

DECENTRALISE EVERYTHING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CRYPTO ART AND NON-FUNGIBLE TOKENS AS EGALITARIAN ARTEFACTS

by

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FORM A

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Summary

Title of dissertation	Decentralise Everything: A Critical Analysis of Crypto Art and Non-Fungible Tokens as Egalitarian Artefacts
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Supervisor	Dr Adéle Adendorff
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This study surveys the emergent artistic phenomenon identified as Crypto Art in relation to a perceived artistic decentralisation immanent to the orientation. Crypto Art delineates an artistic orientation predicated on the construction and artificialisation of digital ephemera under the construct of non-fungible tokens (NFTs). In a word, NFTs refer to cryptographically secure certificates of ownership over digital assets (Sidley and Dingle 2022, 132-133). These certificates of ownership are recorded and verified on a distributed digital database known as a blockchain. Crypto Art applies the NFT construct to digital artworks, classifying them as fundamentally unique and singular in their presentation and framework. Moreover, Crypto Art assumes the blockchain's technologically decentralised architecture towards an artistic decentralisation. That is, blockchains have no central custodians and as such are envisioned as replacing human systems predicated on centralised power crystallisations. As an artistic orientation, Crypto Art attempts to bypass the role of intermediating actors – such as galleries and museums – towards a technologically mediated form of autonomous interaction. As such, this study considers the extent to which Crypto Art, through the construct of NFTs located on the blockchain, facilitates an artistic decentralisation.

Key Terms

Non-fungible tokens (NFTs)

Decentralisation

Crypto Art

Blockchain

Dematerialisation

Egalitarian

Art-historical

New Aesthetic

Post-digital aesthetics

Peer-to-peer (P2P)

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INTRODUCTION

Background to Study

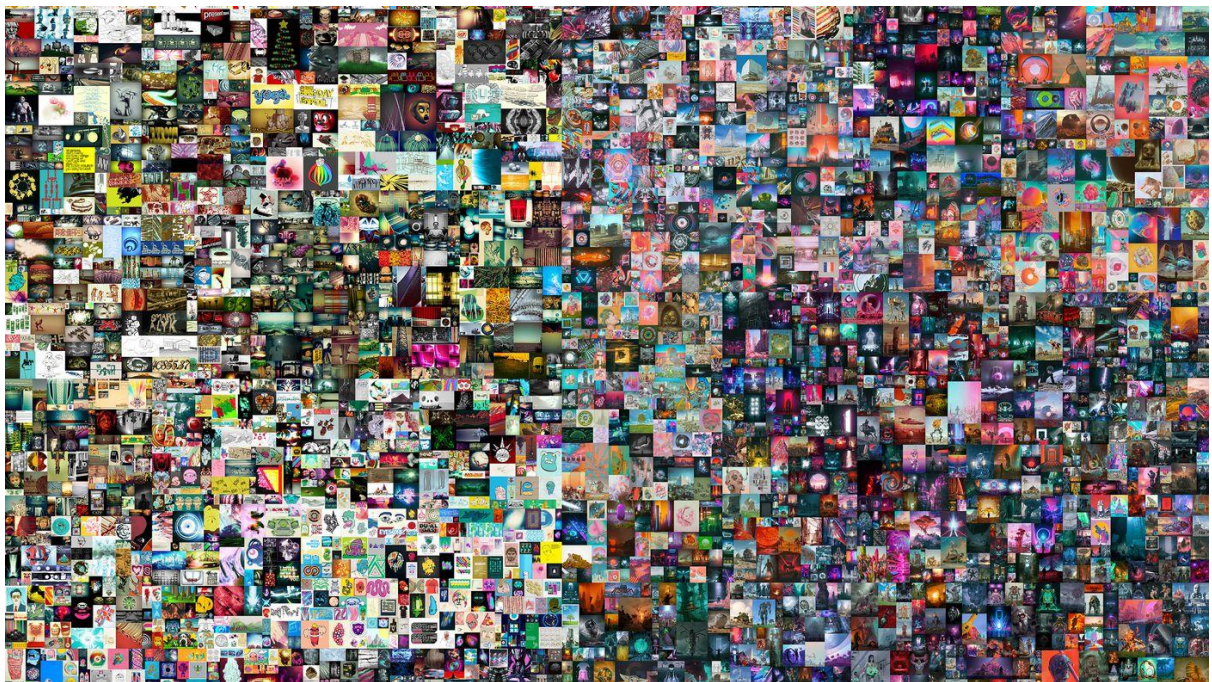


Figure 1.1: Mike Winkelmann (Beeple), *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021. Digital Collage, Token ID: 40913. Non-Fungible Token (JPEG). (Christie's, 2022).

Everydays: The First 5000 Days (2021) (fig. 1.1) (hereafter, *Everydays*) is a digital collage by the artist Mike Winkelmann (alias Beeple) that sold at a Christie's auction for \$69 million on 11 March 2021. The uniqueness of this artwork is due to the fact that it was sold as a non-fungible token (NFT),¹ effectively introducing NFTs into the mainstream art world. In simple terms, an NFT is a cryptographically secure certificate of ownership of a digital artefact, in this case, an artwork (Sidley and Dingle

¹ An NFT is a cryptographically secured certificate of ownership of a digital asset registered on a blockchain (Sidley and Dingle 2022, 132-133). An in-depth elaboration of the term follows in Chapter Three, Section 3.5.

2022, 132-133). NFTs in art represent the fusion of art with information and financial technology to a hitherto unseen degree. This joining of supposedly decentralised technologies and art practice, display and consumption pique my interest and form the locus of my enquiry in this study.²

As technological advancement becomes increasingly pervasive, it is essential to rethink traditional notions of power, positionality, and hierarchy within the art world. Felix Guattari (1996, 103-107) theorises that the rapid integration of machinic apparatuses into biological life characterises the current era of planetary computerisation.³ The increasingly inescapable nature of algorithmic technologies, exemplified by the omnipresence of Facebook⁴ and Amazon⁵, among others, paired with revolutions in information systems, artificial intelligence, robotics, and biotechnology, have led to a processual restructuring of human interaction socially, creatively, and economically. As such, the art world has yet to escape reshaping either.

No greater opportunity has been awarded to conventional spaces of display than computerisation. Advanced technologies have enhanced workflows, strategies, and audiences outside physical locations. Mobile technologies have granted museums and exhibition spaces a ubiquitous existence. The impending realisation of a metaversal museum experience, as contested by Hee-soo Chou and Sang-Heon Kim (2017, 1526), in which virtual and actual spaces become seamlessly interlinked,

² I refer to NFTs as potential decentralising technologies to the extent that they are an extension of a core notion in blockchain environments: deconcentrating digital asset management from central powers to peripheral zones. NFTs represent a perceived application of the blockchain's decentralised architecture (cf. Chapter Three, Section 3.4.).

³Guattari (1996, 103) refers to a contemporaneous era of planetary computerisation in which biological life is restructured concerning an ever-expanding machinic subjectivity. Planetary computerisation describes a zone where machines are "placed under the control of subjectivity – not a reterritorialised human subjectivity, but a new kind of machinic subjectivity" (Guattari 1996, 103). That is, rather than bringing about a processual liberation of the self towards a proliferation of subjectivities, the current era subordinates difference under static identities modulated by machinic elements. I refer to planetary computerisation in relation to NFTs to highlight the extent to which decentralising technologies attempt to restructure human agencies through machinic solutions. I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Four.

⁴ Facebook employs an algorithm that monitors user experience on the platform for data collection and processing, as well as automated reasoning in the case of ad targeting, as stated by Cooper (2019, 81).

⁵ Like Facebook, Amazon is at the forefront with its algorithms designed to record and replicate user interactions across its platforms (Cooper 2019, 81) – these range from e-commerce to streaming services such as Amazon Prime.

is presently underway.⁶ Elena Filipovic (2014, 46) observes that curatorial or exhibitionary attempts desiring inclusivity, such as the biennale model, primarily *reproduce* power imbalances within normative spaces.⁷ Filipovic's (2014, 48) perspective is predicated on the assertion that display spaces replicate a binary semiotic valuation along the timeless landscape of the white cube, despite their efforts of inclusivity and multiculturalism.⁸ The prevalence of the white cube space's imperial character is such that it determines notions of art based on degrees of distance from the white cube; that which is not displayed within its *milieu* is devoid of artistic value.⁹

Several researchers (see Whitaker 2019; Chevet 2018; Francheschet et al. 2021) argue that blockchain technology has various disruptive applications within the art context. A blockchain is a public, append-only distributed digital database that grants its user network secure transactions and immutable records on a transparent peer-to-peer (P2P) basis (Whitaker 2019, 21). In simpler terms, a blockchain can be regarded as a record of transactions made in cryptocurrency.¹⁰ To this end, this research investigates the impact of blockchain-backed art forms within the context of institutional display spaces. The central research question of this study is as follows: how do blockchain-backed digital artefacts represent the decentralisation of the production, circulation, and consumption of artworks through an alleged reallocation of power away from traditional intermediary art institutions? Put differently: how does the decentralised disposition of these new technologies assist in *renouncing* power imbalances within normative spaces?

⁶ The metaverse refers to an intermingling of virtual and physical reality, defining a "scaled and interoperable network of real-time rendered 3D virtual worlds which can be experienced synchronously and persistently..." (Ball 2021). The Metaverse has been viewed as a potential virtual space in which NFTs can be integrated to facilitate greater audience participation (Scheiding 2022, 10; Parasol 2022)

⁷ A biennale is a large-scale, international exhibition that generally occurs every two years to showcase the latest contemporary artists' work and ideas on a global scale.

⁸ The white cube space is a display aesthetic typically featuring unadorned white walls and a rectangular shape. Per Brian O'Doherty (1976, 27), the white wall effectuates the divorce of art from society. Distinct in their modern origins, artworks in capitalist society exist in a placeless context inside the white cube. O'Doherty (1976, 27) also contends that the white wall serves as a site for contending ideologies to promulgate dominant socio-cultural and economic codes.

⁹ This drive towards inclusivity and art's relational valuation to the white cube space may be extended to the virtual museum; however, due to the scope and length of this study that is not within the focus of the present argument.

¹⁰ A cryptocurrency is a digital asset that functions as a medium of exchange where transactions are recorded in an encrypted ledger (a blockchain). In more concise terms, a cryptocurrency refers to a "method of constituting 'virtual' coins and providing for their secure ownership and transaction" (Harwick 2016, 570). An example of a cryptocurrency is Bitcoin.

Before delving into the next section, it is necessary to unpack precisely what decentralisation means in terms of technology (a functional/operational interpretation) and theoretically/philosophically. I investigate decentralisation as an ethos in Crypto Art that attempts to bypass institutional gatekeepers. There is a palpable difficulty in defining Crypto Art in such a way as to integrate its multiple manifestations and apparent contradictions. Crypto Art, as a designator, is an ambitious attempt at unifying diverse artistic orientations under a single banner. On the one hand, it is tempting to categorise it as an extension of Digital Art fused to the blockchain, as Franceschet et al. (2021, 402) and Finucane (2018, 9) put forward. These definitions encompass one aspect of Crypto Art: its intermingling with the tokenising potential the blockchain provides. However, I suggest that this only accounts for the technological aspect of Crypto Art and skirts engagement with the artistic. Unlike art-historical traditions such as Pop Art¹¹, Impressionism¹² and Abstract Expressionism¹³, Crypto Art cannot be defined based on visual uniformity or stylistic choices. This problematises a definition aimed at integrating the artistic or aesthetic aspect with the technological aspect.

I approach Crypto Art instead through the framework of the New Aesthetic as coined by James Bridle (2014, 22). The New Aesthetic engages with the diversification of visual languages under the influence of digital technology. The New Aesthetic prioritises both the visual and non-visual effects of digital technologies on artistic forms, interacting with the seen and unseen processes guiding and informing the production, distribution, and consumption of images in the contemporary era (Bridle 2014, 22-24). As such, and with the above in mind, I conceive of Crypto Art as *an aesthetic programme exhibiting both a visual and non-visual orientation with an emphasis on the production and articulation of digitally scarce artistic objects through association with NFTs afforded by the blockchain*. In other words, I am not content

¹¹ Pop Art refers to an art movement emergent in the late 1950s and 1960s, which took popular culture and mass media as its subject matter. As an orientation, Pop Art “was simultaneously a celebration of post-war consumerism and a reaction against [Abstract Expressionism]” (Atkins 1997, 148-149)

¹² Impressionism refers to a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art movement with a “quasi-scientific emphasis on capturing fleeting perceptions, such as the appearance of light on a cathedral façade at a specific time of day” (Atkins 1997, 89).

¹³ Abstract Expressionism refers to a mid-twentieth century (predominantly North American) artistic orientation that departed from figurative representation in favour of abstraction and non-representation: “Of paramount concern to all the Abstract Expressionists was a fierce attachment to psychic self-expression” (Atkins 1997, 41).

with defining Crypto Art as simply scarce digital art. Rather, I apprehend Crypto Art as a complex operation of digitally mediated artistic prompts, interpretations, strategies, processes, and forms (cf. Section 2.1.).

As an ethos of Crypto Art, decentralisation is the underlying techno-political philosophy guiding Bitcoin¹⁴, Ethereum, and, by extension, Crypto Art and NFTs.^{15,16} Understood as a political philosophy, decentralisation exhibits alignment with both left- and right-libertarian and anarchist ideologies that emphasise eliminating centralised governance structures. Although posing decentralisation as a political philosophy presents its own problems, it permits a clearer understanding of the propositions that Crypto Art and NFTs offer.

Presented as an alternative to conventional institutions, decentralisation attempts to reverse the interplay of capital and symbolic investments in the productive field. This reversal is achieved through purported disintermediation from centralised governance structures favouring P2P production and interaction. However, decentralisation within the Crypto Art and NFT arena tends to operate more as a rhetorical strategy that needs more clarity than a consolidated political theory (Schneider 2019, 4). This study attempts to consolidate the intellectual currents underpinning decentralisation as both ethos and theory. This is achieved by critically engaging with decentralisation in Crypto Art and NFTs. Following the research question, the study explores the role of crypto artworks and NFTs in rearranging traditional relationships within the art world. While virtuality erodes physical barriers, it still invokes a centrality of power that fails to redress the imbalance between collecting subjects, artists, and viewers. Without being overly optimistic about the potential for decentralisation, due attention is granted to scholarly explorations of blockchain applications in digital media and visual discourse.

¹⁴ It is important to distinguish between Bitcoin (with an uppercase B) and bitcoin (with a lowercase b): Bitcoin (uppercase B) refers to the fundamental blockchain layer, whereas bitcoin (lowercase b) refers to the cryptocurrency.

¹⁵ Ethereum is the blockchain on which the ether (ETH) cryptocurrency runs. Ethereum is a smart contract application blockchain that enables P2P communication across a distributed computer network (Buterin 2013, 13).

¹⁶ I discuss Bitcoin and Ethereum in greater detail below.

As Digital Art¹⁷ assumes more widespread notoriety in the press and public imagination, it is increasingly necessary for exhibition spaces and their corresponding markets to adopt technology to accommodate this trend. 2021 observed a boom in interest for NFTs – indicating a widened scope of the shape and form art can take in the digital age. NFTs, held on the blockchain, effectively address a controversial issue within Digital Art: ownership. Since a digital artwork is disseminated online, anyone can arguably copy and paste it, resulting in widespread circulation to the extent that its original author's proprietary claims are eroded. With Crypto Art, each digital creation is produced alongside an NFT registered on the blockchain with a unique identification number. This allows tracing the artwork's provenance and current ownership with the backing of the blockchain. Consequentially, the study explores crypto artworks and NFTs in their attempt to expose functional power imbalances associated with the conventional production and dissemination of artistic works. I explore how decentralisation as an underlying ethos facilitates P2P forms of signification and interaction in the Crypto Art and NFT space. As an integral facet of decentralisation, P2P exchanges attempt disintermediation away from the centralised structures of normative exhibition spaces. To the extent that blockchains such as Ethereum purport to increase P2P transparency, I explore the viability of a decentralised art experience.

Aim and Objectives

This study investigates whether blockchain-backed digital cultural forms facilitate the decentralisation of artworks' circulation and consumption. Considering the impact of Crypto Art and NFTs on arts entrepreneurship, scholarship, and viewership, I conceptualise a reflexive framework that interrogates blockchain-backed technologies' social, economic, and creative effects. To realise this aim, I outline the following objectives:

¹⁷ As articulated by Christiane Paul (2002, 472), digital art refers to artworks produced, stored, and presented in digital format that uses the medium's inherent collaborative, malleable and interactive possibilities.

- to investigate the changes undergone by the art object following its fusion with decentralising NFT technology to the extent that it permits a monetisation of purely digital ephemera;
 - to discuss how this affects the art object in terms of its materiality to the extent that Crypto Art is aligned with the destabilisation of art's emphasis on singular perceptual objects with duration across space and time;
 - to explore how Crypto Art transforms the perception of art's authenticity since it purports to transform easily reproducible digital ephemera into artificially scarce objects
- to explore and establish the complexity and opposing results of blockchain-backed technologies in facilitating decentralisation;
 - investigating the ambiguities and contradictions supplying the notion of decentralisation, specifically as it pertains to Crypto Art
 - establishing and critiquing the relationship between technical decentralisation afforded by the blockchain to Crypto Art's attempted decentralisation of the arts
 - to discuss the underlying motivations informing Crypto Art in its attempt at forging an identity for itself apparently separate from the domain of traditional art.

Review of Literature

A Politic of Decentralisation

In 1988, Timothy C May – an American engineer – authored a text, *The Crypto-Anarchist Manifesto*, outlining the fundamental tenets of Crypto-Anarchy as a political philosophy. *The Cyphernomicon* followed this in 1994, wherein May expounded on his ideas about Crypto-Anarchism. Both texts exhibit a sceptical attitude towards centrally run governance structures – banks, the state, and corporations – favouring autonomy and self-sovereignty. *The Cyphernomicon* proposes limited government interference in personal affairs, articulating that technology can maintain personal autonomy and

create new political realities (May 1994). Further on, May proposes the idea of digital free markets secured through cryptographic methods:

strong crypto changes the nature and visibility of many economic transactions, making it very difficult for governments to interfere or even enforce laws, contracts, etc. (May 1994).

Crypto-Anarchism then refers to implementing “cryptographic methods for anarchist purposes in the digital realm” (Chohan 2017, 2). Although somewhat ambiguous, Crypto-Anarchism proposes disintermediation, bypassing concentrated governance structures and favouring autonomous and individual interactions. May’s articulation of Crypto-Anarchism and technology in mediating P2P social interactions form the foundations of decentralisation as both a design orientation and a political philosophy.¹⁸

More recently, the notion of a decentralisation facilitated via technology is associated with Smith and Burrows’ (2021, 145) identification of exit architectures: “the early construction of new socio-technical architectures within which [...] ideology can be instantiated.” Smith and Burrows (2021, 158) refer to libertarian-minded political structures gesturing towards fracturing nation states into governance regimes run like corporations. These constructs are fuelled by socio-technical mechanisms that effectively “concretize [...] mechanistic computational ‘social’ theories of a hyper-efficient neoreactionary state” (Smith and Burrows 2021, 158). Although I do not interpret Crypto Art as analogous to such political strategies, I suggest that these

¹⁸ In discussing the politics of decentralisation, it is crucial to note the utopian element present in framing the ideals of a cryptographically maintained decentralisation. As I note, Crypto-Anarchism (among other strands of political thought) supplemented the development and trajectory behind blockchain-backed politico-aesthetic architectures. Although Chapter Three explicitly grapples with decentralisation as a strategy, it does not go into full detail about the initial visions and ethos supporting technological disintermediation as a political approach. Initially, I intended to describe the ethos and principles behind cryptographic architectures, the initial Crypto-Anarchistic, libertarian and anarcho-capitalist impulses fuelling blockchain development. Proceeding, I intended to articulate the emergence of Bitcoin (and later Ethereum) as exhibiting decentralised motivations and structures (as they appeared theoretically) prior to the recapture of blockchain systems by small consortiums of individuals and organisations (as well as the subsequent attempted integration into existing frameworks of power and control that, at least from the perspective of the arts, resulted in Christie’s hosting a major NFT auction). As such, outlining the failures of the utopian ideal of decentralisation in a sufficient manner would exceed the scope of the current study. It would require a sustained effort necessitating an entire chapter on its own. Given the length of the study, a discussion on the failed utopian ideal would detract from the central thesis: that of NFTs in the capacity of ‘decentralising’ mechanisms, as techno-social artefacts excised from the technical milieu of a decentralised blockchain architecture. However, given the necessity of the topic, it serves as an interesting avenue to explore in further research.

emphases fuel notions of decentralisation as an exit architecture, even within the context of the arts. From an art-historical position, for example, decentralisation as both design orientation and political philosophy is reflected in Conceptual Art's attempts at undermining normative art institutions (cf. Chapter Two, Section 2.2). Through an aesthetic of indifference (Buchloh 1990, 121), Conceptual artists located their critiques at the level of institutional exhibition spaces. By deemphasising the materiality of art, Conceptual artists attempted to bypass hegemonic cultural and economic authority.

Conceptual Art, Crypto Art and NFTs

In response to shifting ideas concerning art production processes, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler (1968, 46) theorised a total dematerialisation of the art object in which ideas assume dominance over form. Lippard and Chandler (1968, 46) conceived “[a] profound dematerialisation of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object’s becoming wholly obsolete.” Dematerialisation presents the basis for purely Conceptual Art. This ultimately refers to the subordination of materiality towards an art without an object.¹⁹

The experiment in dematerialisation presented a challenge to the methods for evaluating non-object artworks, highlighting how dominant institutions articulated art as objects with perceptual constancy across space and time (Scott 2021). Addressing this impasse, Conceptual Artists developed the use of non-fungible identifiers – certificates of authenticity – to compound the effects of dematerialisation (Wilson 2022). This form of value generation derives scarcity from artistic ephemera, where non-objects assume value through an association with tangible records of authenticity. Citing Sol LeWitt’s Conceptual practices, Wilson suggests that

[by] adopting the practice that each of his artworks was accompanied by an authenticity certificate, where the identification code forced a fungible

¹⁹ The dematerialisation of the object, as described by Lippard and Chandler, did not describe the demise of the physical object. Rather, it outlined the emergence of a specific type of art during the late 1960s and 1970s that de-emphasised the role of perceptual objects in art-making processes. Artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Joseph Beuys took as their starting point the notion that art – at least at the time – is not wholly concerned with the production of physical objects. I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Two.

asset to be associated with a unique non-fungible asset, it is the ownership of a certificate of authenticity [...] that makes the artist's work unique and therein valuable (Wilson 2022).

Crypto Art is a surfeit of this ultra-Conceptual Art since it purports to liberate the art object, embracing immateriality, distribution, and a rejection of hegemonic cultural and economic institutions (Franceschet 2021, 311). As a digital art form, Crypto Art employs Digital Art's inherent interactive and collaborative possibilities (Paul 2002, 472) to further Conceptual Art's appeals for dematerialisation. However, this dematerialisation involves a degree of financialisation (Franceschet et al. 2021, 404). This is to the extent that Crypto Art – the tokenisation of digital art objects as evident in *Everydays* – is inextricably linked to the already hyper-financialised milieu of blockchain technology. As noted:

[Crypto Art] has monetized the conceptual art project of dematerialisation. If [conceptual artists] sought to disrupt and expose the market by getting rid of material objects, crypto art has generated a much more rapid market for digital artifacts, whose velocity makes it akin, in some respects, to financial trading (Franceschet et al. 2021, 404).

This embroilment with financial trading alludes to the two-fold nature of Crypto Art and, to a lesser extent, the changes in art's (non)objecthood following its fusion with financial and information technologies. Non-object art's singularity is undermined given its reliance on two events: 1) the artistic, non-objective ephemera liable for aesthetic reflection; 2) the issuance of a certificate of ownership or authenticity from which value is derived that grants permission for economic speculation. Hence, when discussing Crypto Art, reference should be made to its two-fold transformation instead of a singular commodifiable entity (Wilson 2022). From this, it is possible to infer that what decentralisation proposes to Crypto Art as the object is its bifurcation: on the one hand, as digital ephemera lifted to the status of art; on the other, as a vehicle for financial speculation.

Decentralisation and the Productive Field

Pierre Bourdieu's field theory is pertinent to understanding the distribution of cultural authority in relation to a proposed decentralisation. Bourdieu's field theory accounts for the material and symbolic production of cultural artefacts, duly considering the various effects sustaining the productive field as a universe of meaning (Johnson 1993, 20). Works possess varying degrees of economic and symbolic capital, having significance based on the objective positions of the groups involved (Johnson 1993, 21). The productive field can similarly be understood as "the system of objective relations between [...] agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate" (Bourdieu 1993, 78). The struggle for the power to consecrate results in a distinction between dominant and dominated cultural producers, where the former dictates the flow of cultural and economic authority (Bourdieu 1993, 82-83).

Bourdieu (1983, 319-320) identifies three zones within the productive field: the artistic zone, the zone of power and the zone of class relations. This hierarchy situates the primary artistic zone within the secondary zone of power, located within the broader zone of class relations. Here, the flow of symbolic and economic authority is not so much unilateral as it is a result of conflicting investments by opposing agents within their respective positions. Hence, it is plausible to identify, following Bourdieu (1993, 80-83), concentrations of economic and symbolic capital within the respective positions taken in the productive field.

Decentralisation understood as the underlying principle of Crypto Art and NFTs proposes a reversal of the structure of the productive field. This reversal entails divesting economic and symbolic capital from hegemonic cultural institutions favouring forms of consecration and value generation removed from central crystallisations of authority. Since the structural history of the field is understood as the relationship between dominant positions and opposing dispositions (Bourdieu 1993, 62), the introduction of Crypto Art into the productive field necessarily shifts the existing objective field relations. As such, Crypto Art's attempts at reinvesting economic and symbolic capital towards pure decentralisation indicate its role as dispositional. What decentralisation proposes is an alternative form of consecration, where the power to impose artistic definitions is directed away from central institutions.

The Dispositional Quality of Crypto Art and NFTs

The emergence of NFTs proposes a potential decentring of power distribution in the art world. On the one hand, it represents the institutionalisation of native digital art as viable for cultural and economic consideration. On the other, given the financialised milieu from which they emerged, it questions the viability of NFTs as vehicles for a purely decentralised art experience. Digital technologies are redefining the position of conventional display spaces. Here, virtuality and reality interact in a seamless experience that attempts to demystify spaces of display as accessible to all (Giannini and Bowen 2019, 34). However, a modicum of central cultural and economic authority exists that NFTs and Crypto Art purport to decentralise through crypto-technological affordances. David Joselit (2021, 4) aligns NFTs with transforming art into speculative capital, an idea that may be reflected in the price fetched at auction by Winkelmann's artwork. Considering NFTs as a technological apparatus that extracts private property by enclosing the circulation of images, Joselit (2021, 3-4) suggests:

“art” has been deployed as the ideological mechanism by which [mobile production] is made into private property, susceptible to exuberant speculation. In other words, the category of art is equated with non-fungibility [...] the NFT deploys the category of art to extract private property from freely available information.

Joselit's (2021, 3-4) suggestion that NFTs, such as *Everydays*, prioritise the non-fungibility of art is problematic since artworks – whether digital or physical – are to some degree non-fungible, that is, unique in their singularity. Here, it can be suggested that the exchange value of the artwork as a commodity is predicated on its non-fungibility: art is a positional good that boosts the owner's social status (Adam 2014, 168). Non-fungibility can be construed as a prerequisite for exchanging artworks as commodities to the extent that a commodity's value possesses a purely social reality (Marx 2013 [1867], 27).

Regardless, Joselit's inquiry into the ultra-capitalist nature of NFTs problematises their potential for a decentred experience. NFTs arguably represent the further financialisation of art and cultural production as vehicles for speculative

investment. However, that NFTs and Crypto Art emerged in a field that was financialised in advance should not detract from the affordances granted by distributed networks of value generation (Lotti 2019, 308). That Crypto Art exhibits this multiplicitous nature between artistic ephemera and speculative good problematises any totalising accounts. Instead, the potential for alternative forms of value generation through decentralisation forms the basis of a model through which Crypto Art can be articulated and understood.

Verifiable Digital Scarcity: Crypto Art, NFTs and The Blockchain

As with Conceptual Art, crypto artworks present an alternative form of value generation for seemingly non-object digital ephemera achieved through certificates of authenticity (NFTs) registered on the blockchain. To reiterate, an NFT is a cryptographically secured certificate of ownership of a digital asset, in this case, a digital artwork recognised as Crypto Art (Sidley and Dingle 2022, 132-133). NFTs are theoretically unique and irreplicable.²⁰ This form of value generation links scarcity to digital artefacts. A brief overview of digital scarcity is thus necessary when discussing Crypto Art.

In the early 1990s, Stuart Haber and Scott Stornetta sought a way to preserve the integrity and security of native-born digital artefacts (Haber and Stornetta 1991, 100). The problem presented itself in two ways: firstly, given that digital documents are liable to manipulation, how can we know that their present form does not deviate from the past? And secondly, is it possible to maintain a trustworthy record of the past without relying on a central authority?²¹ Haber and Stornetta's concerns were resolved

²⁰ The contracts used in developing NFTs generally adhere to ERC-721 (Ethereum Request for Comment-721) Token standards, although other token standards exist (such as ERC-1155). Roughly, the ERC-721 standard refers to the guidelines a developer must use in creating a non-divisible asset, namely a NFT, where "the tokens can't be divided into decimal amounts because each token represents an individual asset" (Rennekamp 2018).

