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"Literally, a Game-Changer": Renegotiating the Aesthetics of the Real

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Abstract

The affirmation of identity as a leitmotif throughout art history has become increasingly concerned with the conflation of the real and constructed, the material and immaterial, as technological developments engineer the fabric of reality with heightened sophistication. In the age of lifelike, digital avatar influencers such as Lil Miquela, Ai-Da, billed as "the world's first ultra-realistic robot artist," algorithms developed to create The Next Rembrandt, and the rise of crypto art and non-fungible tokens (NFT's), the ambiguity or removal of the hand of the artist prompts questions surrounding identity as a visualization of the data that follows us and is symptomatic of what curator Shuman Basar refers to as "change vertigo"—realized when our sense of individuality is unsteady and constantly shifting to adapt to an increasingly complex existence where physical and digital borders are no longer distinct. The analysis and dismantling of anterior art historical formulas of representation and dissemination—harbingers for art in the digital realm—reveal a compelling entry point to the immaterial and distributive logic of contemporary aesthetic movements as mediated by truth.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Art, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Art, NFT, Technology, Blockchain, Fiction, Simulations

Summary for Lay Audience

The question of aesthetics as a mode of inquiry for understanding contemporary existence has become increasingly concerned with the conflation of the real and constructed, the material and immaterial, as technological developments engineer the fabric of reality with heightened sophistication. Shifting conceptions of the contemporary work of art, along with its production and dissemination, have tremendous new capabilities to alter audience consciousness and perceptions of agency in this process. in our crucial intercession to the longstanding, emphatic claim of art as a transmitter of truth. The analysis and dismantling of art historical modes of production—harbingers for art in the digital realm—reveal a compelling entry point to understanding contemporary aesthetic movements mediated by the dialectics of truth.

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Preface

'The real is an effaced reality but one which is in no way denied; it is in the position of a lived larval state.'

François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*

The title of this paper employs two regularly used expressions that signal our current cultural predicament with reality: a "game-changer" which is an event, idea, or procedure that effects a significant shift in the current manner of doing or thinking about something, and an informal application of the term "literally" which is employed for emphasis or to express strong feeling while not being "literally" true. Both, when applied superfluously, as is often the case, require no factual basis for their validity. The acknowledgment of this linguistic trend prompted further examination of the rapidity of fads and the thoughtlessness that goes into their adoption. Tremendous technological resources at our disposal allow for the constant referral to something else or someplace else while facing the unabating question of what it means to "exist." The aesthetic negotiation in this exchange begs the question of whether we are culturally satisfied with the groundlessness of a reality that is increasingly representative of the non-human in art. To quote the poet Octavio Paz, "The vision of chaos is a sort

of ritual bath, a regeneration through immersion in the original fountain, a return to the life before."[1]

The question of aesthetics as a mode of inquiry for understanding contemporary existence has become increasingly concerned with the conflation of the real and constructed, the material and immaterial, as technological developments engineer the fabric of reality with heightened sophistication. In the age of life-like, digital avatar influencers such as Lil Miquela, Ai-Da, billed as "the world's first ultra-realistic robot artist," algorithms developed to create The Next Rembrandt, and the rise of crypto art and non-fungible tokens (NFT's), digital art has built a layer of complexity surrounding our understanding of aesthetics as a method of visual inquiry where humans function as systems of force, becoming a visualization of the data that we consume and algorithms that follow us. Curator Shuman Basar refers to this dislocation as "change vertigo"[2]—realized when our sense of individuality is unsteady and constantly shifting to adapt to a hybrid existence where physical and digital borders are no longer distinct. The analysis and dismantling of anterior art historical modes of production and theoretical understanding—harbingers for art in the digital realm—reveal a compelling entry point to understanding contemporary aesthetic movements mediated by the dialectics of

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[1] Octavio Paz, *Alternating Current* (Viking Press, 1973), 83.
[2] Shuman Basar, Douglas Coupland and Hans Ulbricht Obrist, *The Extreme Self* (Köln: Walther Konig, 2020), 1.

truth and simulation, begging the question, when we are no longer bound by our

reality, does art require the tug of its origins?

Theorist Byung Chul Han states we are approaching, "The hypercultural

condition of the 'side-by-side', of simultaneity"—the condition of living in boundless,

site-less spaces where art has traditionally allowed the brain to perceive and creatively

adapt to new realities. The edifying potential of art is instrumentalized in these spaces

through the development of illusory, multiversal conceptions of reality where truth

functions as a fungible concept where this era's happiness "emerges from the abolition

of facticity, a removal of the attachment to the "here", the site."[3] With the internet,

humans exist as a culture that is obsessed with self-actualization and validation at the

expense of concepts such as virtue or earned experience—the visual qualities of

objects and their corresponding representation in the visual arts historically have been

viewed as characteristic of our time. Today, technology's effect on the human

condition is quite necessarily, the medium in which we express the human condition,

and one that we are far more intimately engaged with.

In Nicholas Chernyshevsky's 1853 text, *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*,

the author remarks, "An excellent imitation of the song of the nightingale begins to

bore and disgust us as soon as we learn that it is not a real nightingale singing, but

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[3] Byung-Chul Han, *Hyperculture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 5.

some skillful imitator of the nightingale's trilling; this is because we have a right to expect different music from a human being."[4] While pop once offered a fantasy, social media and reality TV programs such as *The Rehearsal* offer performances of authenticity and the acting out of fictions that *feel* real. The goal is not to recover authenticity for yourself but to perform it for others, where the real world disappears behind the shroud of its varied representations. The revolutionary potential of Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and the Metaverse exists in the ability to compel a person's mind and body to react to a different reality.

In selecting artists for this paper, I chose to begin with Sophie Calle's *The Hotel*, a multivalent series of photographs that for the artist instantiated a decision to utilize the photograph as an equivocal tool to negotiate both reality and fiction through what the viewer infers. This series from 1981 facilitated a poignant comment on projection, fantasy and the ways in which medium can manipulate our perceptions, expanded through the lens of Baudrillard's simulacra. From there, the immersive interplay between fiction and human perception, and in turn, human perception on fiction, anticipates and is working towards an evolution of A.I. via Ai-Da Robot as a vehicle for higher forms of consciousness and human likeness in its creative output and self-representation as a sole entity who is "intellectually optical." The neural networks that

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[4] Nicholas Chernyshevsky, "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality" in *Russian Philosophy Vol. II: The Nihilists, The Populists, Critics of Religion and Culture* (Quadrangle Books, 1965), 1.

support Ai-Da's function and their implications for our understanding of creativity

through the automation of vision is further evinced through Trevor Paglen's ongoing

development of visual training libraries that are culled from the particulars of real life.

The overwhelming potential of reality for the human mind, is best digested

through the creation of stories and it is our metabolization of the details that create

order for understanding. This is not a new practice, however one that requires constant

recalibration in the face of vast quantities of ambiguous, often meaningless genres (i.e.,

'Sludge-Pop'). There's a recursive quality to acts of self-narration—we tell ourselves

stories about ourselves to synchronize with the tale we're telling; then, inevitably, revise

the story as we change. The extended work of adaptation might itself be a source of

continuity and connectedness in our lives. Nostalgia, death and digital immortality

enter as topics linked to being on the peripheral, where one of the anxieties of feeling

like an outlier from current conceptions of reality is a clear sense that what you love will

be taken away.

There is no longer an inability or unwillingness to reimagine consciousness and

agency in non-human ways, but rather our human authority is perhaps best

demonstrated by an agency over constructions of what is being lost with the same

emphasis on conquest and encroachment, what features are destroyed and what are

included and what is the culpability of non-human agents and human-constructed

simulated environments that are now being embraced for offering a form of escape or

creative capacity that is beyond our own anthropocentric understanding of the world?

