in an open sea of RGB gifs. While seemingly abundant, the variety of outputs, themes and formats is extremely reduced. The combination of a profit incentive mechanism and the looming ecological catastrophe that is the Proof of Work consensus algorithm¹⁰ are actively working against the potential to establish fundamentally different forms of sustainable art-making. An opportunity for radical transformation is rapidly slipping away as the space consolidates into a market-first ecosystem. Artworks attached to non-fungible tokens become in fact crypto-commodities: financial assets to be owned, sold, traded and speculated upon.

Ultimately, the imposition of scarcity is driven by a mystification of ownership. As a manifestation of domination, the power of property relies on unilaterally mediating the access to the value that others may enjoy of such possessions, as well as exhibiting such capacity to signify prestige.

Why claim ownership over the intangible? Why conjure a market into existence through the illusion of authenticity? Why build platforms, communities and infrastructure around enforcing property rights? In the best of cases, this may be a way of remunerating digital artists while participating in a fun online marketplace. Artists making a livelihood out of their work is always positive.

As long as artists continue to live within capitalist economies, a new form of collecting digital media will need to provide financial support for the artists that participate.

In the future, a native digital media collecting ecology might be radically different from the current art market, but this new kind of collecting probably won't affect the existing market.

¹⁰ Akten, M. (2021, February 26). The unreasonable ecological cost OF #CryptoArt. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://memoakten.medium.com/the-unreasonable-ecological-cost-of-cryptoart-2221d3eb2053>

*If a new model succeeds, it will emerge as new territory.*¹¹

But is this really what we want? To willingly carry the weight of physical matter? To knowingly emulate the unfair structures of the capitalist art market? To surrender the infinite power of abundance in favor of commodity fetishism?

By commodifying the digital files one is declaring the artistic product itself as the bearer of value, thus obscuring the social relations of the production of the work. Does an artwork only assert its value at the moment of an effective purchase? Is money, as the monotonous, ever-present vehicle of commodification, not the worst way to describe the value of a subjective medium? How is the price of a work of art relevant to its individual appreciation? Where does the value actually come from?

The value of an artwork, subjective in essence, emerges at the encounter of the piece and the personal experience of the spectator. It is realized in a sublime moment that might last seconds and reverberate for a lifetime. The subjective value of an artwork can only increase when it encounters a broader group of people in an expansive set of possible circumstances. To continue to subject art creation to the whims of capitalist markets will only lead us to scarcity, rivalry, conformity and advertisement.

NFTs serve as a metaphor to reflect upon a broader issue: the obsession for possession. As a cornerstone of the capitalist system, we should be vigilant of its development and contest its push. It is through these technological implementations and social mechanisms that the delusion of property is perpetuated. Laws get enacted, property rights exerted and inequality legitimized. The future it envisions is that of absolute commodification. But then, how to economically remunerate artists? Rent and food will not be paid by the sublime experience of the spectator...

Transvestment

Monetary gain should be seen as a vehicle for life sustenance, not as bearer of value. The focus should be on supporting the capacity to produce art. In other words, the value is not in the work of art but in the art of work. By liberating the artworks from the price

¹¹ Reas, C., 2019. *Collecting In The Age Of Digital Reproduction* — *Artnome*. [online] *Artnome*. Available at: <<https://www.artnome.com/news/2019/9/9/collecting-in-the-age-of-digital-reproduction>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

system, digital artists would be able to create in a less constrained environment, with head room for risk, care work, long-term experimentation, sharing and collaboration.¹²

While considerably better, conforming labor to commodification should not be the final answer, but a step towards total de-commodification. A radical transformation of ownership for the art objects, the art producer's time and everything in between. Ultimately, by decommodifying the subjective, value would be correctly allocated in the realm of the immeasurable, the invaluable and the unquantifiable.

How does this future look like? Perhaps as a federated, mutualist network of non-rivalrous forms of art making financially supported by solidarity-based collectives of patrons, decentralized institutions, anti-copyright funds and democratically ran artists cooperatives.¹³

In the digital art world, we have the technological capacity to renounce individual ownership and to dismiss property as a by-product of our material past. We can use the power of distributed ledger technologies to foster a culture of commons-based artistic practices and fund institutional alternatives that act outside State and corporate logics.

