

NFT ≠ ART

DRAFT

DECENTRALIZED ART

As a movement, decentralized art dematerializes and locates conception, production, curation, and distribution outside of central authority, across distributed networks with artists as its source nodes.

Decentralized art is dematerialized, non-fungible, and immutable, with encoded, built-in provenance and authentication. Artworks can be analog, physical, digital, or hybrid; their unifying characteristic can separate from the artistic medium.

Artists creating decentralized art make use of blockchain technology, non-fungible tokens, smart agreements, smart contracts, and decentralized marketplaces to transparently define concept and origin, to create, sell and distribute artworks, track provenance, and build communities that cross geographic and cultural boundaries.

Decentralized art is connected to other art movements, including conceptual art, performance art, pop art, graffiti, street art, and social practice, along with art movements like Fluxus, Situationists, Surrealism, and others.

Decentralized Art

Seth Indigo Carnes

As a practice, decentralized art distributes and locates conception, production, control, and equity outside of central authority, across rhizomatic networks with artists as its source nodes.

Decentralized art is dematerialized, non-fungible, and immutable, with encoded, built-in provenance and authentication. Artworks can be analog, physical, digital, or hybrid; their unifying characteristics are separate from the artistic medium.

Artists creating decentralized art make use of blockchain technology, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), agreements, smart contracts, and encryption to transparently define concept and origin, to securely sell and distribute artworks, track provenance, and build communities

that cross geography, class, and culture.

Decentralized art is connected to past art movements, groups, and subcultures, including dada, conceptual art, mail art, street art, punk, land art, internet art, and social practice, along with Fluxus and the Situationists.



Draft:Decentralized art

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Decentralized art makes use of blockchain technology, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), contracts, and encryption to transparently define concept and origin, to securely sell and distribute artworks, track provenance, and build communities that cross geography, class, and culture.^{[1][2]}

Decentralized art is dematerialized, non-fungible, and immutable, with encoded, built-in authentication. The artworks tend to be digital, but can also be analog, physical, or hybrid, across all artistic media.^{[1][2][3]}

In general practice, decentralized art distributes and locates conception, production, control, and equity outside of central authority.^{[2][4]}

This ethos connects to broader themes of decentralization since the advent of blockchain and Bitcoin, through to Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) and related web3 technology and culture.^[5]

History and context

Following the growth of political theory exploring centralization and decentralization in France and continental Europe during the early 19th century, the concept of decentralization and operating outside the bounds and norms of centralized power and hierarchies was an ongoing theme of the avant-garde in 20th century art movements.^[6]

Examples of art movements, groups, and sub-cultures in this tradition include dada, conceptual art, mail art, street art, punk, internet art, and social practice, along with the Situationists and Fluxus.^{[1][2]}

In the 21st century, decentralized art continues this lineage, making use of digital, decentralized, network technologies.

Themes

Decentralization

While decentralized art is not political by definition, the rebellious ethos inherent to cyberpunks and the hacker ethic permeate its language and culture.^{[7][8][9]} This includes a generalized opposition to centralized power, particularly power dynamics, privacy, control of information, and banking, influenced by the philosophical foundations of blockchain technology, Bitcoin, and other cryptocurrencies.^{[10][11]}

In relation to the art world, this can manifest as tension with traditional gatekeepers and intermediaries of centralization, such as art dealers, curators, galleries, museums, and auction houses.^{[12][13]}

At the same time, decentralized art is connected to cryptocurrencies, their respective markets, and the art market at large, where some artists creating decentralized art have embraced centralized institutions and markets.^[14] Beeple's \$69 million sale of *Everydays: The First 5000 Days* at a Christie's auction in 2021 is an example.^[15]

This interplay between decentralizing and centralizing forces, whether artistic, philosophic, or economic, remains an ongoing tension and theme.^{[16][17][18]}

Distributed Networks

The use of distributed networks is a hallmark of decentralized art. In tandem with the use of networked computers, these networks are also social, in terms of governance, relationships, and economics, consisting of a "distributed community of digital outsiders."^[17]

Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) are one example, some of them being artist communities producing decentralized art.^[13] The technical backend for provenance of a decentralized artwork is another example, transparently recording and revealing details of blockchain transactions and relationships between artists and collectors across time.^[19]

In this sense, the nodes in these distributed networks include not only computers, files, and ledgers, but also human participants and their interactions.