This paper functions as a survey of shifting ontologies of the contemporary work of art, along with its production and dissemination, that have tremendous new capabilities to alter audience consciousness and perceptions of agency in our crucial intercession to the longstanding, emphatic claim of art as a transmitter of truth. Art has always been in negotiation with change and our agential engagement places humans in a position where increasingly, they must legitimize their humanness by deciphering what is real and function as conduits for redefining the material sphere. Proposing new criteria to analyze the aesthetic form is perhaps a fruitless endeavor over understanding why certain disparate artifacts of a history where art was once intensely human evolve within an imagined future.

I leave this final consideration open.

Chapter 1

1. Fiction, the Art Object and Second-Hand Truths
1.1 'I took an empty room and filled it with what I would have wished to find.'

In 1981, French conceptual artist Sophie Calle was hired as a temporary chambermaid for three weeks in a Venetian hotel. During her cleaning duties, Calle examined and documented the personal belongings of the hotel guests, ranging from their prescriptions, diaries, closets, and garbage bins (Fig. 1)[5]. Her only rule was not to touch luggage that was locked, unless they left the key, which presented an open invitation. This voyeuristic period culminated in *The Hotel,* a multivalent series of photographs that for the artist instantiated a decision to utilize the photograph as an equivocal tool to negotiate both reality and fiction through what the viewer infers.

Fig 1. Sophie Calle, *The Hotel, Room 26—detail* (1981), Ektachrome, ed. 3/9. 84.25 x 56 in.

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[5] Sophie Calle, *The Hotel* (New York: Siglio, 2021), 12.

In a 1992 interview with Swiss art historian Bice Curiger, Calle stated that every element in *The Hotel* was real, except for one room which she divulged was "completely fake," adding, "I took an empty room and filled it with what I would have wished to find."[6] The statement altered the previous understanding of the project, where the audience had now become participants in attempting to discern the fake within the image, each becoming less real than it was to begin with. There is an implied authenticity to the project, Calle's process belonging to a practice of "proximal ethnography,"[7] a term coined by Fiona Price as a contemporary development of the ethnographic paradigm where the researcher shares the same experiences as the observed but does so outside their specific domain, using metaphors and "inside-out-inside"[8] research to make tangible the lived and living experience of learning with the intention of fostering mutual understanding.

Sharing the experience of the observed outside of their domain with a particular focus on the banal, Calle's vision and that of her audience is shaped by personal longing, where each room is the empty room—the place where we project onto the

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[6] Sophie Calle and Bice Curiger, "Sophie Calle and Bice Curiger in Conversation. Interview by Bice Curiger." ICA Talks: The British Library, February 18, 1992. Audio, 1:25:01. https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/ICA-talks/024M-C0095X0828XX-0100V0.

[7] Fiona Price, "Proximal Ethnography: 'inside-out-inside' Research and the Impact of Shared Metaphors of Learning." *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2013, pp. 595–609., https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2013.827451.

[8] See: Nathan Fielder's docu-comedy, "The Rehearsal" for elucidation on the practice of 'inside-out-inside' ethnography.

evidence to make something out of nothing. For Calle, outraged subjects of her work

failed to see that the recording of their personal effects was purely incidental, instead

facilitating a poignant comment on projection, fantasy and the ways in which medium

can manipulate our perceptions, bearing the question—is fiction connected to the art

object or to the dubiousness of the individual?

Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations* defines simulacra as a "second-hand truth"[9];

a substitute for reality which has lost its original conditions and attributes yet maintains

an essence of truth as a *replica* of truth. Baudrillard believed that in order to perceive

something as real, one must compare it to something fake, or second-hand real,

underlining that the strength of simulacra is that it is capable of masking reality, the

simulation striving for a perceptual dominance over the real. Hyperreality as such,

exceeds reality by adopting the most obvious attributes of the real, forming an

imperceptible camouflage, blurring the distinction between truth and verisimilitude.[10]

The application of simulacra to a digital identity beyond commonly associated

realms of management and policy (ie. developing realistic models of behaviour for the

purpose of training), reveals the concept of identity as radically morphing, indicative of

an economy increasingly concerned with intangibles derived from the material and

[9] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotexte/Smart Art, 1983), 2.
[10] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 4. "This "imaginarization" of truth, which is relieved of any instance of the Real, is what the classical thinkers referred to as "verisimili-tude" or "likelihood."

algorithms that generate value from the classification and replication of "our-selves," offering the false notion of agency and individuality through the seemingly limitless options available due to technological advancements. In his text, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Walter Benjamin correlates this excess to cultural homogeneity, "As I gazed at the long, long rows of coffee spoons and knife rests, fruit knives and oyster forks, my pleasure in this abundance was tinged with anxiety, lest the guests we had invited would turn out to be identical to one another, like our cutlery."[11]

Because simulations offer the opportunity to substitute reality infinitely, society in turn comes to expect a configuration of the artist that is beyond the artist, as a circular generator of dominant images of need. Philosopher Alain Badiou in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* states, "A configuration is not an art form, a genre or an "objective" period in the history of art, nor is it a "technical" *dispositif*. Rather, it is an identifiable sequence, initiated by an event, comprising a virtually infinite complex of works, when speaking of which it makes sense to say that it produces—in a rigorous immanence to the art in question—a truth *of this art*, an art truth."[12] Simulated images are not lived as objects in themselves, but a reflection of the discursive nature of our image saturated culture. Understanding the basis of their assemblage stems from the characteristics observed in what are considered to be works of art, devoid of their

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[11] Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (London: Belknap Press, 2006), 58.
[12] Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 13.

principles, and in essence,[13] self-deceptive.

1.2 Casting from Reality, Filling the Broken Mold

The use of haptics in simulated environments creates the illusion of the virtual

world possessing substance while reproducing sensations a user would feel when

interacting with *actual* physical objects. As Roland Barthes notes in *Mythologies*, "It is

well known that smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite

reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling. Christ's robe was

seamless, just as the airships of science-fiction are made of unbroken metal."[14]

Artist Niklas Asker in his series, *Filling the Broken Mold* looks to art historical artifacts as

referents for an undefined present in his exploration of materiality. His painting, *Glow*,

2021 (Fig. 2)[15] depicts a man-made, plastic mold of a Christ figure, the seam

pronounced, its cracks suggesting a spiritual inwardness, in the Deleuzian sense, a

body without organs, indeterminate and brimming with potentiality.

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[13] Heidegger employed the German verb *wesen* from which stems the past tenses of *sein*, which means "to be." It is a substantive translation of the Latin *essentia*, or essence and when used as a verb translates to the truth of its own way of being. His pursuit: "what is this self-evident thingly [*sic*] in the work of art?" See: Heidegger's *The Essence of Truth*, 1947.

[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1973), 88.

[15] Niklas Asker, "Filling the Broken Mold," https://niklasasker.se/gallery-1/filling-the-broken-mold.html.

Fig.2. Niklas Asker, *Glow* (2021), Oil on canvas, 24 x 33 in.