²¹ For some clarification, Haber and Stornetta (1991, 105) aimed to devise a timestamped digital ledger that operated under the assumption of distributed trust, namely, eliminating a central authority to ensure the maintenance and integrity of a digital document. Haber and Stornetta (1991, 103) concluded that timestamping could be achieved by relegating a digital document to a designated timestamping service (TSS). The TSS stores a record of the date and time a document was received and an electronic copy for security. In short, Haber and Stornetta (1991, 106) devised a network architecture whose participation in the system is conditioned by the fact that should one client act in a corrupted manner,

in 2008 with the creation of the Bitcoin protocol by the pseudonymous Satoshi Nakamoto. Using the framework of a tamper-resistant, decentralised digital ledger, Nakamoto purposed Bitcoin as a

peer-to-peer [...] electronic payment system based on cryptographic proof instead of trust, allowing any two willing parties to transact directly with each other without the need for a trusted third party (Nakamoto 2008, 1).²²

Capitalising on Bitcoin's strengths, Vitalik Buterin introduced Ethereum as a multipurpose blockchain on which developers could program applications. Unlike Bitcoin, the Ethereum protocol exceeded the bounds of cryptocurrency (Buterin 2013, 19-34) for semi- and non-financial applications. These applications of the Ethereum protocol include the utilisation of NFTs registered on the network to certify the authenticity and provenance of digital artefacts. This form of certification thereby grants digital artefacts verifiable scarcity to the extent that the blockchain backs their uniqueness. Referring to Winkelmann's work, utilising an NFT confirmed the provenance and authenticity of the digital artwork on the Ethereum blockchain, rendering it verifiably scarce. Verifiable digital scarcity forms the basis for Crypto Art, wherein a digital image is given the "dignity of a true work of art, made unique, eternal and collectable through blockchain technology" (Franceschet and Braidotti 2020, 1).

The technical design philosophies of both Bitcoin and Ethereum reflect a shared suspicion of central crystallisations of power – both economic and cultural. The structures of the Bitcoin and Ethereum networks emphasise distributed organisation and collaboration. Haber and Stornetta (1991, 105), Nakamoto (2008, 1) and Buterin (2013, 13) conceive of some level of decentralisation, with the latter two introducing financial incentives as a regulating mechanism. This philosophy is reflected in the

the entire user directory, including the corruptible, is negatively affected. For digital art, Haber and Stornetta (1991, 106) formulated the possibility of creating a distinct and tamper-proof mark of ownership for a digital document, essentially lending to the idea that a digital artwork can be digitally secured and its provenance verified in a trustworthy manner.

²² Essentially, Bitcoin is the first effective blockchain system. Each user is incentivised to maintain its custodian-less basis by mining bitcoin through a proof-of-work scheme (Bitcoin with an uppercase B refers to the blockchain network, whereas bitcoin with a lowercase b refers to the cryptocurrency). Simply, this scheme involves the computation of complex mathematical problems by users on the network. The user that solves the problem is awarded a set number of bitcoin. Once the mining effort is complete, a block cannot be amended "without redoing the work [...] and as] later blocks are chained after it, the work to change the block would include redoing all the blocks after it" (Nakamoto 2008, 3).

arena of NFTs and Crypto Art, where symbolic and cultural capital is purportedly divested from traditional art institutions. Instead, the flow of cultural authority is maintained on an informal community level, where the Ethereum blockchain acts as a medium for storing and transferring digital artworks.²³ The decentralised networks in which crypto artworks circulate present alternative forms of consecration, where the value of an artwork is determined on a P2P basis instead of through an intermediary such as the gallery or auction house.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within intersecting theoretical fields to facilitate an art historical approach to Crypto Art. I expand on Crypto Art beyond the view of the phenomenon as a sub-category of Digital Art. I employ a post-digital framework to situate Crypto Art within a wider aesthetic condition broaching the concerns of art intersecting with technology. A post-digital framework describes the convergence and confluence of digital objects as they act on material processes; or, in more decisive terms, the post-digital “describes the messy state of media, arts and design *after* their digitisation” (Cramer 2015, 19). Within the framework of the post-digital, I employ the New Aesthetic as a conceptual category to understand the processes underlying Crypto Art (namely, the process of decentralisation). As proposed by Bridle, the New Aesthetic concerns itself with both the visible and unseen processes of articulation underpinning aesthetic modes (Bridle 2014, 22-23).

I similarly employ an art-historical approach to Crypto Art informed by Hal Foster’s theory of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action): an account for the ways in which historical- and neo-avant-gardes act on each other in an extended process of pretension and retention (Foster 1996, 22). In turn, I interpret the artist Marcel Duchamp as the historical avant-garde precedent of Conceptual Art; and Conceptual Art as the historical precedent for Crypto Art.²⁴ As such, dematerialisation – the

²³ The social structures surrounding NFTs take place off-chain on social media platforms such as Twitter and Discord with no definable hierarchy.

²⁴ Conceptual Art is an artistic orientation in twentieth-century European and American art that prioritises ideas and processes over finished objects. Viewed as a circumvention of traditional physical art, Conceptual Art was a reaction “against the increasingly commercialised art world of the 1960s” (Atkins 1997, 74)

prioritisation of process and idea over the art object and the marking of the disintegration of the material art object – is central to the study's exploration of *Everydays* as an artefact and the possible exchanges it engenders (Lippard and Chandler 1968, 46). From this art historically informed perspective, I consider decentralisation as an artistic approach to dismantling power structures. Apart from its practical application, the study also considers decentralisation in terms of its theoretical and philosophical concerns. The research utilises a critical sociological approach via Bourdieu (1989, 319), understood as the distribution of cultural and symbolic power in relation to Crypto Art's proposal of decentralised interaction within the field of cultural production.

Research Methodology

The methodological approach of this study follows a critical hermeneutic approach to qualitative research, considering the social, cultural, and political contexts in which crypto artworks are situated and articulated. A critical hermeneutic approach destabilises predetermined notions of comprehension, instead emphasising the creation of new understanding through active inquiry and dialogue with the object of interpretation (Freeman 2008, 387). This stance foregoes first impressions and pre-established methods of human understanding to expose and analyse entrenched meanings (Freeman 2008, 388). Continuing, this bearing permits the social, cultural, and political effects of crypto artworks to emerge during the interrogation process.

Following a hermeneutic approach, the analysis incorporates a continuous dialogic process where interpretation and understanding emerge through active engagement with critical sources (Freeman 2008, 388). Through this, I engage with theoretical bases exploring the contested nature of the art object and the complexities of a decentralisation facilitated by blockchain-backed technology within the art context. Engaging with these sources hermeneutically widens the scope of interpretation to account for the “dynamic and historically situated nature of human understanding” (Freeman 2008, 388). This permits a self-reflective encounter with theoretical texts to arrive at a deeper understanding of the social and creative effects of crypto artworks.

Feasibility and Ethical Implications of the Study

The research objectives set out in this dissertation were realistic, given the scope and length of this study period. In addition, this study only relied on published texts and did not involve any human subjects, respondents, or participants and therefore did not pose any ethical implications.

Preliminary Outline of Chapters

The Introduction provides a survey of the research aims and objectives, the study's background, and its scope.

Chapter One, (Re)thinking Crypto Art, introduces Crypto Art by attempting to provide a formal introduction to the phenomenon. In this chapter, I engage with previous attempts at defining Crypto Art which, I argue, prioritise the technological. That is, these accounts point to the technological component of the phenomenon while neglecting its aesthetic emphases. As such, in this chapter, I conceive a formal and adequate definition of Crypto Art, which I employ throughout the study.

Chapter Two, Critique and Concept: Duchamp, Dematerialisation, and Conceptualism, pre-emptively situates Winkelmann's *Everydays* within a historical trajectory rooted in a tradition prompted by the artist Marcel Duchamp. I suggest that Duchamp prompted the development of an artistic language that sought to elevate the artist's faculties as the primary source of artistic definitions. Through engaging with Duchamp's artistic oeuvre, I consider the extent to which the destabilisation of art's emphases on singular perceptual objects with duration across space and time affected the conceptual framing of art as object. Although I read Winkelmann in conjunction with Duchamp, I do not suggest that the former completed the project of the latter. Rather, I point to a tendency emerging alongside Duchamp that continues in Crypto Art. Thereafter, I prioritise a reading of Crypto Art in relation to Conceptual Art and the dematerialisation of the object. I survey the philosophical implications of Conceptual Art, viewing the movement as an extension of Duchamp; in Crypto Art, I identify a

retention of a core idea in Conceptual Art: that the object need not be physical, and that the artist's elevated faculties facilitate a totalising understanding of art.

Chapter Three, The Promise of Decentralisation, traces the rhetoric of decentralisation in relation to Crypto Art. However, decentralisation remains a contested and little-understood term, specifically when affixed to the terminology of the blockchain. Furthermore, the extent to which this construct extends the bounds of an infrastructural orientation towards a techno-philosophical philosophy remains undecided. I interpret Crypto Art as assuming the blockchain's architectural decentralisation towards an 'artistic decentralisation,' that is, undermining the role of the institution in defining and consecrating artistic objects.

Chapter Four, Reframing the Authentic, evaluates the approach undertaken by Crypto Art in its view of the authenticity and necessity of the work of art. I read Crypto Art in relation to artistic traditions that promoted a specific character to the work of art defined by its ability to distinguish itself as symbolic on a transcendental level. Crypto Art, I argue, reverses this aesthetic formula in favour of a materialism grounded in the technological. By this, I proffer the conclusion that the authentic in Crypto Art is primarily enclosed in the construct of the NFT.

Chapter Five, Conclusion, offers a summary of the research through the conclusion. This concluding chapter surveys the study's efforts, arriving at the conclusion that decentralisation, as it manifests in Crypto Art, is at best a half-realised goal. That is, rather than offering an alternative and independent artistic model, Crypto Art uses the rhetoric of decentralisation as a mode of differentiation to set itself apart in the productive field. This chapter similarly addresses the study's weaknesses and points of tension, as well as offers some areas for further research concerning Crypto Art.

CHAPTER ONE

(RE)THINKING CRYPTO ART

This chapter contextualises Crypto Art as an aesthetic programme oriented towards producing and articulating digitally scarce artistic objects. In this chapter, I engage with previous attempts at defining Crypto Art which, I argue, prioritise the technological. That is, these accounts point to the technical component of the phenomenon while neglecting its aesthetic emphases. As such, I conceive a formal and adequate definition of Crypto Art, which I employ throughout the study.

Defining Crypto Art is complex since it involves unifying disparate references under a single banner. Finucane (2018, 9) refers to Crypto Art as artworks involving the use of cryptocurrencies and blockchain in execution:

I maintain that for work to be considered “crypto art,” it must incorporate the blockchain and/or cryptocurrency into how it operates. The blockchain is Crypto Art’s most essential and defining feature (Finucane 2018, 9).

This definition bypasses the difficulty by subordinating any considerations under the shared banner of the blockchain. Finucane’s emphasis on blockchain functionality sets the parameters for identifying a crypto artwork through cross-referencing the object’s position to the blockchain. While this account perhaps simplifies the task of definition, it generalises the conditions under which a work can be considered Crypto Art. Granted, Finucane (2018, 9) concedes that there is an explicit difficulty in defining works of this nature and that the term itself [Crypto Art] is somewhat disjointed and nebulous.²⁵

²⁵ There is an overlap between Crypto Art as an aesthetic practice and other cases incorporating visual elements. For example, CryptoPunks, an NFT collection composed of ten thousand “24x24 pixel art images, generated algorithmically” (LarvaLabs 2022), blurs the line between art and collectable. Although it is possible to refer to CryptoPunks as an art collection, it might equally be plausible to

Nevertheless, the assertion that any work involving blockchain technology is automatically conferred Crypto Art status hints at an implicit reductionism or perhaps an unwillingness to grapple with the entanglement explicitly. The idea that an artwork that uses the blockchain in its operation can be identified as a crypto artwork involves a degree of indeterminacy and relativity. For example, it follows that any artwork sold in cryptocurrency can be categorised as crypto artwork. Perhaps a functional definition like Finucane's – though invaluable as a starting point – is too insufficient an approach. The implication thereof is that Crypto Art remains something open-ended, understood on an individual basis. However, it should be noted that Finucane's criterion hinges on a contingent factor, that is, the blockchain, and perhaps assumes a descriptive approach to avoid the pitfalls of universality.

This impasse alludes to the complexity of defining artistic movements and whether they necessitate definition. Given that, at the time of writing, Crypto Art is rapidly progressing, it begs whether there is a need to historicise it through definition in the present. While a tenable concern, the need for formal definition begets a richer understanding of the object of cognition. In this case, the need for a more precise understanding of what Crypto Art is permits a comprehensive and fluid approach.²⁶

Considering the above, the art critic Jason Bailey provided specific parameters for categorising Crypto Art. Bailey (2018) defines Crypto Art as "rare digital artworks [...] associated with unique provably rare tokens that exist on the blockchain."²⁷ Bailey's text, 'What is CryptoArt?' (2018), identifies ten characteristics: 1) *Digitally native*; 2) *Geographically agnostic*; 3) *Permissionless*; 4) *Decentralised*; 5) *Anonymous*; 6) *Memetic*; 7) *Self-referential*; 8) *Crypto-Patrons*; 9) *Pro-Artist*; 10) *Dankness*. A brief encounter with some of the characteristics is necessary. Bailey's first criterion, digital nativity, contextualises Crypto Art within a broader framework of

describe them as digital trinkets in the tradition of trading cards: they exist somewhere between the realms of art and collectable. In this case, can they be defined as an example of Crypto Art? Or merely as a non-artistic iteration of using NFTs in conjunction with visual imagery?

²⁶ Benjamin Buchloh (1990, 105), writing twenty years after the first permutation of Conceptual Art, suggests that "to historicize [...] requires, first of all, a clarification of the wide range of often conflicting positions and [...] mutually exclusive types of investigation." While twenty years have yet to pass, there is still a wealth of information at present through which a historical trajectory, albeit an incomplete one, is possible.

²⁷ Like Finucane's (2018, 9) definition, I find Bailey's approach insufficient as it prioritises the technological value of Crypto Art as something primary over a secondary artistic value.

artistic practices exploring art and technology.²⁸ Per this criterion, Crypto Art falls within the scope of Digital Art: the deployment of technologies towards the hybridity of artistic mediums. I refer to Digital Art as a practice and orientation instead of a visual style discontinuous with ‘traditional’ or ‘analogue’ processes of art-making and historical time. Following David Berry (2015, 45), I find the distinction between ‘analogue’ and ‘digital’ to be too simplistic an approach. Berry (2015, 45) refutes the dichotomy and opts for the terminology of a constellation whereby the two – digital and analogue – comingle in diverse ways. In other words, this entails a “rejection of the specificity of the digital as a separate domain, highlighting both the materiality of the digital and its complex relationship with the analogue” (Berry 2015, 45). Perhaps the distinction is rooted in the belief that being ‘online’ and ‘offline’ are two different things. However, as Berry (2014, 50) portends, the ubiquity of technological devices has rendered the division obsolete: “So ‘being online’ or ‘being offline’ is now anachronistic, with our always-on smart devices, tablets and hyper-connectivity, as indeed, is the notion that we have ‘digital’ and ‘analogue’ worlds that are disconnected....” Moreover, as Cramer (2015, 17-18) demonstrates, the notion that ‘digital’ refers to the computational and ‘analogue’ refers to the non-computational is inaccurate. Instead, per Cramer (2015, 17-18), ‘digital’ refers to the division of something into “discrete, countable units”; ‘analogue’, then, refers to “information that has not been chopped up into discrete, countable units, but instead consists of one or more signals [varying] on a continuous scale”. In light of this, I reject the distinction between ‘digital’ and ‘traditional’ art, viewing Digital Art as continuous with prior tradition. Indeed, Langdon (2014, 9) argues that Digital Art is contiguous with previous discourses and practices.

By this, I locate Crypto Art within any form of expression mediated by digital technology (Langdon 2014, 8). As Langdon (2014, 8) indicates, Digital Art might refer to an approach or classification rooted in an engagement with the machinic. This

²⁸ Bailey’s account of digital nativity differs from the conventional account, which refers to digital nativity as the extent to which generations are proficient with information technologies (Çoklar and Tatli 2021, 434). Digital nativity, in this sense, accounts for the extent to which individuals “(1) grow up with technology, (2) are comfortable with multitasking, (3) are reliant on graphics for communication, and (4) thrive on instant gratifications and rewards” (Teo 2013, 390). For Bailey, digital nativity explicitly refers to computer-born objects: “For the first time, artwork can be created, editioned, bought, and sold digitally” (Bailey 2018). Digital nativity, in this sense, means digitally created artworks. I refer to digital nativity in this sense throughout.

encompasses the perceptual and affectual transformations undertaken by the work of art when fused with the computer:

As a broad category [...] digital art incorporates any expression mediated by digital technology. The computer...is central to production, operating as an interface, facilitator and/or canvas for display (Langdon 2014, 8).

Crypto Art is contiguous with Digital Art to the extent that it incorporates digitally mediated expression; that is, NFTs and the underlying blockchain layer mediate its production and operation. As Paul (2002, 471-472) suggests, Digital Art does not describe an aesthetic as a set of artistic practices characterised by “algorithmically driven fluidity of forms, appearances and positions”. Paul Crowther defines Digital Art as prioritising

electronically based technology utilising mathematical algorithms for the acquisition, storage, processing, and presentation of information (Crowther 2008, 162).

I interpret Bailey’s notion of digital nativity as the condition in which technologically mediated artworks exist, noting it as an extension of understandings of Digital Art. Digital nativity, it might be said, is the fact of a work existing through digital processes, with specific reference to the above parameters and the additional possibilities afforded by the blockchain.

Geographic agnosticism, Bailey’s second criterion, refers to a perceived absence of barriers to entry in a geographic locality. This agnosticism alludes to another defining feature of Digital Art, at least per Crowther’s (2008, 164) view: non-locality and the ubiquity of digital technology. Digital images assume form on spatially dispersed devices, traversing physical borders and geographies. This, Bailey (2018) suggests, makes Crypto Art a non-localised, global movement.²⁹

²⁹ Non-locality supposedly grants Crypto Art a certain freedom to the extent that geographical borders are rendered obsolete in the digital. Bailey’s emphasis on non-locality perhaps stems from the notion that art movements emerge, and are shaped by, specific geographies: Herbert Read (1988, 34), for example, ties the emergence of Fauvism – a collection of painters “whose idiosyncratic choice of colours was intended to evoke feeling rather than to describe nature” (Atkins 1997, 89) – to Paris in the early twentieth century. In this sense, “artists are socially integrated and act as units dispersed throughout society” (Read 1998, 50) – artworks reflect their social conditions. Bailey perhaps overestimates the

Agnostic locality works alongside Bailey's third, fourth and fifth criteria: permissionlessness, decentralisation and anonymity. Permissionlessness hints at a democratic aspect where dispersed participation is encouraged, whereas decentralisation directly refers to the proposed promise of blockchain technology. Yet permissionless might similarly refer to the structure of the public blockchain network, which poses no singular custodian or barriers to entry to participate (cf. Chapter Three, Section 3.3.). That Crypto Art is decentralised, per Bailey (2018), refers to the existence of "[tools and guidelines] designed to reduce the power of gatekeepers and middlemen and increase the autonomy of artists," referring to the technical design of the blockchain.³⁰

Anonymity is another feature ensured by the blockchain to the extent that transactions on the blockchain, although public and visible to all, do not reveal any identifying information. However, I fail to see the extent to which anonymity contributes to understanding Crypto Art. In the context of this study, Winkelmann, as a relevant example, does not attempt any semblance of anonymity in the public eye.³¹ Bailey's identification of anonymity is perhaps in reference to the political ideology of Crypto Anarchism and exit architectures underpinning blockchain systems (cf. Introduction.).

digital space as absent of borders and perceives this absence of geographic barriers as a potentially ripe environment for artistic production. In other words, Bailey prefigures the digital as a neutral space or a "potentially progressive domain for overcoming barriers that may otherwise obstruct or restrict ideal forms of participation" (González 2010, 186). However, this view prefigures a conservative utopianism that fails to account for the degrees to which digital space reconfigures existing structures. As such, I doubt the notion of Crypto Art as non-local – indeed, the most notable movements of Crypto Art on the market have been of artists in the United States of America.

³⁰ Bailey's notion of decentralisation draws from the architecture of the blockchain. As I note in Chapter Three, decentralisation, per this interpretation, is fueled by the idea that the deconcentrated structure of public, permissionless blockchains might translate into a social reality (cf. Sections 3.2. – 3.3.). In this context, decentralisation is a socio-technical goal with the ideal of eliminating intermediaries such as in art (cf. Section 3.6.). However, as I note in Chapter Three, understanding of decentralisation presents an unclear goal with an over-reliance on how technical architectures translate into decentralised social and political goals. For Bailey, Crypto Art poses a theoretical or conceptual decentralisation with little basis in the material.

³¹ I must qualify this by stating that there are essential crypto artists who operate anonymously. Notable examples include the anonymous artists Pak and XCOPY. I mention these in passing, given the general scope and limitations of the study. While direct interaction with the two artists might befit a discussion, it exceeds the bounds of this study.

The sixth and seventh criteria are memetic and self-referentiality. By memetic, Bailey (2018) refers to the use of memes³² in the Crypto Art ecosystem and their ability to spread rapidly over networked channels.³³ Self-referentiality refers to a perceived degree of reflexivity in Crypto Art, where artists and their works engage in an almost infinite introspection about notable global events and pop culture.³⁴ Bailey's last three criteria are "Crypto-Patrons", "Pro-Artist", and "Dankness".³⁵ Crypto-Patrons are "a group of savvy technologists and investors who got into cryptocurrency early" (Bailey 2018), these being the collectors of Crypto Art. It might be said that Crypto-Patrons are distinct from regular art collectors to the extent that their collection habits are not limited to tangible artefacts:

[Crypto Art] opens the art world to a generation of collectors who do not care for their living room walls but do engage using mobile devices instead (Franceschet et al. 2019, 25).

The distinction between audiences is an attempt to define the difference between supposedly conventional art and Crypto Art. That is, Bailey attempts to account for taste (reflective in buying patterns) by presupposing an audience prior to

³² In digital culture, memes refer to virulent cultural units – such as jokes, rumours, and videos – propagated online (Shifman 2013, 362). Memes are characterised by their ability to be transformed from interpersonal, cultural information to grand social phenomena (Shifman 2013, 364-365). In other words, memes are cultural artefacts that are usually parodic or satirical in nature that gains their valency through their being shared across social networks.

³³ I must clarify what Crypto Art's emphasis on the memetic concept entails. From a Western art-historical perspective, the memetic concept recalls the contested notion of mimesis. Stephen Halliwell (2002, 5) presents two theories of mimesis derived from Plato and Aristotle: mimesis as the depiction or imitation of an accessible natural world graspable outside art "by whose norms art can...be tested and judged"; the second, mimesis as the creation of an independent artistic reality, "one that...may still purport to contain some kind of 'truth' about...reality as a whole". Although relevant to a discussion in an art-historical context, the memetic concept pertains to propagating cultural forms via the Internet. Rather than mimesis, I refer to the memetic concept within the context of digital culture. Shifman (2013, 362) traces the coinage of the term 'memetic' by Richard Dawkins in 1976 "to describe gene-like infections units of culture that spread from person to person." The meme concept in Crypto Art relates to the phenomenon's reference to memes as cultural units, as much as how Crypto Artworks might function as memes themselves.

³⁴ Bailey (2018) defines self-referentiality thus: "CryptoArtists [sic] often play with references to key events and personalities within cryptocurrency and blockchain culture." This is a little unclear, and perhaps not as notable as one would imagine. I interpret this in the same sense as the banalisation of the Dada art movement (cf. Chapter Five, Section 5.5) in which art is reduced to the language of the everyday. By incorporating aspects of the mundane, Crypto Art blurs the distinction between high and low art. Perhaps, then, 'self-referential' is an incorrect categorisation. Instead, Crypto Art exhibits a preoccupation with the mundane.

³⁵ I intentionally reject Bailey's notion of Pro-Artist as repetitive and foldable under the notion of 'decentralisation.' It might be said that all artistic movements are pro-artist, and I find the need to distinguish this rather juvenile and unnecessary.

the constitution or presentation of a work of art. Of course, suggesting that an audience exists prior to the work or the inverse is unwise. I find the distinction an attempt at clarifying the bounds of Crypto Art as a phenomenon that operates in the inverse to a perceived 'traditional' art world. Indeed, the distinction attempts to posit the existence of two different zones of interaction. In contrast, I find that if they are indeed separate zones they comeingle and overlap rather than exist as separate entities unto themselves.

"Dankness" must be understood within the context of memes and digital culture. A form of Internet vernacular, "dankness" loosely refers to the quality of a meme perceived as effective and authentic (Pettman 2019, 28). Bailey (2018) interprets this quality thus: "Because [Crypto Art] is open to everyone, judging it by traditional artistic standards kills what is great about it. Instead, it is best to judge [Crypto Art] by 'dankness' or potency of expression and creativity". From this perspective, dankness refers to Crypto Art's authentic character. In Bailey's estimation, dankness is an inversion of an aesthetic sensibility that stands against tradition and is more communal in orientation. In effect, there is the reconstruction between convention and subversion – Bailey views Crypto Art as composed of communal aesthetic experiences that are not limited to the perspective of an individual spectator.

I consider Bailey's characteristics a useful, though inconclusive, starting point in articulating Crypto Art.³⁶ Rather than attempting an all-encompassing definition of the phenomenon, Bailey's characteristics attempt to identify discrete elements constituting Crypto Art. Nonetheless, I find the approach too restrictive in providing a detailed metric against which potential crypto artworks can be judged and valued, that is, Bailey's criteria attempt a prescriptive articulation of Crypto Art. In contrast, I perceive the phenomenon as too diverse and ambiguous to warrant a rigid account against such strict features. However, what remains apparent is that Crypto Art involves the fusion of the hybridity of forms with the tokenisation potential of the blockchain. Thus, Crypto Art is defined as

limited edition digital art, cryptographically registered with a token on a blockchain [where tokens] represent a transparent, auditable origin and provenance for a piece of digital art (Franceschet et al. 2021, 402).

³⁶ In all, I find "Pro-Artist" to be too limited a defining characteristic, and instead view it as contained within the notion of decentralisation.



Figure 2.2: Mike Winkelmann, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021 (detail). Digital Collage. Token ID: 40913. Non-Fungible Token (JPEG) (Christie's 2021).

As tempting as it is to view the above definition as sufficient, I view it as unsatisfactory. By this, I suggest that it only accounts for the technological aspect, bypassing the artistic side production. Crypto Art boasts a visual diversity; Winkelmann's *Everydays* itself exhibits myriad visual references and non-uniformity. As such, I find it unfeasible to approach Crypto Art from the position of principally visual aesthetics.³⁷ Rather, I adopt the framework of the New Aesthetic as coined by Bridle (2014, 22-23), which interrogates and interprets the influence of digital technologies on artistic forms. The notion of the New Aesthetic cross-examines the underlying technological systems swaying the production and perception of images. The New Aesthetic is prompted by the urge to understand how images in the contemporary era are born, with an emphasis on

³⁷ I suggest that an approach rooted in a purely visual analysis places Crypto Art within the constraints of traditional art criticism from which it seeks an escape.

[the] processes of capture, storage, and distribution; the actions of filters, codecs, algorithms, processes, databases, and transfer protocols; the weight of data centres, servers, satellites, cables, routers, switches, modems, infrastructures physical and virtual; and the biases and articulations of disposition and intent encoded in all of these things, and our comprehension of them (Bridle 2014, 23).

In other words, the New Aesthetic is a way of seeing through and being seen by digital devices (Paul and Levy 2015, 27). John Berger suggests that prior assumptions about art influence the presentation of an image as art:

Beauty
Truth
Genius
Civilization
Form
Status
Taste, etc. (Berger (2008 [1972], 4).

To the above, and with the construct of the New Aesthetic in mind, we might add the Internet, social networks, NFTs and the blockchain. Approaching Crypto Art through the lens of the New Aesthetic, I offer a characterisation of the phenomenon: Crypto Art is an aesthetic programme exhibiting visual and non-visual orientations with emphasis on the production and articulation of digitally scarce artistic objects through association with NFTs afforded by the blockchain.³⁸ Crypto Art does not explicitly describe a style but the elevation of a singular defining practice, namely, the presentation of a work of art alongside an NFT to guarantee artificiality and scarcity.³⁹ By no means an all-encompassing account of the phenomenon, I refer to Crypto Art in this light throughout the study as an attempt to resolve some of the ambiguities and confusions associated with the term.

It is worth considering whether my account falls victim to some of the earlier definitions' shortcomings to which I alluded. Does the characterisation overemphasise the technological at the expense of the artistic, or the inverse? Similarly, do I simplify

³⁸ I refer to my characterisation earlier in the discussion.

