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Blockchain manifestos: fighting for the imagination of a culture

by Charlotte Kent • November 2021 • Journal article

The cryptoverse is a promised utopia, an antidote to the ivory tower, market-driven art world with its well-documented preference for work made by white men. Cryptoart is meant to be a setting where every viewer/collector is on a level playing field regardless of fluency in artspeak, and every artist is properly rewarded for their talents. So far though, it hasn't fully turned out that way.¹

Against the backdrop of an explosive cryptomarket in 2021, the journalist Shana Nys Dambrot questioned the utopian rhetoric surrounding blockchain.² As she argued, the history of art has disregarded individuals based on sexist and racist ideologies to allow a certain discourse to be maintained. Numerous attempts over the last fifty years to address this imbalance have made little progress. The technology of blockchain seems to offer a solution, however, designed as it is to produce an open market in which anyone can participate. A blockchain is a decentralised, distributed ledger that stores data in packages called blocks. Its values of decentralisation, pseudo-anonymity and trustlessness suggest an abandonment of hierarchies, offer users a degree of privacy and reject human influence in decision-making and social relations. However, that has not been the experience for many in the collision of mainstream contemporary art and blockchain, such that some artists question the social implications of this new web-based technology. This article explores three independent manifestos written amid the hype of 2021, in which the artists Claudia Hart, Cassils and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley address blockchain technology and the utopian ideals it espouses.

The social life of blockchain

Although blockchain technology has been imagined since the end of the twentieth century, it was only launched in 2009 with the bitcoin blockchain, offering a non-hierarchical data management system with decentralisation, transparency, immutability and anonymity as key features.³ Ethereum, another blockchain, launched the ether (ETH) cryptocurrency in 2015, widening interest in the technology.⁴ Despite assorted criticisms about Ethereum's design and functionality, smart contracts – a self-executing contract in which the terms between buyer and seller

are written directly in code – enabled the chain to become a marketplace for anything. Ethereum launched a specific kind of token, ERC-721, in January 2018, which became the standard for non-fungible tokens (NFTs) by assigning sole proprietorship and securing a clearer financial value for digital objects. Previously these were inherently reproducible and mass communicable, therefore undermining the scarcity model that private property presumes. The NFT reinstates a form of scarcity by authenticating one file.

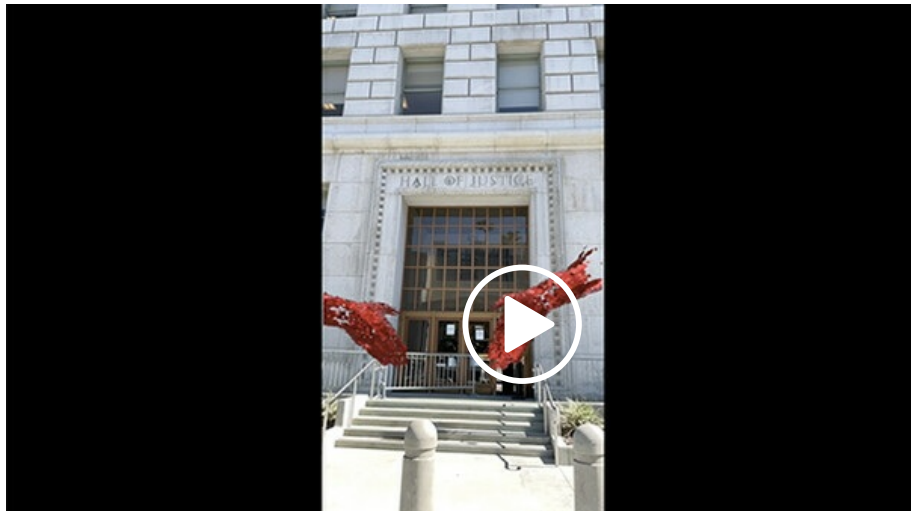


FIG. 1 *Contract Killers*, by Nancy Baker Cahill. 2021. Animated AR artwork (Courtesy the artist).

The smart contract's automation proposes trustless agreements. But is a rejection of trust the answer to greater equity and to respecting diversity? The artist Nancy Baker Cahill questioned this notion in her project *Contract Killers* (2021), which renders smart contracts non-binding and dubious **FIG. 1**.⁵ The augmented reality work shows a handshake superimposed in front of specific locations, such as a courthouse, to represent 'a realm of obligation and agreement where trust evaporates and where stated contracts continue to fail individuals and communities'.⁶ As Baker Cahill demonstrates, artists who directly engage with technologies have insights into both the potential and the limitations of adopting such systems and can provide important warnings about their social implications.

