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Roundtable on Aesthetics of Trust with Ed Fornieles, Sarah Friend, Paul Seidler and Sam Spike. Moderated by Laura Lotti and Penny Rafferty, with comments by Frances Liddell

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Beyond the hype and financial speculation, blockchain has increasingly been used as a medium for artistic inquiry, recasting the relation between art, technology and money under a new light. As different consensus models are deployed to verify the state of the decentralized ledger, the question of trust is rearticulated in technological terms. But does that really provide an escape route from years of social evolutionary mechanics or is it opening a more-than-human labyrinthian door? Shifting the focus on how authenticity, ownership and art itself are produced through this novel technosocial apparatus, blockchain also reshapes the relations between artwork, artist and audience.

We invited artists and thinkers Ed Fornieles, Sarah Friend, Paul Seidler and Sam Spike to a conversation about these themes, exploring oracles as frameworks for knowledge production, the aesthetics of trust, the relation between the automated incentives and community curation, and the tensions between community, contracts and capital that pervade these peer-to-peer networks.

Keywords: blockchain, verification, trust, art history, curation, community

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2023 – Blockchain has become mainstream with a whole jargon of terms such as web3, NFTs, DAOs, smart contracts, and governance, increasingly pervading the cultural discourse.

Beyond the hype and financial speculation associated with tokens, blockchain has increasingly been used as a medium for artistic inquiry, recasting the relation between art, technology and money under a new light. As different consensus models are deployed to verify the state of the decentralized ledger, the question of trust is represented in technological terms. But does that really provide an escape route to years of social evolutionary mechanics, or is it opening a more-than-human labyrinthian door? Shifting the focus on how authenticity, ownership and art itself are produced through this novel technosocial apparatus, blockchain also reshapes the relations between artwork, artist and audience.

As the euphoria of the recent bull market has faded, we invited artists and thinkers Ed Fornieles, Sarah Friend, Paul Seidler and Sam Spike to a conversation about these themes. In the context of the broad thematic of aesthetics of verification, we were interested in exploring how oracles (that is, entities – primarily software-based ones – that connect smart contracts with the outside world) have become frameworks for knowledge production in a technical milieu which doesn't know anything beyond itself. This opened onto a discussion on the aesthetics of trust, that is how trust is constructed, expressed or felt beyond representation. Further we delved in the relation between the incentives that are programmed within smart contract systems to encourage honest behaviour vs. the more fluid labour of curation that goes into the production of an artwork; and the tension between community and capital that pervades these peer-to-peer networks.

For years Ed, Sarah, Paul and Sam have developed practices engaged with blockchain technology: *Finiliar*,¹ *Lifeforms*² and *Terrao*³ respectively – and art networks such as *Fingerprints DAO*.⁴ Although the artworks are compositionally quite different and have specific communities, the practices and the themes they explore have many crossovers and resonance among themselves, in addition to being very inspirational and heavily influential to our own work with *Black Swan DAO*.⁵

So let's begin with introductions...

¹ "Finiliar | Digital Friends," Finiliar, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://fini.world/>.

² Sarah Friend, "Lifeforms," Sarah Friend, 2021, <https://isthisa.com>.

³ terrao, "Terrao," terrao, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://terrao.org>.

⁴ "Fingerprints | Home," Fingerprints, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://fingerprintsdao.xyz/>.

⁵ "Black Swan," Black Swan, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://blackswan.support/>.

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Ed Fornieles: I can start if you want. So I'm Ed and I've been working on *Finiliar* now since 2016. It's a project that existed in the more traditional art world sense. Way back it was a digital work that created cute avatars that responded to fluctuations and data. And back then it was using RSS feeds and stuff and it was present in the galleries on large digital screens and sculptures and other things like that. And the data we were feeding off was mainly currencies.

We had ETH, I think, as one of them in the first ones, but it could potentially be anything and these characters would become happy and buoyant when doing well or start vomiting if the currencies were doing badly. And for some reason, this project just persisted and grew incrementally over the years. And then the advent of NFT occurred. Which seemed like an obvious place for Fini to move to; a technology that allows for many people to interact and some into close proximity with them.

