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“Bullshit Art” and Non-Fungible-Tokens

Abstract

The NFT art world is a mixture of late capitalism and populist aesthetics in which any idea of an “adequate artistic expression” has become increasingly difficult. Beeple’s digital artwork “Everydays: The First 5,000 Days” sold for \$69.3. Twobadour, one of the two buyers of the work, thinks that work “is going to be a billion-dollar piece someday.” Until recently, “art” as a vague institution could still provide some landmarks about the ‘how’ of art and the discourse attached to it. Galleries and museums played a role in promotion, which sparked debates, both public and elitist. Curators, who are generally excluded from the financial craze, functioned as gatekeepers. Once NFTs are introduced into a highly speculative art market, any notion of aesthetic “truth” becomes dysfunctional. Authenticity emerges from the Enlightenment tradition for which being authentic meant to be free and autonomous. In the twenty-first century, authenticity needed to be installed in non-materiality, and NFTs are the latest result of this process. Dematerialization means despatialization. The digitized version of a work is authentic, but authentic has here a meaning different from what it was before. The shift goes hand in hand with the reissuing of authenticity as a highly abstract category that is common in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Non-fungible Tokens, Beeple, Injective Protocol, Authenticity, Kitsch, Bullshit

Bullshit Art

The twenty-two-page book “On Bullshit,” by analytic philosopher Harry Frankfurt introduced the term “bullshit” as a philosophical notion. Frankfurt explains that bullshit is different from lying because, unlike the liar, the “bullshitter” does not try to deceive (2005, 6-7). The bullshitter is bluffing

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and is not serious; bullshit is not false, but merely fake and phony (47). Importantly, people are not *forced* to believe in an alternative reality because “real” reality does not get dissimulated.

Frankfurt’s initial article was published in 1986, and since then, the “bullshit situation” has changed, confronting us, for example, with a string of financial scandals, fake news, and social media. A Ponzi scheme at the stock exchange can be seen as bullshit because people are not forced to believe in it. Often, the financial truth is available to everybody, and if some people prefer to believe the fraudster, then this is, at least partially, their fault. Financial gurus are mainly bullshitters because they distort the truth through exaggeration. In many speculation booms, we cannot even find a fraudster, but bullshit simply emerges and cannot be traced to particular lies. In bitcoin speculation it is not clear whether the bitboys are true believers or con men, whether they are victims or perpetrators. Gurus of questionable religious sects follow similar principles when they invite their followers to contribute large sums of money without forcing them to do so. These gurus speak untrue things, but to accuse them of lying, one would have to prove that they consistently brainwashed their adepts, thereby preventing them from acting otherwise. Fake news, often so blatantly fake that nobody *should* believe it, only become lies when they are so systematic that they leave people no chance to escape their influence. Since today all kinds of information are readily available on the internet, a video stating wrong facts must be seen as bullshit rather than as a lie because videos contradicting these facts are also consistently available. Nor is propaganda a lie unless populations have been consistently deprived of all alternative information, which is today probably only possible in extremely rural regions or in North Korea. The same goes for marketing. Advertisements present half-truths in a playful fashion: commercials do not misrepresent reality but rather evoke alternative—often quite unlikely and fanciful—realities that nobody is forced to believe in.

Bullshit embellishes or twists reality without straightforwardly lying, which turns the bullshitter, metaphorically, into an artist. Frankfurt famously speaks of the “bullshit artist” because bullshitting is “not a craft but art” (52). The bullshitter is playful as he offers a free interpretation of reality. The liar is not an artist, but rather a social engineer who seeks to design a perfect crime, whereas the bullshitter’s aim leans more towards a form of creative manipulation. The liar calculates, counts, and measures whereas the bullshitter is more spontaneous and is simply indifferent to the truth.

I claim that art is on the side of bullshit because art does not misrepresent reality but simply offers alternative, aestheticized, realities. “For art, reality is nothing,” says Baudrillard, it is “never concerned with questions of

reality. The purpose of art is to invent a whole other scene" (2005, 77). The aesthetic truth that art attempts to represent is more evasive than other truths, especially when compared with the truth of science. Science is supposed to make true statements about reality, which basically means that it ought to properly *describe* reality. Any false statement willfully uttered by a scientist must be considered a lie. A scientist cannot get away with saying "I was only bullshitting," which is different in art. Since the "truth" of art is evasive, art's "falsehoods" are equally evasive. Art is bullshit from the beginning; it cannot be rejected because it misrepresents reality. Yet there does remain a difference between art and "regular bullshit." Art is *expected* to deliver aesthetic representations of reality whereas the bullshitter embellishes reality when they are not supposed to.