Blockchain produces a system that eliminates human trust in favour of trust in technology. Cryptography and pseudo-anonymity reject confidence in another person because that person is largely undisclosed. There is a commonplace belief that software and hardware design is apolitical; its supposed mathematical objectivity is the reason participants think it better than subjective, biased, human agreement. One must remember, however, that all technologies are designed by humans. The way biases frequently inhere within their designs undermines the neutrality that technology in general, and blockchain technology in

particular, espouses.⁷

In its first decade, art made using blockchain technology was a specialised practice. The terminologies, ideologies or aesthetic conditions were rarely discussed outside a core group of active practitioners. This changed after a compilation of five thousand digitally created images, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, by Beeple, sold for \$69 million at Christie's, New York, on 11th March 2021. Such a price exploded interest in NFTs in mainstream contemporary art.⁸ The subsequent NFT auction was held by Sotheby's over three days in April 2021, selling fairly simplistic works of code art by Pak, which in total realised nearly \$17 million.

The discourse around NFTs retains the early bias that technology is apolitical and ahistorical, with the engineer operating purely in the realm of computer mathematics in contrast to the more ideologically minded artist. Because the work is virtual, its lack of physicality is 'believed to elide all difference' and make social politics irrelevant or inconsequential.⁹ The scholar Maria Fernández describes how media theorists of the 1980s and 1990s frequently represented 'electronic technologies, especially the computer, as either value free or inherently liberatory'.¹⁰ Programmers were understood to be devoid of political radicalism, for they were 'far too devoted to the machine and its potential'.¹¹ Much digital art celebrating coding or adopting internet memes has been deemed neutral, natural or normal. The rise of postmodernism's critique of value-free propositions entered art discourse at the end of the twentieth century and made subsequent artists more suspicious of the technologies they nevertheless used. Peg Brand highlights this in relation to gender in her essay 'Feminism in context', but it can be applied universally to the digital world:

the ideas, beliefs, attitudes and values expressed in cultural products are ideological, in the sense that they are always related in a systematic way to social and economic structures in which the artist is situated [. . .] Ideas and beliefs which are proposed as value-free or non-partisan are merely those ideas which have assumed the guise of universality, perceiving as natural social facts and relations which are in fact historically specific.¹²

A depoliticisation has adhered to the art and technology discourse, but there are no neutral practices: every act enables or disables something. The easy depoliticisation of a set of aesthetics increasingly associated with blockchain obscures the flow of politics within the crypto scene, mitigating the transparency claimed by the community.

The visual language of such artists as Beeple or Pak are not neutral. Their aesthetics are political and they present gender, class and an assortment of ideologies within their subjects. For

example, in an article for *ArtNet*, Ben Davis reported on the explicit racism, misogyny and homophobia, as well as militaristic and pornographic stylings that permeated Beeple's *5000 Days*.¹³ Although he included political figures in his images, these were not critiqued but rather crudely sexualised or covered in waste. The high prices that these works realised are part of a political and aesthetic context that must be recognised. Gender and race bias exists within the tech industry. Works made by women or people outside of global art centres accrue less fiscal or media attention.¹⁴ The work *Dreaming at Dusk* (2021) **FIG. 2** was made by Itzel Yard, a female artist from Panama who uses the handle lxShells. Self-taught, like many in the crypto scene, she produced 'a generative art piece derived using the private key of the very first onion service, duskgytldkxiuqc6.onion' (onion is the service of the Tor browser, which allows users to access websites anonymously).¹⁵ The work represents her passion for code in visualising blockchain technology while simultaneously revealing its underlying structures as they enter our social and economic realm. The piece sold in May 2021 for 500 Ether (at the time about \$2 million), but few art media outlets covered it. Similarly, interest in the work of a trans youth known as FEWOCiOUS generated so much traffic that Christie's' website crashed, but otherwise the piece received scant attention among mainstream art media.¹⁶