³⁹ As I discuss in Chapter Four, the implication of this practice is the extraction of authenticity in the face of the reproducibility of digital artefacts. NFTs, for Crypto Art, represent a certain kind of authenticity that I find discontinuous from assumptions of the authentic in art.

matters to such an extent as to blur the existence of Crypto Art in general? I distinguish between the visual and the non-visual to reconcile the two defining aspects of Crypto Art: the artistic and the technological. What is left unclear is what I mean by Crypto Art's non-visual emphases. By non-visual, I refer to that which remains unseen, the systems and perceptions underpinning the image. Indeed, Berger (2008 [1972], 17) asserts that the meaning of artworks is detached and transmissible: "that is to say, it [meaning] becomes information of a sort, and, like all information, it is either put to use or ignored." The New Aesthetic is an attempt at localising and illuminating the detached meanings of artworks, and I adopt the stance in relation to Crypto Art for a more focused understanding. To be sure, Bridle (2014, 22) identifies the New Aesthetic as a concern "with everything that is not visible in these images [...] but that is inseparable from them, and without which they would not exist". The unseen, the invisible, in Crypto Art might relate to the infrastructure of the blockchain, the pseudo-immateriality of NFTs and the works themselves, or the thematic motivations supplying the phenomenon: the fact of decentralisation, I argue, as an underlying thematic of Crypto Art.

In the following chapters, I present the above parameters for Crypto Art to conduct a unified analytic effort. Crypto Art, defined and understood in the above sense of an aesthetic orientation predisposed to articulating digitally unique objects, details various visual emphases with shared ideological motives, which I explore later in the study. Rather than taking the technological element at face value, I suggest that Crypto Art amounts to a perceptual mode impacted by supposed decentralising architecture. On a broader level, Crypto Art recalls artistic traditions that subverted the role of tangible objects. As such, in the next chapter, I provide a joint reading of the artist Marcel Duchamp and the Conceptual Art paradigm as precursors to Crypto Art.

CHAPTER TWO

CRITIQUE AND CONCEPT: DUCHAMP, DEMATERIALISATION, AND CONCEPTUALISM

This chapter contextualises Crypto Art as an aesthetic programme oriented towards producing and articulating digitally scarce artistic objects with reference to a Western art-historical trajectory. I suggest that Duchamp prompted the development of an artistic language that sought to elevate the artist's faculties as the primary source of artistic definitions. Through engaging with Duchamp's artistic oeuvre, I consider the extent to which the destabilisation of art's emphases on singular perceptual objects with duration across space and time affects the conceptual framing of art as object. Although I read Winkelman in conjunction with Duchamp, I do not suggest that the former completed the project of the latter. Rather, I point to a tendency emerging alongside Duchamp that continues in Crypto Art.

My reading of Crypto Art in relation to the practices of Duchamp and Conceptual Art is informed by Hal Foster's notion of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) (1996, 28-29).⁴⁰ Per Foster (1996, 28-29), the relationship between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde is not a consequence of definite breaks and ruptures but a (dis)continuous anticipation and repression of the past and the future.⁴¹ That is, the historical avant-garde acts on the neo-avant-garde:

⁴⁰ *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action) is central to Foster's theory of the avant-garde. In a word, the historical avant-garde marks a traumatic event in the symbolic order given its attacks on convention; this trauma is only recorded by the neo-avant-garde who comprehend the project of the historical avant-garde: "One event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to who we are only in deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*)" (Foster 1996, 29). Deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) describes this process of temporal reception and anticipation. For example, Duchamp's emphasis on non-retinal art (as I discuss below) in the early twentieth century is comprehended (not completed) by Conceptual Art in the latter half of the same century (cf. Chapter Three).

⁴¹ Foster (1996, 1) understands the neo-avant-garde as a "loose grouping of North American and Western European Artists of the 1950s and 1960s". The historical avant-garde, in turn, describes a grouping of predominantly Western European artists of the early twentieth century, operating between the 1910s and early 1940s. Perhaps implicit in Foster's understanding of historical- and neo-avant-garde – and their *Nachträglichkeit* relation – is that deferral is endless. That is, the two temporal modes are perpetually slipping in and out of presence. Although I do not explicitly refer to Crypto Art as a neo-avant-garde in my study, I suggest that it similarly embodies the embodied *Nachträglichkeit* relation as posited by Foster.

Historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted [...] as a continual process of protension and retention, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts [...] a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition (Foster 1996, 29; original emphasis).

Rather than positing a decisive break with the past, Foster's model of the relationship between avant-gardes is based on theoretical returns in the present of past iterations. Thus, the neo avant-garde realises the project of the historical avant-garde in a decentred relationship (Foster 1996, 20). For example, Duchamp's emphasis on non-retinal art (as I discuss below) is comprehended in a deferred relationship to Conceptual Art in its understanding of dematerialisation. That is, the initial event of Duchamp's non-retinal art, as an attack on the convention of art, is rearticulated by Conceptual Art through the language of dematerialisation as a critique of the identity of the institution. As it were, I suggest that where Duchamp questioned the convention of art, Conceptual Art questioned art's institutional framing (Foster 1996, 17). The deferred relationship Duchamp shares with Conceptual Art is co-extensive with Crypto Art. By extracting conceptuality, I distinguish a tendency in Crypto Art that invokes the project of dematerialisation, albeit through technological means, using the tokenising capabilities of the blockchain towards a decentralised art. Citing Winkelmann's *Everydays* as a relevant example, I explore the extent to which Crypto Art borrows from the artistic languages of Duchamp and Conceptual Art. I argue that art's relationship to a dematerialised object, beginning in Conceptual Art and continuing in Crypto Art, provides the basis for decentralising symbolic and capital authority in art.

2.1. 8 to 9 April 1917: Duchamp and the Reception of the Readymade

Establishing a line of inquiry that traces the dematerialisation of the art object necessitates careful consideration of the changes in post-war artistic production in Western Europe and the United States of America. Since, in varying ways, artistic production reflects overarching socio-economic and ideological concerns, it is necessary to consider the material as much as artistic factors driving cultural change.

As Bourdieu (1993, 259) proposes, the ontological question of how artworks come into being as artworks must be replaced with a historical question involving the processes constituting the entirety of the productive field. This is to the extent that the productive field emerges alongside a specific artistic language that articulates and categorises artistic objects (Bourdieu 1993, 260). The invention of an artistic language internal to the artistic field, which in itself is reflective of the totality of production, is bound to a historical context:

linked to a situated and dated social universe, they [artistic categories elaborated in a specific language] become the subject of usages which are themselves socially marked by the social position of the users who exercise the constitutive dispositions of their habitus in the aesthetic choices these categories make possible (Bourdieu 1993, 262).

Thus, an ontological inquiry (for example, questions pertaining to what distinguishes the artistic object from regular objects) may be understood through a historical trajectory that considers the genesis of this specific universe of meaning (the productive field). Working from this angle, I describe the positions and dispositions constituting the emergence of the productive field, that is, the social conditions “which make possible the character of the artist as a producer of the fetish which is the work of art” (Bourdieu 1993, 259). However, it is not only limited to what Bourdieu (1993, 261) refers to as “the ‘subject’ of the production of the artwork” – the artist – but also to the set of agents populating the field of art: critics, art dealers, collectors, institutions, as much as the artists themselves. That is to say, the collective enunciations are distributed across the entire field. As such, a historical inquiry into the dematerialisation of the art object necessarily includes, to varying degrees, all the producers constituting the universe of belief, the productive field.

Yet a need still exists to help identify the appropriate precursors that form the pantheon of idols and beliefs sustaining the universe of meaning. And here, Bourdieu’s historical approach faces a terrifying indeterminacy. If what constitutes the field is not the artists themselves but all involved in sustaining the fiction of the artistic field, how do we identify a locus from where to begin? Bourdieu’s determination of the field’s genesis is both historically specific and generously permissive; it commits to, on the one hand, a deprivileging of the artist’s role in matters of production and, on the other,

to a complete unravelling of the pursuable avenues of inquiry. That is to say that the ordinary task of constructing an art-historical lineage shifts from a linear model of distinct origins and progression to a diffuse model premised on identifying the invention of an artistic language emerging alongside an artistic position.

And with the above in mind, we turn to the matter of dematerialisation and objecthood in twentieth-century Western European and American art insofar as it assists in elaborating the artistic condition underscoring Crypto Art. Although dematerialisation achieves proper articulation in the language of Conceptual Art, it is possible to identify an immediate precursor in Marcel Duchamp. No history is complete; there is always something that escapes our memory. By singling out Duchamp, I risk flattening the social universe to locate the origin of a sacred phrase. There is a palpable danger in confining history to the genius's singular mind rather than the mass's collective soul. However, as in many paintings, individual enunciations are the products of assemblage, as Duchamp (1975, 142) suggests in his writings. That is to say, following Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 80), a singular enunciation is always underpinned by a collective social universe that individuates and subjectifies it.

Much has been written about Duchamp's use of readymade sculpture in his artistic oeuvre and the legacy of his choice.⁴² Interpretations of Duchamp's readymade vary, and there appears to be a general variation in articulating the notion of the readymade and the implications thereof.⁴³ Duchamp's break with tradition can be interpreted as the continuation (or perhaps culmination) of Modernist Art in the Greenbergian sense.⁴⁴ The Formalist interpretation espoused by the American art

⁴² Roughly, a readymade refers to a found object, "often a mundane manufactured product [...] given a new identity as an artwork or part of an artwork" (Atkins 1997, 99).

⁴³ In some readings, Duchamp positions the readymade as an aesthetic object proposing a counter-aesthetic (Fontaine 2014, 57). In this manner, the readymade emphasises the peculiarity of the artist-as-enunciator: any object the artist chooses can be nominated for the status of an artwork (Fontaine 2014, 57). This reading is in accord with another, which stresses how Duchamp's readymades reorganised aesthetic categories while disavowing "an ontological definition of art" (Molesworth 1998, 51). Both accounts point to the deprivileging effected by Duchamp's new categories of objects; the readymade breaks with all prior artistic traditions where the opticality of easel painting and sculptural figures are primary.

⁴⁴ The origins of the Modernist period in art remain contested, given the need for more clarity in deciding which artists/works serve as adequate transitional figures. However, I subscribe to the proposition of art historian Sir Herbert Read (1988, 13, original emphasis) that art's modern period began with the painter Paul Cézanne: "...the modern movement [...] begins with the single-minded determination of a French painter [Cézanne] to see the world *objectively* [...] what Cézanne wished to see was the world, or that part of it he was contemplating, as an *object*, without any intervention either of the tidy mind or

critic Clement Greenberg (1990 [1961], 94-95) emphasises a self-critical tendency wherein tradition is ruptured to entrench a discipline further in its area of competence. That is, the disciplines must exclude influences from others towards a purer understanding of each discipline in relation to itself, such that painting becomes more like painting and only concerned with the wares and intuitions of painting, and sculpture becomes more like sculpture, and so forth. For Duchamp, however, it was not a matter of criticising painting internally to further establish painting in itself; rather, as Duchamp's artistry progressed from his late-Cubist period, it was a matter of critiquing the convention entirely (as I discuss below). By this, I suggest that Conceptual Art later misread the object's dematerialisation in Duchamp. Dematerialisation, if we refer to Duchamp as being preoccupied with a dematerialised object, was a critique of convention, whereas, for Conceptual Art, it was a matter of undermining the institution. To be sure, a Modernist reading emphasises furtherance of the pictorial through negation, culminating in further purification, whereas Duchamp eventually abandoned painting altogether. Regardless, such an approach situates Duchamp's activity and choice of the readymade in a broader Modernist tradition.⁴⁵

The question of why Duchamp turned to the readymade still lingers. Suppose we follow Bourdieu's sociological method and consider the socio-historical conditions informing the field's trajectory. In that case, an acknowledgement of the relevant artistic positions contemporaneous with Duchamp suffices. Duchamp (1975, 141) dates his earliest choice of the readymade to 1913 – a bicycle wheel fastened to a stool. Two years later, in 1915, Duchamp (1975, 141) purchased a snow shovel in a New York hardware store, stating that it was around this time that the term readymade encapsulated this manifestation. In his writings, Duchamp (1975, 124) cites Cubism, particularly the works of Pablo Picasso, as a significant influence on his thought.⁴⁶ The influence of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) (fig 2.1), in particular,

the untidy emotions". Read's thesis accounts for a historical period, whereas I interpret Greenberg's modernism as both a project and a condition for the modern.

⁴⁵ As tempting as it is to reframe the choice of readymade through a Modernist lens, such an approach ultimately fails once the trajectory of Duchamp's career (and a cursory glance at both Greenberg's and Duchamp's writings) is considered.

⁴⁶ One account dates the emergence of Cubism to 1907, a year marking two significant events: a retrospective of Paul Cézanne's work inspiring a younger generation of artists and Picasso's seminal painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Gualdoni 2008, 107).

inaugurated a period of formal experimentation gesturing towards the fourth dimension:



Figure 2.3: Pablo Picasso, Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O), 1907. Oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. (<https://smarthistory.org/pablo-picasso-les-femmes-d-alger-o-version-o/>).

[the shift] to more and more geometric forms of representation, reducing the vision to a dense structure of intersecting planes that were intended to convey not the appearance of things but the totality of their presence in the dimensions of space [and time] took place in the work of many other artists (Gualdoni 2008, 111).

Cubism, inspired by Picasso and his contemporary Georges Braque, opted for a representation that decomposed forms to their geometric basis. This decomposition of forms accompanied an intellectual disposition where the recreated Cubist image was figured as a signification system comparable to writing (Gualdoni 2008, 112). The Cubist image can similarly be regarded as an attempt to render three-dimensional qualities on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. That Cubism influenced Duchamp's painting is uncontested. Perhaps the greatest indicator of this is in Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* (fig 2.2), dating to 1912, the year preceding the first readymade.



Figure 4.2: Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 151.8 x 35 93.3 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
(<https://www.singulart.com/en/blog/2020/05/08/nude-descending-a-staircase-no-2-1912-duchamps-stirring-piece/>)

Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* (1912) (fig 2.2) occupies itself with Cubism's emphasis on geometric form, shape, weight and volume. Unlike

Cubism, the painting incorporates motion (a fact that preoccupied Futurists⁴⁷ who were contemporary with Cubists).⁴⁸ Per Duchamp's account, what initially drew him to Cubism was a desire to break up forms, to decompose them as the Cubists achieved (Duchamp 1975, 124). *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* can be interpreted as an exercise in deconstruction. Motion is reduced to geometric fact, three-dimensional perspective is upended and rendered in fourth-dimensional quality, and the figure's mechanical descent extends across the canvas's surface in a continuous sweep.⁴⁹

The dissolution of forms anticipates the project of Crypto Art, albeit in an altered relation to Duchamp. Foster (1996, 17) postulates that the historical avant-garde emphasises convention, whereas the neo-avant-garde embodies an institutional approach. I interpret Duchamp's decomposition of forms as limited to the conventions of art; Duchamp sought to expose the limits of art rather than offer an investigation into its institutional framing. Through an emphasis on ephemeral digital objects, Crypto Art's dissolution of forms emphasises an attempt at exposing art's institutional limits.⁵⁰

After *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, Duchamp's artistry approaches a certain level of complexity. It is too convenient a coincidence that a year separated the rejection of the painting in 1912 and the appearance of the first readymade in 1913. Duchamp grants that after 1912 he decided to abandon his prior influences:

I wanted to live in the present, and the present then was cubism. You see, in 1910, 1911, and 1912 cubism was new: the approach was so different from the previous movements that I was very much attracted to it. I became a Cubist painter [...] But that was not enough for me...I

⁴⁷ Futurism was an art movement contemporaneous with Cubism that "took the form of the glorification of speed and movement" (Atkins 1997, 119) as its impetus.

⁴⁸ However, Duchamp (1975, 131) maintained that he was unaware of Futurism at the time of the work's composition. As such, a reference to the Futurist project in relation to Duchamp's oeuvre is perhaps thematically irrelevant.

⁴⁹ It is interesting that Duchamp's painting exceeded the experimentations of both Braque and Picasso, who prioritised static forms by meticulously recording the velocity of a subject moving through space (Taylor 2012, 57). Perhaps because of this, Duchamp's technical and artistic proficiency was ill-received, and the work was withdrawn from its intended Paris exhibition in 1912 (Taylor 2012, 58).

⁵⁰ What I mean is Crypto Art's implicit motivations attempt to critique, if not reject, the imaginary of the 'traditional art world.' Consider the Beeple saga. Noah Davis (in Marple 2022), an expert in Post-war & Contemporary Art who facilitated the Christie's auction of *Everydays*, noted his interest in NFTs and "the potential of their decentralised technology." Davis (in Marple 2022) contrasts the values of Crypto Art as opposed to the traditional art world: "This is a world that operates with its own clandestine rituals and its own weird pacts behind the scenes"; its own cabals within cabals. I don't resonate with that kind of structure at all." Here, there is the idea of a centralised art world contrasted against the decentralised potential of Crypto Art.

had done what I could with Cubism but now it was time to change (Duchamp 1975, 129-130).

It is thus plausible to suggest that Duchamp's turn to the readymade was, in part, a response to the ill reception of the *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* and a desire not to repeat himself (Taylor 2012, 58). That he had reached, even broached, the technical and creative limits of the dominant movement at the time (Cubism) perhaps led Duchamp to question the outer limits of art itself, hence the readymade. However, the Cubist influence must not be understated since it was Cubism's formal reduction that influenced Duchamp's later thought:

Reduce, reduce, reduce was my thought; but at the same time my aim was turning inward, rather than toward externals. And later, following this view, I came to feel an artist might use anything – a dot, a line, the most conventional or unconventional symbol – to say what he wanted to say (Duchamp 1975, 124).

Some have interpreted the inward turn to which Duchamp refers as a precursor to Conceptual Art during the 1960s and 1970s (see Kosuth 1991; Sandler 1996; Wood 2002; Fontaine 2014). For Duchamp, following 1912, the shift towards the internal resulted in an extension to the idea of the artefact (Sandler 1996, 70), namely the readymade. From 1913 onwards, Duchamp's emphasis shifted away from a strict painterly basis toward the nomination of objects (although he continued to paint for some years). From the choice of readymade, at least from the Duchampian perspective, it is possible to infer two things: a) the artist as a medium for the exposition of ideas, utilising whatever in their arsenal to say what they wish to say; b) art as transformed "to an intellectual expression [at the service of the mind] rather than to an animal expression" (Duchamp 1975, 125-126; 138).



Figure 2.3: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917/1964. Sculpture, 38.1 cm x 48.9 cm x 62.55 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA (<https://jstor.org/stable/community.14704405>).

The story of Duchamp's urinal – *Fountain* (1917) (fig 2.3) – is familiar. In 1917, a porcelain urinal was submitted for exhibition at the Society of Independent Artists in New York. The anonymous artist – one Richard Mutt, from Philadelphia – signed the urinal 'R. Mutt 1917.' Scandalised by the entry, the Society's board of directors refused to exhibit the urinal and hid it from public view. Duchamp, later revealed as the mysterious artist, resigned from the board in protest.⁵¹ *Fountain* is among the last of

⁵¹ Similarities can be drawn between the reception of *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* in 1912 and *Fountain* in 1917. Both works tested the bounds of custom – *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*'s break with Cubism and *Fountain*'s break with previous artistic traditions. Likewise, both stirred

Duchamp's readymades and the most famous. It achieved its fame in posterity, seeing as how it was unseen by the public at the time nor listed in the Society of Independent Artists' exhibition catalogue (De Duve 1996, 98-99).⁵² As stated earlier, the visceral reaction to *Fountain* is rooted in Duchamp's upending of artistic categories. With *Fountain* or the readymade in general, Duchamp effected a recontextualisation of objects (Joselit 2007, 37). Per De Duve (1996, 91), *Fountain* operated as both a joke and a test questioning the limits of art. In both cases, it succeeded. Duchamp prompted the avant-garde to question the definition of art resulting in two 'theories' of art:

[something] is art because an artist so decided; something is art because the context determined it De Duve (1996, 91-92).

The first artistic theory is *appropriative*, which centres on the artist's choice of object to raise to an artistic artefact. The second is *contextual*, emphasising that the exhibition of an object in a museum/gallery setting automatically raises it to the status of art. However, de Duve (1996, 93) does not contrast one to the other and instead subsumes both theories under a single *institutional* theory. Duchamp, as de Duve suggests, demonstrates that the *appropriative* theory and the *contextual* are interdependent; an institution verifies an artist, and an institution displays the works of an artist (the integrity of one hinges on the other). From this position, it is possible to arrive at an institutional understanding. What distinguishes the readymade from a regular artistic object is its institutional framing and the recontextualisation effected through the artist's nomination. The readymade emerges from the encounter between object and author, object and institution, and object and public encountered through the institution (de Duve and Krauss 1994, 71). I suggest that Crypto Art incorporates

controversy and were denied participation in their respective exhibitions. But perhaps that is where the similarities end and drawing comparisons only serve an understanding of one in the face of the other. It can be suggested that where *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* questioned the parameters of Cubism, *Fountain* questioned the logic of modern art itself.

⁵² A more interesting scenario is that the original vanished following its submission; only replicas (executed in 1950, 1963 and 1964) remain, in addition to the infamous photograph by Alfred Stieglitz in 1917 (De Duve 1996, 95-96). A handful of people looked at the original, including Duchamp, his accomplices in the affair, and the Society's board of directors. The art historian Thierry de Duve suggests that this blurring of the matter may have been intentional: "[everything] was done to prevent it from making history" (de Duve 1996, 115).

this approach not to reveal the limits of art but to contest its institutional framing through a technological re-articulation under the guise of the NFT.

De Duve later proposes a more interesting reading of the readymade, which bears relevance to the Conceptualist reception of Duchamp and, subsequently, Crypto Art. Where Joseph Kosuth (1991, 18) suggests Duchamp signals the move from the visual to the linguistic, de Duve (1996, 387) counters that Duchamp inaugurated a transition into an enunciative paradigm. A word on the enunciative paradigm: drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, de Duve (1996, 387) identifies this paradigm as the condition of the art operating through enunciation. At its fundamental level, the enunciative refers to linguistic signs uttered/stated and untethered to signification, grammatical rules and logic (de Duve 1996, 387). From the perspective of the arts, this condition disidentifies the recognition of artworks from their perceptual characteristics and roots in identifying artistic works as part of enunciative acts (Kyndrup 2002, 28). For de Duve, art after Duchamp is dependent on this paradigmatic value:

[the] readymade is simultaneously the operation that reduces the work of art to its enunciative function and the “result” of this operation, a work of art reduced to the statement “this is art”, exemplified by Duchamp’s readymades (1996, 389).

The dematerialisation of the art object, if viewed from this position, does not deprioritise the physicality of an artefact; instead, it signals the privileging of an enunciative value. The idea assumes dominance in some instances, but the visual/perceptual does not give way to the linguistic or the realm of language toward the conceptual (see Kosuth 1991; Wood 2002). Following Duchamp, positions in the artistic field have less to do with the traditional modes of painting and sculpture and more with enunciative functions. What emerges alongside the operation where artwork is reduced to the statement, “this is art”, is a category of floating positions and artworks verifying the various enunciations (de Duve 1996, 389). For Crypto Art, the enunciation, “this is art”, is qualified by reference to NFTs. In my view, there is a challenge to existing institutional framings.

2.2. 1966-1972: Dematerialisation and Conceptual Art

If art after Duchamp is the result of an enunciative operation, then it is appropriately realised in the vocabulary of 1960s and 1970s artistic practices. Writing in 1968, Lippard and Chandler theorised a tendency in contemporary art toward idea and process over a realised object (Lippard and Chandler 1999 [1968], 47). Dematerialisation signalled the movement into a regime with a non-visual emphasis (Lippard and Chandler 1999 [1968], 48). The visual presentation of objects factored less in the works of some artists who instead chose to convey ideas. Whether metaphorical or actual, the jargon of dematerialisation typified the artistic environment of the 1960s and 1970s in Western Europe and North America.

Before Lippard and Chandler articulated dematerialisation, the artist Sol LeWitt authored a text delimiting the foundations of Conceptual Art. LeWitt (1999 [1967], 12) identified this artistic orientation as one where the idea of the concept is the primary concern of artistic works. LeWitt acknowledged the execution of work as not entirely necessary, provided the idea at the foundation of the artwork was good. To LeWitt (1999 [1967], 13), the evolution of the work's inherent idea was more important than its execution. As articulated by LeWitt (1999 [1967], 15), Conceptual Art prioritised the intellectual faculties of the artist and their attempt at engaging the viewer on an affectual rather than perceptual basis.

During this period, the American artist Joseph Kosuth began his artistic investigations into the relationship between visual phenomena and their verbal definition (Gualdoni 2008, 432). Starting in 1965, Kosuth's investigations assessed objects' interactions and definitions. Drawing on a highly intellectualised reading of Duchamp, Kosuth's structuralist surveys explored the ambiguous relationship between the sign, signifier and the signified. Kosuth's installation, *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (fig 2.4), typifies his investigations, highlighting the relationship between a concept and its referent. Kosuth's *Chairs* constitutes a body of work prioritising the conceptual while simultaneously bifurcating the object: as information, as referent, (and later) as a saleable commodity.



Figure 2.4.: Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Installation (wooden chair, gelatine silver print and text), 118 x 271 x 44 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France (<https://jstor.org/stable/community.10594456>).

At the same time, the German artist Joseph Beuys engaged in a politically oriented appraisal of the relationship between the artist, art as object, and the broader society. Beuys' art consisted of performances, or 'actions', instead of objects in the traditional sense, as evident in his seminal work, *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) (fig 2.5). For Beuys, action-oriented art (rather than object-oriented) formed the basis of an artistic sensibility with the potential to inaugurate societal change. Through his performances, Beuys believed he could transform society:

In his performances he assumed the role of shaman – that is, one who makes a private experience public for the purpose of healing society. In a sense he extended his thinking from his own body in action to the body politic; that is, he moved to sculpting society as his art (Sandler 1996, 92).



Figure 2.5: Joseph Beuys, *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974. Performance (photography by Larry Qualls). Larry Qualls Archive: Contemporary Art, USA, (<https://jstor.org/stable/community.14274631>).

Beuys' widening artistic categories to include his own body further undermined the enclosed idea of an artistic object while simultaneously exemplifying art's enunciative basis. The politicised dimensions of Beuys' art coalesced into the egalitarian view that everyone can be an artist, every creative act is artistic, and the awareness of the individual's creative power could reform society (Sandler 1996, 92).⁵³ As I discuss in Chapter Three, Crypto Art operates within a similar framing. This implicit egalitarianism echoes Beuys: the de-definition of art as a sacred space only accessible to the few. For Beuys, then, art is the domain of all. To this extent, I identify Crypto Art's egalitarianism as possessing a technological basis. The sentiment of Crypto Art is the notion that through the blockchain, a more permissive artistic environment may be fostered. That is, by presenting the blockchain as a decentred

⁵³ Likewise, the Belgian poet and artist Marcel Broodthaers assumed a contextual critique of art. Broodthaers' art, like Duchamp's, took the institution as its identity and focused on the narrative changes undergone by recontextualised objects in a museum/gallery setting (Sandler 1996, 94). This critique directly examined the economic and symbolic processes constituting the field of cultural production, culminating in Broodthaers' attempt at operating a fictional, parodic museum in his own house – the Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, Section of the Nineteenth Century (Sandler 1996, 95).

condition for the existence of artworks, Crypto Art attempts to redefine the category of the artist, and the work of art, through the rhetoric of accessibility afforded by decentralised architecture (cf. Sections 3.5 & 3.6).

That the above artistic strategies reveal a *conceptual* basis is confirmed if *conceptuality* (in its broadest sense) is understood as undermining objects with a stable, perceptual duration across space and time. Beuys' actions and Kosuth's definitions undermine the idea of art-as-object on a perceptual basis. The influence of Duchamp is uncontested – both positions primarily figure as art in the service of the intellect, using whatever means in their creative expression. Conceptuality, then, is a pluralist, hybrid tendency that emerges in response to the specificity of Modernism. It defines a trend that widens the scope of artistic practices.

The writings of Kosuth form a rigorous account of Conceptual Art and its tendency in general. Following a radical reading of Duchamp, Kosuth (1991, 16) argues the conceptual irrelevance of aesthetics to art – anything is viable for artistic consideration if prompted by the artist. Therefore, Kosuth echoes the object's dematerialisation and the priority of the artist's intention. As a reiteration of Duchamp, it follows that the scope of objects liable for artistic reflection widens to include anything conceivable by the artist. Kosuth, in turn, defines art as analogous to an analytic proposition, possessing a tautological reality enclosed in itself (Kosuth 1991, 16). This articulation forms the basis of an artistic (dis)position in the broader field of cultural production, termed 'conceptual' as a proper name, but with an additional politicised dimension intent on undermining the institution's position in defining art. Kosuth seizes the power of artistic definition and confines it to the mind of the artist who questions and expresses art by presenting new propositions to art's nature. This approach effectively attempts to divest the symbolic power of definition from the display setting and to render 'art' in the eye of the artist and their audience.

However democratic Kosuth's method is, I identify some theoretical concerns. For one, Kosuth's reduction of art to an analytic proposition is presented on philosophically dubious grounds. A brief encounter with analytic propositions is necessary. In Immanuel Kant's (2003 [1781], 7) first critique, an analytic judgement is understood as one where the predicate B is contained in subject A. That is, analytic judgements do not need to go beyond the predicate in defining the conditions of the

subject. Analytic judgements, Kant (2003 [1781], 7) says, “merely analyse the conception [...] become conscious of the manifold properties in that conception, to discover this predicate in it”. Kant juxtaposes analytic judgements to synthetic judgements where the predicate B is not contained in subject A; that is, synthetic judgements go beyond the sphere of conception to define their conditions. Thus, synthetic judgements are grounded in experience and constituted by *a posteriori* knowledge acquired after the fact (through experience or retrospect).