Paul Seidler: Should I continue? *Terraio* is a project which was founded in 2015. It was, in the beginning, a more speculative project which was interested in the ideas of smart contracts managing and administering sort of capital, but also in questions of personhood and representation of these systems which are mirrored back into legal systems. In 2018 we deployed our first real contract or our first essentially interactive artwork which was called *Flower Tokens*.⁶ *Flower Tokens* was an experimental project centred around the tokenization and verification of natural commodities, and a first attempt at creating a combined crypto-collectable physical asset. Flowers existing in a monitored installation were represented by and tied to an individual ERC721 on the *Ethereum* mainnet. And these flowers were then sold as NFTs, or these flower NFTs were sold. This experiment lasted for almost half a year, maybe a little bit shorter. It showed us what happens when you tokenize these kinds of ecological entities, but also showed us how community or how governance is essential for these kinds of projects because they need some sort of social framework to live in. We did a lot of other iterations which I will not go into that much. But I think one of the main ideas or things we're kind of still discussing and still interested in is the question of how to manage actual land and actually real-world resources through decentralized systems. And with decentralized systems, I specifically mean here like Smart Contracts and DAOs.

⁶ terraio, "Everything You Wanted to Know about Flowertokens but Were Afraid to Ask — Part 1: General Concept," *Medium* (blog), July 20, 2018, <https://terraio.medium.com/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-flowertokens-but-were-afraid-to-ask-part-1-general-concept-ea50427b718b>.

Sarah Friend: I'm Sarah, I do a lot of things. But the most relevant project is probably *Lifeforms*. It's an NFT entity that, like any living thing, needs to be cared for in order to stay alive. And the way that you care for a *Lifeform* is within 90 days of receiving it, you have to give it away. Lifeforms also have a physical sculptural instantiation that has been installed in physical exhibition contexts. They live on phones. They have little kind of lumpy silicone bodies, on the screen, they are kind of glowing breathing, amorphous shaders. And yeah, I think that there are a lot of commonalities with the *Lifeforms* and the projects mentioned so far, actually aesthetically, but also in terms of the community. *Lifeforms* is really on some level a project of social dynamics, perhaps a group performance, in a way. I have another project that I've worked on as well that is quite relevant, I think, to the conversation, which we don't have to talk about now, but it might come up. It's not my project alone, but I was a contributor for a long time to a community currency called *Circles*⁷ that uses a *Web of Trust*⁸ as one of its sort of core mechanics in a kind of different way than something like *Lifeforms*, but still adjacent or related.

Sam Spike: So my background is not as an artist but as an art historian. My name is Sam. The topic of the media of verification and the aesthetics of trust is actually something that I have been interested in for a while, but I've previously approached it from the opposite direction...

Before entering the world of blockchain, I was due to start a PhD on the aesthetics of falsehood, or the sort of affinities that exist between falsehood as a category and the aesthetic as a category. So I'm interested in those ideas very much. I was, for a year and a half, a very active member of an organization called *Fingerprints DAO*, which is a group of about 200 people who collectively govern a collection of artworks. I was sort of the person who really led the definition of the collection thesis there, which was centred around this idea of blockchain artworks that really interrogate blockchain technology as both a technical and material medium, but also as a sort of social phenomenon. I left that about nine months ago and since then have been working with Ed here on *Finiliar*. I was for a while, well, still am, very interested in this period of the profile picture boom of 2021 and the potential for artists to use that format, that large scale format of thousands of editions and that kind of scale of distribution, as a canvas for making artwork. And so when I met Ed and he told me

⁷ "Circles UBI – A Basic Income System for Communities," accessed September 6, 2023, <https://joincircles.net/>.

⁸ Andres Arevalo-Maklouf, "Dsrrptv + Dscntrlzd ≠ Dscnctd: A Review on Disruptive Technologies and Data Protection – Circles UBI," September 10, 2023, <https://joincircles.net/dsrrptv-dscntrlzd-%e2%89%a0-dscnctd-a-review-on-disruptive-technologies-and-data-protection/>.

what he wanted to do with Finiliar, I thought that it seemed like a really interesting instantiation of that. So Ed and I run that now together as an artwork-cum-business, or business-cum-artwork, I don't really know.