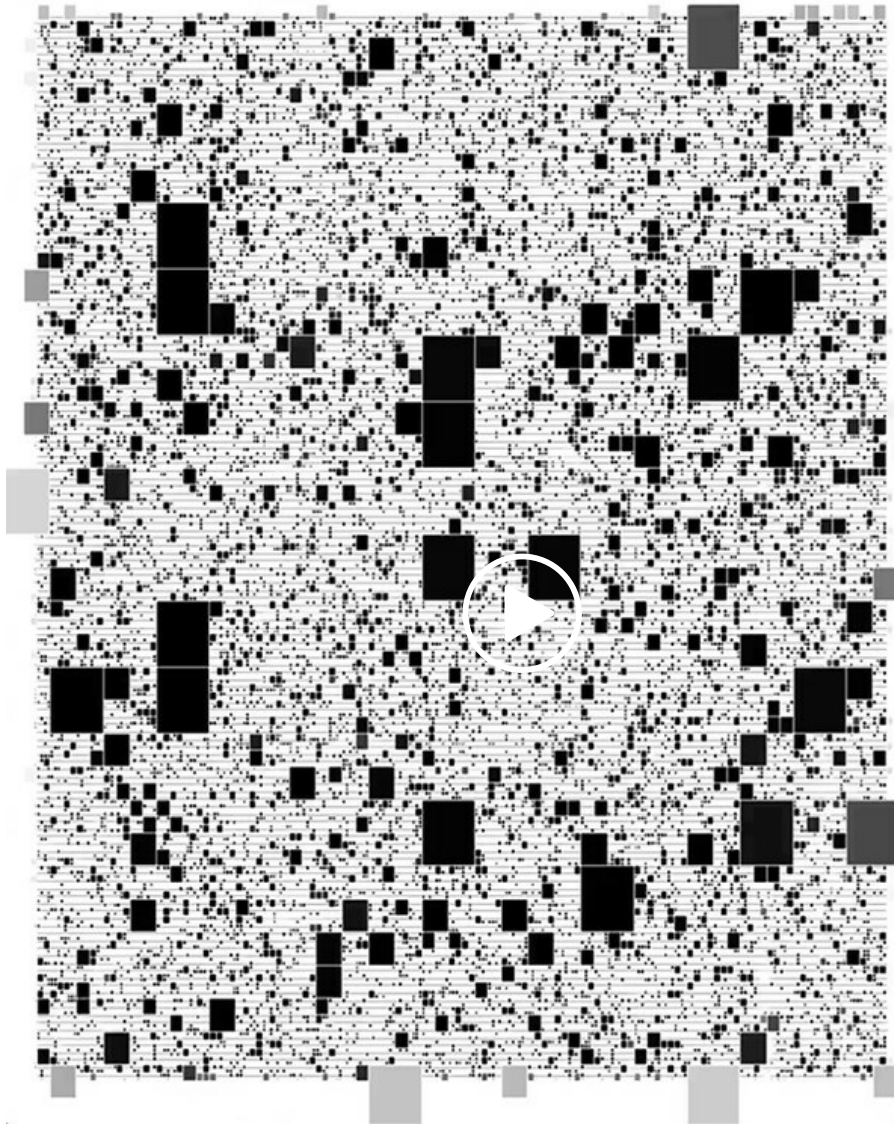


FIG. 2 *Dreaming at Dusk*, by IxShells. 2021. MP4. (Courtesy the artist).

The blockchain realm, frequently called the ‘cryptoverse’ for its underlying cryptographic logic, can supposedly offer a more accessible, communal space. This enthusiasm for blockchain speaks to utopian aspirations. However, each of the three aforementioned manifestos disrupts an easy embrace of blockchain without simply rejecting it. In their proclamations, Hart, Cassils and Brathwaite-Shirley reconsider the fixed bureaucracy of identity, expand recognition of an array of artists and lifestyles, investigate the ideologies of blockchain protocols, alter rapacious consumer exchange networks and cultivate sustainable practices for blockchain’s emergence into our social realms. They mediate a landscape that needs to be cultivated not merely developed. These manifestos argue that the virtual and tangible are not divided spaces but are in fact jointly fabricated, and that the behaviours in either impact both.

Politics of proclamation

In the early years of the internet, numerous manifestos responded to web-based technologies, recognising the emergence and potential of a new environment.¹⁷ People circulated ideas about a cryptographically secured peer-to-peer network decades before the launch of Bitcoin, urging their audiences to imagine alternate social realities enabled by technology – not so different than the delight expressed by the Futurist manifesto written in 1909 about the potential of the machine. The social history of manifestos aligns with aspirations of new cybernetic realms: varying in style and content, manifestos are a clarion call for change. They fight for the imagination of the culture.

In her introduction to *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, the modernist scholar Mary Ann Caws states that a manifesto represents a moment that ‘positions itself between what has been done and what will be done, between the accomplished and the potential, in a radical and energizing division’.¹⁸ A manifesto is typically against something, rejecting the errors of the past, as well as proclaiming a new reality, typically by invoking marginalised or radically new ideas. A manifesto proposes entry into a better world by urging its audience towards a personal and practical engagement with the troubled world. This is typically achieved through use of the first-person plural, what Caws refers to as ‘we-speak’. This presents the problem ‘they’ permit while suggesting ‘we’ can make it different. *The Hacker Manifesto* (1986) uses it profusely: ‘We make use of a service already existing without paying for what could be dirt-cheap if it wasn’t run by profiteering gluttons, and you call us criminals’.¹⁹ Using ‘we-speak’ shifts the idea from the speaker to the larger group who extends it into action. However, as Adrienne Rich articulated in her 1984 essay ‘Notes toward a politics of location’:

Isn’t there a difficulty in saying ‘we’? *You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us.* Two thoughts: there is no liberation that only knows how to say ‘I’; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through. And so even ordinary pronouns become a political problem [. . .]

