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Art and the Blockchain

30.03.16 by **Ruth Catlow**

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**Ruth Catlow is
Co-founder and Director
of Furtherfield**

To tie in with our [Blockchain: Beyond FinTech](#) event, Ruth Catlow, Co-founder and Director of [Furtherfield](#), writes about how artists are using the blockchain as a medium.

As the underpinning technology for [Bitcoin](#), the blockchain is widely heralded as the new internet. Alex Puig, CEO of the Digital Currency Summit, calls it the ["Internet of Value"](#).

The blockchain is a decentralised infrastructure for automating, monitoring

and verifying transactions, and this promises to facilitate the monetisation and marketisation of all things networked. It is no surprise then that the sponsor of the most recent [Ethereum London Meetup](#) was speaking to the room when he said, “We can make finance great again!”

While the technical protocol is now well described, conversations about blockchain’s transformative potential beyond FinTech are yet to attract the same level of debate and development within other sectors – let alone connect with a wider public. This is a problem because technologies develop to reflect the interests of those who develop them. Artists can help here.



Few conversations are had regarding blockchain's potential beyond FinTech - artists can help change this

[Ascribe](#) and [Monegraph](#) both look to build the market place for digital art by offering platforms that allow artists and collectors to prove that they own original digital art assets. They use blockchain to determine and track provenance without restricting the circulation of the artworks.

Perhaps more importantly though, an active community of artists, technologists and activists are asking questions and developing critical practices around blockchain's potential. These can transform our approach to contemporary economic and social challenges.

It may be surprising to some to find artists central to projects such as [D-Cent](#) and [FairCoop](#), the blockchain-based tools for enhanced democracy. However, artists have worked with computing and communication infrastructures for as long as they have been in existence.

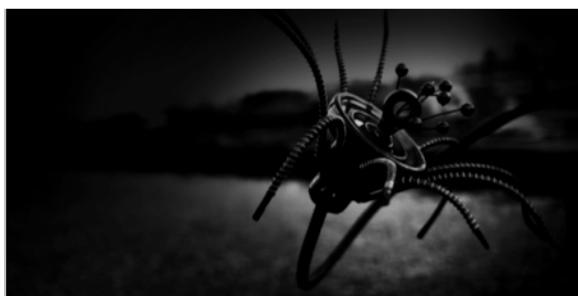
They created software to craft experiences and relationships, pre-empting developments in the social web by 10 years. Audiences for early [Net Art](#) became participants in and co-creators of distributed online artworks, making really strong user interfaces to engage people. The new social relations were integral to the aesthetics and message of their work.



"Artists have worked with computing and communication infrastructures for as long as they have been in existence"

When artists use new technologies as their materials, a number of things happen:

1. They discover ways to extend the expressive and communicative range of tools, devices and systems
2. By making connections that are neither necessarily utilitarian nor profitable, they explore potential for diverse human interest and experience
3. They do the cognitive work to make difficult abstractions more legible and fascinating.

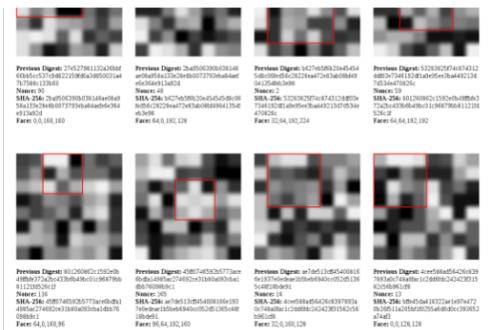


Plantoid uses blockchain technology to interact with gallery visitors

For instance [Plantoid](#), a blockchain based artwork by [Okhaos](#) is a metal sculpture. It is powered by a blockchain-based smart contract that, when tipped with bitcoin by gallery visitors, will trigger the commission of another artwork.

Rob Myers' [Facecoin](#) is an artwork and [altcoin](#). Data visualisations of real-time bitcoin hashes are searched by facial recognition software. It generates portraits as proof of aesthetic work, or 'Proof of Face' as [Stephan Tual \(Slock.it\)](#) notes. This work provokes dialogues about value and values

because the algorithm decides what constitutes the ‘portrait’.



A snapshot of Rob Myers' Facecoin, which presents 'Proof of Face' data visualisations

The promise of blockchain as a medium, metaphor and distribution platform for these artists is [as a decentralised co-ordination technology](#); allowing people to bypass intermediaries, to organise and co-operate peer-to-peer. At scale, it can help form organisations, products and communities; prompting people to co-create an Internet of Values.

Ruth Catlow is Co-founder and Director of Furtherfield, an arts led organisation for art shows, labs and debates around critical questions in arts, technology and society. Furtherfield's [Art Data Money](#) programme seeks to develop new economies for arts in the network age. You can follow them on Twitter [@furtherfield](#). Don't forget to follow us too [@DigiCatapult](#).

One Comment on: “Art and the Blockchain”

 *nicolas herbert* says:
[March 30, 2016 at 11:15 am](#)

Hi Ruth Catlow,

I use Diaspora*, am involved with Maidsafe and wondered if Maidsafe would be more useful.....
(you have shown a few of my one minute films)

Nick

I no longer use Twitter etc.. !!

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