

Galina Bleikh & Elena Serebryakova

NFT ART: The End of the Age of Walter Benjamin¹. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical NON-Reproducibility

According to a long-established tradition, any study dedicated to modern art must include a quote by Walter Benjamin (specifically, from his celebrated essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"). This situation is comically reminiscent of the recent Soviet past, where any written work – from a school essay to a scholarly paper – had to include quotes by another Marxist writer, Vladimir Lenin.

As an epigraph to his essay, W. Benjamin used a quote by Paul Valéry (Paul Valéry. *Pièces sur L'Art*, p.103-104 "Le conquete de l'ubiquite", 1936), which says, *inter alia*: "For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art." It seems to us that, nowadays, following the birth of NFT Art, this epigraph remains the only relevant passage in Benjamin's essay.

Benjamin famously asserted that, in the age of "mechanical reproduction", with the new technologies enabling the creation of an infinite number of copies and reproductions, the artwork had lost its authenticity, its uniqueness, and its "here and now" quality – all the attributes that he referred to as the "auratic" of the original.

Today, with the emergence of the blockchain technology – which enables one to append an electronic signature to any file, thereby making it unique and inimitable – the situation has fundamentally changed.

Usually, files (both audio and video files, animation and footage) are objects that can be copied and reproduced (let us recall the vain attempts by the proprietors of galleries, who were allegedly selling unique video-art, to combat this copying through various programming tricks). This is a well-known obstacle to the growth of the art market for new media: The collector typically wishes to possess a unique artwork.

Now, we can finally satisfy the collector's desire to be the sole owner of a piece of high-tech art: The NFT (Non-Fungible Token) enables us to create, sell, and buy totally unique and original artworks, of which only a single copy exists. These works are stamped with the artist's electronic signature, which cannot be forged.

Using W. Benjamin's terminology, we may claim that these attributes of NFT Art make it "auratic".

¹ <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>

We think that the age of "mechanical reproduction" is now being replaced by the age of mechanical NON-reproducibility. The Internet environment makes this non-reproducibility clear, explicit, and accessible to every user.

Farewell, gold! What is the color of the new currency?

Up until now, the value of money was backed by gold, which was dug up at gold mines. In the new network model of monetary relations, money is backed, obtained, and literally "mined" through the generation of computer code.

We use artistic methods to study the new relationship between humanity and money that has emerged as a result of the new blockchain technologies. In the previous epoch, gold served as the representation of the projection of the emanation of light into the material world. In our own age of network culture, the light of this emanation is being moved into the sphere of activity of the global network, being projected into it in the form of computer codes, which are turning into a new form of money – cryptocurrency – before our eyes.

As artists who make use of light as a symbolic, cultural, digital, and energetic resource, we declare that this new projection signifies a "new gold", and that it has a greenish-bluish nature.

We define this color as #4be5ff and proclaim it as the symbol of the new crypto-age.

The image, which is 1 px in size, has the color parameter #4be5ff, and it is our own unique artwork, defining the code of the "new gold" of the digital civilization.

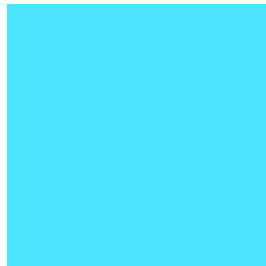


Fig. 1. Galina Bleikh & Elena Serebryakova. #4be5ff. 1 px. Scale: 100:1

The assignment of a color code to the blockchain is based on the idea of transcoding the traditional view of the nature of money into the new crypto-format.

Cryptocurrency is characterized by decentralization, transparency, and openness, on the basis of an "open key" system. All these qualities are attributes of the global network, and they reflect powerful tectonic shifts in the system of international relations.

Whereas gold possesses the nature of the material world and its objects, cryptocurrency possesses the nature of the digital world. This nature makes it similar to all the content of the global network, which likewise consists of digital code.

The digital and the cultural layers influence each other, leading to the emergence of a new computer culture – the hybrid interaction of human and computer meanings.

In this new culture, the artwork regains its lost auraticism.

It is only the color of the aura that has changed: The golden aura of the art of the past becomes the ethereal blue aura of the art of the present (#4be5ff)!

Where does NFT Art "reside"?

Internet platforms hosting and selling works of NFT Art have been proliferating like mushrooms after rain. Specialized exhibition spaces, art markets, and auctions are being rapidly flooded with various works of NFT Art, which are highly diverse, in terms of both quality and price range. They are being sold, resold, and re-resold in exchange for cryptocurrency, mostly Ethereum. Incidentally, this is a wonderful name for a cryptocurrency: ethereal-ephemeral money in exchange for ethereal-ephemeral art!

Some of the most popular NFT Art resources are Zora, Foundation, SuperRare, and OpenSea. Readers wishing to learn about the most expensive and momentous sales are advised to look them up on the Internet – an overview of current events on the art market is outside the scope of this article.

We would only like to add that, as artists working in New Media Art and developing the strategy of hybrid interaction with the neural network (Hybrid Neural Network Art – HNN Art), we are grateful for the priceless opportunity, afforded to us by the NFT technology, to become part of the revolution unfolding in modern art before our eyes.

Since 2011, artists Galina Bleikh and Elena Serebryakova work together. Their art projects are based on individual innovative art strategy of a Hybrid Neural Network (HNN Art). They have created conditions that correspond to the working pattern of a Hybrid Neural Network (HNN) consisting of their own bio-neurons and artificial computer nodes.

The hybrid creative system enables the artists to attain a synergetic combination of neural and symbolic models, thereby realizing the possibility of transcending the stifling boundaries of individuality and one's own self.