The movement of change is a changing movement, changing itself, demasculinizing itself, de-Westernizing itself, becoming a critical mass that is saying in so many different voices, languages, gestures, actions: *It must change; we ourselves must change it.*

We who are not the same. We who are many and do not want to be the same.²⁰

In this passage Rich articulates how the use of first-person plural can impose an ideological stance even as it invites participants to

recognise themselves in the proclamation. Manifestos enjoin audiences, but their attitude can also seem solipsistic.

Manifesto writing proliferates alongside periods of technological progress. The rapid growth of print publishing at the start of the twentieth century shares similarities with the rise of photocopying at the end of the 1960s as well as the internet at the turn of the twenty-first century; these were all fertile periods for manifestos, artistic innovation and sociopolitical change. New technologies of reproduction caused major shifts in expectations as well as sensibilities surrounding art and speech. A manifesto typically arises in response to dissatisfaction with the political or aesthetic options available. In his 1988 'Crypto Anarchist Manifesto', the scientist, engineer and writer Timothy C. May wrote how computer technology was finally realising the ambition of dismantling government regulation and taxation, transforming 'the nature of trust and reputation'.²¹ Written five years later by the mathematician and computer programmer Eric Hughes, 'A Cypherpunk's Manifesto' (1993) further explores the potential to ensure privacy without 'governments, corporations, or other large faceless organizations'.²² Both reject centralised hierarchies, glorifying networked cooperation.²³ The investor and entrepreneur Naval Ravikant tweeted a manifesto in thirty-seven parts on 21st June 2017, exalting the shift from networks, which he perceives as enforced by rulers, to a wide open free market: 'Blockchains combine the openness of democracy and the Internet with the merit of the markets'.²⁴ Blockchain hails Web 3.0, a term used by the reporter John Markoff of the *New York Times* in 2006 to describe the shift from 'a Web of connected documents to a Web of connected data'.²⁵ Internet searches would improve because the system would know 'you', but rather than 'you' being a series of bureaucratic boxes, such as age, address or blood type, 'you' remain anonymous while also being recognised for your activity online.

Hart, Cassils and Brathwaite-Shirley are explicitly concerned with expanding identities on the blockchain and position their projects and texts amid the technology's newfound popularity within the art world. Hart examines identity as flexible and relational through the smart contract. Cassils adopts the guise of earlier tech manifestos to warn about the intrusion of rapacious capitalism and questions the reassertion of a white male canon. Brathwaite-Shirley not only demands recognition for Black trans communities, she also insists on bridging virtual and tangible experience to mitigate the idealism around blockchain technology that results in a kind of isolationism. These manifestos indicate that blockchain not only provides fiscal opportunities, privacy or security, but also a social realm. They proclaim the politics of this emergent space. The technology is not neutral and as such must be socialised if it is to be truly distributed and decentralised.

An identity in progress

The artist Claudia Hart wrote *A Feminist Manifesta for the Blockchain* in April 2021, as a part of her contribution to *The Bardo: Unpacking the Real*, the second exhibition hosted by the blockchain art gallery Feral File, which opened on 20th May 2021.²⁶ She argued for blockchain's disruption of the history of representation. Her knowledge of cyborg feminism, queer theory, copyright law and the modernist avant-garde led to her proposal that:

Identity on the blockchain presents an allegory for the 21st century wherein identity is ritualized through the computer file, individually designed, smart-contract bound, and secured on the blockchain, born when registered by the process of minting on a distributed network.²⁷

The immutability of blockchain transactions implies a fixed and singular identity, albeit a constructed one. This might seem in contrast to the diversity emphasised by cyberfeminism. Writing about 1990s cyberfeminism, the scholar Francesca Ferrando states that 'its practices were participatory and decentred; its goals were mainly concerned with making the digital realm a woman-friendly space, which would not perpetuate patriarchal agendas'.²⁸ However, Hart and other artists who have used technology over the last thirty years see how the embrace of iconography with Web 2.0 did not enable greater access or opportunity; many utopian ideals of this period were shattered by the increasingly commercialised internet.²⁹ Film and new media practitioners have historically sought to 'wrest the power of representation from corporate media and make it available to the public'.³⁰ Many of these artists find potential in the model of interaction that blockchain proposes but wish it not to reiterate the centralising and corporatisation that has marginalised certain people and practices across mass media and networked technologies. Hart's *Manifesta* asks us to question what identity might become across the virtual and tangible realms when freed from the prescriptive demands of current authorities.

Hart imagines how the emergence of blockchain and the promise of Web 3.0 would necessitate a new practice around personal identity. No longer dependent on visual representation, a coherent digital identity could be action and process-oriented.

