



Cryptographics

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Cryptographics is an artwork that reflects on the recent phenomenon of crypto art, which involves associating digital artifacts with blockchain, tokenizing artworks with non-fungible tokens (NFTs). This practice has recently been the subject of heated debate within art and the humanities, as well as setting off a feeding frenzy by artists, digital content creators, and speculative investors. In *Cryptographics*, I take an artistic interpretation of this topic, highlighting the way that while tokenization is intended to make unique digital assets more easily traceable, it treats content as inconsequential, raising a number of questions regarding the value of digital artworks. Working with found text fragments from discussions centered on NFTs and crypto art and existing images, the work seeks to negate the representational role of images, reducing them to mere fields of pixels. By obscuring the visual content of the images and text, this work questions what impacts it may have if we are to treat all digital content as commodifiable, yet interchangeable.

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image studies, net art,
algorithmic media

Description

In *Cryptographics* (Lee 2021) I explore some of the issues brought up in current discourse on the topic of NFT– or crypto– art. These terms refer to the practice of associating digital assets, in this case, artworks, with non-fungible tokens (NFTs) on blockchain, keeping a digital record of transactions involving the tokens. This allows non-fungible tokens to be traced and sold, while in many ways treating artworks, themselves, as fungible. Developing the concept of “cryptographics” through artistic experimentation, this project considers the potential aesthetic implications that crypto art may have.

Background

Minting NFTs for digital assets is not necessarily new, with a proof of concept as early as 2014 (McCoy 2014; Di Liscia 2021), albeit under different names such as “monetized graphics” (Zeilinger 2018). But the sudden interest around tokenization has in large part been stoked by sensationalized high-ticket sales like those of Beeple’s mosaic *Everydays: The First 5,000 Days* (2021), videos *Earth* and *Mars* by Grimes (2021), and pictures of monkeys by Bored Ape Yacht Club (BAYC) (2021).

The tokenization of artworks has recently been a source of heated debate, with many artists, curators, and theorists debating its ethical, aesthetic, and technical dimensions (Olsen, 2022; Pipkin 2021; Rivers Ryan 2021). One of the main ethical issues in such discourse is the excessive energy consumption of minting NFTs, making this practice extremely irresponsible from an ecological standpoint. Other central points of critique include the speculative economic models they contribute to and the relative lack of artistic merit found in many NFT projects.

As these points have already been discussed at length, I decided to zero in on the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of crypto art rather than adding yet another voice to the already saturated conversation on the ethical problems associated with crypto art. Considering this phenomenon from a historical perspective, it’s notable that while traditional criteria for the evaluation of art objects typically emphasize their material worth, scarcity, accrued human labor, and cultural significance, in crypto art, often greater emphasis is placed on artworks’ speculative value in terms of cryptocurrency than on the qualities of the item itself. This is not an inherent departure from the traditional art market’s assessment of art objects, yet the replication of such norms undermines many of the claims to the contrary that have been made by proponents of NFTs.

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Responding to this topic, I produced *Cryptographics* in the context of the ONB Labs Web Residency, Austrian National Library, Vienna. The work takes the ONB

Labs' open digital collections of images and metadata as a starting point, thinking about how such online resources are in many ways antithetical to the ideas behind NFTs. In contrast to the attempts at creating and monetizing digital scarcity, which has been a central goal in crypto art contexts, ONB Labs makes its digital resources accessible to the public for free. With this in mind, I decided that rather than working with any of the Labs' content in a direct, visual sense, it would be more interesting to appropriate and obscure it, in the same fashion that NFTs treat the content of digital assets as interchangeable. I created a web-based work in response to these ideas, taking images from the online collection and subjecting them to this obfuscation, and overlaying them on top of a text composed of fragments of online conversations about crypto art.

Using the term "cryptographics", I have been exploring the close association between crypto art and cryptocurrency, effectively treating the artworks, themselves, as superfluous. According to this logic, the work of art acts primarily as a vessel for speculative value. This is not necessarily a notable change from the way that the art market has already functioned in the 20th and into the 21st century, yet it draws an interesting parallel between encryption and the creation of art.

In this sense, do the one-of-a-kind qualities of artworks merely act as a form of registration for economic transactions?

Can the production of artworks thereby be understood as parallel to crypto mining, the computational process by which blocks in blockchain are created?