Conversely, analytic judgements are constituted *a priori*, that is, before the facts of experience. Analytic propositions need not wait to be constituted through experience. Thus, when Kosuth reduces art to as an analytic proposition, the result is the ideas and materials of art become internal to themselves and independent of empirical evidence. One need not proceed outside the facts of art to be cognisant of the idea of ‘art’. Citing the Minimalist⁵⁴ work of Donald Judd, Kosuth presents the following scenario:

[If] one of Judd’s box forms was seen filled with debris, seen placed in an industrial setting, or even merely seen sitting on a street corner, it would not be identified with art. It follows then that understanding and consideration of it as an artwork is necessary *a priori* to viewing it in order to ‘see’ it as a work of art (Kosuth 1991, 23).

The premise is that to apprehend the artwork, advance information “about the concept of art and about an artist’s concepts is necessary” (Kosuth 1991, 23). Yet this is inconsistent since the knowledge of art and the artist’s concepts do not exist *a priori*, that is, independent of experience. Instead, the concept of art and the artist’s concepts are constituted *a posteriori*, that is, through experience. Thus, Kosuth’s analytic approach to art appears philosophically unstable.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Minimalism was an art movement that emerged in the late 60s and 70s, eliminating representation in favour of absolute compositions (Atkins 1997, 116). In other words, Minimalists such as Donald Judd “eliminated representational imagery and illusionistic pictorial space in favour of a single unified image, often composed of smaller parts arranged according to a grid” (Atkins 1997, 116).

⁵⁵ However, one might still grant Kosuth the appearance of art as analogous to an analytic proposition, albeit one constituted by impure knowledge. This is to say, following Kant (2003 [1781], 1-2), that it is analytic with empirical elements, elements necessarily derived from experience.

Thierry de Duve undertakes a more stern appraisal of Kosuth's conceptual account. According to de Duve (1996, 376), Kosuth harnesses "Conceptual Art to the program of accomplishing the passage from a period of restricted modernism to a general one." By this, de Duve infers that where Greenberg attempted to enclose art, Kosuth widened it through his reading of Duchamp and the conceptualist tendency. This widening has been construed as the passage from the visual to the linguistic per Kosuth. However, as earlier stated, Duchamp and the readymade marked the passage into an enunciative paradigm characterised by reducing a work to the statement "this is art" (de Duve 1996, 413). From this perspective, the artist does not define art but rather enunciates something as a work of art. Accordingly, there are parameters identified by de Duve (1996, 390) underpinning the enunciative condition. The first is object-bound, equating to a referent in play, which might be an object presented as the 'this' in the statement and perhaps identified as 'art' in posterity. The second and third conditions are determined as subject-bound: there is an enunciator who transmits the statement and a receiver who receives the transmission and repeats it. The fourth and final condition of the paradigm is the presence of a surface of inscription where the statement is recorded and institutionalised (de Duve 1996, 390).⁵⁶ These conditions hold for the existence of the readymade as much as other seemingly 'conceptual' works. From this perspective, the artist and their intention form only one position in a dynamic network where meanings and beliefs about art's nature are constituted.

If the enunciative paradigm is the condition for the existence of artworks (de Duve 1996, 391), then dematerialisation outlines the desired effect. Whether dematerialisation imparts an overtly political dimension remains contested. However, it is possible to infer through the works of some artists the dematerialised aspects

⁵⁶ These parameters also hold for the existence of crypto artworks. However, I note that Crypto Art attempts to supersede the fourth condition, that is, the fact of the surface of inscription. As I find it, the inscription surface articulates the role of exhibiting institutions as the gallery and museums in art. It is where enunciations are accorded specific values and are interpreted, digested, and canonised. Crypto Art, whether correctly or incorrectly, views the surface of inscription from a negativistic position: it takes the identity of the inscriptive surface as a neutralisation of alterity. O'Doherty (1976, 80) accords the exclusive character of the surface with a proper name: the white cube. Crypto Art assumes critique of the white cube as an inscriptive surface not from a position of internal subversion (as with Conceptual Art) but from the construction of the different architecture of inscription – this, I believe, through the construct of NFTs and the blockchain layer. I wonder whether decentralisation is better referred to as re-centralisation: replacing one inscription surface (the white cube) with another (the blockchain). The distinction is between a fallible, human social valuation system and an infallible, immutable, machinic architecture.

sustaining Conceptual Art's politicisation during the late 1960s and 1970s. The results of Beuys and Broodthaers reveal overtly ideological determinations towards more comprehensive societal transformations. Reacting to the European political convulsions during the May 1968 uprisings, Broodthaers' institutional analyses deconstructed the museum as a site of ideological contestation (Wood 2002, 59). Broodthaers' work also explored art's commodification and the institution's role in ascribing aesthetic and economic value to artworks (Sandler 1996, 95). By the same token, Beuys' activities at the helm of the European avant-garde dissected materialism, the consumer society and crystallisations of power in the art world and the wider political climate (Wood 2002, 24). As such, the dematerialisation of the object during the 1960s and 1970s accompanied an attempt to undermine the monopoly of the art institution in defining art and consecrating artistic objects.

By producing 'dematerialised' or 'non-object' works, an attempt was made to disavow the economy collectively. In Beuys' case, it became a matter of determining whether something as ephemeral as a performance – an 'action' – possessed any commercial value. A challenge was posed from the perspective of the art business, reliant on the sale of physical artefacts. Can economic value be ascribed to something fictitious? Here, Bourdieu's sociological account serves as helpful. The productive field, necessarily understood as the system of objective relations between agents and the struggle to consecrate the value of a work of art (Bourdieu 1993, 78), comprises two forms of capital: *economic* and *symbolic*. Where the former refers to commercial interests and profits, the latter connotes a set of dispositions that contribute to one's standing in cultural distribution. Symbolic capital in the economy of cultural goods, per Bourdieu, conveys an aura of disinterestedness, of a certain anti-commercialism:

'Symbolic capital' is to be understood as economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognised and thereby recognised, hence legitimate, a 'credit' which, under certain conditions [...] guarantees 'economic' profits (Bourdieu 1993, 75).

In the long run, the disavowal of economic profits permits the accumulation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1993, 75). Regardless of dematerialisation's political dimension, the attempt at subverting the logic of the field through the accumulation of disavowed economic capital, that is, *symbolic* capital, inevitably reinforced the field's

objective relations. Symbolic capital functions as a sort of credit or marker of authenticity – the more disinterested an artistic position is, the greater authority it gets rewarded. This is a sort of paradoxical position, where an attempt at negating the logic of the field further entrenches the field's logic because, since Duchamp, negation is that which is at the field's locus:

[nothing] more clearly reveals the logic of the functioning of the artistic field than the fate of these apparently radical attempts at subversion. Because they expose the art of artistic creation to a mockery already annexed to the artistic tradition by Duchamp [...] Art cannot reveal the truth about art without snatching it away again by turning the revelation into an artistic event (Bourdieu 1993, 79-80).

The functioning of the productive field is such that it permits acts of mutiny to recapture and expropriate them. In this way, its functioning encourages rupture to entrench itself further. Conceptual Art and the vocabulary of dematerialisation are examples of this recuperation and subsequent institutionalisation. Now, in the twenty-first century, it is possible to speak of Conceptual Art as one chapter in the history of modern art. The terminology of Conceptual Art has been annexed by the tastemakers of art, which has left an opportunity for further elaboration on the matter. At this moment of the twenty-first century, the mantle has been taken up again by Crypto Art and its immanent project of decentralisation.

2.3. Art on the Blockchain: Sensation to Information

Duchamp's urinal and Winkelmann's digital collage can be held in the same breath insofar as both artworks exist through reproduction, hearsay, speculation and, most importantly, scandal. I am not suggesting that Winkelmann's collage is the contemporary equivalent of Duchamp's urinal (even if it has the potential to be). Instead, the two artworks demonstrate a close affinity in broadening artistic categories and their propositions regarding art's nature. Once again, a return to Duchamp. It is as though you cannot speak about art without encountering Duchamp's shadow. And this is precisely the case, given that the lineage from which Winkelmann emerges is traced back to Duchamp and the readymade. To reiterate, the readymade marked the

transition from the visual to the enunciative, where the work of art is reduced to the statement “this is art” (de Duve 1996, 389). Given the appropriate conditions, anything can be articulated as a work of art. When encountering both Duchamp and Winkelmann, we need not ask, ‘Why is this art?’, instead, ‘How is this art?’; to wit, identify the relevant agentive enunciations in their capacity to consecrate objects within the collective universe of belief.

It is tempting to ask the somewhat redundant question of how Duchamp’s urinal differs from a regular urinal. Verily Duchamp already demonstrated the “quasi-magical potency” (Bourdieu 1993, 81) of specific individuals to transform the ordinary into the artistic ritualistically. So the question is posed, to which Goldsmith (1983, 198) submits that Duchamp’s strategic employment of the readymade attempted to subvert art’s emphasis on the pictorial as the primary unit of aesthetic reflection. In so doing, Goldsmith suggests that the Duchampian readymade tautologically asserted the importance of idea over form:

Art [...] no longer exists. As a vehicle for the communication of ideas, however, the readymade reaffirms the traditional artworld (Goldsmith 1983, 198).

However, Goldsmith’s assessment blames Duchamp for, paradoxically, Duchamp. The traditional art world contemporaneous with Duchamp was appalled by his practices. He was only retroactively incorporated into the heart of the art world’s operation. Regardless, Goldsmith’s evaluation of the readymade reveals its attempted subversion of the artistic values dominant at the time.

It is impossible to speak of art presently without referring to Duchamp because he fathered a tradition of auto-critical investigations into art’s nature. Indeed, the controversies surrounding the legitimacy of Digital Art as a form worthy of artistic reflection attest to this. As noted, Kosuth’s (1991, 19) reading of Duchamp prompted the conclusion that aesthetics are conceptually irrelevant to art – it is context and narrative rather than form and materiality that direct art. Suppose this is the case (although we have seen that it is not), then anything artists raise to the context of an art object is automatically conferred that status. Yet this perspective only reveals one facet of an artwork’s existence, one that privileges the faculties of the artist. Kosuth

prioritises the artist's enunciation alone, failing to consider that it operates with an entire matrix. At length, an enunciation is not performed in a vacuum. As it were, de Duve credits Duchamp with exposing the enunciative validity of artworks, and we return to Duchamp because of this.

Winkelmann's opus, *Everydays*, is among the most controversial and expensive digital artworks. Considering the work realised \$69 million at Christie's auction held in 2021, coupled with the medium of its execution and Winkelmann's previous obscurity, *Everydays* remains an object of scorn and adoration. And in this respect, it is possible to suggest that Winkelmann's collage had a better reception than Duchamp's urinal. Here the similarities begin to dwindle. On the one hand, Winkelmann's work is lauded as a pivotal event in legitimising digital art. On the other, ephemeral *kitsch* further contributes to art's denigration, heightening art's commercialist tendencies. That a digital collage – by an artist until recently unknown in artistic circles – can sell for as much as an original work by Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons is a matter worth serious consideration. Christie's presented the work as a first of its kind to add salt to the wound and reaped the bountiful benefits.



Figure 2.6: Andy Warhol, Marilyn Diptych, 1962. Acrylic, silkscreen ink and pencil on linen, 81 x 57 inches each (two panels). Tate Gallery, London, UK
 (<https://jstor.org/stable/community.13705744>)

Much like Picasso's *Demoiselles* and Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) (fig 2.6) came to typify the visual palate of Cubism and Pop Art respectively, I suggest that Winkelmann's *Everydays* typifies the palate of Crypto Art. With the associated risks of such a suggestion, I assert that an understanding of Crypto Art must necessarily be executed in the face of Winkelmann's work. The work consists of five thousand individual images instantiated on a screen, a reality that deters the viewer from dedicating the necessary effort to viewing each iteration. Sure, one or several images might be looked at separately, but never all five thousand at once. It can be submitted that Winkelmann's work seizes the reproductive efforts of Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych*. Where Duchamp's urinal attempted to say everything by remaining silent, Winkelmann's encyclopedic collage attempts to utter everything purposefully. Doing so unwittingly silences itself because there is nothing interesting left to say about art. If Winkelmann's work is a manifestation of contemporary art, it is only because it is contemporary in itself, as Jean Baudrillard (2005, 89) suggests. What lingers is an

artwork less preoccupied with overtly aesthetic gestures, less disgusted by its characterisation as an *object* in the banal sense, but also art reduced to information. As Baudrillard (2005, 91-92) laments, Winkelmann presents a work whose subject is derived from it being art, an artwork about art.

It begs the question, how do you approach an artwork that boasts so much? Perhaps this affords certain liberties to the extent that matters of style, form and composition – the work’s formal aspects – are unimportant. It is possible to refer to the medium itself as a configuration of digital algorithms and flickering lights on a screen, but still, the work submits to perceptual experiences. Broaching the subject appears at once difficult yet all too easy. Here an analysis becomes conceivable, permitting the proposition that Winkelmann’s work, and conceivably the general tendency of Crypto Art, constitutes the operation of art reduced to information.

2.4. 11 March 2021: Beeple’s 5000 Days

On 1 May 2007, Winkelmann commenced posting images, which later conspired to give rise to the work, *Everydays*, online. He would continue to do so religiously over the next 13-and-a-half years. The first image – a crass and menial portrait of the artist’s uncle – formed the basis of what would later be a grand digital collage. The collage comprises five thousand digital images compiled over five thousand consecutive days. The images comprising the whole are loosely collated in chronological order – spanning the first image on 1 May 2007 to the final piece on the five thousandth day, 1 January 2021. Most images from popular culture and everyday life are produced digitally, with some of the earlier additions drawn by hand. Considered as a whole, the digital mosaic is a square image file (21,069 x 21,069 pixels or 319,168,313 bytes). The artist released a square image on the web daily since the project’s inception, corresponding to a digital manifestation of the traditional artist’s journal or sketchbook. *Everydays* bears witness to the artist’s improved abilities through its progression (Davis 2021). The images differ stylistically between the early and late periods of the work’s completion, reflecting Winkelmann’s gradual adoption of 3D imaging tools in his artwork.



Figure 2.7: Mike Winkelmann, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021 (detail). Digital Collage. Token ID: 40913. Non-Fungible Token (JPEG) (Christie's 2021).

Despite their stylistic discrepancy, each piece is prompted by the idea of immersion in everyday life. This reflects the Duchampian tradition of banalisation and disidentification – everything is equal, and nothing is great. *Everydays* completes the custom of banalisation and de-aestheticisation. Some of the pieces observe the mundanity of daily life – as evinced by the first portrait of the artist's uncle – while others interrogate grander social, economic and political issues. There exists a contrast between the grotesque and distasteful – a nude Donald Trump breastfeeding an infantile Joe Biden, captioned “Birth of a Nation” (fig 2.7) – and the mundane and innocuous (once again, portrait of the uncle).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ One commentator noted the work's vulgar and offensive sentiments alluding to racist, homophobic and misogynistic imagery (see Ben Davis, 2021. *I Looked Through All 5,000 Images in Beeple's \$69 Million Magnum Opus. What I Found Isn't So Pretty*. Available: <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/beeple-everydays-review-1951656>.)

After completing the 5000th image, on 16 February 2021, the artwork was minted on the Ethereum blockchain.⁵⁸ In an exclusive partnership with Christie's auction house, the artwork was auctioned for two weeks (25 February 2021 to 11 March 2021). Bidding for the work opened at a meagre \$100. A fortnight later, on 11 March 2021, the winning bid by a pseudonymous buyer ⁵⁹ was placed during the auction's final minutes – totalling an outstanding \$69,346,250.⁶⁰ The auction positioned Winkelmann, a relatively unknown artist up until this point, as the third most expensive living artist – falling behind David Hockney and Jeff Koons – and the collage among the costliest digital artworks ever sold.

For many, this auction marked a pivotal moment in the history of Digital Art, the business of art and its intersection with the expanding crypto-community and blockchain finance. Christie's effectively became the first significant legacy auction house to offer native digital artwork alongside an NFT. Additionally, the auction house became the first to offer standard payments for the lot alongside cryptocurrency, marking a significant milestone towards the widespread adoption of cryptocurrencies in art. So, Christie's strategically positioned itself in Crypto Art and the blockchain forefront.⁶¹

The artwork's scandal relates more to its fetched price at auction than its visual basis. The auction mystified many in art circles, others woeful, and some positively bemused. While artists had used blockchain technology in art prior to sale, none realised such meteoric numbers. It prompted questions regarding the nature of the deal – what was sold: the digital image, the NFT associated with the image, both or neither? Appropriately rephrased, the question reads: *is it the work itself or the operation of the work reduced to information through tokenisation that has more value?* These are not new concerns and can be traced to the historical moment of the project of dematerialisation. Seth Siegelaub, an American art dealer, staged an exhibition titled *January 5 – 31* in January 1969, featuring a group of Conceptual

⁵⁸ Token ID: 40913

⁵⁹ The buyer was later revealed to be one Vignesh Sundaresan, alias MetaKovan, a Singapore-based computer programmer and blockchain entrepreneur.

⁶⁰ Bidders were invited to make payments for the work in both US Dollars and the cryptocurrency Ether. At the time of sale, \$69,346,350 converted to 42,329 Ether.

⁶¹ Since the Beeple sale, Sotheby's followed suit with a curated NFT auction documenting pre-Ethereum NFTs. The auction ran from 3 to 10 June 2021. The highest sale was the NFT Cryptopunk-7523 by Larva Labs at an estimated \$11 million.

artists.⁶² This exhibition reversed the site of display from the physical space to the exhibition catalogue – the information about the work assumed preeminence over the physical work itself:

In a notable shift, artwork was now being conceived as ‘information’, which could be circulated more efficiently through the medium of texts and photographs than through the transportation of physical objects (Wood 2002, 36).

Siegelaub’s exhibition demonstrated the process of art’s processual dissolution of information. Duchamp’s readymades had earlier confirmed that supplementary information distinguished an object from an artwork. By captioning something as mundane as a snow shovel, Duchamp transformed it into an artistic artefact. Siegelaub’s gesture showed that there need not be a tangible object in the mix; that information alone was enough. However, the Winkelmann affair is merely a reiteration of these events on a digital basis. The image’s gradual obsolescence bleeds into an enclosed circuit of viral information, a reality where art is the communication between network nodes attempting a recapitulation of previous events. Art, from this perspective, is a repetition of repetition, something akin to Baudrillard’s non-event:

No more faces, no glances, no human figures or bodies there [...] The relationship to the “work” is on the level of contamination or contagion: you plug in, become, absorb, immerse yourself just like in flows or networks [...] This vertical and horizontal, aesthetic and commercial diversification is now part of the work, and the work’s original core is beyond repair (Baudrillard 2005, 92-94).

Everydays typifies this ouroboros of informational repetition. If it is possible to speak of an art object, then it is not in the singular sense. Instead, the object becomes bifurcated: the work, whether physical or dematerialised; and the information about the work, which assumes primacy. Jean-Francois Lyotard’s (1979, 4-5) explanation of

⁶² The group show featured the works of Robert Barry, Douglas Heubler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, with the show catalogue being the primary manifestation of the project. The show is also referred to as the *January Show* and aimed critique at conventional institutions due to the temporary nature of the exhibition space.

postmodernity's mercantilisation of information accounts for this, noting that information is produced for exchange, thereby losing its use-value.

To suggest that Winkelmann presents an art processually reduced to information implies that there was an initial existential condition. If information is the present constitution, it logically follows that it underwent a metamorphosis from a previous iteration. We might return to the formalism of Greenberg and Michael Fried in an attempt to capture this condition – in Greenberg's case, art as self-purification; and the Friedian case against 'theatrical' art in favour of autonomous art (Fried 1998, 157). Essentially this is a return to the language of Modernism. But that only serves a purposeless end and limits the scope of reason within restrictive bounds. Such necessitates a different vocabulary untethered to the concerns of establishing a higher, superior culture. In attempting to define the function of philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari offer an account of this prior existential condition. Accordingly, art is that which preserves and, in so doing, stands up on its own (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 164). If art is preservation in itself, then what is preserved, Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 164) suggest, is a complex of percepts and affects. Percepts do not explicitly refer to the perceptual; they exist independent of an experiencing subject (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 164). Similarly, affects do not refer to emotions but supersede the individual experience. Affects are those that Guattari suggests speak through a subject but are not necessarily tied to it:

Affect is thus essentially a pre-personal category, installed "before" the circumscription of identities, and manifested by unlocatable transferences, unlocatable with regard to their origin and destination (Guattari 1996, 158-160).

The work of art is the preservation of affects and percepts to the extent that they permit the work to stand on its own. These affects and percepts constitute a "bloc of sensations" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 166), such that were the work of art to possess an essence constituting it as art, it would be the fact of sensation. The role of art is the extraction and preservation of sensations that exist independent of the viewing subject and the artist (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 167). Sensations impart a particular complex of autonomy insofar as they are the precondition and the logic for an artwork, that is, the sensation exists before the artist translates it into a work of art.

Yet, the sensation is not the sole preserve of the artist. Continuing, sensation guides aesthetic composition, and a work of art is necessarily composed (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 191-192). Deleuze and Guattari's (1994, 198) denouncement of Conceptual Art suggests that it attempts to dematerialise sensation through generalisation. Where the work of art exists on an aesthetic plane of composition, Conceptual Art presents a "neutralised plane", that is, in the language of an exhibition catalogue, which infinitely reproduces sensation:

[the plan of composition] tends to become "informative", and the sensation depends upon the simple "opinion" of a spectator who determines whether or not to "materialise" the sensation, that is to say, decides whether or not it is art (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 198).

Dematerialisation, then, is rephrased as the dematerialisation of sensation that constitutes the work of art. Aesthetics is subordinated to technique, prompting the dissolution from the sensational to the informational towards an infinite reproducibility where the heterogenetic, pre-individualised fabric of sensation – affects and percepts – is neutralised and inscribed to the identity of a subject (Guattari 1996, 160-161). Art procedurally reduced to information, dependent "upon the simple 'opinion' of a spectator", can offer no more than anxious self-reference and introspection (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 98).

Apropos of *Everydays*, the transition from sensation to information is realised. Not only is one aspect of the work infinitely reproducible (the digital image), but it also depends on enunciative conditions to record its artistic status.⁶³ At its most fundamental level, the work continues the project of dematerialisation, but along a

⁶³ The challenge presented to aesthetic discourses by Winkelman's work is such that it decodes and rearranges aesthetic positions in the contemporary given its fusion with information technologies. Crypto Art – as a field entangled in the technological – is closely associated with generative aesthetics, for example CryptoPunks (as I allude to earlier; cf. Chapter One). Briefly, generative art is a medium that employs "a technical device capable of generating drawings" (Nake 2012, 68) towards a complexity of visual forms. This entanglement invokes both seen and unseen processes contributing to our understanding of art in the present, most notably the impact of code and software on the production and consumption of aesthetic forms. I allude to the impact of such invisible processes throughout the study, primarily framing them through the lens of the New Aesthetic (cf. Chapter One and Chapter Two). Although an interesting avenue to pursue as generative aesthetics offers a substantial impact to contemporary discourse, it exceeds the parameters of the study's scope. Additionally, the impact of generative aesthetics is minimal in relation to Winkelman's work which serves as a central locus of the study.

separate register. There is another operation at work. This procedure expropriates the terminology of dematerialisation and affixes it to the promise of the blockchain, namely, the rhetoric of decentralisation, where the intermediary is bypassed in favour of P2P functionality. Where the historical moment of dematerialisation attempted to undermine the institution by dissolving the object, Crypto Art prompts a neutralisation through the provision of a technological answer; that the blockchain's technical decentralisation can facilitate disruption of the power distribution in the art world since it promises an alternative form of artistic mediation.

At length, I establish a Duchampian and Conceptualist character in Crypto Art. I argue that Crypto Art's relation to these two previous modes is neither total nor discontinuous. What Crypto Art borrows from Duchamp and Conceptual Art is the acknowledgement of an enunciative condition characterised by the statement, "this is art". I reiterate that the previous statement is qualified by a technological resolution encapsulated in the construct of the NFT. We might modify the statement thus: "this is art because it is associated with an NFT". The implications of this statement are borrowed from Conceptual Art's politicised dimension, as emphasised particularly by Beuys (cf. Section 2.2.) Yet noting the deferred relation Crypto Art has to Conceptual Art, I argue that what is at stake is an egalitarianism not rooted in the creative act but guaranteed by a technological apparatus. What I find most curious about this technological utopianism is its indeterminacy and inconclusivity, specifically regarding art. With reference to Crypto Art, I summarise this egalitarianism under the banner of decentralisation. The following chapter attempts to clarify certain ambiguities to position Crypto Art's project of decentralisation more adequately.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROMISE OF DECENTRALISATION

In this chapter, I explore the rhetoric of decentralisation in relation to Crypto Art. Presented as an alternative to conventional forms of institutional consecration, decentralisation attempts to subvert modes of cultural legitimation within the productive field along economic and cultural axes. However, decentralisation remains a contested and little-understood term, specifically when affixed to the terminology of the blockchain. At a fundamental level, the blockchain prompts architectural devolution to the extent that its functionality hinges on geographically sparse nodes. A blockchain network does not depend on a singular authority to guarantee its maintenance, and this is construed as technically decentralised.

Furthermore, the extent to which this construct extends the bounds of an infrastructural orientation towards a techno-philosophical philosophy remains undecided. As such, this chapter critically explores the theoretical motivations underpinning decentralisation as it is realised in the interaction between dispersed technical architectures and Crypto Art. I interpret Crypto Art as assuming the blockchain's architectural decentralisation towards an 'artistic decentralisation,' that is, undermining the role of the institution in defining and consecrating artistic objects. Following the previous discussion on art's enunciative values (cf. Section 2.2.), I understand decentralisation as an attempt at articulating the reality of the blockchain as a material surface of inscription where the statement, 'this is art', can be recorded. I articulate artistic decentralisation as a drive towards autonomy, whereby artistic production, sovereignty, and self-definition assume a more significant role than that of the institution in the productive field.

3.1. The Ambiguities of Decentralisation

Although abstruse and contested, it is plausible to suggest that decentralisation has a suspicion of centralised crystallisations of power and control as its impetus. That is to say, broadly understood, the notion imparts a mistrust of central authorities in

matters as diverse as legitimisation, coordination, and mechanisation. To this extent, the conceptual motivations supplying the theory (again, loosely understood) aspire towards a subtraction from the centre. In the most general sense, it follows that decentralising is to reallocate decision-making from a perceived monolithic locale towards the periphery. An attempted rationalisation of power occurs, rectifying a perceived asymmetry as the central point of control is divested of its authoritative energies.

However, as it stands, decentralisation is employed as a banner under which disparate motivations, interests and conflicts are paraded. In this regard, it operates more as a rhetorical strategy delineating differing aims and promises intent on subverting perceived power imbalances (Schneider 2019, 2-3). Given the term's ambiguity, approaching decentralisation proves a difficult affair. The allure of decentralisation's re-ordering is such that a universal definition of the term fails since it is pursued to differing, often contradictory ends. While it is possible to understand it as a tactic or general tendency as much as a rhetorical strategy that prioritises the dispersal of control within a dynamic system, such an understanding lacks clarity and definition. It follows that a more distinct undertaking is necessary to arrive at a sufficient understanding, specifically concerning the Crypto Art project.

It suffices to limit our understanding within strict parameters to avoid the ambiguities associated with the generalised fact of 'decentralisation'. The necessity of this condition is to the extent that the notion assumes varying meanings and is, as such, context dependent. For example, decentralisation has been employed in the realm of market economics by the libertarian philosopher Friedrich A. Hayek. Hayek views decentralisation as a model for economic planning realised through competition (1945, 521). Per this perspective, wherein the economy is perceived as a dynamic system composed of rational actors, central planning cannot account for extenuating circumstances provoked by sudden changes. As such, Hayek concedes a need for some form of decentralisation to ensure dispersed maintenance of a system. For Hayek, a distributed system better accounts for the sudden introduction of dispositions – it becomes a matter of pragmatics in the face of rapid change (since the economy is never at equilibrium):

The whole acts as one market, not because any of its members survey the whole field, but because their limited individual fields of vision sufficiently overlap so that through many intermediaries the relevant information is communicated to all (Hayek 1945, 526).

This distribution aims to replace the span of control from a central mind to a distributed set of individual actors operating with financial incentives, that is, they are induced to maintain the state of the system for their assured benefit (Hayek 1945, 527). Hayek forms a case for decentralisation resting on supposedly economic foundations.⁶⁴

Another pertinent example of decentralisation is its employment in communication network topologies' description and infrastructural design. These topologies describe the structure of communication in disparate network models. Baran (1964, 1-2) posits that communication networks can be factored into two distinctive components: centralised and distributed. A centralised communication network describes a cluster of nodes operating around a single central node, whereby the destruction of the central node impacts the integrity of the entire network. Contrary to centralisation, a distributed network forms a segmented structure in the form of dispersed communication nodes where a single originary zone does not form the prerequisite for operation (Baran 1964, 1-2). Furthermore, Baran (1964, 1-3) identifies a decentralised network as neither centralised nor distributed. To this end, a decentralised communication network is better resistant to periods of breakdown or failure since communication is dispersed across a more comprehensive matrix.⁶⁵ The example also imparts another layer of ambiguity pertaining to discussions surrounding

⁶⁴ Yet what this also reveals are overtly political dimensions pointing towards the gradual obsolescence of the state in monitoring and directing economic activities.

