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## NFT: An Episode in Digital Arts

**Abstract:** The development of digital art has been marked by numerous transformative phases, with the rise of NFTs (non-fungible tokens) representing a pivotal moment in its evolution. This paper posits that the ascent of NFT art is closely linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, which catalyzed a shift towards digital mediums and redefined the relationship between art and technology. NFTs not only revolutionized the creation, distribution, and monetization of digital art by embedding databases and data archives into the artwork itself, but they also challenged traditional notions of ownership and value in the art world. This study examines how NFTs altered the perception of digital art, particularly during the pandemic, and investigates the factors contributing to the subsequent decline in their prominence after the initial surge of interest.

**Keywords:** digital arts; NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens); Crypto Art; COVID-19 pandemic; digital archive; art market.

### The emergence of Crypto Art amid the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the extent to which the digital world, which had already become an integral part of our daily lives, has now eclipsed the physical world as the primary domain of human activity. This shift underscores how the physical world, once the primary setting for work and social interactions, has increasingly become an alternative to the digital environment. The quantitative breakthrough of the digital occurred in various walks of life. One can talk about the breakthrough of technologies for controlling our digital, but not only digital, movements: “drones are used to combat the pandemic not only in China but also in Italy and Spain”<sup>1</sup>; they are equipped with applications for measuring the temperature of random passersby and for recognizing their faces, even when they are wearing masks. The pandemic has undoubtedly made social, economic, and class inequalities more visible and added new levels of functioning: differences between those who can protect themselves from infection by staying at home and those who cannot, those who

<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemija! 2* (Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2022), 19.

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have access to vaccines and those who do not, and new forms of exploitation related to the corona-economy have emerged. Transparency has affected another process that, although it began long before the pandemic, gained an extreme variant with the pandemic through the explicit declaration of art and cultural activities as non-essential and their literal removal, which occurred almost overnight.<sup>2</sup> This is a process of marginalization of art.

However, not everything is so bleak in the relationship between the pandemic and art. On the contrary, one could speak of a sort of blossoming, especially if we talk about, for instance, the art market. After the onset of the pandemic in 2019 and the subsequent stagnation that spilled over into 2020, this stagnation was eliminated at the beginning of 2021, at least according to the art market. The first thing that was revived after the initial pandemic impact was precisely the art market. This is confirmed by the statistics of Christie's, one of the oldest and most eminent auction houses, which controls about 95% of the global art market and which reported a 75% increase in revenue compared to the year before. Another indicator of the relatively quick and influential recovery of the market is yet another breakthrough. In March 2021, digital artist Beeple sold his work *Everydays: The First 5000 Days* for seventy million dollars. This is unprecedented because, for the first time, a digital work was valued at so many millions. Moreover, it was the first time something intangible, without a physical dimension, something that is essentially a database, a digital archive containing information about all its previous owners, was sold in an auction house with the longest tradition in selling art objects. Digital art has finally gained its market model of functioning and has become profitably sustainable, which was not the case before and is probably the reason it was previously relegated to a separate niche compared to contemporary art.

This market breakthrough, which spilled over into the story of the breakthrough of digital art, is connected with the emergence of NFTs and Crypto Art. NFT (non-fungible token) is a cryptocurrency associated with the blockchain technology, one of the leading technologies in the field of information technology for storing and adding large amounts of data. With the introduction of non-traditional currencies, first Bitcoin and later many others, this technology has been applied in the distribution and transactions of cryptocurrencies. The key difference between transactions with traditional currencies compared to cryptocurrencies is that the former are realized through a 'third party', namely banks, while the latter are conducted in a decentralized manner, through a network maintained by so-called miners. "Blockchain is a distributed method of adding and storing large amounts of data from various domains such that only verified data is added and, once added, these data cannot be altered."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Museums Around the World. In the Face of COVID-19*. UNESCO Report (2021). Anne-Sophie V. Radermecker, "Art and culture in the COVID-19 era: for a consumer-oriented approach," *SN Business & Economics* 1, 1 (2021): 1–14.

<sup>3</sup> Miodrag J. Mihaljević, "Bitcoin, Blockchain Technology and Cryptography – An Illustration of Certain Issues," *Annals of the Branch of SANU in Novi Sad*, No. 16 for 2020 (2021): 42.

