

Geert Lovink on the New State of Crypto Art in Conversation with Alex Estorick, Contributing Editor for Art and Technology at Flash Art

*This is the original transcript of the interview for 'Towards a New Ecology of Crypto Art', published on February 26, 2021 [here](#).*

Alexander Estorick: Flash Art's column, [The Uncanny Valley](#), specializes in the relationship between contemporary art and AI. We are putting together a conversation on the political ecology of Crypto Art. By 'ecology' I have Memo Akten's recent [contribution](#) in mind, which begs the question of how both the market for non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and the blockchain more broadly might be used to cultivate a more critical, less destructive, less neoliberal project. What would you like to replace the presently unsustainable model of crypto art marketplaces?

Geert Lovink: Would you judge an artwork by the currency in which it is sold? The take-away from the new media arts saga is that all artworks reflect on their own (im)materiality. The thesis here is that we should also consider the digital money layer as an essential new element of the expanded artwork. Scholars like Olav Velthuis describe the myths of the global art market. Let's apply this to the emergence of crypto arts.

First we need to separate the technical possibility to generate and store unique (and thus scarce) digital artworks from the question of price, currency and method of payment. As Akten shows, the current model of storing digital works of art on a blockchain is utterly unsustainable. Art on the blockchain can only be interpreted in the light of absurd abundance of data centres, cable and 5G bandwidth that somehow nobody seems to pay for. Add to this the ever-growing computational/storage capacity of PCs, laptops and smart phones at the receiving end and you get the infrastructural drive. As soon as one of these elements becomes scarce and expensive again, the whole blockchain scheme falls apart. For sure, we will be able in the near future to store works ourselves in a safe way at home, offline and verify it online whenever we want but we do not need this baroque 24/7 networked blockchain structure for that.

What's most urgent, from the perspective of the artist, is not so much a marketplace or blockchain but an easy-to-use payment system based on public standards, not controlled by corporations (read: exchanges) or states, that is peer-to-peer, with the least possible intermediaries (so no BTC or ETH and their fees). Crypto is now too much a goal in itself, ruled by an

invisible 'pump 'n' dump' mob. After a decade of insulated speculation on the currency and token side it's time to focus on the user and use value instead of geeky-male narcissism, hoarding 'digital gold' for no reason other than accumulation. Creative workers and artists urgently need revenue models so that they can focus on their own work. Techno-solutionism may be inevitable in an early stage when technology itself needs to be developed, but do not forget how boring that is for outsiders.

Now, let's turn to crypto and its vast distance from the art world and its rigid institutions. It is hypocritical demand the dissolution of curators, galleries and auction houses on the one hand while introducing new technological gatekeepers, from Winklevoss Bros. to Elon Musk and Tether-backed investors. Black box algorithms and right-wing libertarians are hegemonic. If the crypto community cannot discuss power, race and gender issues, why bother? The world does not need of more billionaires and is crying out for a radical redistribution of wealth. If you're not part of the dark web, crypto-tech is not delivering. Unless crypto starts to sabotage its own speculative dream machines, things will inevitably collapse, regardless of the 'democratic' promises of the meme-swarms. The crypto business is anything but decentralized and deeply dominated by racist right-wing techno-libertarians. This is out there, in the open, for everyone to see. Unless this is properly addressed, nothing will move on, certainly not in the art world.

In the debates of our MoneyLab network, founded in 2013, we have always emphasized the importance of multiple additional forms of income in order to fight mass precarity amongst the creative workers worldwide. Selling crypto art as unique works (or in limited series) should be seen for most producers as additional income, at least for now. The demand of a Universal Basic Income will remain in place. Highflyer artist Beeple is the exception to the rule here. Overinflated prices merely reflect the Tulipomania state of crypto art which needs a place to stash its money.

What's obscured here at all times is the ideological mixture of speculative crypto currency HODL crowds and the justified demand for artists to be paid a fair wage for their work. At the moment, the marketplaces for crypto-arts are, all too often, ways to funnel 'funny money' and temporarily store it elsewhere (for tax evasion reasons or not, this is yet to be investigated critically).

AE: What do you see as being the most interesting means of using the blockchain to develop critical and decentralized artistic strategies?