⁶⁵ It is interesting that Baran distinguishes 'decentralised' from 'distributed' rather than using the two interchangeably. Each term connotes a different meaning. A decentralised network describes a heterogeneous distribution of nodes independent of a central locus, where the failure of a few nodes does not impact the overall integrity of a network to a great extent. However, given that the design of this network connects a lower cluster of nodes to a higher set of nodes, failure would result in some nodes being unable to communicate with others (Bodó, Brekke and Hoepman 2021, 4). As Baran (1964, 3) notes, the failure of even a small cluster of nodes poses the potential to destroy communications. On the other hand, a distributed network topology delineates a higher-order decentralisation whereby each node bears the same number of connections to other nodes (Bodó, Brekke and Hoepman 2021, 4). If viewed from the perspective of fault tolerance, a distributed network is more resilient to failure since every node shares similar connections and paths to other nodes. In this case, even if several nodes were to fail, the remaining nodes would still be able to communicate with each other (Bodó, Brekke and Hoepman 2021, 4). On the contrary, a decentralised network would suffer substantial communication difficulties if even a small cluster of nodes failed.

decentralisation. On the one hand, decentralisation is pursued to ideological ends, describing a system of human organisation where social and economic activities occur with little governmental oversight. This points to political decentralisation. On the other hand, decentralisation is employed in the technical designs of network structures and data interfaces, alluding to an architectural orientation more resilient to breakdown and failure.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, it is plausible to construct an account of decentralisation that synthesises social and economic organisation principles with the technical architecture of deconcentrated systems. Bodó, Brekke and Hoepman (2021, 2) noted that there have been numerous attempts at implementing technical decentralisation towards pursuing socio-economic and ideological aspirations. For one, the Internet is an example of a decentralised (although not distributed) system that has been heralded as a novel tool for political and social mobilisation (Bodó, Brekke and Hoepman 2021, 4).⁶⁷ This highlights the potential use of decentralised systems in rectifying perceived power imbalances or how the promise of technical decentralisation translates into socio-political decentralisation. In this respect, it is plausible to view decentralisation as eliminating gatekeepers (Schneider 2019, 13) who exercise (often unfair and impartial) power over a societal segment. This points to the use of technology as a way of exiting politics, where the mediating role of the human in social relations is replaced with self-regulating and autonomous technological systems (De Filippi and Loveluck 2016, 3).

Given the scope and orientation of the discussion, the decentralised system to which I primarily refer is the blockchain (although other similar systems exist).⁶⁸ The

⁶⁶ Similarly, a semantic element is at play in the opposition of decentralisation to distribution. As noted, while there exists an overlap, one does not describe the other (at least from the perspective of infrastructural design). Collapsing one under the other or separating them would be sufficient since they impart different alternatives.

⁶⁷ Earl et al. (2010, 425) note that the Internet had played a role in political mobilisation since the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries “when former American president George W. Bush called for war against Iraq when the World Trade Organisation met in Seattle in 1999, and when fears of global warming mounted, people responded by taking to the street and to their computers.” Similarly, Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer (2013, 118) emphasise the role played by the Internet and social media in the Arab Spring revolution, which saw democratic protests across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011.

⁶⁸ To reiterate earlier remarks, a blockchain can be regarded as an append-only decentralised database. Initially conceptualised by the pseudonymous Satoshi Nakamoto, the pioneer of Bitcoin, the blockchain forms a system whereby transactions are transparently recorded and arranged in chronological order (hence a ‘chain of blocks’ whereby each block represents a store of information) (cf. Section 3.4. – 3.5.)

extent to which the Bitcoin network is decentralised is only insofar as its functioning is not localised to a single node. Instead, the architecture of the network was designed such that control by a central issuing authority is unfeasible. Bitcoin's architectural decentralisation translates to an almost techno-cultural decentralisation where disintermediation from existing monetary structures is at the heart of its philosophy (Dodd 2017, 5). This imparts a rhetoric of societal reorganisation/decentralisation since economic activity is embedded in the broader social fabric of perceptions, motivations and behaviours. Viewed from the perspective of the blockchain, or more specifically Bitcoin, decentralisation outlines financial disintermediation through technological means. Bitcoin purports to relieve intermediary financial institutions of their legitimacy in issuing currency and mandating economic activity (Dodd 2017, 11).

However, Bitcoin's ideological underpinnings exceed the bounds of economic disintermediation, attempting to trace an alternate mode of interaction where social organisation and governance operate based on code and software. Subsequent blockchain protocols, namely Ethereum, adopt Bitcoin's emphasis on decentering towards a technologically mediated abstraction of governance over the social body, that is, towards greater individual sovereignty and autonomy (Cunningham 2016, 240) achieved through the use of blockchain applications. The emphasis on sovereignty and individual autonomy extends to Crypto Art, given its conceptual fusion to NFTs tied to the Ethereum blockchain. If art is decentralised, it is via the prompt that a self-regulating technological apparatus can replace the role of conventional agents – galleries, museums, dealers, critics and auctioneers – in defining and consecrating artistic objects. Hence, the economic decentralisation afforded by Bitcoin and subsequent blockchain protocols perhaps supplements artistic decentralisation. Bitcoin deployed as currency interrogates centralised financial interaction, and Crypto Art, through the construct of NFTs, interrogates centralised power structures in art.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ I discuss Conceptual Art's attempt at undermining the institutional apparatus in a similar feat in Chapter Two (cf. Section 2.2.). As I articulate, Conceptual Art's production of 'dematerialised' works (such as Joseph Beuys' 'actions') sought to undermine art's commercial value; that is, dematerialised works, as intangible objects, differed markedly from readily saleable physical works such as painting and sculpture.

3.2. Towards a Techno-philosophy of Decentralisation

It is necessary to interrogate the fact as it emerges within the terminology of the blockchain to arrive at a sufficient understanding of decentralisation proportionate to Crypto Art. Limiting the scope within these parameters simplifies the task to an extent, however, with the additional burden of excluding certain nuances pertaining to decentralisation in a broader sense. It should be noted that decentralisation in this discussion is taken as implementing a techno-social system facilitated by architecturally dispersed technology, that is, the blockchain (Bodó, Brekke and Hoepman 2021, 2). To better situate the discussion, I should qualify that the techno-social effects of decentralised architectures are viewed solely in relation to the artistic field. Where an overarching consideration of Bitcoin and decentralising software as political programmes might prove useful (see Golumbia 2016), such an approach exceeds the scope of the discussion. However, this is not to suggest that Crypto Art's project is apolitical, autonomous and removed from the social fabric. On the contrary, Crypto Art is necessarily political, given that the architecture it relies on is situated in a larger history of struggles opposed to concentrations of power (Bodó, Brekke and Hoepman 2021, 9-10). Furthermore, Crypto Art can be regarded as an iteration of an overtly political digital anti-institutionalism (Golumbia 2018, 104) emanating from the visual arts with an immanent goal of undermining the legitimating role of art institutions.

3.3. Decentralisation and the Blockchain

Recalling earlier remarks, Crypto Art describes an aesthetic programme exhibiting a visual and non-visual basis, emphasising the production of digitally scarce artistic objects. In defining Crypto Art, I associate it with an immanent project of decentralisation, namely the rejection of the role played by intermediary agents in consecrating and defining art. The fact of decentralisation, as it pertains to Crypto Art, is realised through the terminology of the blockchain. A brief technical account suffices.

Note that when referring to decentralisation in blockchain systems, it is necessary to distinguish between two implementations, *permissioned* and

permissionless. Acknowledgement of this reality assists in refining an understanding of decentralisation, especially if the complexities of *decentralised* versus *distributed* systems are to be considered. That is, as suggested by Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz (2022, 5), while decentralised systems might be distributed, the same cannot be presented inversely. In general, a permissionless blockchain refers to a public system that does not enforce restrictions on participation. Bitcoin is an example of a permissionless blockchain system, as it is open to public use. In a permissionless system, users reserve the right to enter, participate and exit at will – they are essentially open to everyone (Behnke and Janssen 2020, 4). The maintenance of a permissionless system, such as Bitcoin, is through the work of anonymous users who compete to solve complex mathematical formulas. These processes are collectively known as mining, which is the implementation of a Proof-of-Work scheme (Helliard et al. 2020, 3).⁷⁰

Contrasting permissionless systems, permissioned blockchain systems are geared towards private use, businesses and organisations. As such, the maintenance of the ledger is secured by verified gatekeepers rather than anonymous miners (Helliard et al. 2020, 4). Unlike permissionless architectures, permissioned blockchains are oriented towards controlling user participation (including entry and exit) and are better fitted towards enterprisaal applications (Behnke and Janssen 2020, 4). Given their reliance on a central verifying authority, permissioned systems cannot be regarded as decentralised (Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz 2022, 6). Decentralisation, then, primarily relates to permissionless, that is, public, blockchain systems:

These are the only type of blockchain systems where the definition of decentralised may be applicable because permissionless blockchain systems are distributed systems where different components are controlled by multiple authorities (Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz 2022, 6).

Reconciling the semantic differences between decentralised and distributed, Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz (2022, 9) identify five aspects that contribute towards a

⁷⁰ Mining is an integral aspect of the Bitcoin system and essential to the maintenance and functioning of the network. Essentially, mining is the creation of new coins whereby individual computer nodes solve complex mathematical formulas (Whitaker 2019, 30). The collective process is referred to as a Proof-of-Work scheme. Jack Parkin (2020, 19) refers to this scheme as the effort to solve a problem and subsequently record a new block of information in the blockchain.

decentralised blockchain system: disintermediation, distributed blockchain, peer-to-peer network, algorithmic trust and open-source principles. Disintermediation refers to means of participation, where anyone willing to participate in the network can do so without consent from other parties (Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz 2022, 10). A distributed blockchain makes reference to the fundamental reality of a shared ledger without a central custodian duplicated on a peer-to-peer network permitting direct interaction. Algorithmic trust refers to the consensus mechanism that governs community participation. Per this perspective, algorithmic trust refers to “a set of rules that disintermediated stakeholders share to manage the blockchain’s extension and security” (Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz 2022, 11). Algorithmic trust could also refer to the underlying technical infrastructure that facilitates disintermediation towards a peer-to-peer basis. Finally, open-source principles refer to transparency in the decision-making structure; every stakeholder is privy to the software, code, and communication that dictates the nature of the network (Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz 2022, 12). These five factors contribute towards a decentralised blockchain system. Note that this definition is limited to a description of network architecture without the associated linkage to social or ideological concerns. In turn, the definition encompasses the implementation of a *distributed* data structure between *disintermediated* parties in a *peer-to-peer network* who rely on *algorithmic trust* to coordinate participation in a transparent, *open-source* manner that permits all stakeholders to audit the system (Bezuidenhout, Nel and Maritz 2022, 14-15).⁷¹

After the fact, it suffices to suggest that decentralisation, as it pertains to the milieu of the blockchain, prefigures the techno-utopian ideal of code-mandated social interaction. While the configuration of the Bitcoin protocol, as an example, might not observe political dimensions, the fact of its social immersion portends otherwise. By this suggestion, I am proposing an approach to novel technologies that situates their inclusion in the social body. This entails an explicit encounter with the perceptions and motivations – intentional or unconscious – woven into technology by their human

⁷¹ Translating these terms into the context of Crypto Art is not without difficulty. The complexity is in finding real-world equivalents of these values in action. It might even be suggested that the manifestation of Crypto Art does not adhere to these principles. Perhaps the great difficulty in applying this outside of a non-scientific realm is given that it describes a necessarily total and absolute network architecture that cannot faithfully translate into a social reality. As it were, Crypto Art does not subscribe to this model of decentralisation – consider, again, the role played by a so-called centralised institution, namely, Christie’s auction house, in the sale of Winkelman’s landmark work.

counterparts. This is not to look at machinic processes as the extension of an ideological model; rather, an anticipation of the undefined theoretical bases that precede and follow the use of certain technologies. With regard to the blockchain, it becomes a matter of approaching it as a social artefact liable for fusion with any number of political affiliations (Parkin 2020, 73).

The blockchain scholar Jack Parkin (2020, 5) identified this idea of the interwovenness of human and non-human machines that constitutes blockchain technology as the superlative of algorithmic decentralisation. In a text exploring the hidden incentives underpinning Bitcoin, Parkin (2020, 5) observes algorithmic decentralisation as redirecting social interaction without the involvement of hierarchical human decision-making processes. Per this perspective, algorithmic decentralisation connotes ideas of transparency and egalitarianism achieved through replacing human systems – essentially an attempted solution to power asymmetries. However, as Parkin (2020, 8) suggests, power imbalances unwittingly form in decentralised architectures.

Considering the above, and again taking Bitcoin as an example, decentralisation is the realisation of a social goal through technological re-articulations. For one, Bitcoin re-articulates the trust in financial intermediaries by providing the possibility of peer-to-peer payment. In turn, this is interpreted as a re-articulation of power asymmetries in the global economy. Bitcoin's purported elimination of an intermediary through cryptographic proof serves as an antidote to conventional financial agents:

Bitcoin attempts to redistribute monetary trust into a predetermined codified architecture that 'decentralises' the control of monetary policy (Parkin 2020, 20).

At the root of this approach is the belief that code and software can mandate social experience. With regards to art, this entails a transition from the conventional display setting such as the gallery space towards an overtly digital anti-institutional environment such as a blockchain-backed platform. In other words, a decentralised alternative where trust in institutions' internal processes is replaced with a disintermediated form of artistic appraisal and definition. Here, the observable role of

an agent, such as the gallery, is diminished in articulating artistic artefacts. To a degree, the blockchain – as opposed to conventional agents of the arts – constitutes the heart of the operations that include Crypto Art's existence in the cultural field.

It is worth considering why Crypto Art is prompted by institutional cynicism. Although I discuss this in the next chapter, it bears mentioning here (cf. Section 4.5.). Berger (2008 [1972], 80) identifies the function of art as skewered towards dominant class interests. That is to say, the production and consumption of art are tied to larger social and economic cues:

[art] entered the culture of the ruling class, whilst physically, it was set apart and isolated in their palaces and houses (Berger 2008 [1972], 25).

[the] art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class (Berger 2008 [1972], 80).

Historically tethered to dominant interests, art possesses an exclusionary character in terms of its audience and practitioners (cf. Section 3.6., 3.7. & 4.5). This exclusionary character is maintained by institutional actors, such as the gallery and museum, whose distinction sets apart 'professional artists' from 'non-professional artists'.⁷² The impact on art is such that certain artists whose interests align with the dominant class's taste are canonised to the detriment of other artists whose interests do not align. Indeed, Bourdieu (1993, 42) reminds us that the artistic field is the struggle to exclude certain positions to entrench and venerate others. The artistic field becomes a tightly wound and heavily policed arena where participation is strictly monitored. Large exhibition institutions, among others, form centres of cultural and economic power that restrict participation. As I discuss in the following section, with the case of Bitcoin, what is at stake in instances of power concentrations is the abuse by custodians of the means of participation. In the artistic field, participation is highly conditional and skewed towards dominant interests. Crypto Art, then, might be read as a response to the restriction of the field. Rather than being content with enclosure, the programme attempts to level the playing field through the use of technology.

⁷² I use the term 'professional' to refer to consecrated artists whose works are recognised and canonised and 'non-professional' to refer to non-exhibiting artists as recognised and valued in the productive field (cf. Section 4.4.). Per this schema, Winkelman is classed as a professional, that is, economically and culturally consecrated agent in the productive field.

3.4. Bitcoin and the Simulation of Trust

Decentralisation, if viewed from the perspective of Bitcoin, can be summated as the simulation of trust via cryptographic or algorithmic means.⁷³ Nakamoto (2009, 1) conceived Bitcoin as an alternative to the centralisation of the trust-based financial model.⁷⁴ By this token, Bitcoin's decentralised nature eliminates the need for trusted intermediaries – such as banks or the state – to regulate economic activity. This is perhaps a move towards a trust-less digital system without central oversight or planning. It is a fact of trust, or the perceived abuse thereof, that prompted the conception of Bitcoin:

The root problem with conventional currency is all the trust that's required to make it work. The central bank must be trusted not to debase the currency, but the history of fiat currencies is full of breaches of that trust. Banks must be trusted to hold our money and transfer it electronically, but they lend it out in waves of credit bubbles with barely a fraction in reserve (Nakamoto 2009).

Nakamoto's suspicion of so-called trust-based financial models is hardwired into the functioning and maintenance of the Bitcoin network. Through cryptographic proof as an antidote to the misuse of trust (Nakamoto 2009, 1), Bitcoin permits two parties to transact without needing a trusted third. Hence Bitcoin emphasises peer-to-peer functionality.⁷⁵ By this token, it can be suggested that Bitcoin eliminates the need for a reputable centre of trust that Nakamoto identifies in the conventional milieu of banking and finance. The role of a trusted intermediating party, be it the state or a

⁷³ As discussed earlier, Bitcoin is a peer-to-peer payment network that relies on cryptographic proof to ensure its integrity and maintenance. The theoretical basis for the technology was established in a 2009 white paper by Nakamoto titled 'Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System'. Nakamoto's paper outlined a dispersed network architecture consisting of a financial application (in the form of the Bitcoin cryptocurrency) and a time-stamping server (perhaps understood as the blockchain) that would offer an alternative to traditional finance. In the broadest sense, Bitcoin can be construed as a hypothetical response to the issue of trust in traditional finance (Cunningham 2016, 237).

⁷⁴ Parkin (2020, 53) notes that Bitcoin functions as an "anti-centralised currency [...] one that pushes against the nationalism of the financial system embedded in central banks".

⁷⁵ The integrity of each electronic transaction is ensured through the publication of the transaction across the entirety of the network. In the Bitcoin network, transactions are recorded in such a way as to be transparent and accessible to every user through the use of public keys. While this might appear contradictory to Bitcoin's claims of privacy and integrity, it serves a crucial function in the ecosystem. As Nakamoto (2009, 6) states, while every transaction is publicised, there remains a level of anonymity given that no information links to an individual.

central reserve, is replaced with Bitcoin's time-stamp server model. From this perspective, Bitcoin does not eliminate trust as it delegates it to cryptographic and algorithmic software (Baldwin 2018, 3).

If decentralisation is the simulation of trust via cryptographic/algorithmic means, then Bitcoin forms the basis for a conjecturally decentralised model. In some respects, Bitcoin's simulation of trust signals a departure from local concentrations of economic and monetary power towards a disintermediated form of interaction. To view Bitcoin's socio-technical effects outside the domain of economics, it suffices to reiterate its embeddedness in social practices maintained by strong beliefs (Dodd 2017, 10). This suggests that leaps in technology are often situated in discursive frameworks that shape their use and effects in the social. Apropos of Bitcoin, the simulated trust (decentralisation) is attached to the overarching concern of governance in the contemporary era of planetary computerisation. What is at stake, in this case, is the replacement of trust as a social construct – to say, the trust placed in an arbitrating third party – with algorithmic or computational trust (Cunningham 2016, 245). As Bitcoin is limited to electronic cash payments, the human element in financial interactions is delegated to machine code. This can be interpreted as the articulation of software as the basis for trust in digital culture. To wit, Bitcoin presents a computational trust:

[a] complete faith in the ability of mathematics and technology to eradicate problems emerging from human behaviour (Cunningham 2016, 244).

To reiterate, decentralisation is as much bypassing intermediaries as it is a technological re-articulation of trust. The blockchain can be relied on to function in a trustworthy manner, only to the extent that one can view software as dependable. In this case, trust means that the software should function as it was programmed. With this in mind, Bitcoin's re-articulation of trust is elevated to the social domain as a techno-utopian ideal; the autonomic processes of so-called trust-based human

systems are replaced with the autopoietic self-regulative operations of the blockchain (Dodd 2017, 12).⁷⁶

3.5. On NFTs

Where Bitcoin concerns itself with electronic payments, Ethereum extends the concept of the blockchain to any matter requiring some form of consensus. Taking the issue of trust, Ethereum conceives the possibility of trustless transactions – not just monetary – that can be regulated through a blockchain architecture (Cunningham 2016, 249). Like Bitcoin, Ethereum pursues the idea of decentralised consensus protocols with an implication beyond the scope of the financial. By this token, Ethereum can be regarded as the ideal foundation through which decentralisation is effected, specifically as it applies to Crypto Art. This is evinced from the fact that the application of NFTs to digital and physical assets was effectively realised on the Ethereum platform (although this is not to suggest that the concept emerged solely in relation to Ethereum). Recall that Winkelmann's *Everydays* was minted on Ethereum before its sale.

A word on NFTs. Consider the following scenario: an artist creates a digital image and shares it online only to find that another party has appropriated their creation as one of their own. Given the Internet's unending content, combined with the infinite reproducibility of digital images, asserting the provenance of digital assets is near impossible. In the case of our artist, claiming authorship of the digital asset is not

⁷⁶ Bitcoin's re-articulation of trust is perhaps reminiscent of the post-truth condition. In a word, post-truth describes a contemporary political paradigm linked to "a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not" (Mcintyre 2018, 13). The post-truth era is generally marked by a conceptual "disrespect for established authority" (Fuller 2018, 181) and a general broadening of opinions and so-called truth statements. I suggest that Bitcoin's computational trust reflects our current post-truth condition in its attempt at supplanting the generally accepted financial authority of banks and the state. Here, the post-truth condition is typified by reliance on the technology, as in, you can trust the incorrigibility of Bitcoin that it will function accordingly. I similarly argue that the emergence of Crypto Art is coextensive with post-truth. Again, the established authority of the gallery and museum, as proponents of certain artistic realities, is no longer accepted as universal. Instead, what has occurred is a sort of dynamism and "openness to previously ignored people and their ideas" (Fuller 2018, 181). What I find interesting, however, is that perhaps Bitcoin and Crypto Art present solutions to post-truth. The blockchain (and NFTs) offer a specific material 'truth' that cannot be altered, wilfully misinterpreted or debated – everything is set in stone (or rather in code) and immutable. However, this exceeds the scope of the discussion.

an easy feat. For them, it becomes a matter of finding a way to secure and verify the provenance of their digital assets. Another scenario: a digital artist attempts to sell their work to a reluctant buyer who argues there is nothing unique about a digital image that can be endlessly copied. Here, the matter pertains to attributing value to a digital image under the tenor of scarcity. The contention is that an artwork's value is partly derived from its uniqueness (if we are to subscribe to the theory that uniqueness translates to ameliorated social standing). As noted by Paul (2020, 7), as far back as the 1990s, Digital Art played a minor role in the market, given its pseudo-intangibility. The two scenarios can be reduced to their prompts. The first scenario is prompted by the interrelating ideas of provenance and ownership over digital images, whereas the second correlates to the notion of generating value for native digital assets. These two scenarios can be considered practical concerns underpinning the adoption of NFTs in the visual arts.

An NFT can be formally defined as a certificate of ownership of a unique digital item. At the time of writing, the NFT concept has seen widespread success in the visual arts; however, other such applications exist. Fundamentally, the NFT concept represents physical or virtual assets on the blockchain. Recalling Bitcoin, the impetus behind the technology was the notion of conducting electronic cash payments on a peer-to-peer basis. In this context, it can be argued that each bitcoin, to an extent, represents a store of monetary value – or a bitesize of information regarding a transaction with some commercial worth retroactively attached to it. Per this view, each bitcoin is exchangeable with any other bitcoin in the same manner as a dollar is interchangeable with another. That is, bitcoins are fungible, allowing them to be mutually swapped for each other without sacrificing their ingrained value (Sidley and Dingle 2022, 131). Bitcoin's infrastructure was only designed for using a singular token, that is, a bitcoin, with no other applications intended. Nevertheless, there existed the possibility of tracking a certain class of bitcoins by attributing additional information to their construction.

One iteration of the above idea was to track the origin of bitcoins and colour a set of coins to appear as distinguishable (Rosenfeld 2012, 5). Conceptualised as 'Coloured Coins', this involved metaphorically 'colouring' a set of coins by tracking their genesis and identifying them through a different symbol or unique hash

(Rosenfeld 2012, 7). In other words, Coloured Coins were attributed with additional metadata that set them apart from other bitcoin circulating on the blockchain:

The idea is to open up Bitcoin as we know it now into two separate layers [being the] underlying transactional network based on its cryptographic technology [the blockchain], and an overlay network of issuance of distinct instruments encapsulated in a design we call 'colored coins' (Assia et al. 2013, 3).

Coloured Coins built on top of Bitcoin were among the first examples of non-fungible assets. The applications of this innovation were far-reaching. It followed that anything within reasonable scope could be represented on the blockchain through the issuance of Coloured Coins. Accordingly, these applications included the issuance of shares, smart property allocation, community and corporate currency, access and subscription services, and, of particular relevance, the maintenance of digital collectables (Assia et al. 2013, 3). Conceivably, since asset classes could be represented on the blockchain, it extended to the domain of digital collectables, whereby proprietorship could be managed "by storing the current ownership of the work as a coloured coin on the blockchain" (Assia et al. 2013, 3). Coloured Coins effectively theorised the notion of decentralised administration of native digital artefacts in a trustworthy manner, given their foundation on the Bitcoin blockchain. Once again, the issue of trust emerges and is duly extended to the domain of artistic artefacts. Here, the blockchain, as opposed to an intermediating human system, serves as a custodian of the value of digital artefacts. With Coloured Coins, the matter similarly extends to sale and ownership. As such, Coloured Coins prefigured the idea of digital scarcity that underpins the value of Crypto Artworks and their interrelation with NFTs. It suffices to remember the distinction between the artwork and the token, where the latter essentially describes a collection of code that informs the condition of the former. For now, however, a discussion on the autonomisation of Crypto Art will further emphasise the ties to decentralisation.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Nonetheless, it was only in the development of the Ethereum protocol that the notion of virtually representing assets on the blockchain assumed a mature trajectory—in particular, introducing token standards into Ethereum distinguished 'fungible' assets from 'non-fungible' assets, namely the ERC-721 token standard, which made this possible. Roughly, ERC-721 is a standard for creating NFTs, rendering it unique from any other tokens (Ethereum 2022). With this token standard came the

3.6. Crypto Art and Decentralisation

As it were, the genesis of the productive field entails a historical, as opposed to ontological, trajectory.⁷⁸ Per Bourdieu (1993, 259), the character of the field is constituted by the sum of artistic languages that emerge along and traverse its horizon. Where the field is concerned, internal struggles occur for self-definition over artistic categories, that is, the course of the field is characterised by the concerns of including and excluding agents from the social universe of belief (Bourdieu 1993, 164). It is a matter of establishing a monopoly over the definition of art and artistic worth. Since the field is constitutive of three overlapping zones – to say, the artistic, the zone of power and the zone of class relations – there exist somewhat definable crystallisations of power.⁷⁹ In the most rudimentary sense, these power formations might assume institutional form in the model of the gallery or individual in the expression of the influential art dealer. To summate, the distribution of authority within the productive field is, at best, skewed in the direction of dominant class interests (Bourdieu 1993, 164).

As suggested earlier, decentralisation encompasses several facets associated with the misuse of trust by intermediaries. Where Crypto Art is concerned, decentralisation is the perceived rectification of asymmetrical power formations in the artistic field. This relates to restructuring the agentive relations in the field, where the autonomous production of artists substitutes what is perceived as the field's reliance on intermediaries; what Crypto Art demands of the field is greater sovereignty over matters of self-definition. Crypto Art, in its specific character as a theoretically 'decentralised' and 'egalitarian' movement, represents a disposition internal to the field's logic. In short, the urge to create art imbued with its ideals and detached from

possibility of verifiably asserting the singularity of a digital asset. In addition, ERC-721 became the standard used in the most popular iterations of Crypto Art.

⁷⁸ My prioritisation of a historical trajectory is not to discount the legitimacy of an ontological account of how artworks come into being as artworks. Note that the ontological question pertains to the conditions in which an artwork emerges, whereas the historical question accounts for the reception of artworks within a given socio-historical system. It is suggested that matters of ontology are already contained within the historical question insofar as being is always context-bound.

⁷⁹ Yet the description is deceptively simple since it evokes a singular, totalising power that originates in a central focal point that extends outwards. Even from the perspective of a decentralising architecture such as Bitcoin, the assessment of power establishes a dichotomy between those with and without power. For now, it suffices to establish these asymmetries without the obligatory complexities.

convention, the disinterested charisma of Crypto Art that realises itself symbolically is a reiteration of the field's entrenched values that draw as far back as Duchamp.

It might be that the concern at this stage is artistic lexicology, the specific language that characterises Crypto Art's emergence in the field. I suggest that a notable facet of Crypto Art is that it is tethered to the dialect of the blockchain. This distinction elaborates its approach to digitally rendered objects, where the blockchain serves simultaneously as a tool, medium and incubator for artistic works. Accordingly, I note that Crypto Art is rooted in a tradition of artists seeking to democratise by whatever means. In this case, decentralising merely supplants the notion of democratisation with technological affordances. However, perhaps I am being too simplistic in my approach by taking the fact of the blockchain at face value. It might indeed be that Crypto Art's interaction with the blockchain is only a surface-level manifestation of a specific societal configuration. Berger (2008 [1972], 81) notes that oil painting in Europe coincided with a specific way of grasping the world "which was ultimately determined by new attitudes of property and exchange." This relationship between property and exchange found expression in oil painting, and I might take this as a starting point in my way of seeing Crypto Art. Thus, I am prompted to ask what type of society is emergent, or has emerged, that utilises Crypto Art as a form of expression. I proceed with the notion of the 'network society' as a conceptual category. Manuel Castells (2004, 3) identifies this configuration thus: "a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies". Taking a literal approach, the role of networks in the contemporary greatly accelerates temporal modes of being; given the efficacy of networks, information is permitted to travel at accelerated rates across several channels. Crypto Art, of course, embodies a type of network, that is, the blockchain. In this case, what is described is a social configuration typified by removing central custodians. Castell's account of the network encompasses this lack of clearly defined centralised power structures:

power 'is no longer concentrated in institutions [...] organisations [...] or symbolic controllers [...] It is diffused in global networks of wealth, power, information and images, which circulate and transmute in a system of variable geometry and dematerialised geography' [...] The new power lies not in institutions but in codes of information and images of representation and identity produced in networks. These codes and images reflect the dominant logic of the network society (Van Dijk 1999, 130).

