# Originality in the digital age

One of the practical and conceptual challenges digital creative practice has brought into the picture is that of originality or reproducibility.

In digital art, replicability is not a flaw but a feature. Internet pioneer Steward Brand coined it under the slogan *“Information wants to be free”*.

From a purely practical perspective, this raises the following challenge:

*"If our (digital) property can be infinitely reproduced and instantaneously distributed across the planet "without" cost, how are we going to protect it? How are we going to get paid for the work we make with our minds, and if we can't get paid, what will assure the continued creation and distribution of such work?"* (Tehranian 2021)

In the realm of creativity, this goes even deeper. A digital copy of a digital asset (art piece) is, objectively, the same as the original one. This goes against the tradition of giving more value to the original because if the original is the same as the copy, what is the “artistic value” of the original piece?

Even more, if the new digital aesthetic is about flows of information, what does “information wants to be free” imply for the digital practice?

## Originality as a myth of traditional art

Already in 1935, Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1969) was philosophising about how machines would influence creative practice.

He introduces the concept of the "aura" associated with unique, original artworks. The aura is the sense of authenticity, originality, and authority that is felt when in the presence of a one-of-a-kind piece of art. He then argues that mechanical reproduction diminishes the aura of an artwork. Copies lack the spatial and temporal context of the original, leading to a loss of the unique experience associated with the authentic work of art. In his words:

*“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”* (Benjamin 1969, p3)

In other words, the historical context of an original piece cannot be replaced by even the most perfect reproductions of it. Jack Burham reacts to this perspective as follows:

*“One hypothetical issue in esthetics is the seemingly trivial question of whether undetected art forgeries have historical validity. Usually the answer is that they do not, and the reasons most often invoked have to do with stylistic consistency or the utter uniqueness of the artist imitated. But regarded in the context of important records which have been destroyed and replaced with copies, the real reason becomes evident. We accept copies but feel no compulsion to venerate them. A known false work of art cannot mediate between past and present, the diachrony of history and the synchrony of mythic event. Belief in the physical authenticity of the work of art is absolutely essential to myth, since the object is the tran- substantiated energy and psyche of the artist it survives. Hence totemism in art not only moves laterally in terms of linking contemporary art forms, but also vertically with relation to past and future events.*” (Burham 1973, p14)

Since digital art comes from a different tradition than fine arts, the problem of replicability is more an issue of fine arts than digital art. It becomes a problem for digital art when it tries to force itself into the historical tradition of the art practice.

*“Fundamental to the mythic form of art history is the practice whereby all objects are regarded as completely unique. Works of art may neither be divided nor multiplied, although they may relate to other works serially or cyclically.”* (Burham 1973, p40)

Since in digital art, reproducibility is not a fault but a feature, any tradition that grows up from here ought to embrace this. The “aura” of a digital artwork is not on its presence in time and space relative to traditional arts. At best, it would be for its position in the tradition of digital art.

## From the web 1.0 to NFT’s

In less than 30 years, the Internet and the World Wide Web, or the Web, have transformed how we interact with media.

In its first iteration, Web 1.0 focused on messaging and static web pages. From this perspective, web 1.0 could be seen as "old" media on the side of books, news, and Television. One of the key characteristics of that "old" media is that there are few creators of information, and most users are information consumers. Because of this, the creators of information have a lot of control over the information made available and when it is made available to consumers.

This changed with the development of Web 2.0. Here, it was/is all about reading, writing, and creating content by users themselves. Web 2.0 made the development of social platforms possible. These platforms got big because the content created came from all their users. In this sense, Web 2.0 was the birth of new media.

One of the crucial switches of Web 2.0 relative to Web 1.0 was that the end user is not only the user but also the participant of the information. In addition to this, the availability of information has moved towards an on-demand model.

These developments have led us to a situation where the web mediates most interactions. These include interactions with ourselves (e.g., agendas), others (e.g., messages), knowledge (e.g., Wikipedia), and information in general.

Rafael Rozendaal's work, as discussed above, takes place in Web 2.0.