Oracles as Frameworks

Penny Rafferty: Thank you all. I can already see so many overlaps and very interesting things to begin to unpack as we're doing this interview in different thematics. We're going to start with our first short theme, *Oracles as Frameworks*. Each project seems to speak directly, it seems, to the sort of substantiated oracle problem.⁹ How do we know with *Terra0* that there is a forest? How do we know that the *Finiliar* community is human or is made up of people who support and position themselves alongside these *Finiliars* rather than a potential bot farm of support units playing human? And similarly, with the *Lifeforms* how do we know that there is actually a true lifeline attached to them and it's not just something that can be sort of played with or produced on demand? I guess to a certain degree we don't, right? We just sort of believe or want to believe, or perhaps more aptly we suspend disbelief, which is something that art has continually played on throughout history. Also, when I was listening to the four of you with your introductions, I was also thinking how this is interesting in terms of cuteness and this sort of pullback to natural cycles of growth rather than something more sort of industrial or megalithic. And maybe it also made me think about whether the sort of cuteness was a moment of propaganda in terms of how we onboard people to practice belief and participation. Paul, could I ask you to start us off with this theme framework?

Paul Seidler: Yes, sure. From a purely technical perspective and to contextualize oracles in technical terms – essentially, a blockchain is a decentralized ledger. So, it's like an append-only database. This system has no idea of anything which is outside of the scope of the pure transactions of these inherent systems. So, it's a question: how do you bring data in? How do you reflect these states in a blockchain system? This is a question which never in the beginning of the design was brought too much attention to. So, when *Ethereum* launched, everyone was like, oh cool, we're going to do assets, real life assets, or sort of like things which exist outside the chain and they will be reflected on-chain. But actually, no one really thought of how this would work in a trustless manner because you run into a lot of problems. One of the problems is data integrity, right? How do you trust the data which comes in, who is the sender of data,

⁹ Rhea Myers, "Oracles Are The Oracle Problem," *R Myers* (blog), September 17, 2020, <https://robmyers.org/2020/09/17/oracles-are-the-oracle-problem/index.html>; Kevin Werbach, *The Blockchain and the New Architecture of Trust* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 213f.

who brings the data in, and who constructs this transaction? And just like on the informational level, this is quite an interesting problem, but also quite a hard problem to solve because at some point, you need to trust someone, you need to trust a data producer, you need to trust a network which finds consensus about data. You need to somehow have an entry point where the data is produced.

I would say this also brings in the question of informational epistemology. How is the data produced, who is the data producer and to what intent is this data produced and how is this data then used? To my knowledge, there is no good technical solution to this because this is not a purely technical problem. This is a problem of trust and a problem of interfering between a rule-based mediated informational system and basically a growing social system in which we are all living in. And these systems are quite different in how they act and what effects they produce. So with *terrao* in the beginning we had an almost technocratic approach to this problem, where we were interested in seeing how far you could actually solve this by providing automated solutions. Automating sensors or automating microcomputers, giving these computers keys and then trusting them, essentially having sensor networks which then could take data and trustlessly put them into the networks itself. But this of course is always limited in scope and still in this case you always have to trust the producer which is still us, even if this is like a network device, right? So now we're more interested in the question of how the data production itself as a process is always bound to social constructs and social formations. At the moment we're thinking more of this oracle problem not as a kind of technical problem, but more like an epistemological problem where the question really is: how is the data produced? Can this data be produced collectively? What rules, what social, but also what technical apparatus can be put in place to produce these in a way in which the community finds a consensus on data? And this is something we are more interested in than just a pure technocratic or a pure social solution. So for us, it has to be like somewhere in between. But as I said, I don't think this is a solved problem and I do think it's an aesthetically really interesting problem because it generates really weird artefacts.

Sarah Friend: Super interesting. I want to just jump in and say that I thought what you said about trust not being a technical problem is extremely interesting and related to something we often say: that blockchains are trustless. I'm sure everyone here has heard that, and I usually counter that they've actually just shifted the location of trust. So in the case of a Proof of Work blockchain, we are trusting that the hash function that is used in the blockchain is secure. We're trusting that a whole bunch of encryption does not have backdoors in it. We're trusting that the code that runs the blockchain was implemented according to the spec correctly, since almost no one

actually audits it or reads it, or very few users would have the ability to do so. Even in the blockchain case, trust is kind of a performance.