GL: Ledger technologies are boring, administrative platforms and procedures. I do not see any artistic potential in them, other than the wider, much more interesting art-money dialectic (see Max Haiven's recent book, *Art after Money, Money After Art*, 2018), which is centuries old and involves issues relating to the gift, exchange value and symbolic exchange. For me, blockchain is a follow-up of the excel sheet. There's no Excel Art and the world is thankful for it. We suffer enough from the bookkeeper logic. How many more millions need suffer because of cold spreadsheet calculations? What could be more boring? When we're talking about economically sustainable art forms, the livelihoods of millions are at stake - a fact cloaked by the proliferation of cool apps, funky images or token hype. Yet the magnitude of possibilities is exciting, and this is why so many (young) people are involved: alchemy for the masses. We all feel we're part of a magic movement that aims to redefine the definition of money with the potential aim for a radical redistribution of wealth. Nothing less. We're not here to create a few more billionaires. Unless the crypto art community explicitly raises this issue, it will be complicit, a victim, and destined to disappear as money moves on and either solidifies into real assets or evaporates.

AE: In light of the growing porousness between creative disciplines - contemporary art, new media, illustration, etc. - which are often experienced on the same digital platform, how do you see the new reality of multidisciplinary art?

GL: The new reality is a dull one. I am sorry but this world, I fear, is not ready to mix genres and enjoy multidisciplinary art. The direction of the 21st century we're heading towards is an increasingly retrograde one, cheap and unimaginative, obsessed with retromania, copy-pasting pastiches, all neatly separated into distinct cultures, identities, countries and, most of all geopolitical blocs.

AE: How do the new categories of digital art sold on crypto marketplaces stand to affect traditional categories of art?

GL: As we speak, contemporary art has no connection whatsoever with the crypto art world. Artists that deal with the crypto issue in a narrow sense are rare (an exception might be Simon Denny). MoneyLab is on top of this so if you're interested, browse through the website and the previous editions. But do not be surprised if the token issue will show up in upcoming biennials. Following Covid-19, the financial-economic misery in the field of arts and culture will be such that the financial imagination will have to be addressed.

Whether the art market will follow suit, I doubt. This is a very traditional scene. What we can expect to happen is the rise of parallel worlds with almost no interaction.

AE: What do you consider to be the most urgent issues regarding crypto art and art on the blockchain?

GL: A radical cultural break to cater for male geek culture. So far, the speculative nature of crypto has brought some money into the scene but I doubt many artists are actually making a living from their work. We can blame this on the trash imaginary and pop cultural level of crypto art or on the immature taste of its constituency but at some point this becomes a chicken-egg dilemma. We're at least ten years into the crypto-currency wave so let's focus for a change on the nature of the images on display. What's striking is the overall retrograde style, as if we're stuck in the 1970s. The settings are copy-pasted from American science-fiction films and comic books and projected into today's gamer-geek environment.

AE: How might artists and art world actors (yuk) gain a foothold in new marketplaces that privilege financial speculation over all else?

GL: This is a question that can, surprisingly, unite the contemporary and crypto art worlds. The issue here is be able to ignore, personally and collectively, the harsh selection mechanisms that are required in the first place. Without a rigid, closed and interconnected culture of critics, curators, gallery owners and museum directors, real speculation cannot escalate. First of all, we should respect its untimely weirdness. At the same time, we should also challenge the genre to become even more weird in a contemporary fashion and seek a dialogue with today's alienated condition of platform billions. It's much easier to drift off and tele-transport oneself to Ancient Mesa, Russalka or Jakku than it is to radically rethink contemporary realities of Niamey, Karachi or Osaka. Why travel all the way to a distant future only to land in 1970? It might be considered lazy to define your basic aesthetics on work done by others. But there are also other ways of seeing. Crypto art displays an unreconstructed desire for a return to a pre-Reagan revolution, when psychedelia was still a viable means of overcoming the narcissistic self. Instead of rewarding retromania we need to do-over the crypto-social imaginary in order to confront our messy present.

AE: What can we learn from the pandemic's enforced explosion of interest in digital art and how much is likely revert back to 'normal'?

During the pandemic, countless hours have been spent online. If digital/crypto art has not benefited from the booming 'attention economy', when will it? In order to make full use of the current situation, digital art needs to open itself to a multiplicity of genres, schools, currents, aesthetics and offer distinctive twist. Pull the virtual game worlds into the dusty, urban concrete wastelands and create real hybrids, not 2070 escape worlds. If crypto is big and 'disruptive' it should also be able to create its own distinct style and visual language away from past futures. Tell us how we should do 'crypto performances', dance and dress and create a genuinely singular style. It's time to consign Pokemon cards to the past. We can do it.