The compulsion we possess to touch objects that exhibit smoothness is connected to the positivity we associate with the perceived invulnerability of man-made and digital objects whose modes of production are mechanistic. In *Saving Beauty*, cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han explores aesthetics in the digital age, positing that a technical mode of assembly and the elimination of any sign of "casting" from an entity's true reality is informed less by its substance than by the function of its non-visible parts (smartphones, automobiles, etc.).[16] Artist Jeff Koons, for his exhibition at the Beyeler Foundation in 2012 ruminated on the materiality of his highly polished

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[16] Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 14.

sculptures, "The Balloon Dog is really a wonderful object. It wants to confirm the

observer in their existence. I often work with reflecting, mirroring materials because

they automatically raise the self-confidence of the viewer. Of course, in a dark room

that doesn't work. But if you stand right in front of the object, you are reflected in it

and assured of yourself"[17]

1.3 The Agency of 'Intellectual Optics'

This demystification of the art object that Koons has long identified with in his

practice is extended further through the artistic process of Ai-Da, touted as the

"world's first ultra-realistic artist robot,"[18] who draws using cameras in her eyes, AI

algorithms, and her robotic arm. Developed in 2019, this impressively lifelike robot

(Fig.3)[19] had her first solo exhibition at the University of Oxford titled, Unsecured

Futures, participating in both virtual and in-person exhibitions such as The Artist is

Online at Koenig Galerie and Ai-Da at The Design Museum both in London, UK.

Creativity in the post-humanist era is the primary focus of her work, the landing page of

her website stating, "Ai-Da creates art, because art no longer has to be restrained by

the requirement of human agency alone."[20]

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[17] Han, *Saving Beauty*, 6.
[18] Aidan Meller,"Ai-Da," 2019, https://www.ai-darobot.com/.
[19] Suyin Haynes, "This Robot Artist Just Became the First to Stage a Solo Exhibition. What Does that Say About Creativity?" (*Time*, June 17, 2019).
[20] Meller, "Ai-Da."

Fig. 3. *Ai-Da Robot with a Painting Created by Her Response to an Oak Tree.* Photo by Nicky Johnston.

The immersive interplay between fiction and human perception, and in turn, human perception on fiction, anticipates and is working towards an evolution of AI via Ai-Da as a vehicle to higher forms of consciousness and human likeness in its creative output and self-representation as a sole entity who is "intellectually optical."[21] The spectacle of Ai-Da's technological artistic process (her "interpretations" of reality implement neural networks that are modeled on the human brain), takes precedence over the art object itself, creating an inversion that elicits a re-evaluation of the robustness of human relevance to creativity as a neology derived from algorithmic processes.

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[21] Francois Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2012), 15.

An intimate relationship between humans and technology invariably relies upon

technology's ability to function as an expression of humanity, "relating" via information

and tradeable data collected through algorithms. The artist's expression of humanity is

also referential, however drawn from a subjective response within the individual,

commonly requiring some degree of empathy and perspective. Han offers that the

digital has a duplicitous effect on the individual, "Digital beauty banishes any

negativity of the non-identical. It only permits consumable, usable differences. Alterity

gives way to diversity. The digital world, in a manner of speaking, is a world that the

humans have coated over with their own retina"[22]

This process of self-mirroring is evident in works such as Yayoi Kusama's,

Narcissus Garden, (Fig.4)[23], exhibited at the 1966 Venice Biennale, containing 1,500

mirrored plastic spheres available for sale at two dollars each (marketed as "Your

Narcissium (*sic*) For Sale"). Kusama's transactional fusing of capital to one's reflection

spurs a foundational questioning of the viewer's role as a participant, actualized

through the artwork. Han expands on this confrontation with vanity:

> Today, nothing endures. This impermanence also affects the ego and
>
> de-stabilizes it, makes it insecure. And just this insecurity, this anxiousness
>
> about oneself, produces the addictive taking of selfies, produces a self

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[22] Han, *Saving Beauty, 60.*
[23] "Yayoi Kusama's Narcissus Garden - From 1966-2018," *Public Delivery*,
https://publicdelivery.org/yayoi-kusama-narcissus/.

that is idling and never comes to rest. Faced with its inner emptiness, the subject of the selfie tries in vain to produce itself.[24]

Fig.4. *Yayoi Kusama lying in Narcissus Garden*, Venice Biennale (1966), Photographer unknown.

This obsessive maintenance of one's online existence to match the rapid pace of content disseminated in the digital realm, stages a digital death where the subject is positioned in the future as soon as they post, the impermanence of the process reinforcing that nothing endures. Affirmed by Baudrillard, "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning."[25]

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[24] Han, *Saving Beauty*, 33.
[25] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 4.

Chapter 2

2. Virtual Identity and Vision in a time of A.I.
2.1 Fodder for the A.I. Machine

With the Covid pandemic rapidly accelerating our relationship with technology,

crypto art and Non-Fungible-Tokens (NFT's), introduced in 2014 as a nascent, digital

art form (often referred to as "collectibles"),[26] had a breakthrough year in 2021 with a

total sales volume surging to $12 billion dollars.[27] Some collections, listed by artists

who carry an avatar and often function behind a pseudonym, contain as many as

10,000 collectibles, your ownership granting extended, exclusively virtual privileges

such as access to a "Yacht Club membership card and members only benefits."[28]

With NFT's, the process of aesthetic differentiation is generative, commercial,

dematerialized and less commonly concerned with art as a record of our physical

existence in the world as it is a visual representation of ephemerality, aesthetically

formulated by what could best be described by Philosopher Francois Laruelle in *Photo-*

Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics as an "art of thought…Not a conceptual art, but a

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[26] "Crypto art is a recent artistic movement in which the artist produces works of art, typically still or animated images and distributes them via a crypto art gallery or their own digital channel using blockchain technology." (Franceshet et al. 2018: 402)

[27] Matthew Fox, "NFT Sales Hit $293 Million Over the Past Week. These Were the 5 Best-Selling Digital Art Collections." *Yahoo Finance*, December 7, 2021, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/nft-sales-hit-293-million-184358575.html.

[28] Ibid.

concept modeled by the art, a generic extension of art,"[29] relying on materiality and the conceptual conservation of traces of the "real" in art to facilitate a new framework for production and distribution.

Trevor Paglen's *A Study of Invisible Images*, exhibited at Metro Pictures in 2017, saw the artist utilize neural networks developed from training libraries that group images to train an algorithm to "see" a particular object. Typical training libraries contain thousands of images of types of quotidian objects such as cats, bags, cutlery, etc. Paglen's alternative training libraries have purposely ambiguous themes like "Omens and Portents" or "Interpretations of Dreams," training a neural network to recognize groupings of objects from a specific training library to culminate in one work (Fig. 5).[30] To identify these subjects in images, the neural network creates a generic image of what each class looks like, fabricating an ulterior visual template. In this sense, Algorithmic thought provides a foundation, viewed itself as a praxis or an object of thinking with ties to conquest, where a system is maintained through predictive learning by generating its own parts via data provided by neural nets that produce counter-factual models, defined by computer scientist Larry Tesler in the 1980's—"AI is whatever hasn't been done yet."[31]

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[29] Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, 5.
30 Trevor Paglen, "A Study of Invisible Images," Metro Pictures, September 8-October 21, 2017, https://www.metropictures.com/exhibitions/trevor-paglen4/selected-works?view=slider#10.
[31] Pamela McCorduck, Machines Who Think: A Personal Inquiry into the History and *Prospects of Artificial Intelligence* (2nd ed.), (Massachusetts: A.K. Peters, Ltd.,2004), 59.