The blockchain technology is based on cryptography, which is the foundation for maintaining network information security. Crypto art emerged when this technology for distributing large amounts of data and cryptocurrency transactions was applied to visual digital content. An NFT is a digital certificate of authenticity that guarantees ownership of the purchased digital file, regardless of its presence and distribution on the network. They were first used in the gaming industry, then with CryptoKitties, in sports, and eventually in art.

It could be said that everything started with CryptoKitties. They, in fact, play an important role in the online space. There is data showing that in the early days, the largest number of internet users visited to watch funny cat videos, particularly on YouTube, making the earliest visual NFTs CryptoKitties. “Without a doubt, CryptoKitties played a huge role in raising awareness about the ownership of digital assets. Who knows where we would be now without them?”<sup>4</sup>

Images of virtual kittens began to sell in 2017 and were the most popular NFTs for the following two years. In July 2020, the NFT market began to surge, gaining significant attention in March 2021 with the aforementioned sale when Beeple ‘overnight’ became the most sold living artist, right after Hockney and Koons. In the first four months of 2021, NFT transactions exceeded two billion dollars, ten times more than in the entire 2020.<sup>5</sup>

This sudden market breakthrough of NFTs and crypto art is closely followed by other art institutions. In the same year (June 10, 2021 – September 15, 2021), this phenomenon received its first institutional historicization with the organization of the exhibition *PROOF OF ART – A brief history of NFTs* (Francisco Carolinum Museum, Linz). This historical overview begins with the earliest examples of computer, video, and digital art and ends with the metaverse, a virtual space where this exhibition was also realized alongside the museum. The NFT exhibition was also part of the Venice Biennale 2022, further confirming the integration of NFTs and crypto art into official institutional channels. A common formulation is that this represents a significant shift not only in digital art but in art in general, raising the question: what kind of shift is it? Is a technological breakthrough a prerequisite for an artistic breakthrough? Does a market breakthrough open up possibilities for an artistic breakthrough? Or is it a complete commodification of art, considering that even a digital file, which can be reproduced a million times, has gained commodity status? On the other hand, whenever NFTs and crypto art are mentioned, it is usually in the context of investment, buying, selling, and the market, which raises another question: is this even art?

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<sup>4</sup> Matt Fortnow and Terry QuHarrison, *The NFT Handbook* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2022), 113.

<sup>5</sup> Matthieu Nadini et al. “Mapping the NFT Revolution: Market Trends, Trade Networks, and Visual Features,” *Scientific Reports* 11, Article number: 20902 (2021).

## NFT market vs. art market

The initial idea for NFTs was to protect artists by allowing them to control their copyright and finances and manage themselves independently of the existing gallery system.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that the key novelty brought by NFTs is decentralization: anyone can create an artwork and present, distribute, and sell it through online platforms, often referred to as the first global movement. This formulation is debatable, given that we have been living in a global world for more than two decades, but it certainly has the technological support to function globally. In addition to decentralization and globalization, it is also associated with democratization because, unlike traditional collections that are exclusive, hidden, and often inaccessible to the general public, NFT collections are online, always available and visible. Another advantage of these collections is that they cannot be stolen or copied because there is a digital record of ownership and sale available to everyone. Additionally, all those in the ownership chain earn from the sale of the work, not just the last owner, which is the case with the traditional market. Finally, to have your works in NFT collections and sell them, it is not necessary to be part of an existing gallery system: you are your own gallerist. Everything sounds great, doesn't it?

As time goes on, however, it has become evident that there are far more similarities between the traditional and NFT markets than initially assumed. Increasingly, the conclusion is that despite decentralization, openness, and accessibility, the NFT market suits major players and global tycoons who are constantly seeking new investment opportunities. It turns out that the NFT market is ideal for this, as one does not need to be an art lover, know anything about it, or even have a certain affinity for art, which is generally the case with traditional collectors, to buy crypto art and have a profitable investment. When comparing the traditional and NFT markets, data shows that 1% controls 60% of the traditional market, while 1% controls 50% of the NFT market.<sup>7</sup> This leads to the conclusion that the difference is minimal, meaning that the crypto market also operates within a neoliberal model characterized by significant inequality (“the famous 1%”). This calls into question the decentralization and democratization touted as its main advantages. The takeover of the NFT market by large capital is confirmed by last year's sale of Beeple's work for seventy million dollars, which occurred amid a mega-crisis, “[...] faster and larger than any we have experienced in the last century, and perhaps even in the last few centuries”<sup>8</sup> – likely the biggest in the history of capitalism.