So, if art is always bullshit, why would it then still make sense to talk specifically of "bullshit art"? If everything aesthetic/artistic is an alternative reality in the first place, is the term "bullshit art" not a pleonasm? Or can art still be affected by bullshit in some other ways? The answer is yes, because art is not supposed to represent *reality* but rather a truth *about reality*. Traditionally, art is endowed with a capacity to "say the truth" about life, love, existence, God... And if it fulfils this task in a sloppy way, then it becomes bullshit art. Art can lie and produce alternative realities, but there are some expectations about how this ought to be done. If art lies about the *artistic* reality it produces, it becomes bullshit art. To put it in a formula: *Art is bullshit but it should not be bullshit art.*

In art, bullshit does not concern the what, but the how. The stories and pictures are not true, but the way in which the artistic reality is presented should not be affected by bullshit. Both art and science are submitted to a strict bullshit prohibition, but for science, this prohibition concerns itself with matters of reality, whereas for art it is concerned with how an obviously fake reality is presented artistically.¹

Art lies about reality, but it should not bullshit about its own presentations—by presenting, for instance, kitsch as high art.² Here it differs from other activities. *The reality art presents is a lie but should not be bullshit, whereas marketing, religious sects, propaganda, fake news, and fast money speculations are bullshit, but should not be lies.* If marketing or propaganda were to insist too much on fake facts, they would become mere lies, which is unethical. They must instead remain bullshit.

¹ If science followed such principles, we would allow science to make false statements, and only worry about the procedures taken to reach such conclusions.

² I do not suggest that all producers of kitsch artworks are aware that they are producing kitsch. See below on "unconscious kitsch."

Kitsch and Bullshit

To clarify these claims, it is useful to look at an obvious example of bullshit art, which is kitsch.³ By refining the definition of bullshit in art (through kitsch), a useful tool becomes available that will help to analyze NFTs in the main part of this article. “In the same way that bullshit ignores and sidesteps epistemic norms, kitsch ignores aesthetic norms,” writes Eva Dadlez in this issue. Both kitsch and bullshit are indifferent towards truth, which can sometimes even make them look cool (at least as long as the exaggerations, distortions, and inadequacies are used sparingly).⁴ The matter becomes complicated when we consider that kitsch might not always have bullshit *intentions*. Sometimes it can even appear as the contrary of bullshit. The kitsch painter’s naïve believe in simple beauty can be contrasted with the bullshitter’s calculating mind who perfectly well knows that he is bullshitting. Much (though not all) bullshit is ambiguous whereas kitsch (unless it is used ironically) is straightforward. Kitsch is transparent whereas bullshit is blurring the truth. If my aunt produces a kitsch painting with summer flowers, every stroke of it will be honest. She does not appear to be bullshitting. Still, she is indifferent towards aesthetic norms that more authoritative aesthetic communities take for granted, and this carelessness qualifies her art as bullshit. In her case, she might not even know about these norms, which questions the claim if this can really be seen as bullshit. Does involuntary bullshit exist? Yes, because there is involuntary kitsch. I would categorically hold that whoever presents as true what is false because s/he is indifferent towards truth is bullshitting. Only this makes bullshitting different from lying, because for lying the intention matters. Saying something false without having the intention to do so is not lying. Unintentional lying is logically impossible, whereas unintentional bullshit, just like unintentional kitsch, is possible. Again, the reason is that we are here talking not about facts but about the representation of facts. I can say “she thinks it’s art, and I think it’s kitsch.’ Seen from the respective subjective points of views, we are both right. This does not work with lies: here, if one of us is right, the other must be wrong. Therefore bullshit is on the side of kitsch.

³ I have explained my thoughts on the relationships between kitsch and bullshit in Botz-Bornstein 2015 and 2016 and respond in this section to criticism that has often emerged in discussions.