Fig. 5. Trevor Paglen, *A Man (Corpus: The Humans) Adversarially Evolved Hallucination* (2017). The AI from which this image was made was trained on the corpus "The Humans," taught to recognize things such as: Woman Holding a Gun; The Perfect Android; Licking Ice Cream; Human Eyes; Porn: A Man: Cocaine; and more. Dye sublimation metal print, 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

Paglen's exploration of this simulacrum has immense implications for our understanding of reality, "You have a moment where for the first time in history most of the images in the world are made by machines for other machines, and humans aren't even in the loop. I think the automation of vision is a much bigger deal than the invention of perspective."[32] For Laruelle, a photo-fiction is indeed a theoretical universalisation of the photo–but a generic one, by way of science, as seen through

[32] Katherine Schwab, "The is What Machines See When They Look At Us." *Fast Company*, September 8, 2017. https://www.fastcompany.com/90139345/this-is-what-machines-see-when-they-look-at-us.

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Paglen's neural networks. "It would be a bit like an artisan, to use a Socratic example, who instead of making a bed following the ideal model of the bed he already had in his mind, got it in his head to make an idea of the bed that would somewhat resemble the bed but would also not be its copy, but rather a "generic" extension of the bed."[33]

2.2 Interfaces and UAV's

When viewing Artist Anicka Yi's installation, *In Love With The World*, commissioned by Hyundai and exhibited at the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern[34], we are asked to consider a more dramatic technological life and what it would be like to share the planet with machines that could survive and evolve without human intervention. Through the development of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's) in the form of aerobes (Fig. 6)[35], Yi claims to create and reveal future possibilities for hybrid machine species, studying the processes of evolution and collective behaviour in connection to the politics of ecology. Shiny, colourful, squid-like creatures float through the expanse of Turbine Hall, each following a unique flight path with no determinate sequence, generated from system software—concealed propellors and tentacles emulating a fluidity found in nature. Entrancing and immersive, *In Love With The World*

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[33] Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, 12.
[34] "Hyundai Commission: Anicka Yi In Love With The World." Tate Modern. October 2021. https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/hyundai-commission-anicka-yi/exhibition-guide.
[35] Ibid.

mythologizes *real* nature, creating a dissociation akin to visiting a zoo where the

animals can't see or engage with us, and viewers must employ their imagination to free

themselves from disenchantment.[36] The experience of functioning as an interface to the

work is tinged with a sense of unease in consideration of whether AI could eventually

develop sensory consciousness and function autonomously in the near future.

Fig. 6. Installation view of Hyundai Commission: *Anicka Yi: In Love with the World*, Tate Modern
(October 2021). Photo by Will Burrard Lucas.

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[36] The animals are there so we can see them—if they can't see us, then do we exist? This is also
   applicable to posting the banal and selfies on social media, "existing" through recognition.

2.3 The Metaverse: Virtual Identities and Digital 'Ghosts'

The film *Counterfeit World* (1964) tells the story of a virtual city that is developed as a computer simulation for market research purposes[37] in which the simulated inhabitants are conscious; all but one aware of the true purpose of their identity. With the introduction of the Metaverse (a combination of the prefix "meta" implying transcending, affixed to "universe"), considerations surrounding the societal implications of a virtual world where the infinite is possible and the data that is mined from our imagination are portent. Plans for a utopian future where one could remove themselves from planet earth to the perceived limitlessness of space,[38] are not so dissimilar from living on earth immersed in a simulation, both risking the absence of responsibility attached to individual actions (such as in a video game). Economist Robin Hanson argues that the effects of simulation awareness are self-interested: "…your motivation to save for retirement, or to help the poor in Ethiopia, might be muted by realizing that in your simulation, you will never retire and there is no Ethiopia,"[39] generating concerns regarding consumption, disposability, footprint, and the legal rights of non-government entities both virtually and in outer space.

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[37] Nicholas D'Ascanio, "This City is the Most Average Place in All of Canada," *Reader's Digest*. August 31, 2021. https://www.readersdigest.ca/travel/canada/most-average-place-in-canada/.

[38] Thomas J. Herron, "Deep Space Thinking: What Elon Musk's Idea to Nuke Mars Teaches Us About Regulating the 'Visionaries and Daredevils' of Outer Space." Columbia Journal of Environmental Law 41 (3): 553.

[39] Robin Hanson, "How to Live in a Simulation." *Journal of Evolution and Technology,* 7 no. 1 (2001)., 7.

As quickly as we can develop a diverse assortment of virtual identities, they can just as hastily be deleted from existence. Thea-Mai Baumann, an Australian artist and technologist had created an Instagram account with the name @metaverse in 2012—a profile she used to document nearly a decade of work through her augmented reality company, Metaverse Makeovers. A few days after Facebook's announcement on October 28, 2021 that the company would be changing its name to Meta, Baumann attempted to login to her Instagram account and received the notification, "Your account has been blocked for pretending to be someone else."[40] When the hegemonic "someone else" (ie. Facebook) enters second, what qualifiers dictate who is the rightful owner of a particular identity and its corresponding digital data? Baumann plans to develop her experience into an art project, "…P∞st_Lyfe, which is about death in the metaverse,"[41] examining the future of data and questioning who lives on as our post-mortem digital ghost?

Lorenza Pignatti, Professor of Phenomenology of Contemporary Art at the New Academy of Fine Arts (NABA) in Milan explores the reliance of consciousness on the dimension of time in *Experiments in Eternity: Erkki Kurenniemi*. Her analysis of Kurenniemi's lifelong art experiment entitled, *In 2048,* exhibited in 2012 at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany addresses the limits of simulation and queries whether a person

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[40] Madison Connaughton, "Her Instagram Handle Was 'Metaverse.' Last Month, It Vanished," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2021.
[41] Ibid.

can truly be "reactivated" post-mortem. Actively engaged in the cyber-utopian

counterculture of the 1960s, Kurenniemi spawned *2048* as a lifelong multimedia

archive to store a retrievable memory of his existence, where the artist's life can be

reactivated on July 10, 2048 and "played" as a game—a means of making eternity

accessible. Simulated or replicated human experience stems from the term

"expiration" with the Latin root, "per-ire," which is "to go beyond" or "to die,"[42]

Kurenniemi's *2048* representing a pensive assessment of the philosophical implications

of a simulated life where technology surpasses human development, and we

decompose (rather dispassionately) as a set of digital data. Pignatti considers the

impact of attempts to compute duration once devoid of conscious experience:

> Digital simulations have an uncanny ability to proliferate, transform, and agitate.
> Ubiquitous screens and devices have defined the psychological formation of the
> younger generation. Immersive techniques and metadata management are
> transforming the techno-environment such that we should no longer think in
> terms of technology *shaping* self-perception, but instead of technology
> simulating the self, and then replacing the self with its simulation. The
> technological downloading of human identity is the horizon of this evolution.[43]

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[42] Lorenza Pignatti, "Experiments in Eternity: Erkki Kurenniemi," *e-flux Journal*, 85 no. 10 (October 2017), 1.
[43] Ibid.

Eternime, a project spawned in 2014 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and

developed into an online service with the tagline "Who Wants to Live Forever?" offers

the promise of digital immortality, building Artificially Intelligent avatars of users, its

tagline reading, "We strongly believe that a future where humans are not forgotten

after they die is far more enriching for the world than the current reality."[44]

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[44] 'Eternime,' https://eternime.breezy.hr/.

Chapter 3

3 The Self-Sovereign Identity--A Rupture Between the Physical and Digital
3.1 Visionary Nostalgia? 'Non-Conformists and Misfits'

"We are entering the First Wave of Digital Nostalgia"[45] according to technology

and culture writer for *The New Yorker*, Kyle Chayka. The most recent shift towards pixel

art made visible in NFT's, Crypto Art and in the moribund but original late-nineties

video games, such as Pokémon are aligned with what the writer Carl Wilson once

called the "20-year cycle of resuscitation"[46] of popular culture. Chayka aligns with

Baudrillard in his belief that, "Nostalgia is partly a response to disappointment with the

present."[47] The earlier era of the Internet represented a time when individuals felt they

held a distinct identity in their digital lives, prior to the dehumanizing corporatization of

content offered by Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Paradoxically, the return

of mnemonic, generic and intentionally rudimentary pixel art appears to signal a desire

to shed the veneer and return to a more personalized form of self-expression.