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<sup>6</sup> “The only thing we'd wanted to do was ensure that artists could make some money and have control over their work.” Anil Dash, “NFTs Weren't Supposed to End Like This,” *The Atlantic* (2021), [https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/nfts-werent-supposed-end-like/618488/?utm\\_medium=offsite&utm\\_source=medium&utm\\_campaign=all](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/nfts-werent-supposed-end-like/618488/?utm_medium=offsite&utm_source=medium&utm_campaign=all), acc. on August 16, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Ippollito, “Contemporary Conversations: Non-Fungible | The New Market for Rare Digital Items,” Sotheby's, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6jcTllpUmg> (2021), acc. on August 16, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

There is a legitimate joke about Marxists having correctly predicted twelve out of the last three capitalist crises. But if any Marxist had ever suggested that the worst crisis in late capitalism would be precipitated by a bat virus, even the comrades most inclined to catastrophism would have shaken their heads and wondered what drug had induced this hallucination.<sup>9</sup>

Whenever the mentioned artist talks about his works, he mainly discusses how their market price has increased.<sup>10</sup> These are digital drawings with a cyberpunk aesthetic that critique consumer culture and serve as a daily commentary on current events in the world. They were created over 15 years, with the initial idea of drawing something on the computer every day to record his progress, following the ‘famous’ ‘no day without a line’ principle.

Thus, in the midst of the digital, technologically networked media space, an old technique of craft perfection was revived, which was the subject of avant-garde criticism for reducing the artist to a craftsman and art to the retinal, or as Duchamp would say, “enough of the dumb painter”. This is also the starting point for a series of works by Raša Todosijević, titled *No Day Without a Line*, in which he literally draws lines, with the number varying according to the ‘significance’ of the place or institution where they are exhibited. Beeple, one might say, has truly mastered the use of drawing software, as his drawings resemble frames from dystopian video games, but the main impression is that such drawings have been seen countless times, which brings us back to the question of originality, authenticity, and uniqueness.

Good old Benjamin wrote in 1936 that the emergence of technical reproducibility is not only related to the introduction of new media, photography, and film, but also completely changed the way art functions. For this reason, issues concerning the relationship between originals and copies are no longer relevant, as reproduction has become the dominant type of image in modern culture. However, the question of originality and authenticity has not lost its importance, primarily because it serves the art market, which takes precedence in the art theory and retains it to this day.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency* (New York: Verso, 2020), 109.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that as many as three of his works were on the list of ten best-selling NFTs:

1. Beeple, *Everydays – The First 5000 Days*, \$69 million, March 2021, Christie’s;
2. Beeple, *Crossroads*, \$6.6 million, February 2021, Nifty Gateway;
3. Kevin Abosch, *Forever Rose*, \$1 million, February 2018, GFTO;
4. Pak, *Metarift*, \$904,413.47, March 2021, MarkersPlace;
5. Steve Aoki and Antoni Tudisco, *hairy*, \$888,888.88, March 2021, Nifty Gateway;
6. Pak, *Finite.*, \$809,789.40, March 2021, Foundation;
7. Beeple, *The Complete MF Collection*, \$777,777.77, Nifty Gateway, December 2020;
8. Chris Torres, *Nyan Cat*, \$561,000, February, 2021, Foundation;
9. Trevor Jones and Jose Delbo, *Genesis*, \$552,603.98, October 2020, MakersPlace;
10. FEWOCiOUS, *The EverLasting Beautiful* by FEWOCiOUS, \$550,000, March 2021, Nifty Gateway

Sarah Cascone, “Here Are the 10 Most Expensive NFT Artworks, From Beeple’s \$69 Million Opus to an 18-Year-Old’s \$500,000 Vampire Queen,” *Artnet* (2021), <https://news.artnet.com/market/most-expensive-nfts-1952597>, acc. on August 16, 2024.

Therefore, photography spent most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seeking an appropriate model to secure its status as an art object. This was achieved when a way was found to differentiate between originals and copies, which the nature of the medium itself does not recognize. This difference is formal, but it allowed it to cross into the market. The same process of assigning authenticity is undergone by the digital record. With the advent of NFTs, this process was recently completed. Blockchain played a key role in this. This technology provided a solution to the previously unsolvable problem of how to secure commodity status for a digital record that can be copied infinitely. A connection was made between art and NFTs, the digital and the tangible, and thus CryptoKitties led us into crypto art.

