

To ask whether blockchain technologies can help create a commons must prompt a reconsideration of the underlying concept itself: Who is a commons for? Are its contents finite, such as land, or potentially infinite, such as knowledge and cultural expression? And should a commons be a resource pool out of which property can be generated, or, rather, a utopia of un-ownability? Debates surrounding such questions have long been dominated by economists and philosophers. Perhaps most famously, the notion of the “tragedy of the commons” suggests that without strictly regulated access, greedy users will always exhaust shared resources, and thereby destroy them. Humans, in this view, are too egotistic for any commons to stand a chance of persisting. Can emerging blockchain tech – computational solutions that work on principles of decentralisation, non-hierarchical control structures, and consensus-based, self-enforcing rule systems – mark a turning point in this thinking?

Among those to resist the “tragedy of the commons” perspective was the Nobel prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom, who, throughout her career, sought to find solutions based on cooperation and collective action. Her work is a reminder that the problem of creating and maintaining a commons has never been purely technological in nature – instead, a commons also requires, well, a *commonly* enacted commitment to safeguarding shared resources and equitable access to them. A commons, therefore, should be understood not simply as a source of potential property, but as an ecology of inclusivity and accessibility, a world of care for both the objects and the subjects that populate it.

In the last few years, such ecologies have begun to be imagined in the form of blockchain-based decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs). With the emergence of sophisticated DAOs, often in digital activist communities, it is possible that blockchain technologies will soon play an important role in efforts to establish new types of commons. But as always, we must not mistake a technology that can

augment a solution for the solution itself. After all, blockchain tech occupies a wide spectrum ranging from crypto-anarchist activism to far-right libertarianism.

In art contexts, this conundrum is well-encapsulated by the NFT phenomenon. From the get-go, blockchain-based “non-fungible tokens” that render digital artefacts as unique were presented by many as a revolutionary approach to making the art world more equitable and democratic. But for anyone who cares to notice, much of today’s NFT world looks like a platform-powered desert of hyper-propertyisation. In an environment of digital expressions that are, potentially, infinitely reproducible, should artificial scarcity really be part of how we imagine a commons? Other key features of NFTs, such as algorithmically enforceable secondary-sale royalty contracts, may make the art market more sustainable for some, but they are also symptomatic of an increasing financialisation of creative practice. And while the promise of fractionalising art-ownership on new blockchain-based platforms may indeed result in “shared ownership” models, this is a far cry from the values of inclusivity and shared access inscribed in more radical ideas of the commons.

A few months ago, the artist Sarah Friend tweeted from a blockchain-themed panel at Art Basel, where a poignant statement had been shared: “In crypto, everyone’s a freeport.” Unfortunately, the freeport – a special economic zone of free trade often used for tax evasion and unregulated wealth hoarding – appears as the total opposite of the commons. There is no doubt that blockchain tech holds exciting opportunities for instituting new types of commons. So far, though – with the exception of experimental DAOs – we’ve mostly used the technology for amplifying existing ownership models and inventing even more restrictive ones.

MARTIN ZEILINGER is a researcher and curator working on AI art, the blockchain, intellectual property, and experimental video game culture.



Martin
Zeilinger
**Can the
blockchain
finally
create
a
commons
?**

Mónica
Belevan
**Why is
crypto
“high modern”
but NFTs
“high
romance”
?**

In March 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, I began tracking changes in epochal sentiment. For a year, I obsessively collected them on Twitter under the tag #Kulturinstinkt, a neologism meant to capture a libidinal response commensurate with the Covidian shake-up. Think of it as drive theory – not to balance Eros and Thanatos in individuals, but *Zeitgeist* and *Weltgeist* on a world-historical scale. Such was the start of *Covidian Aesthetics*, where “aesthetics” function as an early warning system for incoming *Kultur* (and outgoing *Zivilisation*).

Such a conception of aesthetics makes *affect*, not beauty, its central concern. To expand on the Breibartian formula: it is not only politics that’s downstream from culture; culture is downstream from nerves. Inevitably, since the centering of affect is itself romanticising, I came to stumble on the most romantic feature of Web3: the NFT, where non-fungibility equals uniqueness equals value. (Rarity is a

romantic value.) The fundamental tension between certain aspects of Web3 and the Interzone of the NFT space is what I’ve described in terms of a modern/romantic dialectic. Bitcoin, for example, can be thought of as a high-minded movement built around a revolutionary manifesto; eminently modern and conceptual. In its current stage of development, the NFT space is the Satoshi whitepaper’s drop-shadow; a hedonic hotspot, powered by orgiastic individualism (styled as “self-sovereignty”) and excitement.

Both theatres of operation coexist, but do not always overlap, within a broader space sometimes referred to as the metaverse, the closest precedent of which, imaginably speaking, is the dynamic unconscious in both its collective *and* associative forms. The metaverse is thus a) a symbolic base-layer and archetypal repository, and b) an expanding, co-created psychocultural *Gestalt* of shared representations “not necessarily inherited” or held identically by each individual. There is no full picture to be had of the libidinal economy, but here we are, enacting it.

Neither the metaverse nor the unconscious was discovered, and it is irrelevant to think of either in terms of existence. Each was *invented* to beget new possibility-spaces for symbolic capacity. There is a reason why what started as money is now manifesting as art. NFTs may soon be as ubiquitous as smartphones. Sticky tech, spread through viral channels – art and entertainment – is how Web3 is most likely to leak into the mainstream. It’s why cryptoart is equal parts warlike and artful. An NFT is easy to arm as a high-concentrate dopamine capsule. For every claim of ecocide and money laundering that’s thrown at us, we are, respectfully, in the drug business – a romantic pursuit if ever there was one.

MÓNICA BELEVAN is Chief Concept Officer at Accursed Share. She writes at Covidian Aesthetics.