Digital provenance can help us understand the complex ecosystem of interdependent relations, attributions, remixes and appropriations, enabling artists to build reputation and social capital, without the need of commercializing the art itself.

A new generation of patronage platforms could redistribute wealth through an Artistic Universal Basic Income that includes those involved in maintaining artistic infrastructure, doing care work and other invisibilized forms of labor, and those engaging in performance, oral tradition and other ephemeral, untokenizable forms of art.

We can reverse the neoliberal mechanisms of intellectual property and attach copyfarleft and peer-production licences to protect workers from capitalist exploitation and art works from commodification.

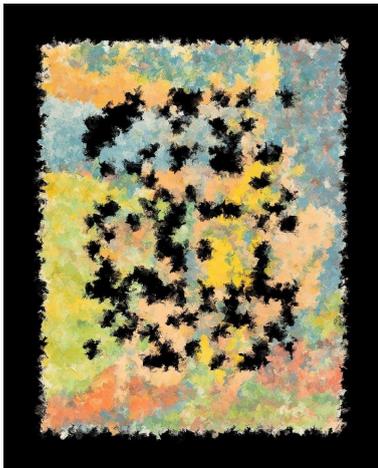
¹² *The Golden Calf Vol. 2 | Is Art a Commodity?* 2018. [video] Directed by P. Taxxon.

¹³ Disco.coop. 2020. If I Only Had A Heart: A Disco Manifesto. [online] Available at: <<https://disco.coop/manifesto/>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

The possibilities are endless and our journey has just begun. As these forms of revolutionary organization continue to pop-up, systems that support them must be established. A new normal is to be built. Transvestment¹⁴ acts as a form of direct action for the expropriation of value from capitalist forms of production and into new models of social coordination. By strategically participating in the capitalist market economy, projects may acquire capital that can be redirected towards emancipatory purposes. NFTs can supersede their commercial value by serving as a stepping stone for funding long lasting, post-capitalist projects, allocating resources towards nurturing forms of deeper wealth.

Neoliberalism is our natural environment. We therefore operate with what we call strategic duplicity. This involves recognizing what works in the systems we work against.

...We work with them, strategically, while nurturing an alien logic that moves in very different directions.¹⁵



Emulating the motion of a stiff, mechanical brush, a sampled line with a 1px width slides on top of the original photograph iteratively. In just 1/60 of a second, the original data is constantly overwritten with a swift motion. As the algorithm works its way through the image, the original information is lost and substituted with a sampled slice of already present pixels. This new configuration of the image becomes progressively more suitable for jpeg compression with each subsequent transformation. After enough time, the algorithm will overwrite the pixels where the original signature of the painting was shown, symbolically overtaking the authorship of the piece and in some cases deforming the original beyond recognition.

Disguised among the pixel data, each final image contains a hidden file with a password to decrypt a corresponding video essay. The only way to retrieve the invisible file is to run the image through the open-source software that concealed it in the first place.

¹⁴ Wiki.p2p foundation.net. 2020. Transvestment - P2P Foundation. [online] Available at: <<https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Transvestment>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

¹⁵ Todoroff, U., Cotte, J., Taylor, V., Gregory, K. and Madar, C., 2020. *A Cryptoeconomy Of Affect*. [online] *The New Inquiry*. Available at: <<https://thenewinquiry.com/a-cryptoeconomy-of-affect/>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

At the beginning of this process, a pattern of black squares was drawn on top of the image. This binary grid is the key that reveals the contained secret file. While the key is public, and visible to anyone, only those with access to the 'authentic' original image will be able to retrieve the corresponding password to watch the corresponding video-essay. Any illegitimate copies of the image will not reveal the hidden file, as compression and resampling changes the original configuration of pixels. With this act, the auratic power of cryptography is made explicit and the manufactured authenticity it provides is made functional for conceptual purposes, ultimately revealing a deeper form of wealth hidden inside the tokenized piece. Let this be a warning, for when objects are gratuitously made scarce, spurious markets spawn.

Even before capitalism is overcome, it may be possible to have one foot in both streams, in ways that prefigure its beyond. In that beyond, quantification would be beholden to surplus-value of life, rather than surplus value of life being slave to accumulation.¹⁶

¹⁶ Massumi, B., 2020. 99 Theses On The Revaluation Of Value. University of Minnesota Press.