⁴ Not all bullshit and not all ‘bullshit art’ is kitsch. Gluing a banana to a wall and sell it as art, is bullshit art, but it is not kitsch.

In the present issue, Lucas Scripser distinguishes between "bullshitting about art" and "bullshit art," but I would go beyond that system. Scripser is right in saying that there are certain expectations about what can be presented as art and what not, and when an art dealer goes against these expectations by presenting kitsch as art, then he is bullshitting. If my aunt puts her work on a serious art website, then she is clearly bullshitting (consciously or unconsciously). However, I also believe that aesthetic expressions can present themselves, *on their own*, as art, craft, decoration, non-art, kitsch, or bullshit. A kitsch painting can require to be accepted as art without any kind of art dealer being involved, simply because undue pretensions are intrinsic to the artwork. A work can play "the kitsch game, while it intends to look like the art game," to use Denis Dutton's (1997) words. The "atmosphere of social pretense" (Scripser) surrounding the artwork can emanate from the work itself and is not necessarily put into the work by outside factors such as the art market. The mall art that Scripser mentions, and to which Dadlez refers in her article from 2018, is both kitsch and bullshit, and it might not need a bullshitting art dealer to be so. One could discover such pieces in a barn and see that they *want* to be art. Pretense is *in* Thomas Kinkadee's paintings, it is not merely due to the "mismatch between the prestige attached to a work of art and [the question] whether a work of art merits or deserves such status" (Scripser). Even without the prestige they have achieved, these paintings are pretentious because, obviously, they want to be art. The nonsense character of the work itself classifies it as bullshit, without any particular social placing being necessary.

Kitsch does not truly lie about reality: very often it is even too realistic. It becomes bullshit art only when it pretends to be art without being so. Kitsch operates with exaggerations, sentimentality, banality, clichés, superficiality, and triteness, which means that it is indifferent towards the standards of an *aesthetic* reality. Kitsch artists produce kitsch because they know that some people prefer this taste. This is neither unlawful nor unethical because nobody has ever been forced to buy kitsch products. The only problem is that these items are too straightforward or too formulaic and thus cease to be art because they do not correspond to the standards that some groups of people consider the standards of art: standards about adequacy, appropriateness, sophistication, harmony, subtlety, seriousness, etc. As Dadlez writes, "kitsch departs from aesthetic norms: its aims are not the aims of art. Kitsch may aim at enhancing status or reinforcing political affiliations or demonstrating the elevated tastes or religious convictions of the purchaser of the work" (Dadlez 2018, 62). Of course, the borderline between these two realms is fluid and highly subjective, but this is not the problem I want to

discuss here. Kitsch is not “false art” (a falsification); it does not fake “real art.” A cheap copy of Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” does not pretend to be a real Van Gogh. It does not lie about a reality, and yet it pretends to be art. This pretension might make it slightly unethical, but this is still different from lying, because objective standards regarding what art actually is are blurred anyway, which makes lying impossible.

The Loss of Truth

Assumptions about lying and forgery make sense only as long as we assume that truth exists somewhere, out there, and that the lie is concealing this truth. In the 1980s, there emerged the assumption that truth *never* exists out there in reality, and that it is produced only by language. Richard Rorty summarized this position (often called “postmodern”), writing that “only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot” (Rorty 1989, 5). The world we discover when we use Newton’s vocabulary is different from the world we discover when using Aristotle’s vocabulary; and it does not matter because the world itself does not contain any truth. This view would invalidate any discourse on lying. Somehow, everything then becomes bullshit, though some examples would be more acceptable than others. Of course, we would not call it bullshit because the concept of bullshit only makes sense as a derivative of lying. Bullshit would just be another way of discovering the world, and this does not necessarily inaugurate relativism. There would still be various standards of bullshit: some of it would be beautiful (that could be art), and some of it would be ugly. There would also be rules about how bullshit should be produced in certain situations, etc. However, even in a world without truth we would not want art to be bullshit art. Art is a fake presentation and never about the truthful presentation of the world, but it must be delivered in an adequate style and according to certain standards; and we would still have heated discussions about what these styles and standards are. Even in a world without truth we want things to be done *in certain ways*. I say this about art, but it is highly likely that ethics would function in similar ways, though this is not the topic of this article.