The next iteration of the web, web 3.0, is happening right now. It is based on blockchain technology. In addition to the reading and writing capabilities of Web 2.0, it brings ownership and decentralisation as digital natives in its conception.

### Non-Fungible-Tokens

A key technical feature of Web 3.0 was the introduction of Non-Fungible-Tokens (NFTs)[[1]](#footnote-1). NFTs were first promoted as the solution that would allow artists to be free from the middle parties dominating the art market. Artists would have full ownership of their digital assets.

This ideal was well aligned with the avantgarde principles of rejecting art institutionalisation.

The process of creating, or making available, an NFT is known as "minting". This involves uploading the digital asset, providing details about the work, setting any additional parameters (e.g., edition size), and defining the smart contract.

NFTs had a boom in 2021 and stormed into the art world. On the commercial aspect, some NFTs sold for over $69 million[[2]](#footnote-2). Even Sotheby’s launched the “Sotheby’s Metaverse” branch to address the newcomers. However, as for today, the hype has calmed down. The NFT markets have slowed down, and the values of NFTs dropped. Nowadays, the trade of NFTs is “regulated” by marketplaces like <https://opensea.io/> or <https://superrare.com/>.

With the market's over-saturation, it is impossible for upcoming artists to be noticed without the help of networks and some intermediary to promote their art. We are back at the starting point where some autonomous institutions regulate the art market.

Notice that the process of “minting” requires the precise definition of the object to be made available. The immutability of the blockchain implies that what is decided at this point can never be changed again. That is, minting promotes the creation of static, finished art objects.

Theoretically, any digital assets can be minted, i.e. become an NFT. However, we see that images, gifs, and videos in the NFT’s art markets make most of the items available. In other words, most of the items available in the NFT’s art markets are digital mimesis of physical counterparts. Namely, traditional aesthetic objects in digital form. They do not embrace the characteristics of digital aesthetic objects like dynamicity or cybernetic perspective, as we discussed in the previous chapters.

Artists could mint other objects instead of the “final product”, for example, the script with the code or the complete application needed for the digital artwork to run. However, this does not happen, primarily due to the market demands. The NFT’s audience asks for digital representations of traditional physical art objects. This brings us back to the 1986 Unstable Media Manifesto, where we ask for a new art form and a new audience.

A question that remains unanswered for NFTs to integrate into the digital art practice is: *What is the right thing to mint?*

Notice that Rafael Rozendaal, before NFTs, offered the domain of his artworks for sale. Since the artwork is the website itself, and domains are unique, he had already solved the issue of originality and replicability for his artworks without NFTs.

## Illustration, CryptoPunks and Bored Ape

Let’s look at two examples of NFTs that draw a lot of attention. Those are CryptoPunks and Bored Ape Yacht Club.

### The art objects.

*“CryptoPunks are a set of 10,000 unique digital collectable characters stored on the Ethereum blockchain. Each item in the collection is a 24x24 pixel, 8-bit-style portrait with a unique set of attributes and traits.*

*CryptoPunks was one of the first non-fungible token projects and has since paved the way for other successful NFT collections such as CryptoKitties, Bored Ape Yacht Club and CrypToadz.”* (kraken.com 2022)

CryptoPunks were launched in 2017, before the NFT boom of 2021, and were initially free. Seven CryptoPunks[[3]](#footnote-3) are listed in the “Top 20 Most Expensive Sales of All the Time” (Langston 2023)

*“Bored Ape Yacht Club is a collection of 10,000 non-fungible tokens on the Ethereum blockchain. Each NFT in the collection depicts an Ape with an algorithmically generated set of traits, including different eyes, facial expressions, hair colours and accessories.”* (kraken.com 2022)

The Bored Ape collection was one of the most iconic collections in the 2021 NFT boom. These came in the news and were the topic of several lunch discussions. They reached their top on Bored Ape 8817, which sold for 3.4 million dollars in an auction facilitated by Sotheby’s. The same action was the public launch of Sotheby’s Metaverse branch. (GMTA Software Solutions Pvt Ltd 2023)

### Review of the art objects.

These two examples are illustrations of digital art objects that do not follow the full potential of digital art practice and try to put digital assets back into the traditional establishment of art institutions.