Part of its promise is the possibility of a decentralized identifier (DID), a secure digital identity, written by a subject, and replacing the algorithmic, branded, selfie product, a representational trope that marks the closure of the old, materialist photographic one.³¹

Hart claims that identity has been co-opted by regimes of representation, reproduced online through selfies and various other social media postings that enact a personal brand.³² There is no person present, only an infinity mirror of convenient, commercial self-reflections. The hopeful *Manifesta* expresses a desire for another identity, one produced through online actions and communications that are constantly being recontextualised, as new data alters the relevance or significance of previous information sets. This is meant to contrast against an identity captured by representational snapshots of self-reinforcing data points. Hart has also expressed doubts about the actualisation of this utopian ideal, but her articulation of it as a manifesto nonetheless encourages audiences to consider the current problems and to imagine the potential for something different.³³



FIG. 3 Still from *Kiki.object*, by Claudia Hart. 2021. 3D-rendered animation. (Courtesy the artist).

Manifesta accompanied the release of *Kiki.Object* FIG. 3, now minted as an NFT. The work was originally produced as a GIF made from 3D animation in 2017 for *dadaclub.online*, which was founded in 2016 to celebrate the centennial of the establishment of the Dada movement. The work features an image of Kiki de Montparnasse (1901–53), a singer, actress, artists' muse and writer who helped define the zeitgeist of 1920s Paris, whom the artist has digitised and manipulated, twisting Montparnasse's head and turning her into 'an impossible object'. She is wrapped in magazine covers based on original Dada designs. Flickering between purple, orange and the indubitable green-screen-hue FIG. 4 FIG. 5, she gazes at the viewer, described by the artist as 'a rendered 3D simulation of the XYZ model (a GIF) – an image of an image of a computer model, a simulation of a simulation', in so many ways the model of a model.

This figure is trapped by the regime of representation. The colours and backgrounds change but the figure remains motionless.



FIG. 4 Still from *Kiki.object*, by Claudia Hart. 2021. 3D-rendered animation. (Courtesy the artist).



FIG. 5 Still from *Kiki.object*, by Claudia Hart. 2021. 3D-rendered animation. (Courtesy the artist).

Mainstream electronic media discourse often presents online identity as singular and self-made; even the notion of a data double

suggests that identity is a distinct entity. This remains despite the arguments of contemporary feminist and postcolonial theorists, particularly in cyberfeminism, for plurality, hybridity and historicisation.³⁴ The NFT makes singular the otherwise infinitely replicable digital object and so comes to stand in Hart's text as a figure for the Decentralised Identifier (DID). This singularising could be interpreted as ignoring the pervasive hybridity of any life, let alone the explicit multiple identities of diasporic communities but Hart's references to cyberfeminism imply that she is not reiterating a narrow, purist identity logic. *Manifesta's* DID does not argue for an unalterable articulation of self at the moment of minting, but for an accumulation of experiences continuously registered on the distributed ledger. Her text supposes that any DID would accrue a person's web browsing history, all of which would be interactive and relational with other online people and places; identity would not be self-created but self-initiated. Verification of identity would not originate from some authority but from the network of participants interacting online and on the blockchain. Such a proposal reinforces the importance of the collective and the significance of history in producing or enabling identity.³⁵ No longer a fixed, idealist essence, identity becomes a production rather than a bureaucratic inscription – the personal 'branding' that Hart disdained in contemporary mediated identity designation. Subjects are not autonomous but implicated within networks of relations, in contrast to the trade and exchange values of consumerism.

Consuming values

On 20th July 2021 the manifesto 'Eat Your Crypto- \$HT COIN for the Revolution' appeared online to accompany *\$HT COIN* – an online performance project by the artist Cassils, who at the time anonymised themselves behind the handle @WhiteMaleArtist. Every day for one month *\$HT COIN* auctioned a new NFT parodying *Artist's Shit* (1961) by Piero Manzoni, first on the art production platform Snark.art and then by Philips auction house **FIG. 6**. Cassils researched the diets of canonical modern or contemporary white male artists, such as Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Andy Warhol, filling each of their *\$HT COIN* 'cans' with a representation of the artists' excrement. Each NFT was accompanied by social media posts about the artist's biography, diet and perspectives on art, which were interspersed with quotes attributed to White Male Artist of things said to their 'community of artists who are not cis white men [...] over the years during their art careers'.³⁶ The narrative voice adopted by White Male Artist invoked the social callousness of 'crypto-bros' and yet the tone frequently undermined self-satisfaction; for example the use of the word 'shit' was not always marketed as the positive product of the artist as in the post: 'Genius or shit? Both. Buy some for yourself and live large'.³⁷



FIG. 6 *\$HT Coin: After Barney*, by White Male Artist (aka Cassils). 2021. Digital render virtual medium: tin can, printed paper and excrement (coffee, eggs, extra-virgin olive oil, salt and freshly ground black pepper, Vaseline, green tea, medium head of red cabbage, outer leaves removed, raw pistachios, toasted and finely chopped, fresh mint leaves, finely chopped, lemon juice, deboned puffin breast, sea salt, carrots, celery, onions, quinoa, beef broth, beach lovage, basmati rice, unsalted butter, bay leaves, saffron threads, whale meat, flour, kale, salmon), 4.8 by 6.5 by 6.5 cm. 30g. (Courtesy the artist).