Non-Fungible-Tokens

My view of art is conventional. The assumption that art contains some truth, be it only an evasive and self-produced truth that does not necessarily correspond to something concrete, can be contested. The same goes for aesthetic

standards, and the introduction of NFTs has made this clearer than ever. A non-fungible token is a unit of data that are tracked on blockchains to provide the owner with a proof of ownership. NFTs are not interchangeable and are therefore often used to represent artworks, especially digital art. Some pieces have sold for extremely high prices, which shows that this art is more closely linked to speculation than the last generation of "physical" art.

The NFT art world is a mixture of late capitalism and populist aesthetics in which any idea of an "adequate artistic expression" has become increasingly difficult. However, despite its populist aspect, NFTs are not necessarily at home in the world of mass-produced art-shops found in malls. On the contrary, the most famous and most expensive ones belong to an elite, a new elite though, different from the traditional elite that produces art which often only they can understand. Sara Borghero writes in her article in this issue that "even after art freed itself from imposed canons, in the production of a series of transgressive and provocative works by avant-gardes and post-avant-gardes, it remains an elitist system." NFT art went paradoxically "popular-elitist," which was only possible within the context of the financeo-aestheticism offered by this new art world. Old (elitist) aesthetic standards are irrelevant, not because we are in a mall, but because this art emerges from a particular capitalist universe in which *nothing* needs to be adequate. The fusion of art (for which reality never mattered) with a sort of capitalism that has lost contact with reality in its own way, can only result in bullshit art.

Beeple's digital artwork "Everydays: The First 5,000 Days" sold for 69.3 million dollars and is the third-most expensive work ever sold by a living artist. The most striking feature of this work is that one cannot see anything; not because the artist works with elitist notions of metaphysical emptiness but rather because the 5000 pictures are so small that one needs to aggrandize them one by one. And who will look at all 5000? "Everydays" is a digital sketchbook in which the content does not seem to matter much but where the bulk concept creates supplementary monetary value. Though technically competent, artistically, the single pieces are far from convincing. Some could be encountered in the creepier sections of DeviantArt, some, one might spot on a van in Alabama. Many pieces are sprinkled with a *premier-degré* free-thinking hipster wit, and as a political satire, they would not even keep up with the Simpsons. Some are crossbreeds of cartoon and porn with jokes that are not provocative but just embarrassing (see Ben Davis' article on *Artnet* for an analysis of the entire work). Twobadour, one of the two buyers of the work, thinks that the investment will appreciate into the future: "This is going to be a billion-dollar piece someday." Bullshit?

Kitsch has become a noticeable phenomenon at least since Romanticism and has been skillfully handled by Pop Art artists and others. But until recently, “art” as a vague institution could still provide some landmarks about the ‘how’ of art and the discourse attached to it. Galleries and museums played a role in promotion, which sparked debates, both public and elitist. Curators, who are generally excluded from the financial craze, functioned as gatekeepers. Artists like Warhol or Jeff Koons were not simply swept up by their own kitsch and their own commercialism—or at least that was the impression that they could successfully instill in the public. The “traditional” kitsch artist could still distinguish between art and business, at least in private.

More recently, elitist commercial art like “Zombie Formalism”⁵ has already begun to abolish the distinction between elitist art and commercial art. Interestingly, these artists did so by circumventing kitsch, that is, by producing a sort of explicit anti-kitsch. As “enlightened nouveau riches,” the lovers of Zombie Formalism are suspicious of “traditional” kitsch (the tacky version) and go for the totally abstract; however, since this art is formulaic and exaggerated in its own way, this anti-kitsch can be considered just another sort of kitsch.

Any critical distance disappears entirely once art *immediately* becomes an object of speculation, which most clearly happens through NFTs. For Žižek such an overlap would represent a constellation where even the most shocking value “is fully integrated in the art market of the establishment” (Žižek 2013, 23). With Rorty we can say that the art market discovers art through a different kind of language and that in this art market landmarks of truth have ceased to exist. The statement that the Beeple collage “is going to be a billion-dollar piece someday” is bullshit, but it is interesting to observe how the art-bitboys get away with it. Such statements about the financial value aim to be part of an artistic process: like art, they are not supposed to be scientific statements about reality but rather aesthetic statements about an *artistic reality* that is virtual and potential. The buyers of “Everdays” become part of the work, which means that the financial reality has become aesthetic.