Crypto Art is indicative of this network configuration in a theoretical and practical sense: I regard the programme as the visual expression of the kind of techno-egalitarian blockchain-backed materiality. Deleuze's (1992, 6) notion of control societies – a historical period marked by the mutation of capitalism by digital technologies – notes the influence of networks on current social configurations. Crypto Art, in my opinion, is the extension of this concern with the network and control mechanisms. I understand this concern both on a macrocosmic and microcosmic scale. On a corporeal level, control societies affect the individual's dissolution into discrete units of information (Deleuze 1992, 5). Deleuze (1992, 5) describes this as the dissolution of individuality into 'dividuality': "Individuals have become 'dividuals' and masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks.'" Winkelmann takes this surge of information and packages it into a five thousand collage artwork – the accumulation of thirteen years is stamped into a single artefact.⁸⁰

I suggest that Crypto Art's decentralisation is proposed along two intertwined registers: an economic axis, whereby matters of financial reimbursement for artistic works become the preserve of the artist as opposed to an intermediary, and a cultural axis, pertaining to matters of taste, value and aesthetic arbitration. Per the economic, it suffices to note what I earlier alluded to as the productive field's 'institutional' character, that is, as typified by the commercial gallery or as the means through which artists access a purchasing public. As for the cultural aspect, I primarily refer to what, in broad terms, can be understood as matters of consecration – questions concerning who decides the artistic merit of certain works. Along these two primary registers, Crypto Art, as a specific position taken within the productive field, operates in a general sense; and, consequentially, what Crypto Art attempts to interrogate or rectify through technology. Accordingly, assessing Crypto Art must be performed against a historical background, that is to say, the development of a social space for art, characterised by

⁸⁰ On another level, Crypto Art's networked constitution relates to the informal notion of 'network spirituality' as defined by the art group Remilia Collective: "Network Spirituality is the state of tapping into a shared consciousness [where] you can communicate at the speed of thought with telepathy [...] the shedding of meat-space ego and the adoption of a wired person [that is] plugged into a network hive. Network spirituality is each one of us as a unique nodal point on a unified field, every interaction being an act of creation, the expression of your individuality is meaningful pleasure that drives evolution on the micro and macro scale" (Fang 2022).

its own internal rules, values and social coordinates. This can also be rephrased in terms of the historical development of an artistic universe, specifically to developments in Western Europe.

3.7. On the Emergence of an Artistic Field in Western Europe: The Commercial Gallery, Professionalisation, and Exclusivity

The set of objective relations that characterise the artistic field draws reference from establishing a contemporary art market and a corresponding public space for the consumption of art towards the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, note that the circulation of artworks as commodities – specifically paintings – dates at least to the fifteenth century, with evidence of primary markets in places such as Florence (De Marchi and Van Miegroet 2006, 72-73). The necessity of distinguishing between these two historical periods is given that the public space for the consumption of art by specific societal segments did not occur until the mid-1800s (Fletcher 2007, 38). The emergence of a particular artistic language that constituted the productive field where specific works and artists assumed greater value over others coincided with implementing an institutional apparatus – arbiters of both economic and aesthetic value.

Before the 1840s, the exhibition of art by institutions such as the Royal Academy of Arts in London occupied an educational character. By this suggestion, art exhibitions were directed towards aspirations of public betterment and edification with the view of art as serving a civil good (Helmreich 2017, 440). To be sure, such a perspective is distinguished between two forms of valuation, namely financial and aesthetic. At least in the Victorian sense, the ideal public art institution eschewed financial gain and served as the custodian of social consciousness (Helmreich 2017, 439). It should be noted that creating a space where art could be consumed coincided with the manifestation of social imagination, an ideal audience with shared social values and, to an extent, class background.

Articulating a separate space for the consumption of art invoked the creation of a specific frame of reference by which works could be categorised and placed within the cultural hierarchy. Such a suggestion is partly derived from Bourdieu's

characterisation of the social basis of taste. By this, taste is socio-historically determined by conditions of upbringing and education, serving as a marker of class (Bourdieu 1984, 1-2). Aesthetic preferences are not independent of social mores but rather informed by a cultural code that corresponds to one's distribution in the social hierarchy. A cultural code imbues the viewer of an artwork with a specific set of competencies, a socio-historically determined aesthetic disposition:

A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded [...] A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason [...] Thus the encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight' as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy [...] presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code (Bourdieu 1984, 2-3).

Taste, which forms the basis for grasping artistic objects, is mediated by a cultural understanding that fulfils a social function – regulating social difference (Bourdieu 1984, 7). The State regulates societal segmentation as much as cultural preference. If it is to be said, the ideal public around which the commercial art gallery emerged in Victorian London was distinctive of the middle-upper class. By one suggestion, the Royal Academy of Arts maintained an affluent identity by charging a one-shilling admissions fee, “ensuring that [their] public was largely comprised of the wealthy middle classes and the aristocracy” (Helmreich 2017, 439). Enclosing the space for artistic reflection through financial exclusion meant that matters of aesthetic determination were reserved for the upper classes. The tastemakers, at least in nineteenth-century England, were well-educated and prosperous. This fact forced them to ensure that British visual culture was not influenced by the ‘unrefined’ lower classes (Helmreich 2017, 440).

While the Royal Academy of Arts maintained exclusionary pricing models, it was not a space for selling artworks. This fell to an established dealer class who specialised in the commercial distribution of paintings. According to one estimation, the 1860s saw a developed gallery culture that determined market conditions (Fletcher 2007, 38). The role of the dealer here cannot be underestimated, as it was the professionalisation of an art dealer class that usurped the role of the professional

institution in judgements of taste. Art dealers possessed a dual basis, functioning as merchants on the one hand and connoisseurs on the other. The mercantile identity of dealers was given that many originated from retail backgrounds, selling art as a supplement to other entrepreneurial activities (Helmreich 2017, 442). Some dealers observed an artistic background, starting as artists before entering the picture trade (Bayer and Page 2011, 82). This perhaps contributed to the perception of dealers as connoisseurs whose entrepreneurial streak reflected their flair for aesthetic appraisal (Bayer and Page 2011, 83). The gallery space, with the dealer at its helm, represented the fusion of this double logic, that is, as a space for artistic objects' consumption (in the intellectual and commercial sense).

Social distinction, however, permeated these spaces. The gallery similarly executed its audience just as the Royal Academy distinguished its ideal public. Directing the cultural understanding of the group was the dealer, who assumed a position as an arbiter of taste:

As the dealer assumed a gatekeeper role, his taste became a part of what his gallery offered its audience, promising a discerning eye for new art and an assurance that the unworthy had been weeded out (Fletcher 2007, 53).

In a literal sense, as Bourdieu (1984, 6) notes, taste classifies and, in turn, classifies the classifier. The delineation of a preferred audience articulated a specific segment inaccessible to those without means, which consequentially established a set of internal rules and conventions governing the legitimation of art in the artistic field. To say the role of the middleman in articulating artistic worth became the standard for the appraisal of works within the productive field. The middleman could be, in either sense, an institution or an individual.

To a similar extent, the proliferation of commercial intermediaries in the form of art dealers was contemporaneous with the specialisation of art criticism and scholarship, that is, scholars dedicated exclusively to expounding the ideals of 'good' and 'bad' art to a receptive public. Art criticism as a profession occurred with the specialisation of the art dealership and the development of a commercial gallery structure. Where the dealer professed to be a tastemaker, the commercial element in

play still hinted at their role in pursuing self-interests. It is worth noting that in some cases, dealers exercised artists' output towards fashionable styles and subject matter for economic gain (Fletcher 2007, 50). Some dealers integrated themselves into every step of the artistic process, directing output through a profit-oriented approach:

[Dealers] supplied the materials to the painters whom they subcontracted to fill commissions received, and they provided instructions to match the product as closely as possible to the type of imagery that would sell according to knowledge about demand abroad obtained through their agents and their respective networks (van Ginhoven 2016, 33).

Per the above, the social role of dealerships, and their promotion of specific works over others, was intertwined with the realities of their profit margins. As such, professional art criticism served a more impartial function in delineating taste. Pursuant to art historian Elizabeth Prettejohn's (1997, 74) appraisal of Victorian England, art criticism before the late 1850s was irregular, authored anonymously, and economically unfeasible. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the number of yearly exhibitions was increasing at such a rate that adequate, refined coverage was necessary (Prettejohn 1997, 74). Art critics, like dealers, functioned as educators of a specific public. While they did not possess the commercial means as dealers, they exercised influence over their middle-class readership through art education, teaching audiences to systematically "link works of art with specific cultural values" (Prettejohn 1997, 73).

As intermediaries, the dealer and critic, through their judgements of taste, facilitated social difference through means of distinction and enclosure. Where Bourdieu's field theory is concerned, questions of artistic consecration can be relegated to the struggle to impose the dominant mode of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993, 41). Strictly speaking, the legitimating agents within the productive field operate along two hierarchal principles – heteronomous and autonomous (Bourdieu 1993, 40). Where the latter principle relates to disinterested capital accumulation (symbolic), the former is favourable "to those who dominate the field economically and politically" (Bourdieu 1993, 40). Suggesting the exclusionary character of the dealer and critic towards maintaining class interests is to indicate their heteronomous identity. Heteronomy, if it is to be understood, is the specific value by which dominant factions

reify the established order and reproduce economic capital (Bourdieu 1993, 40-41). Correspondingly, the struggle to impose artistic definition per the heteronomous principle serves to discredit any other attempts at achieving autonomy (that is, playing by your own rules).

3.8. Crypto Art as Autonomous Cultural Production

Returning to Greenberg's encounter with Modernist painting reveals a preoccupation with narrowing an area of competence for the discipline. To be understood, Greenberg's conception of Modernism regarding painting emphasises an internalisation, a declaration of a tradition with its own logic, norms and consistencies – a referral to the discipline's unique structures and histories alone. To reiterate, per Greenberg (1990 [1961], 94), Modernist painting critically employs the methods of the discipline to strengthen its internal tendencies. This approach attempts to promote an aesthetic that is internal to itself and independent of an external referent. It can be said through the Modernist purview that the progression towards autonomy characterises the discipline's history. What this autonomy entails is at times deceitful and ambiguous; in a practical and theoretical sense, however, the pursuit of autonomy realises itself in matters of style, technique and rhetoric. For example, to follow Fried (1998, 154-157), an autonomous art form presents its internal consistency independent of the circumstance in which the viewer encounters it – circumstance, a subjective encounter by which art is devalued to the status of 'object', borrows more from sculpture than the discipline of painting.

Retracing the discussion to the artistic field helps to note its structural composition of positions and *ipso facto* dispositions. Recall that the field is defined by struggles over the legitimate form of cultural production, where dispositions correspond to a challenge issued against established authority. By this, a position within the field is tantamount to a representation within the hierarchy of artistic crafts (Bourdieu 1993, 62). A position, tied perhaps to a dominant school and relevant descriptor (for example, Cubist, Pop Artist, Conceptual Artist), confers its occupants a sense of domination over other occupants within the field (Bourdieu 1993, 62). It follows that certain positions within the dominant mode of cultural production operate within a heteronomous model, that is, with the demand of the market in mind. The

heteronomous principle seeks to generalise in matters of production while simultaneously enclosing the field upon itself. This might be interpreted as giving rise to or distinguishing between positions within the field.

On the contrary, at least in its genesis, a disposition pertains to a generally unconsecrated, uninstitutionalised and ergo unrecognised emergence in the field. In other words, dispositions affect a counternarrative to the field's internalised rules and conventions. Shaped by the field's coordinates, a disposition is contrasted to its institutionalised counterpart in matters of accruing capital – let it be maintained that legitimisation is at stake. However, it is a legitimisation of a different sort, more concerned with creating a separate sphere of influence within the field generally, at least for a limited period, untethered to the concerns of immediate economic reward.

As Bourdieu (1993, 112-113) identifies, the emergence of a position within the field results from a process of autonomisation, whereby artistic production is less inclined to observe conventions established by predecessors or external constraints relating to the economy. Autonomisation within the field, in this sense, relates to the establishment of an instantly recognisable and distinguished category of artists and artistic goods (Bourdieu 1993, 112). The construction of this category relates to a paradoxically dualist view of art, in other words, art-as-commodity and art-as-symbolic-object (Bourdieu 1993, 114). This distinguishes between the commercial and the symbolic proposes opposing realities for art production, diffusion and consumption, that is to say, different modes of evaluating, opposing sets of codes and references relating to specific audiences. Within the field, this opposition realises itself in two mutually interchangeable structures defined by their principles of legitimisation (*heteronomous* versus *autonomous*). Bourdieu (1993, 115) identifies the structures thus: the field of restricted production and large-scale cultural production.

Where the field of large-scale production concerns itself with the demands of the market, restricted production is of greater relevance in relation to Crypto Art. The field of large-scale production, operating through heteronomous means of legitimisation, consecrates artistic objects commercially. By this, recognition within large-scale production is an immediate encounter with a purchasing public. In contrast, the field of restricted production, through a logic of autonomisation, consecrates artistic objects

through peer recognition. It correlates to the view of art as symbolically dissociated from the commercial:

[the] field of restricted production tends to develop its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors. [It] can only become a system objectively producing for producers by breaking with the public of non-producers... (Bourdieu 1993, 114-115).

Detached from the economy and dependent on internal as opposed to external recognition, restricted production is the means through which dispositions assume their crucial character as relatively antithetical to the dominant symbolic order. Restricted production cannot define itself externally; it must do so through specificity and differentiation, through reference to internal history. Where art is concerned, restricted production is the creation of an internal set of rules and conventions catered to an audience of other artists as symbolic producers. To differentiate is to render autonomous, overly concerned with self-identification and restricted in the means through which this self-identification and definition are possible.

Crypto Art is autonomous to the extent that it possesses its own internal conventions and operations. Autonomy, understood within the context of the field, pertains to cultivating a disinterested ethic or accumulating symbolic capital (cf. Section 2.2.). Indeed, as Bourdieu (1993, 119) notes, the image of the artist within the restricted field of production is one of pureness, untainted by the commercialist strains of bourgeois art.⁸¹ Pure art, with its own modes of legitimation, both prefigures and reproduces the field's logic of cultural determinism, or the struggle over the legitimate right to exercise symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1993, 121).

In addition, I propose that Crypto Art's autonomisation, that is, differentiation through specificity, seeks to reinvent the structure of the artistic field as it were by

⁸¹ Bourdieu (1993, 120) identifies pureness in restricted production as works that abide by the principles of their production; or rather, works are pure "because they demand of the receiver a specifically aesthetic disposition in accordance with the principles of their production". As such, restricted production is limited to other artists as symbolic producers, not the general public. Hence, what Bourdieu refers to as 'pureness' is in reference to a code only decipherable to those operating within the field of restricted production. Purity, in this sense, is a matter of decipherability: "works of restricted art owe their specific cultural rarity, and thus their function as elements of social distinction, to the rarity of the instruments with which they may be deciphered (Bourdieu 1993, 120).

deconcentrating powers of legitimation from institutional centres. This approach is perhaps a break from Bourdieu's account of autonomisation as a rupture from economic concerns and mainstream appeal. Where Crypto Art is concerned, pursuing restriction is as much a form of specificity as it is a departure from the structural rules governing recognition in the artistic field (for example, recognition through gallery exhibitions or patronage from influential collectors and dealers). Just as Bitcoin marked a departure from existing financial structures, so Crypto Art attempts in the artistic field.

Consider, as an example, Crypto Art's recognisable form of specificity: the use of NFTs. The NFT represents a particular legitimation that a work of digital origin is, in fact, authentic. This perhaps marks a departure from the conventional model of legitimating authenticity dependent on experts and validators under the employ of an institution. A diminished need exists for a human element to verify the truth; the token representing the artwork serves as partial validation. As an afterthought, anyone can crosscheck the details of the token. As another example, Crypto Art articulates a public of its own distinct from that of conventional exhibition spaces. As noted earlier, the audiences of commercial gallery spaces represent a specific segment of society ordained with competencies that permit cultural decoding. In the most literal sense, this translates into divisions relating to the class background. It might be suggested that Crypto Art audiences differ from those of the traditional art world unfamiliar with NFTs. By extending the bounds of reasoning, I suggest that Crypto Art instantaneously pursues autonomy through heteronomous means. Such a view is based on Crypto Art's embroilment with the hyper-financialised world of blockchain finance.

So far, I have identified Crypto Art's autonomisation in a dual sense: as the development of its internal logic and as a call for greater sovereignty for the totality of the field. However, I am prompted to ask whether Crypto Art truly wants to be free. The Winkelmann affair is indicative of this indeterminacy. That is, only by way of a historically dominant intermediary (Christie's auction house) was Crypto Art truly consecrated (to a degree) in the artistic field. This undermines any notion of 'decentralisation' and egalitarianism since the manoeuvre was performed within the confines of the productive field. From this perspective, I believe it might be said that Crypto Art presents a pseudo-autonomy in terms of the degree to which it seeks freedom from the structural configuration of the field.

Nonetheless, Crypto Art symbolises a disposition in the field in the manner of its presentation and rhetoric. I have argued that this disposition is shaped by a seeming reluctance to abide by the field's conventions. As such, there is an attempted, although by no means successful, move towards autonomy. I suggest that this autonomy is, at best, half-realised since the abolition of intermediaries is a matter of rhetoric and not a practice of stylistic differentiation rather than material performance. However, I identify that this autonomisation process might also be reflected in Crypto Art's approach to the work of art and its objects. In acknowledgement of the above, in the following chapter, I turn to a discussion centred on defining Crypto Art's dispositional approach to the question of authenticity and the necessity of the work of art.

CHAPTER FOUR

REFRAMING THE AUTHENTIC

Taking the notion of authenticity to task, I discuss the implications of Crypto Art's emphasis on NFTs as guarantors of authenticity in art. This chapter reads Crypto Art in view of a modern framework that attempts to define the authenticity in the work of art as independent yet not removed from the material. As I discuss below, the modern accounts for a transcendental approach to art, which excises it from the social and embeds it in a realm unto itself. In its extreme, this resulted in reducing content to form, that is, pure abstraction. However, as I identify, the notion of an art independent of the material, or standing on its own, is misleading. Rather, I argue that the authentic in the modern is bound by the material instances of its production. For the modern, the work of art possessed an internal character that rendered it legitimate as a symbolic object. In contrast, Crypto Art, I argue, reverses this formula, and proposes what I term a material authenticity located in the construct of the NFT. Rather than presupposing authenticity, Crypto Art externalises it in the NFT. By externalising the authentic, Crypto Art points to an egalitarianism of the art object no longer bound by the hermeticism of the modernist framework.

4.1. On the Duplicious Fact of Authenticity

Is there a definable principle or aesthetic value internal to the work of art that renders it as art, that is, a ritual space marked off from the more expansive universe, or a *temenos*, as the art historian Camille Paglia (1991, 23) terms it?⁸² Put differently, is it possible to speak of art as having an internal necessity that justifies or upholds its existence as a symbolic object? To simplify matters, as it were, what does the work of art possess that renders it *authentic*?⁸³ Concerning Crypto Art, I identify a fundamental

⁸² Paglia (1991, 23) adopts the Greek word *temenos* to discuss art. In Paglia's *oeuvre*, a *temenos* as it applies to art describes a concealment, "a secret, sacred space [...] or a ritual precinct" (Paglia 1991, 23) in which art is an excision from the natural world.

⁸³ That is, authentic in a symbolic sense. I proffer a dual approach to authenticity: material and conceptual or transcendental. Material authenticity, I argue, is a form of external validation. In contrast, conceptual or transcendental authenticity is internal to the work of art and realised in the encounter between the spectator and the work itself.

misunderstanding in the notion of authenticity: what exactly does the art of this persuasion put forward when it is described as authentic? As noted below, the approach taken to Crypto Art's authenticity is markedly different to prior artistic traditions.

Approaching an answer or a point of conclusion necessitates problematising the notion of authenticity, specifically concerning the work of art. What exactly do we mean when we refer to an artwork as *authentic*? Without occupying ourselves with etymological or semantic concerns, I believe clarifying authenticity, as it operates perhaps on a philosophical level – as it were, within the domain of aesthetics – narrows our area of competence. Authenticity, pertaining to the work of art, encompasses several facets. An authentic work might connote notions of external validity by a cultural authority, as in a museum or several expert validators. Authenticating an artwork, say, a newly discovered Picasso piece, relates to what I impart as material concerns, to wit, an external, material authenticity, or certification that a work of art is, in fact, unique in its standing by a cultural authority. This notion of authenticity, we might say, concerns itself with issues such as forgery, provenance, ownership, and originality. However, the feasibility of taking authenticity and originality as one must be problematised too, such that we might be prompted to ask whether originality and authenticity are interrelated and interoperable concepts. Or conversely, we might ask whether the two operate independently of each other.

If material authenticity, as I averred earlier, concerns itself with the material concerns of the work of art, then perhaps it is possible to suggest that the original and authentic are interrelated. To authenticate, in the most basic terms, is to determine the veracity of a work's symbolic claims within a specific context. This consequentially entails that an authentic work must necessarily be an original, or to say, not a forgery. The authentic work of art is the original work of art and vice versa. But might it be feasible to destabilise the relationship between authenticity and originality as independent yet interrelated concepts? To suggest that the relationship between the two concepts might not be as structurally sound as I have relayed before or to proffer that tension between the two might exist, it may be helpful to ask whether a work of art might be materially authentic but conceptually inauthentic, or the inverse. Arriving at this point, I believe, necessitates a different understanding of authenticity. Where one might think of material authenticity, one might also imagine the existence of

conceptual authenticity (Aldrich et al. 2012, 15–17). While I am not suggesting that the two are as removed from each other as I have laid out, I infer that authenticity possesses a dual quality at a minimum. For the sake of this discussion, I identify a material basis *and* a conceptual or even transcendental rationale.

Recalling earlier remarks, material authenticity involves the work of art as it exists through external validation. At a fundamental level, this authenticity is not self-sufficient or unto itself. The productive field is the sum of all attempts to secure symbolic goods' material authenticity. This interpretation inevitably casts the work of art as having its validity on an exterior basis. It follows that conceptual authenticity unavoidably operates on an internal basis. That is to say, the conceptually authentic is something internal to the work of art, an autonomous core designating the work of art as a symbolic object. We might refer to conceptual authenticity as a substructure, as something limited to the confines of the work of art, an *essence*.⁸⁴ To return to an earlier question, could a work of art be *materially* authentic but *conceptually* inauthentic?

The problem in answering such a question relates to what I understand as the fundamental substance constituting conceptual authenticity. Nominally forgoing ontogenetic concerns, what is at the heart of this conceptual authenticity? Since it is internal to the work of art, this mode of validity might relate to form, style, technique and composition. However, suggesting this includes the artist's faculties as they are the executor of said matter. One might state whether transcendental authenticity is in the realm of the artists, in their gestures and intents in creating a work of art. This suggestion promptly elevates the artist and establishes the cult of genius.⁸⁵ Berger (2008 [1972], 103) notes that the stereotype of the genius emerged in the seventeenth century from a “misreading of the relationship between [oil painting]’s tradition and its ‘masters’”. Certain artists, Berger (2008 [1972], 103) suggests, broke from tradition and produced defining works which, after their deaths, were incorporated into venerated traditions studied by generations. The artist is a shaman or alchemist who,

⁸⁴ Perhaps I am too simplistic in suggesting that conceptual authenticity is within the work. I should pre-emptively note that conceptual authenticity is realised through a spectator's encounter with the work of art. Conceptual authenticity creates an interoperability between the work and the spectator's consciousness.

⁸⁵ The notion of Romantic genius is a surfeit of the Romantic period in the visual and literary arts in the eighteenth century typified by “[an] association with originality and innovation (Holmes 2022, 329).

by their intent, converts the base metal of free-floating signs into a golden semiotic system. Paglia (1991, 45) similarly suggests that the “shaman is an archaic prototype of the artist”. This approach to art is explicit in her view of art as a struggle against nature (1991, 39), inevitably placing the artist-as-shaman on a pedestal.⁸⁶ Conceptual authenticity reveals itself as unstable or a pure abstraction that eludes sufficient definition. One might view a history of aesthetics in general as this attempt at defining authenticity on a conceptual, that is, transcendental basis.

If we accept the division between material and conceptual, it might be suggested that a work of art can be materially authentic yet conceptually inauthentic; or, to be precise, that there is an abstract slippage undermining our claims to authenticity (Downey 2012, 106). Downey (2012, 105) suggests the difficulty in articulating a conceptual authenticity, that is, an internal validity to art. Yet we might attempt at least to uncover whether the work of art possesses a condition that renders it a *temenos*, that is, a sacrificial or ritual space (Paglia 1991, 29).

4.2. Modernism, or An Art of Internal Necessity

Paglia (1991, 30; original emphasis) concedes thus: “Art makes *things*.” However, the things that art makes are wholly distinct from other artefacts of human creation. To accord a proper name, art makes things that we designate works of art – these being venerated symbolic icons. Berger postulates the origin of art as existing within a sacrosanct domain:

[originally] this preserve was magical or sacred [...]The experience of art, which at first was the experience of ritual, was set apart from the rest of life – precisely in order to be able to exercise power over it (Berger 2008 [1972], 25).

⁸⁶ Paglia’s theory of aesthetics involves Dionysian and Apollonian principles adopted from Friedrich Nietzsche and the Ancient Greeks. Paglia (1991, 12) identifies the Dionysian with chaos and nature as the “ruler of the chthonian whose law is procreative femaleness [...] liquid nature, a miasmic swamp whose prototype is the still pond the of the womb.” Contrary, the Apollonian connotes order, rigidity, transcendence and hierarchy: “[the] Apollonian is harsh and phobic, coldly cutting itself off from nature by its superhuman purity” (Paglia 1991, 12). Art, according to Paglia, is the Apollonian mastery over Dionysian nature. This mastery and order of reality prompt the artist; art, therefore, is the venerated activity through which humankind asserts its primacy over natural forces. In Paglia’s view, the artwork is a supreme achievement necessary for the advancement of civilisation (although she specifically references the construct of *Western* civilisation and the role of art in its development).

Paglia offers a similar account in her emphasis on art as a bulwark against nature (1991, 29). Per Paglia (1991, 28), nature's chaotic, disorderly flux is arrested through the ordering of reality undertaken by art. Paglia identifies nature as a destructive, threatening force, which must necessarily be warded off for societal cohesion. The threat of the natural, according to Paglia, led to the development of art (among others) as an effective tool:

Religion, ritual, and art began as one, and a religious or metaphysical element is still present in all art [...] It is always a ritualistic reordering of reality [...] Art is a ritualistic binding of the perpetual motion machine that is nature. The first artist was a tribal priest casting a spell, fixing nature's daemonic energy in a moment of perceptual stillness (Paglia 1991, 28-29).

By this suggestion, art is both a movement of enclosure (a *temenos*) as much as a spellbinding gesture. I find Paglia's emphasis on spellbinding pertinent to my discussion. Paglia (1991, 49) refers to the work of art as apotropaic, a "charm to ward off evil spirits", or a protective emblem against the destructive forces of nature. Art is not simply about design or picture-making. Rather, it is pursued to very deliberate, protectionist ends.⁸⁷ I argue, following Paglia, that perhaps the substance underpinning the work of art as a symbolic object is its apotropaic content, its ordering of reality. Thus, the apotropaic serves as a conceptual category motivating a condition for the existence of the work of art. It also reveals the interoperability of a conceptual authenticity: as apotropaic, the work of art orders reality with reference to a lived subject and tradition.

Paglia (1991, 29) notes that art's apotropaic and magical quality is bound to an encounter between the audience and work. If contemplation is a ritual act (Paglia 1991, 29), then it bears questioning what is being contemplated. Mukařovský cites that the encounter with the work is a contemplation of an "aesthetic object":

aesthetic evaluation does not concern the material work but rather the "aesthetic object" which originates through the interpenetration of

⁸⁷ Indeed, Paglia (1991, 49) suggests that great artists throughout history have made apotropaic art: "The *Mona Lisa*, for example, seems to have functioned as an apotropaion for Leonardo, who refused to part with it until his death at the court of the French king (hence its presence in the Louvre)".

impulses arising from the material work and the living aesthetic tradition of the given art. This interpenetration takes place in the consciousness of the evaluating individual (Mukařovský 1978, 64).

The contemplation of the aesthetic object is not only limited to the encounter between the spectator and the work but is influenced by an aesthetic code, a lived tradition that mediates the encounter (Steiner 1978, xvi-xvii). In other words, the evaluation of art is neither object- nor subject-bound but an interpenetration referring to the material work and the immaterial “aesthetic object” (Mukařovský 1978, 65). Mitchell refers to an immaterial aspect possessed by the work of art as the image. Per Mitchell (2002, 5), an image describes an internal lived texture to the work of art as a transcendent quality that operates on an affectual basis that is seemingly untethered to any specific medium.⁸⁸ I refer to the image, as Mitchell understands it, as underscoring a conceptual authenticity. If the image is immaterial, then the picture relates to the material:

The picture is the image plus the support; it is the appearance of the immaterial image in a material medium. That is why we can speak of architectural, sculptural, cinematic, textual, and even mental images, while understanding that the image in or on the thing is not all there is to it (Mitchell 2002, 6).