The *\$HT COIN* project engages with techno-capitalism through selling tokens and cultivating a social media following. Every transaction on the blockchain translates easily into value exchange systems and capitalist relations, but it is the 'coin' that essentially certifies an interaction among set parties. Blockchain technology does not inherently support an economic proposition, but has come to do so through the proliferation of cryptocurrency. Much of the crypto-community seems to reinstate exchange value as the supreme logic of our time but *\$HT COIN*'s highly performative gesture of acquiescence is undermined by a consistently wry or ironic style. Consumption is made scatological, not the typically antiseptic, polished symbol of cultural capital.³⁸ The project reveals the crass commercialism and usury in much of NFT marketing, which has repulsed some audiences and helped to highlight the questionable capitalist practices being adopted.

The NFT boom of 2021 was a glorification of persistent exchange value operating conditions in a realm that perceived the interest and developments as a kind of 'Crypto Renaissance'.³⁹ Invocation of the Renaissance persists in various NFT art projects, although NFTs present not so much an aesthetic revolution as a transactional one.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Early Modern Renaissance did witness a shift from subsistence to commodity production,

from trade to mercantilism, with banking and insurance innovations laying the groundwork for the emergence of contemporary capitalism.⁴¹ Blockchain technology also proposes to revolutionise economic relations, although much still seems the same. *\$HT COIN* maintains a level of absurdity in order to participate in the economic game and not be subsumed by it.⁴²



FIG. 7 Still from *Eat Your Crypto: \$HT Coin for the Revolution*, by White Male Artist (aka Cassils). 2021. Video, duration 2 minutes and 25 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

The project is ‘an exercise in behavioural finance’ that asks how ‘the subjectivity of a maker [is] tied to the value of an art work’.⁴³ When art operates as an asset class, the sociopolitical biases of generations are instated as economic viability and seemingly neutralised as market products. Artists parroted in the project range from Banksy to Mark Rothko, examining ‘an art market in which only 2% of the top grossing contemporary artists are not cisgender men’.⁴⁴ Much of the discourse around blockchain links to the patriarchal lineage in art history.⁴⁵ This seems at odds with the rejection of elitism within crypto-communities, but is a persistent problem in mainstream contemporary art more generally. The painter and critic Mira Schor highlighted decades ago the problems of constantly reiterating a patriarchal

lineage with regards to contemporary practitioners, rather than looking to a broader range that would introduce and establish new voices.⁴⁶ Sara Ahmed more recently wrote: ‘Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow’.⁴⁷ This is the politics in the project that sought to ‘bring gender and racial inequality into focus within the greater arts and crypto community’.⁴⁸ *\$HT Coin* makes stark that those consumed as leading figures of visual culture influence what gets produced.⁴⁹

White Male Artist’s manifesto takes the form of a video work with subtitles. The narrator, disguised in silhouette, delivers a monologue, interspersed with cultural and news imagery that

exemplifies remix culture. For example, the narrator delivers the



FIG. 8 Still from *Eat Your Crypto: \$HT Coin for the Revolution*, by White Male Artist (aka Cassils). 2021. Video, duration 2 minutes and 25 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

words 'consumption has poisoned your oceans' in conjunction with an image from 3rd July 2021 of the fire in the Gulf of Mexico after a gas pipeline ruptured.⁵⁰

Beyond cultural consumption, the manifesto addresses the ecological impact of capitalism

FIG. 7. That is its amusing path to the potential redeeming value of shit: 'can the canon [. . .] suck out whatever speck of good is left and then shit it out. Fertiliser for the revolution'.⁵¹ Economies are carved out of ecologies and the two cannot be extrapolated from one another. In terms of its sustainability ethos, the project articulates a desire to diversify voices in the art and crypto communities and as plenty of documentation shows, diversity is crucial for healthy ecosystems.