Distilling the visual has the potential to invigorate the imagination, creating a

counterpoint to photorealistic graphics, often bordering on cartoonish in their attempts

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[45] Kyle Chayka,"Pokémon and the First Wave of Digital Nostalgia," *The New Yorker*, December 3, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/pokemon-and-the-first-wave-of-digital-nostalgia.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

to *not-quite* reproduce reality.[48] *CryptoPunks* are another example of pixel art's

substantial popularity, circulated on the NFT marketplace, with 10,000 uniquely

generated characters ("non-conformists and misfits") stored on the Ethereum

Blockchain where potential buyers can search for identities with particular attributes

such as CryptoPunk 5530's "front beard," "mohawk thin" and "silver chain" (Fig. 7).[49]

In a cultural environment that is devoid of ideology and confronted with the ubiquity of

the allied technologies of consumer capitalism, pixelation's rupture of the interface

between the physical and digital is concerned with its function, what Will Wiles refers

to in an essay for *Aeon*, "The Machine Gaze," living in a "paradoxical age of

astonishing technology set against jaded and reflexive nostalgia."[50]
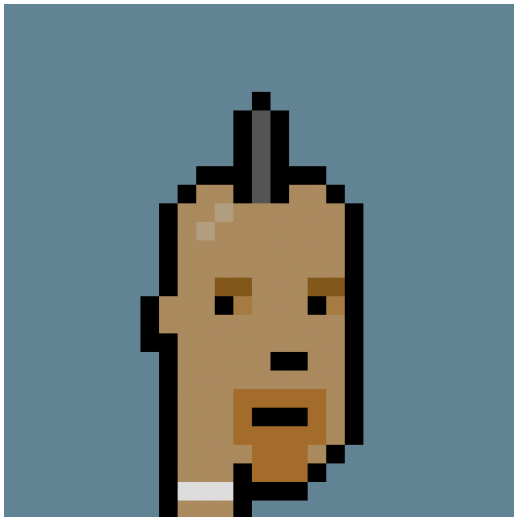

Fig. *7.* Matt Hall and John Watkinson, *CryptoPunk #5540* (2017), Digital Image, 24 x 24 pixels.

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[48] CNET, "Everything Facebook Revealed About the Metaverse in 11 Minutes," October 28, 2021, https://youtu.be/gElflo6uw4g.
[49] "CryptoPunk 5530," https://www.larvalabs.com/cryptopunks/details/5530.
[50] Wiles,"The Machine Gaze," 3.

Co-Curator's Matteo Bittanti and Marco de Mutiis, for the exhibition, *How to Win at Photography* at the Photographers' Gallery, London, UK consider how image making became a numbers game, where features and methods often seen in gaming environments are now being incorporated into non-gaming contexts. Coined in 2002 by game designer Nick Pelling, who had been asked to develop game-like interfaces for ATM and vending machines, the term gamification saw increasingly widespread adoption with online platforms adopting reward and point systems mimicking game mechanics to increase user engagement. States Bittanti, "Gamification is a quintessential neoliberal tool. It's about applying game mechanics to non-playful contexts and activities, thus turning playing into a means to achieve something else. It's a complete subversion of value and purpose: a process that should be rewarding in itself becomes instrumentalized."[51]

3.2 Crypto Art, NFT's and the 'Provably Rare' Self-Sovereign Identity

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Theorist Guy Debord introduces the concept of the "spectacle" as an inverted image of society mediated by images where relations with commodities have negatively altered social connections. Debord believed that the influence of images hinders critical thought and reorders life to look at the past and future as undifferentiated, having a profound impact on human perception, stating,

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[51] https://www.creativereview.co.uk/photography-gamification-social-media/

"The spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice."[52] Debord's text is pioneering in its provision of a relational framework for understanding consumption within contemporary culture where representations of reality *replace* reality, prompting concerns surrounding societal homogenization, cultural alienation, the influence of mass media and its effects on personal identity. The Spectacle's function in reducing reality to an infinite supply of visual fragments was perhaps Debord's most significant prophecy, as evinced in the current art world shift to NFT's. To Debord, in the spectacle, lived reality is replaced by having and appearing—this association with dominant images of need prompting a diminished understanding of existence, and offering a counterpoint to the genealogy of NFT's, specifically artists' challenging the art world's established practices and instead identifying with commercial imagery that "melded currency with art creation."[53]

The global experience of the Pandemic has had a profound impact on how we experience art and thrust us into an accelerated twenty-first century where online screen time spiked dramatically within a compressed timeframe. Our engagement with one another in the face of ongoing tumult, paired with technological advancements

[52] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 13.
[53] Massimo Franceschet, Giovanni Colavizza, T'ai Smith, Blake Finucane, Martin Lukas
 Ostachowski, Jonathan Perkins, James Morgan and Sebastián Hernández. 'Crypto Art: A Decentralized View.' *Leonardo*, 54 no. 4 (August 2021), 402-405.
https://direct.mit.edu/leon/article/54/4/402/97295/Crypto-Art-A-Decentralized-view, 403.

has fed a cycle of impermanence and disappointment. Simulated environments like the Metaverse, where artifice is represented as superior to reality, reinforce the notion that we have choice and can be in possession of what we desire to feel complete "somewhere else." This soteriological application to infinity holds its power in the immaterial and the conceptual, both for the fantasy that we as users wish to access but also what is gained from us, meanwhile facing a potentially dystopian future where we are situated further from true experiences. The literal definition of nostalgia is a painful longing for home (nostos meaning homecoming, algos, pain), which paradoxically questions the possibility for a sustained yearning for the impossible utopian aspirations of The Metaverse (even through attempts to tap into some of the more inspiring depths of the human mind).

Conscientization is a neologism, derived from the Spanish word *conscientización* that conveys the idea of developing a new conception of consciousness with an emphasis on developing awareness and the ability to think critically about an individual's position within different spheres of influence, while also spatially. In "Spaces of Hope," Author David Harvey considers how utopian movements through the ages have attempted to create a just society, his concept of "dialectical utopianism" addressing two types of utopianism: one that is the result of social processes and one that materializes in spatial forms. A reimagining of alternative worlds offers the potential for new forms of social and political life and with it the

prospect of fulfillment while balancing tension between the competing interests of

disparate groups. The fading of borders between the digital and the physical is a

reimagining of a different future, where, if we accept that 'society is made and

imagined,' then we can also believe that it can be 'remade and reimagined.'[54]

3.3 'Challenge the Concept of Value Through Money and Art': 'The Veblen Effect' and the Monetization of Dematerialization

American Economist Thorstein Veblen postulated a theory of the "leisure class"

in 1899 that connected consumerism to the demarcation of socio-economic classes

through what he referred to as "conspicuous consumption."[55] Building on this theory,

the "Veblen Effect," a term coined by Economist Harvey Leibenstein, argues that the

positive effect on an individual's utility function for a commodity is caused by the

knowledge that the price of the commodity is high. In "The Economics of Fashion

Demand" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Dwight Robinson argues that

conspicuous consumption-as a product of a class-based society has held a mode of

differentiation in its tradition of vertical contiguity[56] and sees the loss of meaning of a

consumer good as it is adopted by the class below—a tiered filtering down through