If artworks are understood to be valuable insofar as they are unique, scarce and the product of a great deal of labor, are they not the ideal collateral to serve as the material or data-based foundation for currency?

Through this project, I have been exploring questions such as these, examining how structures in the data and processes behind images may shape the way images perform ultimately inform their significance. In the same sense that Harun Farocki describes images as "operative" (2004), acting upon the world more so than functioning as a visual representation of it, I am interested in how non-visualized aspects of images affect not only the visual but also how we think about images.

What has resulted from this exploration is an online, site-specific work that does not seek to conclusively answer any questions raised from the debates around crypto art and NFTs. Instead, it seeks to draw viewers to reflect on how they engage with online content. By blacking out the individual images, this work expresses a refusal of both the idea of images as strictly visual entities, but also of the hyper-commodification of digital artifacts seen in the hype around tokenization.

Reflections, Challenges, and Insights from the Development Process

Several conceptual challenges arose in the development of this project that constrained the final work in ways that led to several insights, as well as raising

questions for future exploration. This includes several aspects of the artistic decision-making process entailed in producing the work, my own attempts at addressing the context this work responds to, and insights I have drawn after the fact from reflecting on the process.

One of the challenging aspects of the project was the explicit expectation to develop a work employing data from the ONB Labs online collections. While this was the premise of the residency and it is an apparently simple prompt to work from, it made me especially curious to explore the systems and processes that structure and organize visual media, more so than working with any individual images, in themselves. The specificity of the data available to work with was quite specific to the context in which it was commissioned. The ONB Labs collections consist of digital scans of historical Austrian documents including postcards, musical manuscripts, political pamphlets, reports on linguistics, newspaper articles, and a collection of papyri, in addition to metadata for these assets and a web archive of the “Austrian Webspace” since 2009. Because I was more interested in the management of visual data than in any particular visual data, in itself, this led me to adopt a rather abstract approach to the original source material.

My strategy was also informed by a critical perspective on existing projects working with data from the ONB Labs (2021) collections. One project, for example, focused on digitally colorizing the postcards, the other, by Gene Kogan and Sofia Crespo (2019), generated new images based on the existing collection of postcards. Both of these projects work with assets from the ONB Labs postcard collection in a fairly acritical manner. Looking at these as counterexamples, I sought to explore the potential meanings associated with the content, processes, and contexts engaged by the visual material in question instead of fixating on the visual content, in itself.

With these factors in consideration, I was drawn to the idea of producing something that could be understood as a negation of the digital image. In this way, I hoped to connect the context of working with archival digital images with the interchangeability of tokenized assets in crypto art. How I achieved this effect was by attempting to effectively “empty out” the visual content of the images in the ONB Labs collections, which made the dimensions of each image their only differentiable characteristic. Combining and layering these blacked-out images with a poetic text reflecting on the ideas the work addresses, I hoped to aesthetically capture the ephemerality of digital assets.

This work seeks to address the non-visual in visual media through the visual medium of the webpage. In a sense, this is a contradiction in the work, yet I believe it’s a fairly interesting one. Far from attempting to work with the non-visual by creating something that is, itself, non-visual, I find it an interesting challenge to think about how art may confront such a paradox of experiencing, thinking about, or communicating the intangible.

Another consideration I encountered in this project is that its topic was perhaps too broad to thoroughly delve into in the framework of a 4-week residency. In this respect, I see *Cryptographics* as more explorative than offering a conclusive perspective or statement on the various themes that it touches on. There have been so many diverse critiques and opinions on the topic of NFTs and crypto art in the past year that I was wary of creating something that would merely add to the echo chamber. This is something I am interested in continuing to reflect upon in further explorations, as artists play an important role in questioning technological developments at the same time as being wary of the instrumentalization of artist's voices in ways that take away the efficacy of such critiques.

Conclusion

In presenting documentation of *Cryptographics* in the context of the xCoAx conference, I hope to engage critical reflection upon several interrelated topics that have the potential to reshape many aspects of digital media. Whether tokenization will become normalized and widely adopted as a convention remains to be seen, but the processual and systematic aspects of visual media become increasingly relevant to consider as digital ecosystems encompass far more than mere collections of various kinds of data. This project seeks to contribute to explorations of the topic of crypto art, considering the potential implications it may have for practices and aesthetics in digital culture. By documenting and reflecting on the ideas behind *Cryptographics*, I aim to share, discuss, and offer insights from the various conceptual challenges encountered in the development of the work.

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