Halfway through, the manifesto expressly engages with the notion of consuming one's enemies.⁵² This rallying cry in anti-capitalism circles, and an increasingly popular hashtag, is an adaptation of a phrase attributed to the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau: 'When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich'.⁵³ The physical ingestion of other people may be taboo in most parts of the world but cannibalism has historically been practised by small communities for spiritual purposes. The Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade politicised notions of cannibalism in his *Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928). Anthropophagy is the action of transforming base materials, a ritualised conversion enacted through ingestion, whereas cannibalism ignores this spiritual aspect. The indigenous tribes despised by colonisers were engaged in a transmogrification of energy, whereas the Europeans who devoured cultures were the true vulgarians. The manifesto similarly flips this language around consumption in the technosphere by encouraging audiences to reclaim their power:

EAT THE RICH

Corporate cannibal

Eat you like an animal.⁵⁴

It states to its audience: the powers that be in the digital realm devour 'meat-space' – a term popular in cyberpunk science fiction that refers to the tangible world **FIG. 8**. The *Anthropophagic Manifesto* complicates the narrative around consumption, which White Male Artist revises across his engagement with how 'NFTs hyper-perform a culture of consumption'.⁵⁵




FIG. 9 *\$HT Coin: After Cassils*, by White Male Artist (aka Cassils). 2021. Digital render virtual medium: tin can, printed paper and excrement (hot water, freshly squeezed lemon juice, fresh strawberries, frozen banana, peanut butter, fat-free plain Greek yogurt, ice cubes, green tea, purple and green cabbage, red and yellow peppers, avocados, hemp oil, lime juice, hemp seeds, cilantro, green juice, cod fillet, asparagus, Spring onions, basil, garlic, ginger, soy sauce, olive oil, cracked black pepper), 4.8 by 6.5 by 6.5 cm. 30g. (Courtesy the artist).

The compulsion to consume poses social, economic and environmental issues.⁵⁶ Cassils investigated the overall impact of the *\$HTCoin* project to account for the network of good and ill that their own involvement in the space produced. Recognising the carbon impact, the artist donated the equivalent of carbon offset proceeds, which have been largely shown to be ineffective, to an art project that 'turns solitary confinement cells into garden beds [...] designed by prisoners serving their sentences in isolation through proxies on the outside'.⁵⁷ They also designated a portion of resale royalties to support BIPOC, trans and non-binary visual artists. Cassils makes the effort to bridge the individualising of the NFT to bring community onto the distributed ledger. Blockchain technology was originally presented as facilitating frictionless art

sales and greater consumption – based on the assumption that could be devoid of politics. However, some friction and resistance may be beneficial, as effort can contribute to an ethics of care.⁵⁸

Virtual and tangible politics

Hart's *Manifesta* could be described as aspirational and Cassil's manifesto as cautionary. By contrast, Brathwaite-Shirley presents a contract that demands rights for Black trans people, but *Terms and Conditions* (2021)  also compellingly contests the notion that online and offline are alienated spaces. A relationship exists between the virtual and the tangible. The animated GIF of vibrant text was included in the NFT exhibition *Pieces of Me*, organised by left gallery and Transfer Gallery, Los Angeles.⁵⁹ Although *Terms and Conditions* was not presented as a manifesto by the artist, it has similar features. It declares forcefully: 'we are committed to making this a space that centres Black Trans people'. The 'we' inculcates the reader, although who 'we' are is not disclosed as this is generated by reading the statement. Specific actions are delineated in four subsequent points. Accompanying the digital file is a contract that demands the collector to print the terms of sale and display them for two years in 'their physical space', linking virtual and tangible realities.⁶⁰

Kimberlé Crenshaw offered the term 'intersectionality' to address how race, class, gender and other characteristics combine and layer to produce diverse and complex lived experiences of marginalisation and oppression.⁶¹ It is clearly applicable as a concept in the context of Black trans politics, but it can also contribute to Brathwaite-Shirley's position at the intersection of art and technology. Digital art connects the culturally opposed practices, as well as the politics ascribed to each. To create an NFT is to operate in the space between the politics of scarcity, which provides the value and market for mainstream contemporary art, and the infinite reproducibility that has been crucial to the work of many networked artists. Introducing *Terms and Conditions* as a blockchain contract with real-world commitments, Brathwaite-Shirley connects the virtual and physical realities of an artist's life and livelihood.