Encountering the image is a form of recognition. As Mitchell (2002, 6) suggests, the image is recognisable in its discrete forms of appearance. In his fictionalised account of art forgery, *The Recognitions* (1955), William Gaddis novelises the encounter with the image as an arrangement of recognition or recollection that exceeds subjective memory. The image is perhaps interchangeable with what Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 166) refer to as sensation, that is, the omphalos of the

⁸⁸ The image, as I argue in the next section, might be interchangeable with Benjamin’s conception of aura or Mukařovský’s aesthetic object. The image might relate to sensation or a significant mode of expression that need not be attached to matters of exactitude and representation. Herbert Read discusses the significance of the image as being of prime importance to firstly the Surrealists, who prioritised unconscious motivations in their art, and later the Action Painters (or Abstract Expressionists). For Action Painting, Read (1988, 263-266) argues that the projection of the significant image subordinated the naturalistic. Action Painting’s emphasis on pure, direct abstraction linked the gesture of intuitive expression to the act of painting. Read (1988, 266) presents the image thus: “There exists another kind of image, not an associated pictorial image, but a sensational image, an image of indeterminate shape and imprecise colours, which perhaps comes from a deeper layer of the unconscious, with no immediate perceptual associations from the external world”.

work of art (cf. Section 2.3). However eternal the image might be, one cannot suggest that it is unchanging.

On the contrary, if we understand it as the basis of aesthetic value, the image can be thought of as possessing an energetic character. Mitchell (2002, 7) identifies the image as a living species that evolve across space and time. Mukařovský accords the image's tendency to renew itself:

With a revelatory and moving beam, it [the aesthetic object or image] illuminates the past of art and thereby discovers, always anew, its previously unknown aspects. Thus arises a fruitful tension between the past and the future of art, and this tension affects present artistic activity (Mukařovský 1978, 60).

That the image is dynamic and in a perpetual state of renewal is why elaborating a specific character to conceptual authenticity is difficult. However, we might take this state of vacillation, as Mukařovský and Mitchell do, as possibly a condition for internal validity, that is, conceptual authenticity. The dynamism of the image and art's internal validity prompt us to infer that aesthetic valuations are not universally transcendent but rather bound as extensions across time and space. For the most part, this understanding permits a historical genesis to the work of art, as Bourdieu (1993, 262) would have it.

So far, I have articulated, to an extent, a transcendental character to authenticity that is realised in the interpenetration between the work, spectator and lived tradition. However, this does not elucidate Crypto Art's concern with the NFT construct. To be sure, I situate NFTs as an after-the-fact regulator of a work's claims to authenticity. Inevitably, it bears considering what specific type of work requires such comprehensive platforming to ensure its claims to the authentic. In Paglia's (1991, 39) view, art is a "form struggling to wake from the nightmare of nature" – a mastery over noxious natural forces. Modern art marks the great triumph of art over nature, as I argue in the next section, through the abolition of the figurative and the development of internal validity. With Crypto Art, I evince a similar concern with the natural, however, with a zealous preoccupation with the technological.⁸⁹ Crypto Art is less

⁸⁹ I am tempted to employ the concept of the Technocene in positioning Crypto Art's concern with expressing a particular way of being in the contemporary era. Technocene "points to the temporal

concerned with transcendental values and more with a materialist approach to art. I interpret this concern as an inversion of an exclusive character to art that reached its apogee in Modern art. As it were, I view this as a preoccupation with banalisation and accessibility that attempts to render art for everyone. To illustrate, I discuss the transcendentalism of Modern art below.

4.3. Aesthetic Modernity, the Auratic and the Work of Art

Modern art, in the words of Read (1988, 26), was prompted by an identity crisis: the search for a special aesthetic formula divorced from prior artistic traditions. As it stood, the invention of photography and the exactitude of the photograph destabilised the position of the arts – notably painting and sculpture – as spaces unto themselves. Noted by Gay (2008, 111) in his history of Modernism, photography prompted painters such as Vincent Van Gogh to embrace an inward, more expressive artistic mode: “[the] democratic lens, an invention that Van Gogh despised, was to his mind doomed to register mere surfaces.” That Modern art’s identity crisis was somewhat rooted in photography’s mastery over-representation is worth noting. Modern art’s existential dilemma, in Read’s estimation, required an embrace of the new:

[there] was a search for a new art formula, and this formula had to be in some sense super-real, some archetypal form in which the disinherited spirit of man could find stability and rest. Art had lost all its sanctions – its divine sanction in the service of God (for God was dead), its human sanction in the service of the community (for man had lost all his chains) (Read 1988, 26).

What might this new artistic language entail? Since depicting the natural world through extrospective composition was no longer feasible, it fell to a new mode of

dimension of the Age of Man, and [...] underscores the importance of technology in creating the assumed new epoch” (Trischler and Will 2017, 10-11). Technocene delineates an era shaped by comparing humanity with technology to an unparalleled degree. The concept thus describes “an epoch characterised by anthropogenic technologies” (Trischler and Will 2017, 13). Tied to the broader concern of decentralisation, I believe Crypto Art prefigures an arrangement of social relations modified through the architecture of the blockchain (as I discuss in Chapter Three). Thus its preoccupation with the natural is not from a position of mastery through abolition but mastery through reconfiguration. In other words, the idea of the modern sought to cut off nature, viewing it as anathema to transcendence; inversely, Crypto Art approaches nature as malleable and liable to re-ordering (as Paglia suggests of all Western art) – changing nature from the purview of machinic enlightenment.

expression, one necessarily inward-looking, through which artists might carve a separate space for themselves. In Read's (1988, 13) estimation, Modern art begins with Paul Cézanne's alteration of visual forms. Cézanne's singular principle – depicting the world as it exists objectively while simultaneously penetrating reality towards the elusive aesthetic object – marked a crucial transition in the history of modern painting (Read 1988, 13-14).⁹⁰ To some degree, this inwardness meant privileging self-portraiture as the purest form of introspection laid on the canvas. Gay (2008, 108-109) refers to the self-absorption of Modernist painters such as Van Gogh, Gauguin and Edvard Munch.⁹¹ The self-portrait became a celebrated document of artistic merit for the modernist painter as “they laboured to capture their deepest personal responses to the world rather than rendering that world as accurately as was in their power” (Gay 2008, 109). Faithful representations of the world were the domain of photography. To the Modern artist, photorealistic accuracy in representation was outdated. Read (1988, 44; emphasis added) asserts thus, “*Exactitude is not truth* is the thesis of the whole of the modern period in art.” Removed from nature, modern art pursued a higher, transcendental aesthetic ideal.⁹²

The basis of this aesthetic ideal might be summed in the oft-quoted dictum ‘art for art’s sake’. Perhaps the single defining slogan of the Modern period, the idea of art’s existence unto itself, elevates what I have earlier termed conceptual authenticity with its emphasis on the work of art and the artist as removed from the matrix of classical, moral, or social concerns. ‘Art for art’s sake’ emerges in the Modern period as a reaction to the development of photography. Matei Calinescu (1987, 95) sums up

⁹⁰ Read isolates Cézanne as the father of modern art to such a degree as to almost downplay the careers of Cézanne’s contemporaries, such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Bold as it is, Read’s estimation provides a definable starting point for what proves to be the difficult task of constructing a modern art-historical lineage. Read emphasises thus: “[there] is no doubt that what we call the modern movement in art begins with the single-minded determination of a French painter [Cézanne] to see the world *objectively*” (Read 1988, 13). It might be helpful to note that Read’s use of the objective is in both the literal sense of an object and contradicts the fact of a cognising subject. Our interest is insofar as Cézanne’s contemporaries – the Impressionists, for example – and successors – Cubists, Expressionists and Fauvists – reversed this distinction, instead viewing the world *subjectively*; that is, from the purview of a subject with the “intervention either of the tidy mind or the untidy emotions” (Read 1988, 13). The implication, perhaps, is of a gross misreading of Cézanne’s project by his successors.

⁹¹ In a move similar to Read’s appraisal of Cézanne, Gay (2008, 113) asserts the impersonality, as opposed to the expressiveness of van Gogh and Munch, of Cézanne’s self-portraiture.

⁹² Of Henri Matisse, whose works came to be associated with Fauvism and German Expressionism, Read (1988, 43-44) asserts the influence of Cézanne. In Matisse’s work, Read locates the impersonal attitude taken by Modern artists towards the naturalistic. Matisse’s expressive use of colour is not rooted in how things appear to the eye. Instead, his colours hint at an internal sensation experienced in the consciousness of the artist, one that essentially translates to the canvas.

the idea of modernity thus: “[modernity] implies both a radical criticism of the past and a definite commitment to change and the values of the future”. Modernity entails a degree of renewal through temporary rejection of the past to push the discipline forward. Gay identifies the poet Charles Baudelaire as providing a theoretical basis for the modern:

In his [Baudelaire’s] writings, as in his conduct, he personified the conviction that the creative artist must not remain fixated on classical antiquity, chivalric medievalism, or bucolic idylls. Rather, he must appreciate what he called [...] the heroism of modern life (Gay 2008, 46).

Baudelaire’s heroic modernism entailed a necessary contemporaneity (Gay 2008, 46). This denotes a tendency toward suspending the past in favour of an immediate yet transitory present in which the *now* serves as the purest expression of originality (Calinescu 1987, 48-49). The Modern artist is paradoxically reliant yet dismissive of the past to establish a temporal immediacy through which the fundamental units of reality might be reached and aestheticised. Art for art’s sake typifies the Modernist’s temporal immediacy – the work of art is unbound to societal constraints, perhaps even temporal constraints. This notion allows the work of art maximal extension across space and time. Since art boasts its ideals and gratifications, it is naturally resistant to the ebbs and flows of societal development (Gay 2008, 53).⁹³

Returning to the notion of authenticity, we see the slogan ‘art for art’s sake’ as an attempt at isolating the authentic as a conceptual element, that art exists unto itself, and its internal quality attempts to negate the material in aesthetic reflection. Modern art, threatened by the technically precise reproductions of the camera, retreated into itself, abandoning the naturalistic and rhetorically attempted closure from the material. Yet we have already seen that contemplation of the aesthetic object is as much bound to the material as the immaterial (cf. Section 4.2).

⁹³ It might be suggested that the introspective turn referred to earlier is an example of necessary contemporaneity. The present moment in which artists such as Van Gogh and Cézanne worked was threatened by the exact representations of photography. Such that, threatened by the *now* of photography, painting necessarily had to turn from the outward and occupy an internal basis.

I might venture to suggest that Modern art's internal necessity is elevated to a theoretical principle in Walter Benjamin's assessment of the auratic and technical reproducibility (Benjamin 2008, 24). For the sake of the discussion, it suffices to note that Benjamin's aura adheres closely to my earlier identification of a conceptual authenticity to the work of art. As it were, the aura is perhaps interchangeable with authenticity (Benjamin 2008, 22). The auratic to the work of art in Benjamin is a metaphysical abstraction that has, to a degree, some basis in a social fabric. Benjamin observes this:

[the aura is] a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch (Benjamin 2008, 23).

What is evident is the aura's effervescence, its basis as a proto-Platonic ideal form or inner essence to the object of aesthetic observation. It might also be said the aura achieves completion in the subject (cf. Section 4.1). There is another element to Benjamin's description of the aura that I suggest bears a striking resemblance to the Modernist aesthetic formula or perhaps echoes it to some extent. Recall Baudelaire's necessary contemporaneity or temporal immediacy. The Modernist work of art stresses the immediacy of its appearance, as it is produced and consumed in the here and now. At a similar length is the aura's immediacy, which is only graspable in the presence of the original work of art. In reference to theatre productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Benjamin states, "[the aura] is bound to his presence in the here and now. There is no facsimile of the aura" (Benjamin 2008, 31).⁹⁴ From this, it is possible to better interpret conceptual authenticity (or the auratic, the image, the aesthetic object) as something of an eternal dynamic value bound to the moment of its production and consumption; that for the work of art, there is a primary inner component to a second outer component; that is, that the work of art pronounces its auratic mode of existence before its material basis.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Thus, the aura's immediacy is lost in the instant of reproduction (Benjamin 2008, 31).

⁹⁵ There are some complications in this diagnosis. Nowhere in Benjamin's text is reference made to the work of art as announcing a transcendent over a material basis. Whether the work of art dictates its internal necessity over its material existence is never mentioned. However, I argue that Benjamin's discussions of the aura controversially privilege the function of the aura, that is, the conceptual aspect

4.4. Crypto Art, Aura, and the Materialism of the Work of Art

Is it possible to suggest Crypto Art has an aura? Or conversely, whether Crypto Art is dispossessed of an aura given its (digitally) reproducible nature. Let it be reiterated that the aura is, to some extent, interchangeable with the authentic. As I observed earlier, authenticity as it pertains to the work of art functions on a dual basis at a minimum. With regard to Crypto Art, the matter of authenticity is complicated. If we remember that what grants Crypto Art its uniqueness is the NFT, then we are at lengths to decide whether a conceptual or material (or both) authenticity is invoked. I argue that the NFT is at the centre of the crypto artwork: its defining quality, what designates it as unique or special, and what sets it apart from other reiterations of art. To this, I compare with Modern art, which possessed an internal necessity, that of pursuing a higher transcendental ideal as its primary designator.

It might suffice to suggest that Crypto Art conflates material and conceptual authenticity. When we refer to the Crypto Artwork as authentic, I argue that we refer to authenticity as guaranteed by the NFT. Insofar as digital objects are fundamentally similar – that is, given that they are rendered by a machine that translates binary code into human-readable and distinct works (Betancourt 2015, 38) – it is the NFT, an attempt at enclosing the distinction of digital artefacts, that renders the crypto artwork unique. There is unavoidably the implication that Crypto Art, by this logic, possesses authenticity primarily external to itself.

I suggested earlier that the Modernist work of art possessed a primarily internal function assisted by a secondary external basis. That is, it might be argued the work of art has an auratic basis and an outer existence rendered absolute in the material – or a material scaffolding that we might reduce to the physical boundaries of the work. Crypto Art differs from the moment of its genesis; it asserts the primacy of the material vis-à-vis the NFT instead of the interior, the aesthetic object, the image, or the aura. If

of the work of art, over the material. Furthermore, the complications arising from my interpretation of the aura might also be linked to Benjamin's inconsistencies in the manner of description. Scholar Andrew Benjamin (1986,31) notes: "The difficulty with Benjamin's writings on the aura is a lack of consistency. There is no doubt that there is continuity regarding whether or not the aura has been lost; however, there is an oscillation [...] between a negative and positive response to the loss."

it is generally accepted that Crypto Art derives its sovereignty from the NFT, then we determine that the asserted claim to authenticity is primarily material and secondarily transcendent.

Crypto Art's non-fungibility – enclosed in the associated construct of the NFT – therefore attempts to extract the concept from the material. How this conceptuality is removed is retrospective, as an afterthought. There is primarily the assertion of a distinct digital artefact, the crypto artwork. Thereafter, this particular digital artefact is granted a degree of scarcity through the imposition or dual association with an NFT.⁹⁶ It is only after the assertion of material authenticity guaranteed by the NFT that conceptual authenticity is founded.

The materialism of crypto artwork runs contrary to the idealism or transcendentalism of the Modernist artwork. It might then be said that Crypto Art reverses the aesthetic formula of the modern – that is, through an enunciation of the material over the conceptual. As such, it is worth questioning why this reversal is initiated. Situated within the productive field, Crypto Art is effectively dispositional – a new position taken within the artistic field that disrupts the objective relations between all other existing positions. As Bourdieu notes, artistic dispositions are necessarily oppositional, defined in reaction to an established order:

The history of the field arises from the struggle between the established figures and the young challengers. The ageing of authors, schools and works is far from being the product of a mechanical, chronological, slide into the past; it results from the struggle between those who have made their mark [...] and who are fighting to persist and those who cannot make their own mark without pushing into the past those who have an interest in stopping the clock, eternalising the present stage of things (Bourdieu 1993, 60).

A disposition is, in effect, a petulant adolescent seeking a separate identity from an overbearing parent; the dispositional is marked as a rejection of the existing symbolic order. It was through a revolutionary break with Cézanne that Braque and Picasso articulated what would retrospectively be labelled Cubism. Duchamp, the

⁹⁶ Granting, of course, our acknowledgement that the NFT is not the image. Instead, the NFT is a distinct entity that accords scarcity to a replicable digital object.

rebellious adolescent *par excellence*, took his assaults on artistic traditions to greater extremes. There is always a conscious effort to disidentify with one's predecessors. If Modern art prioritised internal necessity, then a radical break à la Crypto Art would completely disregard the interior's necessity.⁹⁷ I suggest that the reversal of the Modernist aesthetic formula is precisely this disidentification. In turn, the reduction of Modernism's esotericism – both in its visual presentation and rhetoric – suggests an implicit egalitarianism in Crypto Art, a model typified by accessibility both in its own forms of expression and rhetoric.

Winkelman's gesture is this moment of rebellion typified. No more art of internal necessity, aura or attempting to broach a higher aesthetic ideal. His work proposes a reaction against orthodoxy. This reaction is quasi-mechanically realised in the emphasis of the material – that is, the NFT – over the conceptual – to say, something bound *a priori* to the work of art. There is additionally the implicit vulgarity and crassness of the work. However, I feel this is only secondary to the subordination of the conceptually authentic to the materially authentic.

The materialism I identify in Crypto Art might be interpreted as art's ongoing crisis of faith or art's attempt to reconcile its newly adopted atheism with its social functionality. Gay (2008, 121) avers Modern art functioned as a symptom of a cultural crisis. Gay (2008, 119) views the self-portraiture of Van Gogh and Munch as the depiction of modernity's alienation and anxiety, respectively. In effect, I am referring to what might paradoxically be termed a spiritual crisis. Crypto Art might be symptomatic of overwhelming contemporary anxiety – atomisation, technological acceleration, algorithmic ubiquity, and the capitalisation of the lived experience. There is another crucial aspect at work in my discussion, namely, the commercialisation of art. Crypto Art's primacy of the material is not merely a rebellion against aesthetic modernity but a direct allegiance with the mechanisms of the art market. As with Conceptual Art, Crypto Art has effectively made saleable the previously unsaleable. Digital ephemera, being the domain of all, is enclosed via the construct of the NFT in its operation of privatising freely circulating artefacts (Joselit 2021, 2).

⁹⁷ This assertion is based on the forethought that Modernism came to typify twentieth-century art as much as the present. Everything was done in accordance with, or opposition to, the idea of the Modern.

That the anxiety of contemporary art, manifested in Crypto Art, is linked to its infusion with movements of capital is a recurring phenomenon in the history of art. The excision of art as a distinct sphere coincided with the establishment of art academies in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that elevated the artist (painter, sculptor) from the artisan or craftsman and bound it with commercial art dealing (Hannema 1970, 19). The Academic tradition, which initially aligned with nobility and aristocracy, tied artistic production to the dominant relations of class and power (Hannema 1970, 20).⁹⁸ In Bourdieu's description, though possessing relative autonomy unto itself, the artistic field is in a dominant position in the productive field (1993, 37-38). To say, the artistic field is subject to the will of the Leviathan. More recently, as Hannema (1970, 79-80) notes in the case of Jackson Pollock, artistic production bears direct allegiance to the economically dominant:

Pollock was enabled to paint in security through the generous support of a patroness who, as the saying goes, believed in him. Such lavish patronage would appear to come naturally in a country where immense interest in the arts combines with enormous wealth [...] The painful reality, the fact that certain artists are actually paid for the dubious privilege of indulging themselves, becomes obscured.

Might Crypto Art be the contemporary expression of art's anxious entanglement with the commercial? It is tempting to consider the great artist-entrepreneur Warhol in broaching the subject of art's relationship to economic capital. Warhol's art became synonymous with consumerism through its conflation of economic goods with artistic artefacts:

[the] 1960s, the period when Warhol made his entry into the art world, were marked by rapid economic expansion resulting in part from the adoption of a Keynesian economic model in which increased consumption was thought to aid production and employment. This resulted in exponential growth in mass consumer culture and the photographic and electronic media associated with it. It is these that became the subject of Warhol's art (Cook 2003, 67).

⁹⁸ Hannema is a little unclear as to what the Academic Tradition is. I nevertheless interpret this tradition as emanating from elite cultural institutions such as the Royal Academy of Arts in London (cf. Section 3.6), which possess an educational character in their promotion of the visual arts. In more definitive terms, Academic Art refers to art based on academic principles, and is "often used to describe an artist or artwork that is long on received knowledge and technical finesse but short on imagination or emotion" (Atkins 1997, 41).

The case of Warhol elucidates art's historical ties to movements of capital, albeit on a much larger and faster scale. Crypto Art's cult of the material in this reckoning with the economically dominant. It is worth noting the ties Crypto Art has to the hyper-financialised milieu of blockchain finance. Over the last few years, rising interest in blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies coincided with a piqued focus on NFTs as the vehicle through which Crypto Art effectuates itself. However, this aspect is beyond the scope of the current discussion.⁹⁹

4.5. Demystifying Art

In 1973, Pollock's controversial painting, *Blue Poles* (1953) (fig 4.1), was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia for \$1.3 million. Pollock's work presented a radical break from classical pictorial representation, emphasising preconscious, personal sensations (Read 1988, 263; Gay 2008, 461; Phillips 1974, 93). Upon unveiling, the initial reaction to Pollock's painting by audiences was predominantly negative:

⁹⁹ There are several factors to consider in the meteoric rise of Crypto Art – or art intersected with NFTs – over the past two years. Although artists have been experimenting with NFTs as far back as 2014 (Ostachowski 2022), it was not until 2021 that mainstream attention was directed towards Crypto Art. A recent article in the New York Times, 'Even as NFTs Plummet, Digital Artists Find Museums Are Calling', highlights that declining museum attendance (owing to the COVID-19 pandemic), surging cryptocurrency prices in the market and newly-minted crypto-millionaires facilitated the boom of Crypto Art (Small 2022). However, this is not to suggest that the interest in Crypto Art was under the impression of a cash grab. Instead, Crypto Art must be viewed in relation to its heteronomous position in the productive field as it is a form of artistic production tethered to the economically dominant. Reporting on the convergence of the traditional art world and Crypto Art, Zachary Small notes: "Until recently, most museums had spurned digital art collections in favour of the paintings and sculptures that still dominate their galleries. Nevertheless, after budgets tightened and attendance plateaued during the coronavirus pandemic, the industry has embraced artistic experiments involving blockchain, virtual reality and artificial intelligence programs. Curators want to connect with younger, tech-obsessed audiences and catch the interest of any crypto millionaires who might want to donate" (Small, 2022).



Figure 4.1.: Jackson Pollock, Blue Poles. 1953. Oil, duco, aluminium paint on canvas, 212.1 cm x 488.9 cm. ([https://jstor.org/stable/community.13709671.](https://jstor.org/stable/community.13709671))

One city newspaper suggested most viewers believed that the \$1.3 million paid for the American painting was a “waste of money”. Another paper reported that the first visitors found Pollock’s work disappointing [...] One week after the painting went on display, Paul Hogan showed up to promote himself by scoffing, “Only a poseur and a goose would go for this...It’s a load of...” Less famous visitors appeared equally puzzled, many of them concluding that even if you happened to like the painting it wasn’t worth “that sort of money” (Phillips 1974, 91).

The response to Pollock’s painting indicated a general gap between art and the masses. With reference to the painting, Phillips (1974, 91) observes: “most of us know relatively little about art and almost nothing at all about Jackson Pollock and this particular painting (except the cost).” More recently, the works of Conceptual artist Maurizio Cattelan highlight the disparity between art and the general public. Cattelan’s sculpture, *Comedian* (2019) (fig 4.2) – a banana stuck to a wall with duct tape, rendered in three editions – provoked bafflement and incredulity after being sold for \$120,000 in 2019 (Cascone 2019). It is worth noting that public bewilderment did not deter collectors from swooping in and claiming the work. As with the Pollock case, the high price fetched by the Cattelan piece brought into question the legitimacy of whether the work could indeed be considered art.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ As reported in Artnet (2019), buyers of Cattelan’s work defended their decision: “Billy and Beatrix Cox of Miami, Florida released a statement [...] on their acquisition, calling the work ‘the unicorn of the art world’ and comparing it to Andy Warhol’s iconic 1962 *Campbell’s Soup Cans*.” The couple also



Figure 4.2.: Marizio Cattelan, *Comedian*, 2019. Sculpture, banana and duct tape (photograph by Sarah Cascone). Art Basel. (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/marizio-cattelan-banana-explained-1732773>).

Cattelan's work was issued alongside a certificate of authenticity "and a long list of instructions with diagrams on how it should be installed or displayed" (Owens 2020). The parallels between this move and Crypto Art's emphasis on NFTs are evident. There is, of course, a long history of conceptual works issued alongside authenticity certificates: once the idea of a work supplanted its physicality, "the artist gave his signature, or a certificate of ownership, even in publicity on behalf of the reputation of the purchaser" (Claura and Siegelau 1999, 289). Crypto Art continues this Conceptual practice and adopts a similar character. Crypto Art might, in some respects, be viewed as a digital mutation of Conceptual Art with its emphasis on seemingly immaterial artefacts issued alongside certificates of authenticity. Cattelan's work, as with the conceptual tradition in general, reveals the problem of authenticity

noted that they intend to loan and later donate the artwork to a museum. "When we saw the public debate *Comedian* sparked about art and our society, we decided to purchase it... We bought it to ensure that it would be accessible to the public forever, to fuel debate and provoke thoughts and emotion in a public space in perpetuity" (Cox in Elbaor 2019).

with regard to (im)material work – namely, its veracity, and its claims to the authentic are rooted in an external construct. I believe this runs counter to the Modernist notion of art for art's sake, art that proposes its authentic standing on its own without the need for some form of material scaffolding. However, this is perhaps an incomplete picture insofar as the authenticity of the Modernist work, as an example, is not internal to itself but realised in the interaction between the spectator and the work; the authentic in Modernism is a manner of seeing that attempted to divorce itself from a material foundation.

I also find that this need for documentation can be identified in the oeuvre of Pollock. As Read (1988, 266) notes, Pollock's method "has become a legend [...] the unstretched canvas on the floor, the use of sticks, trowels, knives and dripping fluids, the occasional use of sand or broken glass". The fascination with Pollock, then, is in part fuelled by the method. This method, in my estimation, counts as transcendently authentic in Pollock's approach. As I have earlier suggested, Pollock's work is notoriously obscurantist; the expectation on the viewer is already predisposed with the cultural knowledge to decode his paintings, the lived tradition of the aesthetic object. From this perspective, context is subordinated to content. Indeed, the modern is typified by the exclusion of external referents. However, with Pollock's specific documentation of his method, his processes contributed to an understanding and interpreting of his work. I find the notion that Pollock's works stand on themselves misleading. The documentation of his method, specifically the role of photography in the Pollock mystique, lent credence to the authenticity of Pollock's work. Notably, the photographs of Hans Namuth supplied interpretations of Pollock's work: "Namuth's photographs and films make explicit Pollock's famous and seriously misunderstood painting technique [...] It leaves us to contemplate that correspondence of fact, fate and chance which transcend lenses, chemistry, history and scholarship to reaffirm the unity at the root of all authentic art" (O'Connor 1979, 48-49). The distinction, however, between Pollock, Cattelan and Crypto Art lies in the presentation and conceptual framing of the work – what is presented with Pollock, I understand, is an *a priori* understanding of the authentic, for example, as exemplified in the notion of art for art's sake; whereas Cattelan (to a degree) and Crypto Art present an *a posteriori* understanding to art, as the view that the authentic in art is not previously assumed but wound up in after-the-fact circumstances – literal certificates of authenticity.

As I stated earlier (cf. Section 4.4), the artistic zone occupies a relatively dominant position within the productive field. That the field is tied to the economically and politically powerful indicates the dominant factions within the artistic field replicate the interests of their benefactors.¹⁰¹ As it were, the struggle over the monopoly to inflict symbolic violence is as much cultural as it is political:

To defend their own position, they have to produce weapons, which the dominant agents (within the field of power) can immediately turn against the cultural producers most attached to their autonomy. In endeavouring to discredit every attempt to impose an autonomous principle of hierarchisation, and thus serving their own interests, they serve the interests of the dominant factions of the dominant class, who obviously have an interest in there being only one hierarchy (Bourdieu 1993, 41).¹⁰²

By this token, it might be suggested that the rift between the art public and the general public is an extension of socio-economic disparity. Following Bourdieu's analyses, we might also say that the discrepancy points to differing tastes: the distinctive character of taste is such that it fulfils a social function as a marker of class (cf. Section 3.7.).¹⁰³ Where it might be easier to engage with a classical work of art rooted in naturalistic representation, the high modernist work à la Pollock poses a more significant challenge. Without the necessary prior information, decoding the riotous phantasmagoria of a painting by Pollock or the gargantuan presence of Barnett Newman proves impossible to the layman.