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[54] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 99.
[55] The factors that induce Veblen effects are explored in Bagwell and Bernheim's excellent text, "Veblen Effects in a Theory of Conspicuous Consumption" in *The American Economic Review* (1996).
[56] Dwight E. Robinson, "The Economics of Fashion Demand." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 75, no. 3, 1961, pp. 376–398., https://doi.org/10.2307/1885130, 383.

levels of affluence. Often reserved for the cultural value is an act of economic

legitimization with mechanisms that fuel adoption of new aesthetic movements

representative of "culture" itself. Cultural value is gained when the awareness of an art

object's cachet and aligning oneself with a movement or owning a work is an indicator

of being prescient and with that, a level of awareness within a realm that is culturally

elevated beyond other obvious consumer goods (fashion, automobiles, technology,

etc.), but nonetheless possesses a value that is socially constructed. Confirmed by

Veblen, "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men, wealth must be put in

evidence for esteem is awarded only on evidence."[57] Veblen's model, which I will refer

to as evidential affluence, also allows for the signaling of wealth by consuming large

quantities of a good at a lower price.

Artist Damien Hirst, in collaboration with HENI Analytics[58] announced in August

2021, a referendum on NFT's versus "traditional art" aimed to "challenge the concept

of value through money and art" through his NFT project, "The Currency" presenting a

stipulation to purchasers of works to choose between owning the digital token or the

physical artwork out of 10,000 unique NFT's, each priced at $2,000.00 (USD) and

associated with a corresponding enamel dot painting on paper, each individually

named after the artist's favorite song lyrics (Fig.8). One month into the project, 2,036

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[57] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 24.
[58] HENI Analytics offer insights through the detailed analysis of data sets developed by machine learning AI apps in order to offer a 'predictive view' of art: https://henianalytics.com/.

works sold, generating $47 million dollars in sales. A year later, with a redemption deadline looming, Hirst posted on his Twitter[59] that in a non-reversible decision, collectors ultimately chose to keep 5,149 physical works and 4,851 NFT's, meaning the corresponding physical tenders of the NFT's would be burned at London's Newport Street Gallery[60] where an exhibition of the painted works would take place, opening on September 9, 2022. To answer the question as to whether aesthetics play a factor in this decision making, HENI developed a ranking system where the rarity[61] of each work is analyzed based on algorithms that assess words within titles, colour usage and density of application and compiled within a market report, made fully accessible to the public.[62]

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[59] "The Currency" thread on Hirst's Twitter:
https://twitter.com/hirst_official/status/1552303406882111494?s=20&t=ALDkQxVl8mBF1YawbeSuXg
[60] Newport Street Gallery presents exhibitions of works exclusively from Damien Hirsts art collection:
https://www.newportstreetgallery.com/
[61] The maximum price paid for a piece sits at $120,614 (USD) for a work titled 'Yes,' which is classified as rare due to its single word title.
[62] HENI, "The Currency" Market Report:
https://reports.nft.heni.com/DamienHirstThe%20CurrencyMarket%20Report30July2021to31August2021.pdf.

Fig. 8. Damien Hirst, 'An Incongruous Destiny' (*The Currency - 7491*) (2021), Enamel paint, handmade paper, watermark, microdot, hologram, pencil, 7 9/10 × 11 4/5 in.

What is the economic meaningfulness of something that holds its value in its rarity, in the form of a "provably rare" NFT of an artwork existing on what the blockchain promises as an immutable truth associated with ownership, while accessible to the masses in a cycle of adoption, consumption and copying? For "The Economics of Fashion Demand" in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Dwight Robinson explains, "Part of market demand for a cultural good (and thus the assignment of value) is determined by its rarity and "demonstrability", or the ability to display to others the rare cultural good."[63] The aesthetic movement of NFT's is reflective of the market cycle

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[63] Robinson, "The Economics of Fashion Demand," 383.

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of fashion, or a "collective selection" where the broader population determines what is

considered successful, in this case, due to a shift in arts function as a commodity form

within the cultural economy, and in the case of Hirst's experiment, a financial gamble

that is exogenous to the form of the artwork itself. James Bridle refers to such new

ways of seeing as a new form of consciousness, producing within us sensations:

> …new ways of seeing (/thinking) produce if not a new world the new sensations
> which are the medium by which we appreciate a new world (and for that tug
> at your heart, that drop in your stomach, when you see a distant place through
> the internet and a number of devices (including your friends drinking in a distant
> city in real-time on Twitter) and wish you were there, I coin the term
> *Strasseblickfernweh*, or Street View wanderlust).[64]

The meaning emergent in the embodied information of art produced within our

cultural context is elucidated in Malcolm McCullough's *Ambient Commons: Attention*

in the Age of Embodied Information, looking to the fixed forms that exist beneath the

data flows that augment our reality and are crucial to our engagement with it. This

"mediated information," "Much more in the sensory field comes from and refers to

someplace else."[65] In the early phase of NFT's Peter Frölich presented a functional

bitcoin mining rig bordered within a traditional, ornate gold frame. *Untitled Mining*

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[64] "The New Aesthetic Panel at SXSW," March 15, 2012: http://booktwo.org/notebook/sxaesthetic/.
[65] Malcolm McCullough, *Ambient Commons: Attention in the Age of Embodied Information* (MIT Press, 2013), x.

Installation (2013) (Fig.9) functions as an example of an early 20th century practice of framing unconventional work in a traditional manner. Charlotte Kent in her essay "Blockchain's Conceptual Landscape," notes that Georges Roualt's dealer "is likely responsible for placing THREE JUDGES (1936) in a late seventeenth-century style French carved frame, where it remains when displayed at the Tate."[66] Framing as a practice for legitimization and the commercial allusions associated with the practice prompts contextualization. The influences and ambitions of the past when correlated with works of the present elicit similar debates surrounding high and low art, artistic value and originality and significantly, the stakes each individual involved has in the current discussion.
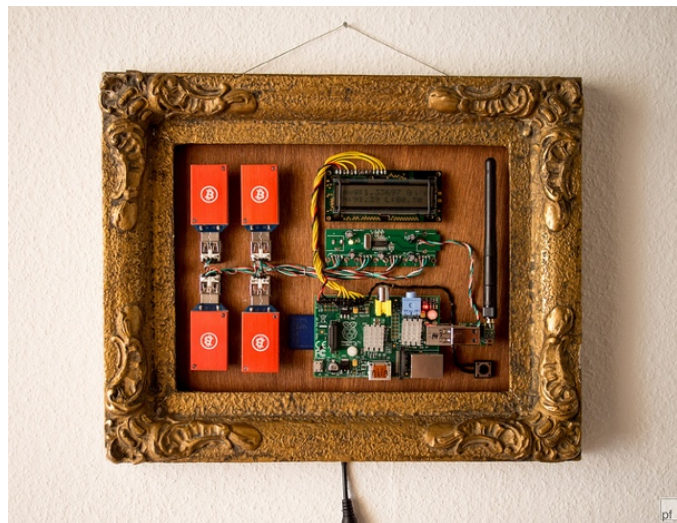
Fig. 9. Peter Frölich, *Untitled Mining Installation* (2013), Hardware: Rasberry Pi Model B, 4x ASICminer Block Eruptor, CSL Wireless USB Stick, Class 10 SD Card, Powered USB Hub (Logilink), 16 x 2 HD44780 Display, Button, 5V, 3A Power Supply. Software: Raspbian Linux, CGminer 3.1.1, BitcoinD (to help the network).

