

Politics of decentralisation:  
Art on the blockchain  
Federico Sargentone & Ulya Soley

As this piece is being written, Bitcoin reaches an exchange price of \$6,001.50. In this very moment – *real time, flash* – millions of investors of an age-range from 16 to 66 years old are celebrating, swearing, crying, holding, selling, panicking, going to the hospital, buying Lambos, going to the moon.<sup>1</sup> They are all gathered together, held within a solid yet floating relationship, by the blockchain. They tangibly demonstrate the failure of centralised structures through their questionable success in terms of crypto-wealth accumulation.

The blockchain, and the entirety of the relationships involved in its functioning, are a mechanism used to validate any exchange between individuals, entities, users. The parties involved in this exchange of information are held in a simultaneous relationship through a network of computers that keep track of that information, and its exchange methods. The magical, auto-normative entity of the blockchain is to be translated into a continuous flux of records. Its physical manifestation is an open ledger registering any transaction occurring between certain givers and receivers. Any linearity of exchange is disrupted, emancipated from being the only, necessary method of transacting data. The possibilities of decentralisation offered by the blockchain are the resultant quasi-political effect of ongoing investigations on how to escape techno-capitalism, an authoritarian centralisation of power that operates through data collection.

Inevitably, the shift from a system where data are centrally held and subjected to the risk of manipulation creates a newly-generated set of peripheral relationships, developed at the outskirts of the supposedly central node of the system. The process of storing data across a network distributes the transactions on many intermediate actors, thus acting as a decentralising mechanism able to set new

standards for transparency and anonymity.<sup>2</sup> So, the dispersed becomes the main, central system. Can we still talk about a periphery if the entire system is decentralised?

If the opposite of periphery – the centre – no longer exists, could the whole idea of peripheral collapse? Chus Martinez directs us to the rather curious brain-functioning of an octopus. Its brain structure is very peculiar. The octopus's arms are autonomous: each arm has its own brain, but the system functions normally, as if it had a head:

Without a central nervous system, every arm "thinks" as well as "senses" the surrounding world without autonomy, and yet, each arm is part of the animal. For us, art is what allows us to imagine this form of decentralised perception. Art is the octopus in love.<sup>3</sup>

The decentralised brain structure and operation system of an octopus is similar to how blockchain functions. The

<sup>1</sup> "To the moon": informal expression, vernacularly coined by users of cryptocurrencies-related subreddits. Also common on 4chan, "To the moon" refers to the optimistic projection of cryptocurrencies to generate a solid return on investments.

<sup>2</sup> "How Blockchain Technology Can Change The Way Modern Businesses Work", available at: [eyerys.com](http://eyerys.com)

fascinating promise of the blockchain – a decentralised autonomous sovereignty – can be used by artists to create a self-governed art world, to fight the commodification of art, or else it could reduce art to a share that sits in a freeport somewhere around the world.

An ongoing art project titled *terra0* is a conceptual project whose function is based on the blockchain. The idea is to create a self-owned, augmented forest, which sells licences, and markets its resources to extend and eventually buy itself from the project initiators, expanding its territories. *terra0* is an example of the relationship between art and the blockchain. An instance of the latter function of the blockchain is Maecenas, a company that sells art on a blockchain platform. They recently made it possible to trade art as stock exchange. Buyers can own parts of different artworks, which stay in warehouses at freeports and are never seen by their stakeholders.

A third possibility is that the blockchain eliminates art's existence entirely. Bjørn Magnhildøen, who runs the production

site Noemata, argues that being and time have a different relation in the context of the blockchain: they are conflated.<sup>4</sup>

He suggests that after the dematerialisation of the art object via conceptual art, perhaps now we might deconceptualise the artwork through the blockchain: it is tangible, but disentangled from existence and concepts.

Will the blockchain become a platform that challenges the commodification of art through its autonomous and decentralised system, will it survive, or will it share the same fate as conceptual art and become subjected to commodification?

<sup>3</sup> Chus Martinez, "The Octopus in Love", in *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Bjørn Magnhildøen, "Aphantasia – Blockchain As Medium for Art", in *Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain*, ed Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett, Nathan Jones and Sam Skinner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).