Ed Fornieles: There's something very human about it. And it's actually making me think in terms of what is trust other than security that is fostered by reliability. And that's probably true both of technical networks or systems, as well as groups of human beings and organizations. I'm just thinking about how it applies to the *Finiliar* project. And I can think of two aspects. One is the fact that we do use on-chain oracles, we use *Chainlink*,¹⁰ which the Finiliars feed off. And then we also have off-chain oracles that link to companies and other data, this might be defined as triple A trustworthy. And then as you move away from on-chain oracles to RSS feeds and APIs which are structurally slightly less trustworthy, a little more vulnerable, a little more reliant on past markers of legitimacy, like coming from an institution. Funny talking about trust on this technical side is making me think about the word from the more human side, and the word "rugged". As in to rug a project, to promise and not deliver, to run with the cash. It's such a feature of the space, a mass hallucination of scams, and hopes and sincere world building. In *Finiliar* we approached the problem by becoming very transparent, by building all of our models in the open, people could see where their money was being spent and could participate and watch as the project developed. In the end I really think our discord became a very supporting and loving environment.

Sam Spike: We thought, well, everybody's just going to assume that we're lying, that we're going to steal their money and run away, so we have to prove that we're not going to do that. It did have this wonderful effect of actually not just making people trust us, but really bringing people on our side and creating a strong community that may not have existed otherwise. But just thinking about what Paul and Sarah were saying before, it sort of made me think about trust. We don't traditionally think of trust as a core feature of aesthetic experience, necessarily. But the difference between trust and the suspension of disbelief, or the suspension of doubt, is quite a fine one. And the suspension of disbelief certainly is a sort of clichéd description of what makes for a good film, what makes for a good novel. Is the fiction believable? Our suspension of doubt, I think, is sort of integral to any kind of aesthetic experience where the material aspect of the artwork is creating something that's greater than the sum of its parts. So I think that's an interesting distinction to foreground.

Sarah Friend: Absolutely. One of the things I have scribbled on my notepad beside me that I'm already rapidly running out of space on is, are narratives greater than tech? Because this feels very connected to what you said, Sam. But then also what we were

¹⁰ "Chainlink: The Industry-Standard Web3 Services Platform," Chainlink, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://chain.link/>.

talking about, about trust not being a technical problem. Like the *Lifeforms* are actually all verified in the smart contract. They fully work the way that I say they do. I don't think that many *Lifeforms* owners have checked up on that, but it's the case. For the most part, I think people just trust me that it is the way that I say that it works. And I've observed often, I sometimes think to myself, why is it necessary, in the context of an artwork, to actually build the tech? I think it also bears saying that trust is tightly coupled with identity. So I don't think the average *Lifeforms* user verifies the *Lifeforms*, they just sort of believe me. But Sarah Friend is an identity that is public. I'm very not anon on the internet and I sometimes say to collectors who doubt me, if you don't trust me, don't buy my art. I guess identity is part of it. Identity and reputation are very wrapped up in the performance that builds trust.

Paul Seidler: I totally agree with this point that there is the question of technology and narrative. And also I'm struggling sometimes in my personal practice that I have the feeling that sometimes these really well-constructed smart contracts and artisanally worked out smart contracts which people write are essentially *nihil*. No one cares about them actually, because people don't verify or don't like them. So I think it's really strange that one inherent kind of medium-specific quality of blockchains is that the code is public, that the code is executable, that the code is transparent and that people can actually read it and verify themselves if stuff is doing what it's supposed to do. What I'm seeing more and more and I think this is something which probably everyone is seeing is that this actually doesn't matter at all.

Sam Spike: It makes me think of a few artworks. The first is a work by the artist Rhea Myers, who produced a series called *Certificates of Inauthenticity*,¹¹ which verify the inauthenticity of the work that you own. It builds on an earlier work that she made where she took ready-made sculptures of certain items that had become the canonical property of large male modernist figures: the Pipe (*La Trahison des Images* by Magritte, 1928/29), the *Balloon Dog* (Jeff Koons, 1994-2000), etc. And I can't remember the exact licensing arrangement, but she used some sort of commons licensing, and she subsequently issued these NFT certificates that authorized that these sculptures of hers were inauthentic. In the write-up that she provides on her website for the work, she contextualizes this within the types of ownership and authenticity afforded by blockchain, discussing how actually we cannot verify that this, for example, *terrao* or this Sarah Friend NFT is the real one, and this NFT which is associated with exactly the same image, is the false one. Other than knowing that that is Sarah's public *Ethereum* address or it's Paul's *Ethereum* address.