When Arthur Danto explained in his essay “The Artworld” (1964) that Warhol’s Brillo boxes are art because, contrary to the Brillo boxes found in the supermarket, they are part of an art theory, he indirectly suggested that

⁵ See Sarah Hegenbart (2019) on the slick abstract art of “Zombie Formalism” that aims to cater to the needs and desires of ultra-rich investors.

anything can become art if only it is inscribed in the right theory. This theory prevents Warhol's Brillo boxes from being a simple lie. Of course, this step can prove dangerously circular because it implies that anything embedded in "the artworld" will become art. However, in reality, it's not that easy; in Danto's time there still existed more or less rigorous ways of defining the "artworld." "Everydays" has no theory, but it wants the entire supermarket to become an artworld that needs neither theorists, nor museums, nor curators. An entire financial environment consisting of blockchain, ethereum, buyers, etc. has been declared an artworld. Both Danto and Beeples (along with his buyers) work with contextualization, but in Beeples's case an "institutional theory," which still matters for Danto, is lacking.

In modern art, some began to question "Is this still art?", but the fact that such a question was still asked shows that standards remained relevant and believed in. Once NFTs are introduced into a highly speculative art market, any notion of aesthetic "truth" becomes dysfunctional. The crypto sphere is a sphere of sublime bullshit because speculation is here enhanced by techno bullshit. Originally, capitalism was about the exchange of real goods. As capitalism evolved, benefits first became more abstract, and later increasingly dependent on speculation. Speculation does not base the value of goods on something "real" but rather on what *could* be real under certain conditions. If conditions change, a product's value changes too. In this context, goods are no longer true, useful, or beautiful but simply "interesting" in the sense that they generate (monetary) interest. Initially, interest was paid out directly in the form of real money; later it became more virtual. In virtuality, what matters is not what is but what could be. During industrialization, "real skills" were still valued;⁶ today, on the internet, we have players and performers. These influencers are not lying about their skills; they are just bullshitting. In *The Art of Deception* (2002), former hacker Kevin Mitnick describes himself as a con artist who uses deception to manipulate people (xii). He shows that social engineering has become a performance art of influence and persuasion. More interesting than substance (the facts, the skills, or the insights transmitted) is the "interest" (the likes and the followers) the product generates. Mikhail Epstein summarizes the culture of "interest," which first emerged in Romanticism, thus: "The interesting is constituted not merely in opposition to truth, after all, but in its juxtaposition of the truthful and trustworthy with the improbable and wondrous" (Epstein 2009, 78). The

⁶ David Graeber talks about the invention of "bullshit jobs" in the postindustrial society. See my article "In Praise of Industry" in *Philosophy Now*, 137, 2020.

coincidence, the strange, and the unlikely can become subjects of interest. In a world where interest is highly valued, facts and events can become quasi-true, which is how conspiracy theories and fake news emerge. Often it does not even matter that a fact has been proven untrue: people continue believing it because it is “interesting.” In extreme cases, these facts become “fetish-facts.” Works like “Everydays” are indeed what Baudrillard would call fetish-objects. They have little value, but they are objects of extreme interest from which arises a virtual value.

Dematerialization and Authenticity

The perception and the interest that an object creates matter more than the object itself, and it is normal that art follows along these paths. But in art, this development moved in parallel with a peculiar dematerialization of the object that has been equally operative for over a century. First, in the twentieth century, art moved from figurative to abstract. Conceptual art then moved even further until the work consisted of only a concept. Art wanted to look past figuration and what it found were Platonic forms. This process went hand in hand with the general approach of modernity, which Baudrillard sees as a contamination of art “by science, or at least by the spirit of objectivity” (51-52). Later, art became even less than Platonic forms. Concepts can still provide pleasure, but at some point, aesthetic enjoyment became the equivalent of participating in some ideology: “We no longer believe in art, take pleasure in art, but only in the idea of art. We are deep in ideology,” writes Baudrillard (92). Today, as Pascal Unbehaun shows in his article in this issue, art does not even produce an artifact of any kind; it can simply be an art project, artistic research, social practice, or interventions.