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[66] Alfred Weidinger. *Proof of Art: A Short History of NFT's From the Beginning of Digital Art to the Metaverse* (Berlin: Distanz, 2021), 146.

The legitimization of identity and place takes the form of apocalyptic imagery and a manner of thinking that embraces destruction in order to make way for the authority of the new. Lansdowne notes, "The reimaged past makes implicit a destructive present and a damaged future; therefore, invasion becomes both apocalyptic and nostalgic."[67] Much as Anicka Yi imagines consciousness and agency in non-human ways for her installation work, so too is human authority reinforced through the authoring of nature, whether authentic or pulled from a combination of inspiration found in nature and imagination, living ecosystems and technology. There is no longer an inability or unwillingness to reimagine consciousness and agency in non-human ways, as offered by Lansdowne, but rather our human authority is perhaps best demonstrated by a bias and agency over constructions of what is being lost with the same emphasis on conquest and encroachment, what features are destroyed and what are included and what is the culpability of non-native human agents and human-constructed simulated non-native environments that are now being embraced for offering a form of escape or creative capacity that is beyond our own anthropocentric understanding of the world?

"The New Aesthetic" refers to the increasing appearance of digital technology as a visual language in the physical world, observing a pervasive fusing of the virtual

[67] Emma Lansdowne, "Crisis of Invasion: Militaristic Language and the Legitimization of Identity and Place," *Invisible Culture*, no. 28, 2018, 4.

and physical, defined as "The New Aesthetic." a term coined by James Bridle that

began to achieve wider attention following a panel at the SXSW conference in 2012.

The gallery's active role in cultivating perceived value of art and who produces it

through a process of placement within permanent collections of museums and

institutions. The proportion of galleries representing the most visible and thus most

successful artists hinged on a cycle of museum acquisition and collector purchase. To

avoid depreciation, galleries assume a stance of inelasticity in the pricing of

represented artists work, creating an economic system that connects aesthetic value to

the role of those who are purveyors of tase (i.e., cultural value). As stated by Elizabeth

Currid in "The Economics of a Good Party: Social Mechanics and the Legitimization of

Art/Culture", "Value for cultural goods is significantly controlled by quantity and

access, but particularly who desires and is able to consume these goods"[68]

Ever since the hype surrounding NFT's began, so has the question continued to

surface, "Why should anyone pay money for it?" quickly followed by an explanation of

NFT's function as a certificate of authenticity. In the case of the sale of artist Beeple's

NFT collage, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, paying 69 million (USD) for an image file

that can be downloaded and shared an infinite number of times as a new online sphere

in art has at times been met with a lack of understanding, where the agency to own

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[68] Elizabeth Currid, "The Economics of a Good Party: Social Mechanics and the Legitimization of Art/Culture." *Journal of Economics and Finance*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2007, 387, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02885728.

and resell your image file feels illusory. Anika Meier argues that we are now living in a "Post-NFT" era, rife with questions surrounding intent. On July 14, 2022, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, began minting NFT's of rarely exhibited impressionist works in its collection, from the likes of Monet to Degas to raise funds for the conservation of pieces in its collection. This initiative is in partnership with LaCollection, a company that digitizes high resolution files of physical artworks and lists them on an online marketplace.

Gatekeepers, according to Currid "…are central to the valorization of goods symbolically"[69]…as such, gatekeepers act as officers of symbolic value while cultural commodity intermediaries (e.g. buyers for record stores, luxury clothing stores and so forth) are essential in the successful transformation (and transmission) of art and culture from symbolic to economic value (though many intermediaries take cues from gatekeepers). Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between cultural production that is symbolic versus that which is growth-oriented is in correlation with the growth of an increasingly socially diverse consumer public, "This process is correlated with the constant growth of a public of potential consumers, of increasing social diversity, which guarantee the producers of symbolic goods minimal conditions of economic independence and, also,

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[69] Ibid, 388.

a competing principle of legitimacy."[70] The cultural economy relies on cultural habits

that cannot be divorced from a market of cultural fields. Confirmed by Susen, "The

power of culture is only conceivable as "symbolic power", that is, as a form of power

which determines how we make sense, or how we fail to make sense, of reality by

virtue of cultural codes."[71] In this sense, the primacy of a cultural commodity rests in its

ability to convince consumers of the social legitimacy of its market, thus altering our

habits into what Susen refers to as a "subjective appendage of systemic

commodifiability."[72] Or as Bourdieu notes, "The commodification of culture reinforces

the affirmation of the primacy of form over function, of the mode of representation

over the object of representation, […] of the saying over the thing said."[73] In short, the

prioritisation of the systemic hegemony of capitalism through a works mode of

production is what legitimates it. However, the case of NFT's sees its internal content

take precedence over its external form, the distinguished form of collective habitus

linked not to the creation of an autonomous aesthetic field (connections are often

made to Blockchain art's semblance to prior ready-made and pop art aesthetics),

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[70] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 1.
[71] Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner. *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 9.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid, 180.

however the codified legitimacy is the idiosyncrasy of Blockchain art's function over

form, confirmed by Susen:

> When we buy into the symbolic power of cultural commodities, we are subject
> to both the powerful nature of the symbolic and the symbolic nature of power:
> we seek to acquire the value the commodity *represents*, and we aim to obtain
> the authority the commodity *contains*.[74]

3.4 Biofiction: A Tool for Understanding an Anti-Deterministic View of Aesthetic Reality

Musa Duman, in her piece, "Nietzsche on the Value of Life and Truth,"

ruminates on how both Socrates and dialectic represent for Nietzsche what is

distinctively an un-Greek way of being in contrast to ancient Greece, where the illusory

charm of rational thought attracted the elite and captivated them—"a noble taste is

thus vanquished."[75] Truth, which philosophy or dialectic invented, grew out of "the

spirit of revenge" against "a noble taste" actualizing the best instincts of life.[76] Much as

in the literary application of Biofiction, the measure of a novel's success is dependent

upon the extent to which a character "feels" real, as opposed to whether the fictional

protagonist is in fact accurately represented. Let us consider "accurate representation"

in terms of an aesthetic form, and how truthful fictions have come to dominate the

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[74] Susen and Turner, *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, 180.
[75] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 475.
[76] Musa Duman, "Nietzsche and the Value of Life and Truth," *Archives of Philosophy*, 52: 19-39.
https://doi.org/10.26650/arcp2020-002, 25.

aesthetic sphere, looking to the biographical novel as an aesthetic form, "in reaction

against and as a counter to the historical novel."[77] Following the Enlightenment,

scientific instruments and analysis were employed in order to understand cataclysmic

historical events with the hope being that the systematization of the knowledge of what

happened would allow individuals to predict and avoid future catastrophes. This

endeavor, referred to by Lackey in *Biofiction: An Introduction* as "…an attempt to

make history into a rigorous science"[78] prompted the rise of the historical novel,

notably as an aesthetic form that often conveyed the causes of human-generated

disasters more broadly.

George Lukács' *The Historical Novel*, a landmark study published *in* 1937,

articulates the legitimization of historical fiction and its success is representative of how

the audience participating engage with the work, "When successful, the historical novel

sheds useful light on how readers in the author's present have come to be as they

currently are, thereby giving them the necessary information to predict and direct the

future in the service of social and political progress.'[79] Friedrich Nietzsche, a notable

detractor of the conception of history-as-science argues in his essay, "On the Uses and

Disadvantages of History for Life," that the approach removes responsibility as it

considers humans to be simply the product of their environment—a historical,

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[77] Michael Lackey, *Biofiction: An Introduction* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2021), 10.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

deterministic view devoid of agency. Nietzsche demands a biography that emphasizes humans' ability to evade determinism rather than shed light on the socio-historical reality that defines the human and the conditioning forces of the age.