¹¹ "Certificate of Inauthenticity - Rhea Myers," accessed October 9, 2023, <https://rhea.art/certificate-of-inauthenticity/>.

Sam Spike: There is also the artist *Pak*, the anonymous crypto conceptual artist, who has created lots of works that I think are relevant to the notion of the scam as an artwork. But one of the pieces that they made in early 2021 was a series called *The Title*¹², which was basically a rip off of the Yves Klein exhibition that Klein did in the early 50s in Milan where he exhibited identical blue canvases but priced them differently. In *The Title*, the pieces are also all identical. They all point to exactly the same IPS hash, but they are priced differently, and they have different titles. So one is called *The Cheap* and it costs \$2 to buy. And one that was absolutely identical was called *The Expensive* and cost \$10,000 to buy, and so on.

Ed Fornieles: I honestly think NFTs are just the reinvention of painting. And painting is a type of artwork that is legible to a financial instrument and the same with current NFTs. There is plenty of other blockchain artwork that is manifesting itself, that is experimental, doing interesting things, but it's not legible in the same way and therefore doesn't attract the same energy.

Sarah Friend: You're right. Art history spent so long breaking down the categories of the object on a wall, then we really got excited when we made them again, in the digital context.

Penny Rafferty: It makes me wonder if the *Opensea* Smart contract is like an off-the-shelf canvas instead of stretching your own, in a way – the producer ready-made.¹³

Paul Seidler: There's another weird aspect to the *Opensea* sphere, which is essentially that there is no formal definition of how the metadata of NFTs should be structured and essentially *Opensea* just defined it. There is nothing, besides the first ERC721 draft, which is defining the metadata specification. And there was never consensus about this. *Opensea* just defined how the metadata has to look in the JSON and what fields it has to have. I mean, this is one company which essentially defines now how a whole art form is writing their contracts. Which, yeah, I do think it's something to think about in terms of trustlessness.

Aesthetics of Trust

Laura Lotti: So maybe this is a good point to move to aesthetics of trust although we have been exploring it prior. How does trust – or the lack thereof that blockchain

¹² Nifty Gateway Curated, "The Title by Pak," Nifty Gateway, January 6, 2021, <https://niftygateway.com/collections/thetitle>.

¹³ oage, "Introducing Seaport Protocol," *Opensea Blog* (blog), May 20, 2022, <https://opensea.io/blog/articles/introducing-seaport-protocol>.

somehow promises as a feature – play a role in your works? What does it look like? Can you “touch” it? Sarah, do you want to start?

Sarah Friend: I think that the concept of trust is quite amorphous without being grounded in a sort of specific semantic meaning. So, like, when I say I trust something, what do I actually mean? What do I trust it for? What is the context of that trust? And this is kind of related to the way we talk about security in the tech industry. Security is meaningless in a vacuum. It exists in relationship to the adversary. So, no software is perfectly secure. It is only secure against certain types of attacks or types of adversaries. And similarly, no one is ever perfectly trusted. Well, I mean, maybe, but it's always like, what do you trust someone for? So, we found it very helpful with *Circles*, a community currency I used to work on that aimed to create something like a Universal Basic Income, to have a semantic meaning of trust and to articulate that, in our system, trust means that I trust someone not to be fraudulently collecting a second universal basic income. That specificity is very helpful.

But I think that different semantic meanings always exist for the question of trust in software. Do I trust someone to recommend music? To have the key to my house? These are very different contexts for trust. And then going to aesthetics, different aesthetics of trust emerge. So thinking about the aesthetics of trust, one of the things that come to mind is a bank, the aesthetics that a government uses to build trust, the sort of corporate blue and all these aesthetics around authority. And I thought it was very interesting that actually to some extent, all of our projects, but in particular *Lifeforms* and *Finiliar* have gone this sort of other direction aesthetically, towards cuteness and pathos, which Penny referred to as propaganda. But I just wanted to call that out as being maybe quite interesting and also related to the aesthetics of a scam – like deliberately playing on the heartstrings in a way that might be manipulative. I don't know, I guess I feel like the pathos of these objects is interesting in relationship to trust and it's difficult to articulate quite why.

Ed Fornieles: I think *cutaganda* or nostalgia is also at play here because with our projects there's this appealing to a younger self. And you see this across culture with the proliferation of kawaii and eight-bit aesthetics. Millennials, not given the same economic path to adulthood as their parents, turn inward, seeking comfort through cozy associations. In a sense this aesthetic has become the skin to a lot of NFTs projects, Ponzi schemes and real economic infrastructure are swaddling themselves in this pink unicorn duvet.