Sudden rise of the NFT market began in 2017 and coincided with a surge of interest in blockchain technology from the art market. At that time, there was also a growing narrative about virtual reality, which had been developing since the 1960s, albeit with significant interruptions and revivals, up to the present day. The art market, however, began to take a keen interest in blockchain because its proponents promised to solve the problem of ownership and provenance, not only for physical objects like paintings and sculptures but also for digital records. And they succeeded! It could be concluded that this is one of the reasons why the emergence of NFTs is considered a significant leap in art, as the issue of ownership and provenance is crucial in establishing the market and any other value of an artwork. It could be said that Hans Haacke's work "Seurat's 'Les Poseuses' (Small Version), 1888 –1975", in which he displays a series of documents with transaction data from the period indicated in the title, showing the rising price of this work, represents a precursor to blockchain, in the same way that certificates of authenticity can be found in the works of Yves Klein and Robert Morris.

Blockchain technology provided a solution to the problem of money duplication in the digital space, which could then be applied to all digital records. It turned out that certain codes could be isolated within the blockchain that could be guaranteed as unique. When these codes are 'attached' to specific digital items (which can be a variety of digital records) – images, gifs, memes, texts, or sounds – they bestow uniqueness and originality upon them. As we can see from the field of art, as soon as something can be proven original, it can be sold! It matters little whether the item is physical or digital. The guarantee of originality turns it into a commodity ready for the market. Thus, for market needs, the idea of originality has once again been revived, along with a series of artistic attributes from the previous paradigm, primarily the aesthetic component and uniqueness (the best-selling items in the NFT market are rare digital objects, i.e., those that are less circulated on platforms).

However, the reality on the ground is completely different, and we come to this realization when we ask a seemingly simple question: what are you buying when you buy an NFT, when you can see the same image online, copy it, or take a screenshot? The second question is why you would buy it at all. The answer to the second question can be intuited and is not so much about viewing and enjoying as much as about



investing: it does not matter that you can see it everywhere; what matters is that you can own it and sell it. The answer to the first question is even more amusing: when you buy an NFT, you are not buying a digital record itself, as it is not on the blockchain; only the transaction data are on the blockchain, so you are essentially buying a link.

“Basically, NFTs are a big receipt floating in the sky. That’s all they are...”<sup>11</sup>

## **NFT and networked world**

Each NFT is a node in a network and is connected to other NFTs, so by its purchase, you also become part of the network. In this network, you are partly a patron, someone who supports artists by buying their NFTs; partly a collector, partly a hoarder, whether viewed as a syndrome, disorder, or something archetypally familiar to us; and partly an investor, since the NFT market is like any other market, where you can profit or lose, and partly an artist, as you can create NFTs yourself. The problem with this last point is that you can be a good investor, but that does not mean you are a good artist, and vice versa. But that, it seems, is not even important. What is important is that digital art has finally obtained its economic model of functioning, and not only that, but this model is applicable to the ‘biggest players’ in the market.

What has changed, however, is that it is no longer necessary to be Christie’s to be part of this buying and selling chain. This leaves room for those without large capital to “fit” into the chain, expanding the concept of collecting, which is no longer necessarily an exclusive activity. This, in turn, supports the expansion of the dominant neoliberal model. However, everyone in the buying and selling chain is connected through transactions with everyone else, opening possibilities for introducing heterogeneous network connections, beyond hierarchical structures typical of conventional market models. By showing that NFT networks are modular, research confirms that each NFT can be seen as a node in a network (network of NFTs), and that they are interconnected. What connects them are semantic similarities, same buyers, and approximately the same timeframe in which the transactions are made.

What has also been shown is that the network comprises different clusters, which can be traced through collections, and that they represent specific communities (underlining community structure). Interestingly, despite the divisions into clusters, these communities are not isolated, as buyers purchase and sell digital works belonging to different collections. “This simultaneously guarantees that the network is not dominated by large cliques.”<sup>12</sup> It could be said that the potential of the NFT network and crypto art lies precisely in these modular, heterogeneous, open, and non-hierarchical connections, which open up possibilities for potential progress, something not currently happening in any other segment except this market. However, the greatest challenge digital art faces at this point is how to avoid to completely sink into the neoliberal model of functioning.

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<sup>11</sup> Jon Ippollito, “Contemporary Conversations: Non-Fungible | The New Market for Rare Digital Items,” Sotheby’s (2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6jcTllpUmg>, acc. on August 16, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Nadini et al., “Mapping the NFT Revolution.”