Dematerialization

Critical writing on the dematerialization of art began with Lucy Lippard, focused on conceptual art in the late 1960s, noting “the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art...provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object.”^[20]

Conceptual art’s dematerialization, the “disembeddedness, its emphasis on information and circulation over the big, heavy, stationed object” also featured anti-capitalist aims related to speculation and the art market.^{[21][12]}

With the advent of digital technology, the art object moved further towards full dematerialization. Then with blockchain and non-fungible tokens, the dematerialization of rarity became a unique innovation in decentralized art.^[3]

Rarity

The non-fungible token, invented by NYC artist Kevin McCoy and Anil Dash in 2014, then widely popularized from 2018 to 2021, achieved a working model for rarity, to uniquely identify and limit the supply, or editions, of a decentralized artwork.^{[22][3]}

In economic terms, this is considered forced scarcity. This type of limited edition, decentralized artwork depends on core tenets of blockchain technology: consensus algorithm protocols, computational trust, and the immutability of entries in a distributed ledger.

Primavera De Filippi, a legal scholar, internet activist and artist, shared thoughts on this concept of rarity: “the benefit of NFTs is that we can now freely communicate content and the monetization happens simply because some people want to own the authentic original, rather than by restricting anyone from ever seeing a work because the owner needs to retain copyright in that work.”^[23]

On the dematerialization of rarity, Artreview noted “data becomes ownable, and the physical aspect of rarity becomes secondary, since so much of the market value of contemporary art lies not in the object, but the circulation of its image through digital culture”^[3]

Digital Provenance

Decentralized art uses blockchain entries for provenance, or a digital chronology of ownership. Similar to certificates of authenticity (COA) on paper used for a traditional, analog artwork, a unique non-fungible token (NFT) affiliated with a decentralized artwork serves as a digital certificate of authenticity, with transfers of ownership and pricing recorded as blockchain entries.^[19]

Stuart Haber, a co-inventor of blockchain technology, shared “We used the term “provenance” when discussing algorithmic methods for digital records”. Scott Stornetta, the other co-inventor, noted a key aspect of decentralized digital provenance “Documents that are credible to everyone are those in which every participant collectively shares the trust responsibility.”^[11]

Currently, the provenance information that NFTs and associated smart contracts document on blockchain is simple, but in the future, curator Christiane Paul of the Whitney Museum of American Art, suggests, “By combining a record of ownership and provenance with flexible copyright details, sales and preservation strategies, the NFT could become a more sophisticated authentication tool.”^[19]

Artist Rights

Decentralized art's focus on transparency in both provenance and price history, artist royalties, and defining artist rights through agreements and smart contracts are distinguishing features.^{[24][25]}

Jo Lawson-Tancred, an arts and technology writer, noted a “demand for transparency and a minimum 10% resale royalty distinguishes it from the opaque operations and established practices of the legacy market”^[17]

Reflecting on the relationship between decentralized art and the art world, curator and art historian Tina Rivers Ryans shared that “issues like a lack of transparency, faulty provenance records, art flipping, and artist royalties need more work.”^[26]

Charlotte Kent, a writer and professor of visual history, referenced the historical lineage of artist rights, particularly the Siegelaub-Projansky Agreement, in describing how decentralized art agreements “can address the power imbalance where artists have long been expected to accept contracts, not produce them”, with a goal to “fix the inequity artists experience in the traditional marketplace”^[12]

Contemporary work on new agreements that explore the structure of equity and rights for decentralized art include the *Artist's Contract for Decentralized Art (ACDA)* by the TXT collective, based in New York City, and the *Purchase and Sale Letter Agreement for NFTs* by Yayoi Shionoiri and Ryan Su.^{[27][28]}

Origins of the term “decentralized art”

In 2006, Artpool, an art research center in Budapest, Hungary, created an exhibition and project titled *The Decentralized Art and the World*, featuring mail art and the use of network technology of the time to collaborate and connect decentralized art practice across many countries and artists.^[29]

Following the creation of Bitcoin and advent of blockchain technology in 2008, concepts of decentralization began to slowly proliferate worldwide. That same year, New York Magazine described NYC artist Poster Boy's defaced posters as an effort to start a “decentralized art movement”, an early notation of street art as a type of decentralized art.^[30]