Sarah Friend: I also think cuteness is very different from the aesthetics of blockchain normally.

Curation and Incentives

Laura Lotti: Maybe this is a good segue into the question of curation and incentives and how artworks differ from other more traditional blockchain projects or projects that use the same technology for something that is not art. The question of “baking incentives” into the contracts perhaps also relates to the more fluid question of curation, creating different affordances for engaging with the system. Sam could you get us started on this?

Sam Spike: First I wanted to address something I thought would be interesting to bring up, that speaks directly to the previous points about security and is an abiding interest of mine. It is the way in which this word or discourse of artifice has figured in aesthetics, at least classical European aesthetics, and the notion of the artist as a practitioner of artifice. On the one hand, there’s this famous scene in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* where two artists compete with one another to create the more convincing image.¹⁴ One artist paints a bunch of grapes that are so realistic that birds fly down from the sky and attempt to pick at them. And then his competitor paints a curtain which is so realistic as to persuade the first artist to reach and pull back the curtain, only to realize that it’s an illusion. In that context, artifice is the mark of the master artist. It’s a mark of mastery of one’s craft. Then on the other hand, artifice is often considered sort of deceitful in a negative way, right? Another classical reference here is Plato, who saw artistic reproductions of objects as a kind of obfuscation of the real, true reality of things. Repeatedly through history we see this kind of antagonism between art and falsehood as, on the one hand, something to be celebrated and, on the other, as something that is kind of dangerous: craft is something that’s usually valorized by society, but craftiness is suspicious. And it makes me think in a blockchain context, actually, of protocol security and what Paul was saying about artisanal smart contracts—especially these smart contracts that custody massive sums of money and have to be regularly audited by auditors only for sometimes the auditors themselves to be the ones who exploit the contracts. I think that’s a kind of funny irony. The people that you trust, you have to trust them, but they are also sort of the greatest threat to you.

But then to move away from that, one of the things, Penny, that you said at the beginning, was the way in which everybody’s projects here – *Finiliar*, *Lifeforms* and *terrao* – all have some element of cuteness and something in common with nature as well. And I think another unifying concept is care, right? They’re all about care on

¹⁴ Pliny the Elder, “CHAP. 36: Artists Who Painted With The Pencil,” in *The Natural History*, vol. XXXV: An Account Of Paintings And Colours, accessed September 9, 2023, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D35%3Achapter%3D36>.

some level. And governance is also a form of care. And in a sense, the consensus protocols of blockchain are a way of sort of collectively caring for the truthfulness of the ledger. And also curation is inherently a form of care. The etymology of the word is to care. And as somebody who was working for this organization that was collectively managing this collection, it was very interesting to see how the financial incentives of being part of such an organization, where one sort of primary motivation was to try and make this membership appreciate in value, was frequently at odds with the responsibility to manage an art collection in the best way possible. There was a sort of weird disconnect there. It's very hard to say how artworks differ from other blockchain incentives. But I think a question that all of our projects answer is how blockchain incentives can be artworks. And maybe I'll open it up there.

Paul Seidler: I think it's a super interesting point that also a lot of things which connect all of these projects here is vitalism, or a kind of notion of vitalism projected back into almost clean space or almost kind of hermetic rule-based space. So I think we all have an approach which is closer to software art than to classical painting, in a sense, as it always has sort of this participatory aspect. You have a collective, and this collective or these kinds of collectors engage in some way with the artwork, and through the engagement, these things become interesting. Or through the engagement, these things sort of move away from a pure, static representation of artwork.

Ed Fornieles: The artworks become complete in a way through that interaction. Without that relationship, they fall short or do not reach their full potential and in the sense that they become the opposite of artifice, they become actualized. There is a gap between fantasy and reality and there's something about blockchain that makes things, oddly, for better or worse, very real. They're enacted, they're performed. It's interesting looking at various communities, often the reason stated for participation i.e. 'to make money' is often just an alibi to something far more emotive, something much softer, squidgy and human.