To begin with, both collections restrict the number of items to 10.000 items, whereas the possibilities are much higher.

For example, CryptoPunks can have seven attributes with over 100 possibilities each. The total number of combinations is larger than the current world population. Bored Ape is in the same order of magnitude.

That means that the collections have explored less than 0.00000001% of possibilities. This is opposite to the principles we saw in the work of Vera Molnar. In fact, as only 10.000 were minted, CryptoPunks and Bored Ape have become static objects at the same level of a painting. That is, they go against the dynamic perception of digital aesthetic objects.

Both collections use elements of randomness, but not in the way we saw with Vera Molnar as an aid to the creative process to create a conversation between the artist, the machine and the viewer. It is more like the viewer's interaction when buying a lottery ticket.

Let's recall Claudia Gianneti's perspective on digital aesthetic objects as an exchange of information. That cannot be seen in any of the items of the collection or the collection itself. The user, or viewer, does not influence the art object. In that sense, a CryptoPunk or Bored Ape is a static object dissociated from the viewer. In that sense, they can only acquire “value” based on the tradition behind it, just like a Rembrandt or a van Gogh.

In conclusion, CryptoPunks and Bored Ape are examples of digital art practices that are cloning traditional art establishments into the digital world.

## Illustration: Life forms

Let’s look at another NFT example more aligned with the principles discussed in this thesis. It is Life forms.

Life forms can be found at <https://lifeforms.supply>. Here is the description there:

*“Lifeforms are NFT-based entities. Like any living thing, lifeforms need regular care in order to thrive. If not properly looked after, lifeforms die.*

*A lifeform that has died will no longer appear in wallets, is not transferable, and cannot be brought back to life in any way. How do you care for a lifeform?*

*Within 90 days of receiving it, you must give it away.”*

These are dynamic objects that will keep changing until they die. This concept is interesting as art objects are not usually perceived as living entities.

In addition, these artworks make great use of technology and embrace their possibilities. Imposing the condition that the artwork must be given away within 90 days, or it dies, embraces the possibilities of the blockchain and involves the viewers/owners with the artwork. The immutability capabilities of the blockchain and smart contracts make this work impossible before NFTs.

## Summary

We discussed how the problem of originality incarnates into digital objects. We concluded that the “problem” is not a “problem” of digital art practice but a problem of traditional art institutions and the establishment that romanticises the notion of the singular, irreplicable masterpiece, elevating originality to mythical proportions. It becomes a problem for digital art when it tries to force itself into the historical tradition of the art practice.

Digital art tradition ought to embrace reproducibility. The “aura” of a digital artwork is not on its presence in time and space relative to traditional arts. At best, it would be for its position in the tradition of digital art.

The promise of NFTs to save the art world by removing the middleman and empowering artists to make a living is still to see its realisation. In fact, after the NFT boom of 2021, the market is no longer as profitable and has either returned to traditional establishments and institutions or has become a niche for enthusiasts.

Finally, how most NFTs are produced and consumed today mimics their physical counterparts and does not embrace their digitality and the full potential of digital art and NFTs. The question to answer here is: *What is the right thing to mint?*

1. A non-fungible token (NFT) is a unique digital identifier that cannot be copied, substituted, or subdivided, that is recorded in a blockchain, and that is used to certify authenticity and ownership. The ownership of an NFT is recorded in the blockchain and can be transferred by the owner, allowing NFTs to be sold and traded. NFTs can be created by anybody and require few or no coding skills to create. NFTs typically contain references to digital files such as photos, videos, and audio. Because NFTs are uniquely identifiable assets, they differ from cryptocurrencies, which are fungible.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is remarkable to compare with famous artworks like the Sun Flowers of van Gogh, is valued at around $100 million. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Those are: #8857, #7804, #3100, #5577, #4156, #7523, and #5822 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)