The dematerialization of art⁷ went in parallel with the rise of neoliberalism and its finance culture that dematerializes financial products, and art’s “total conversion of art into a speculative financial instrument” (Price and Kuo 2021; see also De Boever 2021, 7) in the age of virtual crypto markets was inevitable. One effect was that any authenticity of concrete and original objects disappeared. However, this does not mean that *the idea* of authenticity was also abandoned.

In March 2021, the trading group Injective Protocol burned Banksy’s work “Morons (White)” (2006) which they had previously purchased for \$95,000. The act was linked to an investment. Injective Protocol had digi-

⁷ The phrase the “dematerialization of art” was coined by critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in their 1968 article of the same name for *Art International*.

tized the work beforehand, and in order to make their digital version unique, the best thing they could do was to destroy the original (see BBC report, Criddle 2021). Apparently, one believed that, in the future, the digital version would be more expensive than the original.

The object no longer mattered, which might lead one to conclude that Injective Protocol abandoned the idea of authenticity. However, the opposite is the case. NFTs make copying impossible, so any operation linked to NFTs stresses authenticity. At the root of this strategy is a paradoxical dialectics that plays out dematerialization against the idea of authenticity.

Our age is obsessed with both dematerialization and authenticity. First, a drive to dematerialize objects is present not only in art but also in techno culture in general. Objects have increasingly become digital. Second, and paradoxically, an obsession with authenticity developed, since the 1960s, parallel to the technology of dematerialization. Charles Taylor has shown in his *A Secular Age* that we are living in an age of authenticity (see Taylor 2007, 473-504). Authenticity emerges from the Enlightenment tradition for which being authentic meant to be free and autonomous. Earlier, Romanticism had exalted the idea of the artistic genius that still has much impact on our present idea of artistic originality. Rousseau (in the *Confessions*) and Kierkegaard (in various works, especially *Either/Or*) elaborated the idea of an original self in the form of an "inner self" that is true to itself and able to go against social conventions. Marxism searched for the authentic through a fight against *Entfremdung*,⁸ and psychoanalysis strove towards the knowledge of an authentic self hidden beneath social conventions. Since the 1960s, an individuating revolution began openly searching for a more authentic way of living that would include the fullness of sensuality. One wanted to obtain authentic feelings and authentic pleasures. To be real, true, factual, genuine, and authentic was seen as an ethical remedy against the duplicity of people who do not mean what they say, who lie, or who bullshit. Since the 1990s, in the world of "just do it," the notions of the self, identity, and authenticity have become supreme—and often commercialized—goods. However, the obsession with the authentic would certainly not have occurred if we were not living in a modern consumer society that Guy Debord (1967) called the "society of the spectacle," that is, a society in which everything is mere representation and in which very few things are authentic. Worse than that, it is a world in which the material value of things is disappearing, too.

⁸ Marx formulated the *Entfremdungstheorie* (theory of alienation) in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844).

In the end, authenticity needed to be installed in non-materiality, and NFTs are the latest result of this process. The German conceptual artist Max Haarich criticized NFT art by selling single pixels of a digital painting for 1000 to 1200 euro (0,001 Ethereum-Coin) at an NFT-exchange (Haarich 2021). The value augments when the object is sold in small units. But what people get is an almost immaterial object that should normally have no value (the entire object has 3 Kilobytes, and one pixel is correspondingly smaller. It cannot even be seen because the artist colored it in transparent color).

Did the people who burned the original Banksy protest against the culture of authenticity or were attempting to confirm it? Was this act, as Arne De Boever speculates, a push for a “communist politics” that “celebrate[s] the copy against the potentially fascist values of authenticity, creativity, originality, and eternal,” and which Walter Benjamin brings up at the beginning of his essay “The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction”? Can Injective Protocol’s suggestion to value the copy more than the original perhaps even be understood as a revival of the Renaissance spirit where copying was not seen as an abject act but as an artistic expression in its own right? Apparently, at the time, “if a forger painted as well as a master, then he was indeed a master and not a forger” (Han 2011, 16), and similar principles were common in classical China. On a first level, one *could* understand the burning of the Banksy as a statement against the dictatorship of authenticity. However, the code authenticates the digital image, which denotes the strongest *obsession with* authenticity. This authenticity has simply become less material.