Community and Contracts

Penny Rafferty: Let's pick up on our final thematic of *Community and Contracts* because I think a lot of the conversation has already opened up that each one of you really strongly works with a very specific community that surrounds the project. And in essence, it seems like the projects wouldn't even live or work without them. This is also possibly the underlying essence of a truly great artwork, one that holds you so hard you develop your life views around, and it becomes integral to how you see the world and how you participate within it.

Although I do want to add of late I have heard one of the big pushbacks in panels and conversations within the arts, is about how they believe NFT artworks and speculation groups that foster the mints have sort of hijacked this notion of community. And I'm glad that we mentioned Rhea's work earlier because it's something that she constantly underlines, the fact that art, the industry and art workers refuse to talk about capital. And I would suggest this is obvious via this criticism of the NFT community being dubbed as only a speculation group because the art world seems shocked by the idea that capital and community are compatible. And I just wondered if perhaps you could expand a little bit on how your community is activated and supported and how it's really crucial to the work development or the materiality of the work. And Ed, maybe you want to start us off on this one.

Ed Fornieles: One thing that's interesting, perhaps with all the projects that we've been talking about is that we somehow exist in this bridge space between two worlds, artland and this new thing. The art world with its established patterns, history and prejudices. And this new emergent space which is made up of very different people. It feels like we are witnessing something quite strange, a genuine weirdness, as these two types of people meet, build and make sense of each other at the same time.

Sarah Friend: Agree that one of the coolest parts about working in the NFT space is that the audiences can be so different than in the traditional art world. I have really enjoyed it. I had a few thoughts related to the prompt of community or maybe to the common accusation that the word community is being used in a way that is somehow insincere because there are financial motives at play. And I think this is very interesting. It reminds me of the broader NFT context. I think there's a bit of a taboo in general in our culture towards talking about money. A lot of people find it easier to talk about sex than about money. Honestly, ask people how much money they make and watch them squirm. I think that more people will admit to watching porn or tell you about porn that they've watched than tell you how much money they make.

But I think as an NFT artist you have to talk about money. The audience and community requires you to talk about money in a way that is very new to me. People ask me in artist talks, they'll put up their hand and their question will literally be: "Are you a millionaire?" As an NFT artist you have to publicly answer that, apparently. And I think that there are a lot of really old, deep, weird things in culture about money and shame and what is sacred and what is speakable. And I think that all of this is very wrapped up with the idea of a financially incentivized community as well.

Paul Seidler: Since we talk a little bit about money and communities, I would also agree that there is a weird notion in how community is used in the whole blockchain space. I don't think this is necessarily a problem which comes directly from the kind

of technology or this sort of space, but rather something which existed before. When you read on *Facebook*, these are community guidelines, and you're like no, these are not "community guidelines". These are literally guidelines some department wrote. This has nothing to do with community or users. And I do think this notion of community comes out of this web2 context of brands essentially pushing a policy on people. And I think some of these tensions are also felt in the web3 space.

Another point I find interesting is that if we look at how the traditional art market operates and participates and also how collectors are coordinating there, everything is pretty opaque. It's pretty hard to even buy art pieces through galleries. And also the capital which is required to even enter these traditional markets is way higher than, for example, with NFTs. Blockchain based distribution of digital art feels therefore more democratic because the entry is way lower.

Ed Fornieles: And I think that the tonality of the space is often sincere. The incentivization aspect is often an alibi. We have people in our *Discord* who spend a lot of hours of their day there and they're not there to make it all about the profit; quite the contrary, they are there to have friendships and to commune and to talk and to have a conversation. And I think that if I'm honest, web3, for me and I suppose a bunch of other people, can really create important spaces that serve a function in our and their lives. And obviously, that has existed before, especially within gaming communities and other online spaces. But it is just interesting that the incentivization can sort of try to cloak something much more human.

Ed Fornieles: I think the financial side can be an alibi as a gallery artist. Often I would say that sometimes collectors are buying a gallery or an artist's work to participate within the community, to be invited to a dinner, to hang out in a studio, to do something that is perhaps other than their normal day-to-day routine. So it exists everywhere, I guess.

Penny Rafferty: 100%. I can actually quote one collector who told me the reason why they started collecting was because somebody had told them that interesting people collect art. So, I think that that's a clear definition of why people participate. It becomes more than a hobby. It becomes part of your culture, identity, and how you associate and perform in a social cultural evolution. In a sense, I think also the legacy art world often tries to find holes or discrepancies in nascent thinking so they can create opposition or chasms between themselves, and the new models of art making and I wonder whether this actually comes down to trust. At the end of the day, is there something about not trusting this new art form and the materiality of it and its conceptual underpinnings and the language it's bringing forth into this already heavily loaded cult space of aesthetics?

