A digital art revolution?

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A DIGITAL ART REVOLUTION?

It is not uncommon for technological innovations to be touted as disruptive. Without a doubt, this also applies to blockchain technologies, which burst onto the digital landscape and into the public imagination more than a decade ago with the emergence of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. But what exactly do blockchains disrupt, and what positive impacts of this disruption can be felt in the arts?

In a nutshell, a blockchain is a hyper-secure digital ledger – a constantly updated and verified chain of interlinked digital data points. The ledger is decentralised across a large number of independent computer nodes, and is set up in such a way that we can be sure of its integrity without having to rely on third party intermediaries to ascertain the correctness of the data. Blockchains are therefore ideally suited for facilitating secure data transactions between individuals, without any need for trustworthy third parties.

Based on these characteristics, it is no surprise that so far, mainstream blockchain applications have primarily taken the form of cryptocurrencies. In this form, blockchain technologies are poised to disrupt established financial services and industries, often with promises that they will 'democratise' and 'decentralise' existing market structures and business models. In arts contexts, this can have positive effects on creative practitioners, who can now use blockchain technologies for monetising their work without having to rely on traditional trust intermediaries, such as auction houses or gallerists.

This development relies on two key features of blockchains. The first is that the technology can render digital artefacts as uniquely identifiable in the form of non-fungible tokens (NFTs). This makes it much easier to buy, sell and collect digital artworks which, until a few years ago, were considered to be poorly suited for the art market because they were so easy to copy and share.


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Where traditional artists may have had to rely on the goodwill of gallerists or art institutions, digital artists can now sell their work without the need for such intermediaries. Connected to this, the second blockchain feature with disruptive potential for the arts is the ability to connect blockchain data with so-called smart contracts. This term refers to algorithmic protocols that can enforce, more or less autonomously, predetermined behaviours. For example, each time an NFT-based artwork is resold online, a smart contract could trigger a simple rule whereby a fixed percentage of the sales price is automatically transferred to the original artist.

In the UK and many other jurisdictions, all artists are entitled to a royalty every time their work is resold – but the enforcement of this right is notoriously difficult. In theory, this problem can be easily fixed by tying digital artworks to NFTs and encoding them with smart contract-enabled behaviours that enforce resale rights.

As so often, there is a quickly widening gap between the utopian potentials of emerging technologies, and the ways in which they are actually implemented. Currently, several of the largest NFT marketplaces are removing royalty payments from their platforms, suggesting that the world of digital art is perhaps not so different from the 'trad' (traditional) art world after all.

Many art critics and technologists nevertheless agree that the disruptions effected by blockchain technology – in particular, the ability for artists to directly control the monetisation and circulation of their work – is revolutionary, and produces life-changing opportunities for artists, on a scale never seen before.

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