Hannema (1970, 19-25) contends that the rift in appreciation occurs alongside the commercialisation and professionalisation of art as a distinct discipline. Painting and sculpture primarily began in service of the Church and monarchy, for example, in

¹⁰¹ It might be helpful to read Bourdieu alongside Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony describes the methods undertaken by the dominant to direct social life towards maintaining their interests through unilateral control over cultural production (Lears 1985, 568). Implicit in Bourdieu's discussion on the struggle to impose cultural definition is the reification of the claim to existing property relations by the dominant. Bourdieu's field theory might be read as the cultural approach to societal power and privilege. To this extent, Gramsci anticipates Bourdieu's assertion that the dominant class maintains their position through political as much as cultural means. After all, as Lears (1985, 569) identifies in Gramsci, "Ruling groups do not maintain their hegemony merely by giving their domination an aura of moral authority through the creation and perpetuation of legitimating symbols; they must also seek to win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing social order."

¹⁰² For further clarification on Bourdieu's principles of hierarchisation, see Section 3.7.

¹⁰³ To say, one's taste in art is an indication of a socially legitimated social difference (Bourdieu 1984, 7).

monarchist France and Italy (Hannema 1970, 20-21). The artist in service of higher power effectively removes their craft from circulation in the general public.¹⁰⁴ Where the public might appreciate the artist's work, it remained the preserve of the aristocracy. The artist, thus removed from the social fabric as a diviner of the nobility, occupied a distinct position in the social and cultural hierarchy:

[the] painter began to equate himself with the poet, divine in his creative powers, rather than with the humble craftsman [...] The painter, like the poet, became a free agent and empiricist, exploring regions closed to the average layman (Hannema 1970, 25).

Isolated in their role, and with patronage to ensure their stability, the artist is left to their own devices.¹⁰⁵ However, this is not to suggest that all artists function as mouthpieces for the elite. Instead, a distinction is drawn between professional exhibiting artists who are culturally and economically consecrated and non-professional artists whose work does not grace gallery walls. It is with reference to the professional artist that my discussion progresses. If it is understood that the professional artist is left to pursue their artistry without economic anxiety, then it naturally follows that whatever risks taken in their craft are rationalised and consecrated by their subsequent purchasing public and the institution of art.¹⁰⁶ Following Bourdieu (1993, 68), I suggest that a professional artist is free to take the

¹⁰⁴ Paglia (1991, 142) notes that the artist's alliance with nobility dates back to the Renaissance. Renaissance high culture, per this view, is related to the amelioration of the sovereign and not the general public. So, to say that art, as far back as the Renaissance period, has little to do with the concerns of the masses, Paglia (1991, 142) affirms that "Renaissance high culture was organised around the courts of the duke and king, upon whom artists and intellectuals depended for patronage. Art was a tool of the competitive display, by which a ruler maintained his prestige."

¹⁰⁵ However much this is an oversimplification, it necessitates brief mention. Hannema (1970, 25) accords that patronage – first from the State and Church, then from private individuals – drew professional artists closer to the elite at the expense of the public. This movement implies that art entered the preserve of dominant societal echelons, which assured that art possessed an intentionally exclusionary character. On the one hand, you have a mystified form of art that reaches visual expression in Abstract Expressionism. On the other, you have art as a self-regulating differentiator of social difference on the grounds of class.

¹⁰⁶ Here, it suffices to cite Bourdieu's (1993, 67-69) observation that the most economically secure cultural producers are often at the forefront of cultural revolution. The more economically secure, the more symbolic capital a producer accumulates (if we understand symbolic capital as disavowed economic capital). Bourdieu (1993, 68) notes that economic capital permits artists to take risks since they do not need to worry about accruing immediate profit as "economic capital provides the guarantees which can be the basis of self-assurance, audacity and indifference to profit [...] Thus we find that as a rule, those richest in economic, cultural, and social capital are the first to move into the new positions." Self-assurance and audacity are often the hallmarks of an avant-garde position. To put it quite bluntly, the avant-garde (slowly accruing symbolic capital) has the audacity and self-assurance to scramble the objective positions in the field and redefine art's limits.

most risks in defining and articulating their craft by whatever means.¹⁰⁷ This free articulation, I argue, achieves its zenith in Modernism and the development of an art of internal necessity (cf. Sections 4.2 and 4.3).

I suggest the high modernism that Pollock exemplifies renders a divide between the art public and the general public.¹⁰⁸ To follow, the divide is accompanied by a mysticism fuelled partly by economic interest. There is, of course, a contemporary institutionalisation, or better yet, mythologisation, that solidifies the professional artist's shamanic position in the field and inclusion in the canon. A cult of differentiation is cultivated around the consecrated creator. We might say this relates to matters of style (aesthetic, rhetorical and personal) and conduct. The instances of artistic schools – such as Impressionist or Abstract Expressionist – correspond to the cult of the artist(s). In extreme cases, an individual is lifted to the position of figurehead: Warhol for Pop Art, Pollock for Abstract Expressionism, Marina Abramović for Performance Art¹⁰⁹, and Winkelmann for Crypto Art, for example. The construction of mythology is, of course, central to articulating a position in the field. It is also the mechanism for deducing the professional from the non-professional and, after the fact, tying creators to their limited purchasing public.

The cult of Pollock, for example, dramatically indicates the mystification of art that, I argue, signifies two things: a) the reaffirmation of art as divergent from the concerns of the general public; b) the view of the artist as shaman or seraph.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ I should note that professional artists are not always the most economically secure. A professional artist might possess symbolic capital at the start, which later translates to economic capital. Bourdieu (1993, 115) distinguishes between substructures in the field – restricted production and large-scale production, i.e., production for producers (which corresponds to art for art's sake) and production for consumers. Although restricted production is premised on the accrual of symbolic profit, cultural producers who are priorly endowed with economic capital in the form of patronage or personal income are often better disposed to assume such a risky position. It might be possible to refer to the field of restricted production as the domain of the avant-garde.

¹⁰⁸ I use the term high modernism, to designate a tendency in the visual arts and art criticism that distinguishes between Art (with a capitalised A) and popular culture. Greenberg, the high priest of Modernism, articulates high art as only concerned with itself and nothing else. Pure abstraction, the zenith of high modernism, is treated by Greenberg (1965, 5-6, original emphasis) thus: "The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms [...] something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself." The high modernist paradigm of the absolute is seen in Pollock's late works in the visual arts, and in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) in literature, for example.

¹⁰⁹ Performance Art refers to "art activities that are presented before a live audience and that encompass elements of music, dance, poetry, theatre, and video" (Atkins 1997, 142).

¹¹⁰ By this suggestion, I am not indicating that the idea of artist-as-genius rises alongside the idea of the modern. Instead, the artist's modern elevation bears greater relevance to the scope of the discussion.

Diminishing the role of art as serving a social purpose, Pollock's work, as with modern painting in general, serves its own ends. In contradistinction to art with a social purpose, the modernist work worships no gods but its own. The implication of my thinking is clear: I distinguish between art without social aspirations, as in the case of modernism, and art with a social purpose. The distinction requires some minor elaboration. It might be said that Modernism's inward turn prompted more socially conscious artists to attempt to bridge the gap between art and life.¹¹¹ As I have previously suggested, the exclusivity of the Modernist work reveals a preoccupation with the higher echelons of the social and economic hierarchy. Divorced from the general public, the artist's output is on an individual, somewhat magical basis, accompanied by myriad codes and arcana corresponding to a certain social standing. Pollock, as ritualist or mystic, is revealed in his method: he was said to have entered his paintings, integrating himself into the overall work (Read 1988, 266). And the onus of deciphering his paintings was not on Pollock himself but on the cultivated spectator. Pollock needs no explanation since meaning (if it is possible to speak of that) is already contained in the painting itself; that is, the work is self-explanatory (if it is even possible to speak of a Modern work as self-explanatory since content is reduced to form). Hannema observes:

What we lack in his [Pollock's] work is an ability or readiness to communicate with a spectator; there is no reference in his splashes and dribbles to the world of external appearances. Although there is no reason why we should doubt the American's seriousness, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the artist was indulging in a form of self-therapy, with the painting as a mere by-product of the ritual dancing (Hannema 1970, 79).

In Hannema's (1970, 21-23) appraisal of the Academic tradition, reference is made to the romantic notion of man at the centre of the universe beginning during the renaissance. The Renaissance's emphasis on humanism and reason and the primacy of man over nature led artists to prioritise the study of man. The Renaissance's humanism saw the rendering of man as noble and graceful. Divorced from the view of nature as divine creation, artists believed it could be "apprehended by reason and sensory perception" (Hannema 1970, 22). Paglia (1991, 168) states that the Renaissance form is a revolt against man's primordial origins, an attempted ordering or clarification of nature's chaos. Both Hannema (1970, 24-25) and Paglia (1991, 153) identify Da Vinci and Michelangelo as typifying the artist's persona as a divine being. Paglia (1991, 153) observes the following: "Leonardo and Michelangelo, solitary and depressive, created the artist's persona as spiritual quester, as much as a man of ideas as any philosopher. For men, art, science, and construction were intellectual substitutes for sex – not sublimation but undisguised aggression, hostile domination of nature." The artist, then, stands against nature. We might say that pure abstraction, as in the case of Pollock, is the ultimate domination of nature – to the extent that nature is abolished and subordinated to the will of the artist.

¹¹¹ The Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century is a prominent example that sought a socio-spiritual regeneration of humanity through the arts (Winter 1975, 36).

There is, naturally, the anticipation of a spectator capable of deciphering the Modernist work. Many have approached an Abstract Expressionist work and remarked that a blindfolded child could have done it. This reveals a lack of tutelage in the arts. As Greenberg (1965, 215) points out, you must *know how to look* at an abstract work – as integral to and critical of a painterly tradition that stretches back to Cézanne and beyond. Pollock's thaumaturgy operates on a specific, instead of general, basis. I put forward this might be understood as the parenthetical social character of the modernist aesthetic formula. The work itself is magical, as is the artist in the role of the magician, and there is a subsequent expectation of the spectator as an initiate to the modern occult.

Since it is understood that Crypto Art reverses aesthetic Modernity's formula, it similarly corresponds to an attempted demystification of art. I argue that Crypto Art embodies a materialist form, that is, one that attempts to out-manoeuvre the possibility of a transcendental basis for art. The NFT, it has been said, is this materialist character. If there is anything internal to the work of art, it is only an afterthought. Once again, I am not suggesting that the Crypto Artwork possesses no aesthetic value. Instead, it operates on a register that emphasises the cold rigour of technology over the ritualistic and iconographic character witnessed in Modernist art. If the idea of the Modern is an art of internal necessity, then Crypto Art is one of an external necessity.

With an air of playfulness, Crypto Art attempts to subvert the intellectual character underscoring contemporary art. In some ways, this subversion extends to the discussion at hand. To put it differently, there is the idea that the conventions of art (as well as art criticism and scholarship) need to loosen and that the rhetoric of Crypto Art is precisely this loosening. That crypto artists do not take themselves so seriously is evinced by the following excerpt taken from Winkelmann's website:

he [Winkelmann] makes a variety of art crap across a variety of media. [Some] of it is ok, but a lot of it kind of blows ass. [He is] working on making it suck less everyday though so bear with him... (Winkelmann 2022).

By no means the spokesperson for Crypto Art, Winkelmann's comments on his craft indicate a return to the colloquial. Crypto Art seemingly abandons the jargon associated with art and art education in favour of the everyday. The debasement of art's language is reminiscent of Dada. Dada, a loose grouping of politically conscious avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century, sought to "shake off the deadweight of all ancient traditions, social and artistic" (Read 1988, 119). As the paragon of early-century avant-gardism, Dada aimed to deliver art from its pedestal and turn it into an activity as regular as any other.¹¹² Dada, it might be argued, was a revolt against the academicism of art and art's bourgeois, middle-class audience, as well as Western civilisation at large. Although equating the project of Crypto Art to Dada helps position the phenomenon better, it proves insufficient given Crypto Art's tame, non-revolutionary character.¹¹³ The descent from Modernism's abstruse argot to Crypto Art's idiomatic patois reflects the mistrust of human systems of meaning and signification inherent to Crypto Art (cf. Sections 3.2. to 3.3). Invoking external necessity dissolves the immanence of the work of art; everything becomes relational, and anything is permitted.

¹¹² It must be said that Dada was not only a revolt against art but against the dominant principles governing European society. Emerging in the aftermath of the First World War, Dada was a meditation on the destruction and upheaval that ravaged Europe. Read (1988, 118) says of Dada: "In the background was wide social unrest, war fever, war itself, and then the Russian Revolution. Anarchists, rather than socialists, proto-fascists in some cases, the Dadaists adopted Bakunin's slogan: destruction is also creation!" Hannema (1970, 74) comments that Dada "was an anguished protest against the complete alienation of man from nature, a heart-rending cry of agony at the heartless domination of instinct by the intellect." Dada was a partly social, partly artistic movement prompted by a politico-artistic avant-gardism – perpetual revolution, everything anew, down with the old gods and the *ancien régime*.

¹¹³ I suggest that Crypto Art is non-revolutionary compared to Dada given that Crypto Art is summarily a revolt against a perceived traditional, analogue art world; Dada, on the other hand, sublimated political nihilism into an art form as a means of interpreting and potentially reconfiguring post-WW1 European society. Moreover, Crypto Art does not revolt against but embraces a technocratic teleology and the general condition of planetary computerisation under the illusion that greater egalitarian liberties are possible. Futurism values technology under the aspects of speed and motion (Atkins 1997, 119); Crypto Art glorifies technology under the aspects of code-mandated decentralised social organisation (as I discuss in Chapter Three). If it is possible to speak of a Crypto Art revolution, it is in the sense of a deprivileging of human systems of arrangement and signification.

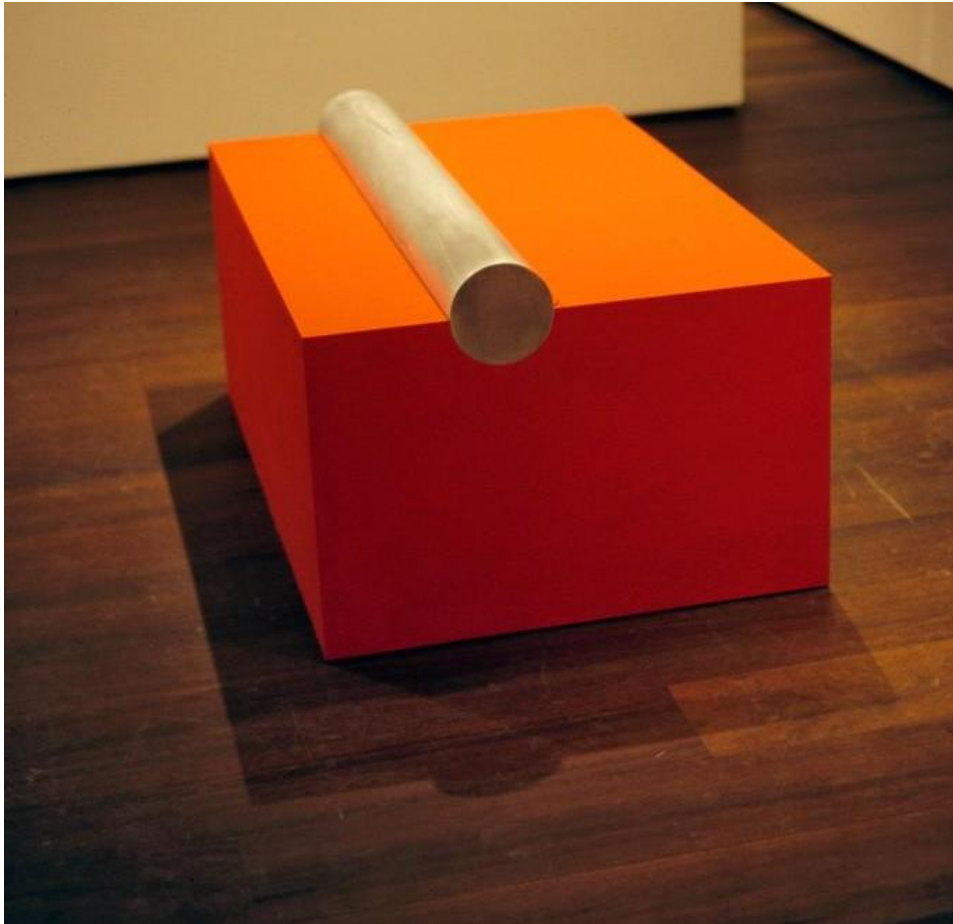


Figure 4.3: Donald Judd, *Untitled (Red Floor Box)*, 1988-89. Douglas fir plywood painted cadmium red with solid aluminium round pipe, 19 1/2" x 45" x 30 1/2".
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.14287171>.

One of the means through which Crypto Art demystifies art is through the intentional innocence of its visual character. Art, since early mid-century Abstract Expressionism, has developed an ever more complex assortment of signs that invoke confusion and bewilderment. Minimalist sculpture, exemplified by Donald Judd's boxes (fig 4.3), diminishes the distinction between art and objecthood. Although it might be said that Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein return to familiar imagery in their works, it is only emblematic of an artistic nominalism borrowed from Duchamp. By denying the primacy of the visual/pictorial, Conceptual Art obfuscates matters further: now the spectator must deal with the conceptual, as much as visual, implications of the work. On the other hand, Crypto Art adopts a simplistic approach: there is no need to decipher the crypto artwork. Everything appears to be on the surface. Winkelman's topical approach to art is perhaps intentionally superfluous. It might be suggested that

this approach is necessarily weary of secondary meanings that traditional art possesses. However, I reiterate that the crypto artwork's visual character is only secondary. Insofar as it is bifurcated (the NFT is not the artwork), the crypto artwork is informative before it is pictorial. To rephrase: when considering the crypto artwork, the information about the work (captured by the NFT) is of primary concern. After all, the crypto artwork without the NFT is reduced to a digitally reproducible artefact without claims of authenticity.

The NFT might also lend itself to Crypto Art's secularisation: it is the material embodiment of art's value (even though it flattens conceptual and material value as the same). While this does not signal an end to aesthetics, insofar as aesthetics is interpreted as the preoccupation with artistic taste, it signals an alternative approach to it: one of the amateur, vulgarian in orientation, dismissive of antiquated notions, ultimately at the intersection between art and technology. Crypto Art is sacrilegious. Modernism privileges form over content; Crypto Art subsumes either concern under the wing of the technological. Everything is true on the blockchain, whereas the veracity of individual aesthetic valuation is problematic and debatable. With Crypto Art, the visual character of the work is often secondary to the material mechanism supporting it. The implications of emphasising material authenticity are explicit: the proof of the work becomes more important than the work itself.

As it were, I suggest that Crypto Art's approach to the authentic is presented on an *a posteriori* basis, where the necessity of the work of art is understood as an afterthought. Rather than presupposing authenticity, Crypto Art presents the NFT as a model for a contingent understanding of the authentic to the work of art. Crypto Art inverts the framework of the Modernist transcendental ideal and externalises the condition of authenticity. This, I have argued, culminates in a demystification of art, whereby the perceived non-neutrality of technology results in the obsolescence of barriers to entry. However, as I articulate in the previous chapter (cf. Section 3.7), this disavowal of a perceived elitism is half-realised, both in practice and rhetorically. By externalising the conditions of authenticity to art, Crypto Art is simply engaging in a mode of rebellious disidentification in a farcical attempt at either scrambling the objective field relations or articulating an alternative field on its own. My theorisation of Crypto Art's externalised authenticity reveals at best an occupation with disidentification through inversion. Rather than articulating a space unto itself, Crypto

Art, through its materialist emphases, invokes the Modern as negativistic to constitute and articulate its dispositional character.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

It is always difficult to isolate the motivations underpinning artistic movements. In many instances, no singular drives and goals are fuelling the creation and development of artistic dialects. It might simply be, as I have earlier alluded to, following Bourdieu, that the idea that new artistic orientations trace a negative trajectory in opposition to an existing symbolic order. What are termed dispositions, understood as antithetical to established positions, are necessary to the overall evolution of the artistic field: dispositions reinvigorate what would otherwise be a stale and antediluvian culture. Duchamp, whom I have understood as representing a powerful dispositional force within twentieth-century Western European and American art, revived an artistic field already stunted by the dizzying effects of Cubism. Similarly, Conceptual Art, although to no extent like Duchamp's, bolstered mid-century art in reaction to the stultifying solipsism of Abstract Expressionism and an art world fixated on tangible commercial objects.

Yet summing the concerns of both Duchamp and Conceptual Art in a single word is an exercise in reduction and self-deception. Duchamp emphasised the ideal over the retinal post-1912 (cf. Section 2.1); however, I argue that this alone does not account for an overall 'Duchampian project'. The case might be more straightforward for Conceptual Art, insofar as its 'project' is already outlined in its name: as it were, the prioritisation of a conceptual element over a physical form. Or perhaps, more appropriately, Conceptual Art's project is concerned with the dematerialisation of art objects (cf. Section 2.2).

I am only highlighting this complexity of isolating the motivations underscoring artistic movements to arrive at an approach to art situated between the generalised and the particular. Generality, it might be said, affords a degree of reflexivity that later prompts more refined inquiries. I believe that beginning from the point of the particular limits one's horizons to irreducible specifics. Inversely, generalising phenomena risks flattening discrete elements into a hodgepodge of information with little coherence or

vigour. As such, a more direct effort is necessary to avoid misreading and extrapolation.

The case of Crypto Art and its overall project, as I identify it, is an attempt at generalising the conditions of an artistic experience through a particular technological method. By generalising, I refer to the fact of decentralisation. The Crypto Art project presents a catholicity whereby free interaction without the influence of intermediary figures, upheld by the technological, comes into being. I argue that the specific mode in which this general condition is manifested is through the affordance of the blockchain. To be even more precise, the construct of the NFT, which, as I see it, is perhaps the single defining feature if we are to speak of Crypto Art. Generally speaking, I situate the movement as coextensive with a twentieth-century Western art-historical trajectory; in more fastidious terms, I isolate the movement as an ostentatious mutation of so-called subversive art predicated on reconstructing objective field relations favouring the artist as primary enunciator within the matrix of recognisable enunciations. With Crypto Art, the caveat is its technological emphases, its socio-technical orientation viewing decentralised architectures as paramount to a more equitable artistic experience. In this state of affairs, the artist lays claim to what might be termed art and supplements this claim by appealing to the authentic enclosed in the NFT. Duchamp, for example, proposed his urinal as art through the statement, “this is art...”; Winkelman undertakes a similar gesture, however, qualifying the enunciative statement as such: “this is art...*and it is so because of the NFT.*”

The NFT does not make the art; indeed, the objects of Crypto Art exist as independent yet symbiotically aligned to the NFT. I suggest that Crypto Art makes of art an enunciative statement yet attempts to out-manoeuvre the recording of the said statement (cf. Section 2.2). The notion of decentralising art, I argue, is this very fact of undermining the surface of inscription where enunciative statements are recorded. However, I am not convinced that this undermining functions in its intended manner; bypassing a surface of inscription (institutions) appears to me the constitution of an alternative inscriptive surface. Decentralisation appears more as re-centralisation under the guise of a provocative gesture.

Given this and associated risks, I isolate the notion of decentralisation, whether actual or rhetorical, as integral to an understanding of Crypto Art. I am not suggesting

that Crypto Art functions solely as a vehicle for deconcentrating power in the art world, nor am I of the view that this perceived rectification of power imbalances prompts all Crypto Art. Instead, I suggest that perhaps the general idea supporting the phenomenon is this notion of a techno-egalitarian artistic model. The first chapter presents a foundation for understanding the various informational threads running throughout the study by engaging with the existing literature surrounding the fusion of art, technology, and NFTs. By way of introduction, I discuss, in brief, decentralisation as a politic and its relation to the productive field. In turn, I briefly establish a relationship between Conceptual Art and Crypto Art, suggesting Crypto Art as an extension of the conceptual tradition: interrogating the role between artists, art objects, and institutions. In both Crypto and Conceptual Art, the dematerialisation of the object is an anti-institutional gesture.

Chapter One served as a preamble to my exploration of Crypto Art. In this chapter, I surveyed three prior attempts at defining Crypto Art as a phenomenon but viewed them as unsatisfactory in their approaches. For one, I identified their reliance on the technological at the expense of the artistic. As such, I synthesised the approaches towards defining Crypto Art that encompasses its current iteration. Summarily, I described Crypto Art as an aesthetic alignment exhibiting visual and non-visual orientations with an emphasis on producing and articulating digitally scarce artistic objects through association with NFTs afforded by the blockchain. In offering this definition, I attempt to situate Crypto Art within the construct of a New Aesthetic.

In Chapter Two, I provide an account of Crypto Art within a twentieth-century Western art-historical trajectory. Of importance to this discussion are the contributions of Marcel Duchamp and Conceptual Art to the understanding of art as object in the twentieth century. The enunciative turn inaugurated by Duchamp turned art into the statement “this is art” (cf. Sections 2.1 & 2.2). Duchamp, in essence, revealed art’s enunciative value. Conceptual Art later drew on Duchamp’s revelation of the enunciative to critique the institution of art by producing so-called dematerialised objects. This extrapolation of the Duchampian paradigm prefigured the artist as the primary enunciator of artistic definitions at the expense of institutional actors. I note the egalitarian character of some movements in Conceptual Art, which viewed the dematerialised object as anathema to restriction and delimitation. In a word, the statement “this is art” in Conceptual Art lends credence to the idea that anything is art,

and everyone can be an artist. As such, I discuss the extent to which Crypto Art is an extension of Conceptual Art's dematerialisation, however, through the technological. Crypto Art reconfigures the enunciative by invoking the NFT as a contender in artistic definitions. To expand on this, I analysed the themes and impact of Winkelmann's *Everydays: The First 5000 Days* as a seminal example of Crypto Art.

Chapter Three explicitly grapples with the complexities of decentralisation: in general, as a technological architecture with socio-political ideals; in isolation, as it pertains to Crypto Art. I undertake a discussion that follows decentralisation as a specific techno-political fantasy. In light of this, I discuss Bitcoin's attempted reallocation of monetary trust from central institutions to the software underwriting the blockchain. In my discussion, I articulate an understanding of decentralisation as a simulation of trustlessness in the absence of intermediaries. This deconcentration of power is perceived as egalitarian to the extent that there are no immediate barriers to entry. Through this, I discuss the extent of Crypto Art's artistic decentralisation. I argue that Crypto Art's artistic decentralisation can be construed as a movement of autonomy from the productive field, whereby it attempts to define its own immersive zones of operation. However, I remain unconvinced that decentralisation is anything but a mode of rhetoric, a way of differentiation that serves Crypto Art's existence as a dispositional force in the productive field. I find Crypto Art's emphasis on decentered autonomy a half-realised goal.

Chapter Four takes the notion of authenticity to task. NFTs are certificates of authenticity which supposedly lend credence to digital ephemera. Crypto Art, through NFTs, frames its objects as authentic. However, I argue that Crypto Art's framing of authenticity refers to a material scaffolding rather than the authentic, as it is understood in twentieth-century modernism. As such, I attempt an engagement with two forms of authenticity: material and transcendental, whereby the latter refers to the lived substance of the work of art, rendering it symbolic, that is, frames the necessity of the work *a priori*; the material frames the work of art on an *a posteriori* basis, to say, the authenticity of the work is only arrived at via certification. This chapter identifies the condition of the Crypto Artwork towards a materialist sensibility of Crypto Art grounded in the construct of the NFT. As I identify it, this materialist sensibility counters the esotericism and hermeticism of modern art towards an egalitarian banalisation of

art and art's objects. Here, the demystified art object presented by Crypto Art renders art in the service of everyone rather than in the service of a sequestered elite class.

This study contributes to an understanding of Crypto Art not limited to the view of the phenomenon as limited-edition digital art. Instead, Crypto Art is an artistic orientation unto itself that has its roots in early- and mid-twentieth-century avantgardism. The study similarly proposes a dual interpretation of the art object as it appears in Crypto Art: the intermingling of a technological apparatus with an aesthetic object where one is not fundamental to the other. More so, the study contributes to the discourse of decentralisation as it emerges in Crypto Art, understanding the notion as incomplete and inconsequential yet fundamentally impactful.

However, the study falls short in its singular focus on Mike Winkelmann as a seminal figure in Crypto Art, perhaps risking generalising the movement. Reading Crypto Art in the face of Winkelmann's artwork is achieved at the expense of other Crypto Artists working in the same medium. Ultimately such a singular approach was necessary given the length and scope of this study. Similarly, the study fails to grapple with the role played by alternative NFT marketplaces in framing Crypto Art. These marketplaces facilitate sales of crypto artworks, thus framing their appearances, perceptions and evolution. To another extent, the study does not track Winkelmann's work in relation to previous experiments in Crypto Art, instead choosing a trajectory of twentieth-century modernism. This perhaps results in the minimal discussion of Digital Art in favour of the likes of Duchamp and Conceptual Art, where an understanding of Crypto Art in relation to Digital Art would be more appropriate. As it were, the extent to which artistic decentralisation is achieved remains contested and under-explored in the study.

Given the above, I suggest further research exploring the impact of NFT marketplaces in framing Crypto Art. The extent to which these marketplaces offer an alternative to the traditional model of art market sales might also be explored. Through this, the feasibility of artistic decentralisation might be achieved. Decentralisation, as it relates to the post-truth paradigm, poses an interesting research avenue. The move towards trustlessness may indicate a post-truth condition, and Crypto Art might be regarded as a visual configuration of post-truth. Additionally, I propose a more in-depth engagement with NFTs, perhaps even on a technical level, in relation to notions of the

authentic. As a seminal figure, a reading of Winkelmann from the perspective of Digital Art history remains crucial. Although I am not content with flattening Crypto Art under the label of Digital Art, I believe an exploration of Crypto Art might benefit from a more concentrated effort.

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