Laura Lotti: I think it might have to do with trust and I think it might also have to do with power.

Paul Seidler: I do think it has also to do with technical illiteracy. This is my spicy take. I do think that there is a general problem of big collections but also of galleries and people who are in the art space that they have very little technical knowledge of how these systems work.

Sarah Friend: I somehow feel like it's maybe connected also to this distrust of the tech industry as being this place culturally that a certain kind of discourse feels it's outside but actually maybe it's illiteracy with a mask.

Penny Rafferty: I think that you're definitely highlighting some of the sort of incompatibility that comes from a very surface level, but also looking back at other recent moments of art history, performance, video art, and live art etc., when they came onto the scene, it took the establishment a long time to find the tools to offer the curation and the care and the ability to create space for the viewer and the audience to participate in them. And so, I think if anything, art making is always going to be so much more accelerated and more developed within the scene of the maker than the art world. The institutions are always going to be playing catch up to being able to support and create a landscape of delivery for wider audiences.

Laura Lotti: And through blockchain and smart contracts, art is also gaining perhaps new tools to 'disintermediate' its relation with audiences and collectors, and reshape the institutional landscape in a way that favours the artists and practitioners themselves; and in a sense, *terrao*, *Lifeforms*, *Finiliar* and *Fingerprint DAO* are examples of that. I guess, this was the promise of the blockchain all along; it remains to be seen whether and how it will be realised but the proliferation of experiments in this direction is something to be celebrated. Thank you all for this very rich conversation!

Comment on “Roundtable on Aesthetics of Trust”

Frances Liddell

The discussions in this interview probe into blockchain as a medium of creativity by examining oracles, trust, and the relationship between community and capital to reveal questions about the aesthetics of this field, and the underlying principles that drive it. In doing so, I understand this interview as offering the following question to readers; how do the principles that ground this technology (such as community, scarcity, incentives, or trust) shape the aesthetic found within it?

In taking the latter of these principles, trust is a key element to blockchain technology. Indeed, blockchains are socio-technical systems that connect people through *trusting* the technology, and therefore aim to mitigate a social phenomenon through technical solutions. However, in my view, the discussions in this interview offer an alternative to this idea by instead arguing that the artist plays a significant role in the development and understanding of trust in blockchain-based art. ‘*How do we know with terraio that there is a forest? How do we know that the Finiliar community is human?*’ The response to this is we trust the artists and narratives behind these works, revealing the artist as a type of ‘oracle’, an interface into the technology.

But this artistic-based trust also opens opportunity for experimental practice as shown in examples noted in this interview such as PAK’s *The Title*. This also reminds me of artists such as Steve Pikelney whose work often engages in a ‘scam aesthetic’ to probe into the underlying nature of the technology. A case in point is *FastCashMoneyPlus.biz* from 2018, a garish website filled with pop-ups and clickbait created to promote the artist’s own ‘cryptocurrency’, thus blurring the lines between scam and art through a playful deception.¹⁵ However, these works provoke us to reflect on the boundary between ‘art’ and ‘scam’, ‘craft’ and ‘craftiness’, ‘artifice’ and ‘actual’, when is this boundary made apparent? In the ‘real’ world, works such as Jens Haaning *Take the Money and Run* (2021) highlight how these boundaries are made visible through the law when the artist was made to repay the *Kunsten Museum of Modern Art*, Denmark around 67,000 euros after submitting two empty frames for a collaborative project. But in a field where ‘code is law’, when is the boundary made clear? When does the trust start to cease? Indeed, is trust ever blurred? Or is it only ever defined by the code? Questions such as these are hugely valuable when examining blockchain-based art as they not only probe into the underlying aesthetic, but also show this technology as reshaping our understanding of terms like trust. Similarly, the discussions raised in

¹⁵ “WELCOME TO FA\$TCA\$HMONEYPLU\$.Biz,” accessed October 9, 2023, <https://fastcashmoneyplus.biz/>.

this interview are an important contribution to understanding how creativity offers an alternative lens to explore and evaluate these themes, creating a reciprocal relationship in which principles and aesthetic might continually challenge and shape one another.

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