The pandemic has made the interconnected world visible and transparent. As we have seen, the pandemic initiated a breakthrough in the digital realm on various levels: from markets and tracking and controlling technologies to our ability to learn, teach, open exhibitions, and attend online forums. It seems that we are being prepared for the next step in this process to come: metaverse no longer only a game becoming part of our everyday environment. NFTs are a product of this interconnected world, a steppingstone toward the metaverse, which is already well on its way and which we may or may not experience. We can assume that we will have not just one, but several metaverses, and that in all of them, we will need digital items; in one, we might buy a crypto cat or dog, and in another, we might walk it. NFTs are a bridge to a digital economy. Entering the digital economy is inevitable in all other walks of life, including art, so the question is not whether this is good or bad, but how, besides the transactional potential that currently dominates crypto art, we can also preserve the critical potential. This is particularly important if we have in mind that anything or almost anything can be an NFT, from crypto cats to digitized Warhol prints; the question remains: are NFTs art or just monetized commodities.

Art has long been a commodity, and this connection, cleverly disguised by the attributes of the sublime, aesthetic, and autonomous art object, was exposed by the Dadaists and Duchamp when he directly transferred a urinal from a shop to a gallery. Later, Warhol spoke openly about it, even working in the “Factory”, and added business (business art) to the mentioned attributes. Today, there is no longer a need to hide it; on the contrary, it is emphasized as an advantage, progress, and breakthrough in art. In the neoliberal world that we live in, profit has become the highest value, its starting point, and its outcome, and crypto art is a response to all of that. It seems that what Thomas McEvelley feared in the 1990s, and to what Belting refers when speaking about the global art, has happened: “The problem is no longer that artworks will end up as commodities, but that they will begin as such.”<sup>13</sup>

This is also the reason why it is still too early to talk about a shift in art: at this moment, we can talk about a shift in the market, aligning the dominant market model with art and upgrading it: the appropriation of digital art by capital, as confirmed by Christie’s. How and in what way this will affect art, and whether it will even be called art, remains to be seen.

Considering this market shift and the radicalization of the process of marginalizing art, it could be said that art in the pandemic era is characterized by two extremes, the coexistence of two processes, two faces seemingly opposed: the strengthening and expansion of the blockbuster art model, and on the other hand, rapid process of transforming artists and freelancers into a precarious category of socially endangered people. Nevertheless, we should resist reducing these processes to the well-known dual matrix inherited from the previous century, that is, the division into high and low art, mainstream and alternative, because: “The time of traditional dualistic oppositions

<sup>13</sup> Hans Belting, “Savremena umetnost kao globalna umetnost,” in *Slike/Singularno/Globalno*, ed. by Jovan Čekić and Maja Stanković (Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2013): 223.



that guided social thought and geopolitical cartographies is over. The possibilities of conflict are still present, but they involve multipolar systems that are incompatible with aligning under Manichaeic ideological banners.”<sup>14</sup>

The division into high and low art is constituted by the following differences: in content (in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this was abstraction versus motifs from popular culture), in medium (traditional artistic media vs. new media, new artistic practices), and in the exhibition system (museum-gallery in the first case and mass communication media in the second). Today, this difference is not constituted by content (take for example Koons’ markedly banal motifs taken from the media world, as an unavoidable example of blockbuster art), nor by medium (Banksy’s graffiti and street art interventions and their auction sales), nor by the presentation system (NFTs are not part of the museum-gallery system yet are sold at Christie’s). The difference is present only at the level of economy. Between the aforementioned two extremes there is a whole spectrum of different financial-production frameworks that artists work within, and the pandemic has not caused this division; it has only sharpened this spectrum to extremes. Thus, it is not about a dual division, just as the world today cannot be viewed in a bipolar Cold War key, which is constantly being pulled out of mothballs and imposed in the inability to think of something new, multipolar. “Can’t you see that the pandemic is just a costume rehearsal for a global state of emergency?”<sup>15</sup>

The pandemic made the interconnected world tangible and visible, but also highlighted inequalities; it revealed the marginalized position of art and simultaneously finalized the process of the financialization of art. The pandemic marks a leap into the digital world, which we no longer separate from the previously known real world. It is an overt leap into a controlled world, controlled externally (where we move, what we watch, who we chat with...) and now internally, under the skin (collecting biometric data with regards to what is happening in our bodies).<sup>16</sup> “One can imagine a chronic emergency that plays out in a concatenation of disasters: one pandemic after another, one climate impact after another, blow succeeding mighty blow until the foundations are too damaged and the whole system starts to totter.”<sup>17</sup>