Oscar Wilde rejected history-as-science in his essay, "The Critic as Artist" written in 1891 where he makes an important distinction between history's power in shaping the human and the immense capability of the artist to construct the world. "The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age."[80] This intellectual shift emphasizes the invention of representative figures and movements working in tandem to aesthetically symbolize a more accurate socio-cultural reality of our time. Lackey expands on this shift by stating, "In service to the larger truths in the present and for the future, authors feel free to make changes to the historical and biographical record."[81] Art's ability to evade determinism and function as a construction of self in contemporary visual culture can be seen as a form of Biofiction, communicating how biographical or historical fact is superseded by human agency in how the aesthetic form is approached. The quality of the work ultimately is not measured in its historical accuracy, but rather its socio-cultural accuracy.

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[80] Oscar Wilde, "Historical Criticism," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 143-144.
[81] Lackey, *Biofiction*, 14.

Aligning a conception of truth or fidelity to reality with a reference point to the

past prompted James Bridle to coin the term "The New Aesthetic": "This is one of

those moments when the art world sidles over toward a visual technology and tries to

get all metaphysical. It is the attempted imposition on the public of a new way of

perceiving reality. ... Above all, the New Aesthetic is telling the truth."[82] Bruce Sterling,

in a response to Bridle's definition referred to this aesthetic movement as a

wunderkammer, a selection of exhibited curiosities and rarities, with a basis for their

assembly in Enlightenment Europe. What's significant about this reference is that the

function of the *wunderkammer* to modern science developed a new mode of inquiry

that allowed for reflexiveness between (at times unremarkable) relics of the past as a

tool for understanding emergent digital aesthetics whose banality and ubiquity often

goes unnoticed. Bridle's New Aesthetic, "…is not about seeing something new—it is

about the new things we are not seeing."[83] Prior to visual data becoming lost in the

abyss, the effect of the rapid transformations of digital technologies alters our

relationship with reality, where understanding the underlying structure of the

technology also allows for a deeper acknowledgement of the inherent power relations

and monopolizing of data that often go undetected.

Efforts to fabricate a more "real" gallery experience deploy Augmented and

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[82] Will Wiles, "The Machine Gaze." *Aeon*, September 2012, https://aeon.co/essays/what-do-we-uncover-when-we-look-through-digital-eyes, 7.
[83] Wiles, "The Machine Gaze," 10.

Virtual Reality experiences which features "five masterpieces in high definition on a

metaverse social experience"[84] by van Gogh, Cézanne, Manet, Rembrandt and

Caravaggio, that have disappeared long ago from public view but are now made

visible in the Metaverse. Made to mimic a gallery experience, users are positioned on

an orientation pad in the center of the gallery to view a series of paintings, including

works such as Édouard Manet's *Chez Tortoni*, c.1875 (Fig.10) stolen from the Isabella

Stewart Gardner Museum of Boston on March 18, 1990. Floating in black space. The

"Stolen Art Gallery" attempts to create a point of reconnection, precisely in its premise

to construct a virtual environment to showcase works stolen decades ago, formerly

inaccessible to the art-seeking public. The immersive virtual reality (VR) experience,

developed by Compass UOL "the worldwide tech partner for companies" is accessed

through the MetaQuest 2 headset. Claims to "firsts" in the form of being the first

Metaverse museum[85] take precedence over the context of why and how the work is

being shown, the recreation of a new mode of sharing and meeting in meta-space

through "social interaction technologies for everyone to experience art on a new

level."[86]

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[84] Compass UOL, "The Stolen Art Gallery," May 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EFoXEVCuA8&ab_channel=Compass.

[85] Sarah Rose Sharp. "A New VR Experience Takes You into a Museum of Stolen Masterpieces." *Hyperallergic*. July 28, 2022. https://hyperallergic.com/740555/a-new-vr-experience-takes-you-into-a-museum-of-stolen-masterpieces/.

[86] Compass UOL, "The Stolen Art Gallery."

Fig. 10. *An Avatar Visitor at the "Stolen Art Gallery"* with their head through Edouard Manet's *Chez Tortoni* (ca.1875).

Included are heightened capabilities such as: creating your own avatar, sticking your face through a painting, Oculus technology inserting audio that specifically corresponds to the work being viewed, emoji reactions, the ability to temporarily defile paintings with pens (generously provided) that move well beyond what is permitted within the realm of viewing art even in the most casual museum or gallery setting. The experience takes precedence over the nagging reality that the work on view is not a physical art object, devoid of Benjamin's "Aura" and all that can be gleaned from an in-person encounter, instead Compass UOL claims to offer "more and more realistic

levels of people's immersive experience within a metaverse."[87] Compass UOL's CEO

Alexis Rockenbach expands by stating, "The artistic conception of the gallery was

designed to give greater importance to the pieces of art than to the gallery itself, so

the environment and lighting gives focus and importance only to the pieces, not

having other points of distraction."[88]

    The global experience of the Pandemic has had a profound impact on how we

experience art and thrust us into an accelerated twenty-first century where online

screen time spiked dramatically within a short timeframe. Our engagement with one

another in the face of ongoing tumult, paired with technological advancements has fed

a cycle of impermanence and disappointment. Simulated environments like the

Metaverse, where artifice is represented as superior to reality, reinforce the notion that

we have choice and can be in possession of what we desire to feel complete

"somewhere else." This soteriological application to infinity holds its power in the

immaterial and the conceptual, both for the fantasy that we as users wish to access but

also what is gained from us, meanwhile facing a dystopian future where we are situated

further from true experiences.

    The omissions that differentiate visual content produced by A.I. in its attempt at

mastery over language and imagery has prompted humans to develop an artificial

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[87] Sharp, "A New VR Experience."
[88] Ibid.

perception that plays with our ability to be clever; the embedded layers of knowledge

derived from our experiences, recognizing and filling the missing areas, anticipating

and adapting, shifting the way we respond to information—powerful supercomputers

meanwhile operating on a cycle to guess the gaps. The literal definition of nostalgia is

"a painful longing for home" (nostos meaning homecoming, algos, pain), which

paradoxically questions the possibility for a sustained yearning for the impossible

utopian aspirations of The Metaverse (even through attempts to tap into some of the

more inspiring depths of the human mind). When a simulation provides a platform for

identity reinvention or "re-creation," what is our referent when we've lost touch with

our self? Answered by Adorno, "Because art is what it has become, its concept refers

to what it does not contain."[89]

The characteristic of truth, to return to Nietzsche, is to make definitive our

experience of things. Expanded by Duman, "If truth is the most important thing in

human life, if the core of being human is constituted by, what one might call, an

involvement with truth, then art, too, gains the whole significance it has from the point

of view of its function for truth."[90] With this in mind, what is the fundamental motivation

behind legitimizing the relationship between truth and art today, when the impetus

behind new aesthetic developments is to reject (at worst), conceal or simulate (at best)

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[89] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 3.
[90] Musa Duman, "Nietzsche and the Value of Life and Truth," *Archives of Philosophy*, 52: 19-39, 20, https://doi.org/10.26650/arcp2020-002

references to that which is grounded in referencing that which we have come to understand as real? Situating our histrionics so we can continue to actively trust in art to prompt discourse surrounding truth is an ongoing negotiation between the real and constructed, and much like for Calle, is about searching with a discerning eye for a greater understanding of what we wish to find.

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