What can we say about this copy? This Banksy copy is not what Hito Steyerl calls a “poor image,” that is, a copy that goes on new journey and enriches itself through “circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities” (Steyerl 2009). It is not charming or seductive *as a copy*. Nor is there what Baudrillard calls the “secret of the object” (25) that we would like to crack by tracing the copy back to the original. This copy is supposed to be better than the original. The Banksy copy has no life, it is truly nothing and needs nothing, and at the same time, it is materially “richer” than the original.⁹ Benjamin could still mourn the loss of art’s aura, which he linked to authenticity, but here the aura has from the beginning been purely financial, and since the finances are intact, there is nothing to mourn. This simulacrum of a simulacrum does not pretend to have the power of illusion but is merely

⁹ De Boever calls the NFT artwork a “decidedly rich image” linking its wealth to its financial potential.

a prosthesis sitting in place of the real thing, which is the most perfect definition of bullshit. It is financially more highly valued than the destroyed original, but in terms of art it is art without art, comparable to an asexual idea of sex that does not even attempt to retrieve the reality of sex.¹⁰

Were we to follow the logic of Injective Protocol to its end, the digital copy of the Banksy should be destroyed too, so that only the code remains. The work would have become a bitcoin, and, since the work obviously does not matter, who would be able to argue that this is *not* a work of art? When everything is dematerialized, how can we still speak of standards? The code would not *symbolize* the work: it would *be* the work. This would not be lying or be a willful misrepresentation of the truth; no truth can be represented because the object has disappeared. This code would be the highest accomplishment of bullshit art. The destruction of the digital copy would push the principle of kitsch art into the absurd. There is no fraud, and everything is transparent; criticism is not rejected. This art can simply not be criticized because there is nothing to see. One cannot even criticize some neoliberal concept of "culture as a commodity" because there is no commodity.

The only thing that remains real is the culture of the spectacle. Injection Protocol were aware of the symbolic power of their act when they staged the burning of the Banksy as a spectacle transferred to YouTube.

The original Banksy was authentic in the sense of being linked to time, place, action, and a concrete environment. According to Žižek, in traditional art, "the Place confers to the object a sublime energy; and the presence of the object supports the Emptiness of the Sacred Place" (Žižek 2013, 28). Dematerialization means de-spatialization. The digitized version is authentic, but authentic has here a different meaning. The shift goes hand in hand with the reissuing of authenticity as a highly abstract category that is common in the twenty-first century. This development began, of course, much earlier. From the 1980s onwards, the idea of authenticity underwent important changes: it would no longer be pursued in terms of a Dionysian freedom as preached by the hippy culture of the 1960s but be increasingly defended as an ethical program that would later be called Political Correctness. Authenticity still represents the values of the "individual," but, according to Taylor, the new revolutionaries pursue individualism "with the kind of earnest concern for self-improvement which is light-years away from the Dionysian spontaneity of the 60s" (Taylor 2007, 477). In this sense, the digital Banksy is highly seri-

¹⁰ See Baudrillard about sex that is "more sexual than sex in pornography" in *Fatal Strategies* (1990, 29).

ous: its authenticity is guaranteed by a non-fungible code. This copy insists on its authenticity in the same way a gender fluent person insists on their gender-neutral pronoun. The copy is signed on a chain, and what could be more serious than that?

Can this be changed? The blockchain has brought us into the absurd situation where the authentic has become serious bullshit. It used to be the other way round: the authentic was supposed to save us from the fake. Since it was an obsession with authenticity brought us here, maybe this is also where we need to begin a reform of our thinking. Maybe we ought to aspire to the kind of situation that existed in classical China, where there was no essential difference between forgers and connoisseurs. Byung-Chul Han writes:

If a forger borrows a painting from a collector, and when returning it hands over a copy unnoticed instead of the original, this is not considered a deception but an act of fairness. In this case the rules of the game say that everyone should own the paintings they deserve. It is not the purchase but the connoisseurship alone that determines the lawfulness of the possession. This is an extraordinary practice from ancient China that would put an end to today's art speculation.

It would definitely put an end to NFT speculation.

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