The pandemic has radicalized populism, so in addition to the traditional, we can also talk about a new populism. Here’s how Žižek differentiates between old and new populisms. In the traditional populism, everything negative for a certain regime was not allowed to be heard in the public space. Today, as Žižek says, obscenity is an integral part of populism: anyone can say anything without any responsibility, and this is a strategy used by the authorities themselves. In such an environment, even when the truth is spoken, it appears obscene and thus masks itself, sounding like untruth. In this key, speaking the truth becomes just one of many obscene things, just a

<sup>14</sup> Feliks Gatari, *Tri ekologije* (Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2022), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *Pandemija!* 2, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, “The World after Covid,” FTWeekend Digital Festival, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWo4OrGhGxI> (2021), acc. on August 16, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*, 114.

variant of fake news (“The function of obscenity here is very precise: it should be an indicator of ‘media honesty’”<sup>18</sup>), aimed at provoking emotion and irrational reaction, which are shortcuts to manipulation.

So, where is art in all of this? How can it position itself in relation to all the mentioned changes, fluid values, shifting meanings, neoliberal madness...? Perhaps for a moment, we should take a step back into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Conditionally speaking, we have inherited two approaches to art from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first is the aesthetic approach, which foregrounds the aesthetic dimension and the idea of originality. This high-modernist approach is followed by a postmodernist one, which destabilizes the idea of originality by initiating a series of appropriation practices, but it is incorporated as a detachment from what is being appropriated. The second approach comes from the avant-garde, through neo-avant-garde movements and conceptual art, starting from the idea that art and artistic expression are a form of thinking, not necessarily just creating beautiful objects. One can ask: which of these approaches is operational today in terms of helping us understand art, but also the world around us?

If we start from the first approach, we can conclude that the idea of originality has been completely absorbed and instrumentalized by neoliberal capital, which prioritizes the market and profitable value. With the advent of technical reproducibility, the question of originality has become complex, so Benjamin approaches it from a theoretical angle, introducing the concept of aura and emphasizing difference between traditional and new media, traditional and modern contexts. Today, however, originality is equated with a certificate of originality, as we have seen with NFTs and crypto art: this idea has moved out of the visual, conceptual, and theoretical realms and become a certificate that accompanies the artwork in a chain of transactions.

That such a market influx would occur in art was probably unimaginable even to Yves Klein and Robert Morris. The former, as part of his work *Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959), issued certificates of authenticity. He problematizes the beginning of market dominance by reducing the work entirely to the immaterial – the transaction; however, this transaction ends with pouring gold into the Seine, as profit had not yet gained the status of an inviolable value. Robert Morris, on the other hand, introduces a document on the withdrawal of aesthetic value into the work, cynically playing with, like Klein, the relationship between the market and the idea of originality (*Document*, 1963). Conceptual art problematizes the reduction of the idea of originality to consensus, convention, and certificate, a mere bureaucratic document confirming it. Today, it is an even more precise document, specifically a code written into a network of other information.

Given the current state of truth in our world – compromised, manipulated, and often obscured by a media landscape that instrumentalizes emotion and irrationality – the emancipatory potential of art appears more critical than ever. Art’s power lies in its capacity to engage with and expose mechanisms of manipulation that distort truth and rationality. However, the irrationality prevalent today does not lead to a deeper

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<sup>18</sup> Žižek, *Pandemija!* 2, 179.

understanding of reality, as in surrealist art, but rather functions to suppress critical thinking, which has become increasingly marginalized and undervalued.

The true emancipatory potential of art, as conceived in the Adornian sense, resides in its role as a ‘message in a bottle’, an open channel to the future, and a catalyst for social change. This potential becomes especially vital as we approach a future where artificial intelligence, guided by existing patterns and protocols, increasingly automates decision-making processes. Unlike these predetermined systems, art remains a domain where imagination can transcend existing frameworks, offering novel perspectives and introducing elements that escape standardized solutions. This potential for innovation and experimentation, reminiscent of how Robert Morris and Yves Klein’s introduction of certificates of originality eventually reshaped our reality, underscores art’s unique ability to think beyond the constraints of the present and envision alternative futures.

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