In 2011, Lane Rely, an art professor at Northwestern University, wrote about conceptual art of the 1960s as a “decentralized art world” privileging secondary over primary information.^[31]

In May of 2014, the first known NFT (non-fungible token) was created in New York City by artist Kevin McCoy and Anil Dash, an early start connecting the concepts of decentralized art with contemporary blockchain technology.^[32] Later in 2014, a Bitcoin Magazine article provided examples of “decentralized art”, including graffiti and other art projects.^[33]

2018 marked the birth of the term “NFT” as part of the *Cryptokitties* digital collectibles, using a non-fungible token standard on Ethereum called ERC-721. This project and others like it paved the way for art to be more decentralized, certified as limited editions on the blockchain, with public tracking of sales and transfers.^[34]

In 2022, Chanel Verdult curated a collection of artworks for MoCDA's "decentralized art residency".^[35] That same year, artist and curator Eileen Isagon Skyers wrote a Frieze article titled *New Perspectives in Decentralized Art*.^[36] and in an interview with Right Click Save, artist Carlos Marcial was asked to distinguish the "decentralized art market from the old centralized model".^[37]

In 2023, SuperRare published an article focused on the idea of decentralized curation, noting a "decentralized art ecosystem".^[38]

In April 2024, the TXT art collective published a definition of decentralized art as a type of artwork and movement.^[1] It was also used in the title of a related project, *The Artist's Contract for Decentralized Art*, created as a contemporary rework of *The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement* of 1971.^[28] In public events, TXT has delivered presentations and organized panel discussions on the topic of decentralized art, including members of TXT, curator Christian Rattemeyer, gallerist Rebecca Picanso, and artist G.H. Hovagimyan.^{[39][40]}

Alternative terms

Alternative names for this type of art include "crypto art" or "NFT art", with some confusion and criticism as the nascent field evolves.^{[41][42][43][44]}

Relationship to NFTs

Decentralized art describes a type of art, while an NFT (non-fungible token) is a technology. Most experts describe the NFT as the "certificate of ownership and authenticity, not the artwork itself."^[45] Christiane Paul wrote that an NFT is an "advanced digital version of a certificates of authenticity".^[19]

Kevin McCoy, artist and co-inventor of the NFT, shared his definition, "NFT is a metadata record that you've constructed that can add utility and value and ownership, perhaps to an image".^[23] In the same interview, Rhea Meyers, a pioneer of early art on the blockchain noted, "The reason I got so interested in NFTs is precisely because they look very much like conceptual art certificates of authenticity, and that's now a relatively well-understood model for selling something that you can't otherwise sell"^[23]

Controversy and criticism

The dominant criticism in decentralized art is focused on non-fungible token (NFT) technology and cryptocurrencies, as related to the increasing financialization of art.^{[46][26][19][17]}

In 2021, Tina River Ryans, a digital art curator and current editor of Artforum, noted that "instead of appreciating the value of digital artworks, NFTs have sold them short: They reify ownership and platform capitalism at precisely the moment when digital art could be facilitating a conversation about alternatives such as decentralization and self-sovereignty"^[46]

Later, in 2022, while a curator at Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Ryans clarified this position, differentiating a critique of prioritizing artworks using NFTs as investment or speculation, versus a preferable approach where "the NFT is not something taking precedence over the artwork to which it is attached, but something being used as it was originally intended—as a digital receipt."^[26]

Christiane Paul, curator at the Whitney Museum, noted, “People talk about “buying” NFTs rather than acquiring a specific artwork through an NFT. The sales mechanism itself has been commodified: a capitalist milestone.”^[19]

Interpreting comments by artist Jonas Lund, writer Jo Lawson-Tancred noted “it is beholden to digital artists right now to engage in the wholesale critique of NFTs as a transparently financialized art form.”^[17]

Antecedents

Artists, academics, writers, and art collectives have cited specific past art movements and groups that influenced decentralized art, including dada, conceptual art, mail art, street art, punk, land art, internet art, social practice, the Situationists and Fluxus.^{[1][2][12][23][24][33][47]}

See also

- Mail art
- Conceptual art
- Post conceptual art
- Fluxus
- Internet art
- net.art
- Post-Internet
- Generative art
- New media art
- Digital poetry

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