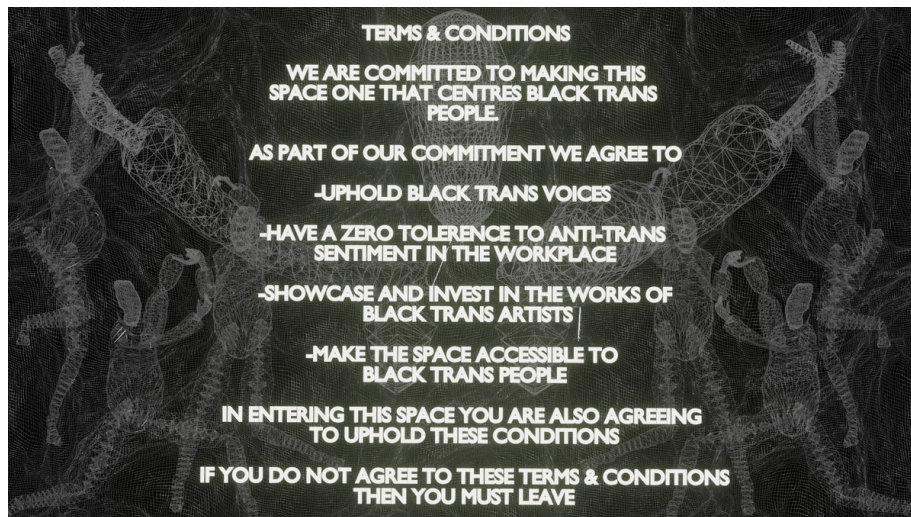


FIG. 10 Still from *TERMS AND CONDITIONS*, by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley. 2021. Animated GIF. (Courtesy the artist and TRANSFER Gallery, Los Angeles; exh. piecesofme.online).

In theory, there are no governance hierarchies in blockchain, hence its claims to decentralisation. Decentralisation was a lauded feature of post-structuralism and Conceptual art's general, although not exclusive, rejection of subject-centred inquiry as produced by invoking biography or psychology. The height of popularity of post-structuralism, however, occurred when many civil rights movements were struggling to centre their experiences. Those who had been marginalised vigorously sought 'the centre' as a place from which to articulate social, economic and political changes: 'in order for hitherto silenced voices to find a place from which to speak, the dominant cultural narratives and discourses must be dislocated'.⁶² An online search for Brathwaite-Shirley provides the tagline for her website: 'an Animator/Artist that creates work centering Black Trans people'. Her 'About' page expresses that she uses 'technology to imagine our lives in environments that center our bodies'.⁶³ Centring bodies that were previously ignored or annihilated redresses historical marginalisation that continues to permeate the present. To produce futures for all requires that some new voices be centred as a part of the process of achieving equitable decentralisation.

Intersectionality reimagines the politics of the centre and the margins and is productive to interpreting the convergence of the virtual and tangible. The utopian visions of some blockchain advocates presume none of the social flaws of human politics will enter this cryptoverse. However, this thinking also limits the potential for good values to be introduced. Hart, Cassils and Brathwaite-Shirley seek to apply the lessons of the tangible sociopolitical space into virtual environments. As Douglas Rushkoff wrote in *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus*, 'the rules that get into a system in the beginning become pretty intractable'.⁶⁴ While technology develops at rapid speed, contemporary choices are

vital.

Conclusion

Discourse around the metaverse – a hypothetical host of virtual environments – has been growing. On 28th October 2021 Facebook rebranded as Meta Platforms. Other companies, including Apple, Google, Roblox and Unity, have also launched extensive investment schemes for this new cyber realm. Many artists working with computer and networked technologies urge audiences to reflect on what these companies have wrought to date. The Professor of Media and Communications at Stanford University, Fred Turner, and the photographer Mary Beth Meehan, published *Seeing Silicon Valley* to highlight the human and environmental price of this new world city on a hill.⁶⁵ Based on their own experiences, they present ‘the unease that was palpable in Silicon Valley [. . .] From those at the lowest end of the economic spectrum to those with higher incomes whose unease was more existential, people conveyed how hard it was to find balance, connection, and community’.⁶⁶ The messaging around many mobile and web-based technologies implies they are time saving tools of global interconnectivity, with social media promoting greater community. Similar messaging accrues around blockchain, the metaverse and Web 3.0. The lessons learned to date, however, indicate that technology does not solve social ills but too often reiterates them in new design packages.

Different blockchains are produced by technologists, engineers and business entities with an assortment of social politics that thereby inhere to the chains themselves. As the media scholar, Ian Bogost stated: ‘If Bitcoin is digital money for people, Ether is digital money for computers. It decides how to spend itself via software automation’.⁶⁷ Recognising each database as a political space is crucial to addressing how they are also social spaces that influence the tangible world. Hart, Cassils and Brathwaite-Shirley are attempting to socialise blockchain technology so that users, designers and investors commit in practice to the current claims that technology will provide a better world. Roy Ascott said in 1993 that ‘Cyberspace cannot remain innocent. It is a matrix of human values. It carries a psychic charge. In cyberculture, to construct art is to construct reality’.⁶⁸ Artists’ engagements with the blockchain reveal the potentials and the pitfalls of this ‘state of the art’ technology.

The metaverse does not introduce an alternative, new realm, but an extension and pluralising of the universe in which company bubbles and profits supersede positive social mores, such as personal diversification and exploration, equitable accessibility and distribution of resources, ecological care or shared community building. That does not have to be the case. Blockchain technology has the potential either to instigate a move away from the marginalisation of centuries of hierarchical capitalism or to

reinforce it. Time – and crucially our choices – will tell.

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