

CULTURE WARS

“SOCIETY GETS THE ART THAT IT DESERVES”: NFTS ARE DRIVING STUNTS AND DIVING INTO THE CULTURE WARS

The NFT craze is disrupting the art world, as Bitcoin billionaires gobble up memeified art (think naked Elon riding a Dogecoin dog) and even racist images. Jack Dorsey, Ja Rule, and now John Cleese are in on the action, with Mr. Monty Python admitting that “the world has gone terminally insane.”



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You have never heard of the artist known as the “Unnamed Artist” before, but by the end of the week (perhaps by the end of this article), he could end up being one of the most famous artists alive today. His work may end up selling for more than a Manet, a de Kooning, or a Picasso. “I have no idea what’s going on,” the Unnamed Artist told me in a phone interview hours before his first NFT was about to go live at auction. “But in this particular realm, no one has any idea what’s going on.” If, when you see the Unnamed Artist for the first time, he looks familiar to you, and even looks a little like **John Cleese**, the actor from *Fawlty Towers*, Monty Python, and *A Fish Called Wanda*, then you probably have no idea what’s going on, either. That’s because, on Friday, Cleese—also known, as of Friday, as the “Unnamed Artist”—is **going to be selling** an illustration of the Brooklyn Bridge he did on his iPad as an NFT. The “buy it now” price for this digital work is being set at \$69,346,250.50.

The crazy thing is, he actually might get it.

Just a couple of weeks ago, most people had never heard of an NFT, or a “non-fungible token.” A couple of months before that, even people in the tech trenches had no idea what an NFT was. NFT employs technology similar to that behind cryptocurrencies and exists only on the blockchain. The best way to understand how NFTs differ from traditional cryptocurrencies is to put your mind in the physical world for a minute. Imagine if you and I were standing across from each other and we both had 10 one-dollar bills. If I swapped one of my dollar bills for one of your dollar bills, we’d both still have \$10 in our hands. Bitcoin and other crypto work in the same way. Regardless of which Bitcoin you have, you have one Bitcoin (and whatever monetary value that is worth). NFTs, on the other hand, are all different. They are more akin to standing in front of someone with a stack of trading cards, where each card is unique. So while they all sit on the blockchain, NFTs are one of a kind, verifiable assets that are easy to trade, but can’t ever be forged or copied. But what they are actually used for is a whole different quandary, and the world seems to have gone mad trying to make, buy, and sell them.

The rapper **Ja Rule** recently **launched an NFT platform** on which he’s selling a painting from the disastrous Fyre Festival with a starting bid of \$600,000. Collectible NBA trading cards called “Top Shots,” which are essentially digital trading cards of basketball players, are **selling** (and people are buying them) for as much as \$240,000 (\$208,000 is the highest price sold **so far**). And **Beeple**, a 39-year-old man from Charleston, South Carolina, whom you had never heard of until three weeks ago but who is now all anyone can talk about, a guy who makes dark and atramentous memeified “works of art,” **including pieces featuring** a naked **Elon Musk**

riding a Dogecoin dog and an image of a **postcoital Santa Claus** after—one assumes?—he’s just cheated on Mrs. Claus, managed to sell a random pixelated artwork to another cryptocurrency investor at auction this month for \$69,346,250—exactly 50 cents less than John Cleese, I mean the Unnamed Artist, hopes to sell the Brooklyn Bridge for.

Art has been suffering from its own identity crises for years now, as it has transformed increasingly into a commodity that is purchased as a value exchange with the hope that the buyer can either use it as a tax shelter or make money on it when they sell it later. But to have this kind of value exchange, art buyers and sellers needed scarcity, which has always posed a problem in the digital world. That’s because, in reality, on a computer, the only thing that is scarce is the storage space of your hard drive. As computing power has grown, and hard drive space has become practically free, even storage is no longer scarce. Just look at the **54 billion spam emails** that are sent each day because it costs absolutely nothing to send them; or the **126 billion viewings** of TV show episodes that are pirated each year because it costs nothing to duplicate them. Now these odd things called NFTs have done the miraculous and created scarcity in a digital world where there is, by default, no such thing. As such, like any collectible or limited number of artworks, people have gone crazy to get a slice of this new fortune.

The insanity around NFTs, and what is now for sale as an NFT, has whiplashed from obscurity to frenetic hysteria in just a matter of weeks. While Ja Rule and trading cards and Beeple’s “artwork” are often talked about with perplexity, there are countless NFTs hitting the specialized trading markets almost hourly. Some are stunts, some are pitched as real art, and there’s everything in between. A company that specializes in blockchain technology, for example, purchased a real, physical print by the artist **Banksy** for \$95,000, then **lit the print on fire** until it was destroyed, and then sold a digital version of it as an NFT for almost \$400,000. **Grimes**, the musician, **sold about \$6 million worth** of music-and-video NFTs last month. **Jack Dorsey**’s first tweet **is currently at auction** with a high bid of \$2.5 million. A poker player is **selling his most** famous quotes as NFTs. The TV show *American Gods* is shilling **trading cards** of the show’s characters as NFTs. The website Quartz is **offering** a news article about NFTs as an NFT itself. There’s an NFT **house** for sale, nudes of the actor **Katie Cassidy** at auction as NFTs, and there are all sorts of digital **collectibles** ranging from pixelated punks to impish kitty cats with wings. Now an Unnamed Artist has a bridge to sell you.

If it feels to you like culture is collapsing in on itself and nothing makes sense, that’s because the speed with which these changes are taking place is exacerbating. It’s almost like we’re living in a simulation that has sped up and no one knows where the pause button is. But that, sadly, is by design. Bitcoin, which is only a little over a decade old, was first adopted by the video game

culture: nerds who thought it was cool to mine on their computers and collect these odd little coins, but who are now Bitcoin billionaires. They are using that money, like Monopoly money that turned real overnight, to dictate what is considered art culturally. In doing so, they are—some believe—destroying the culture. Like all things tech, what we’re talking about when we talk about NFTs is still up for debate. In the same way that no one knew (or still doesn’t know?) if companies like **Twitter and Facebook** were “media companies” or “tech companies,” and the financial markets can’t decide if Tesla and its electric ilk are car companies or iPhones with wheels, NFTs are proving to be a ubiquitary that can be hijacked for anything that someone is willing to pay for: music, videos, collectibles, articles, and the most contentious of all: art.

“Society gets the art that it deserves,” **Stefan Simchowitz**, an art dealer and collector, told me when I called him to ask about the recent frenzy in the NFT art market. “NFTs are a foundational application which will eventually be used by all artists across all platforms and across all media—however, the current aesthetics of this frenzy are largely sexist, racist, immature, xenophobic, sophomoric, and anti-art.” Take Bepple, or **Mike Winkelmann**, who is now considered the most famous NFT artist alive. **His early works** are full of racist images making fun of African Americans and Asians, and equally derogatory toward women. “The identity politics and woke culture wars have been animated into the aesthetics of NFTs, which are supposedly promising the democratization of art for everyone, but are really just a vessel for alt-right aesthetics (packed into pseudo-progressive liberal ideologies) delivered at scale into the culture atmosphere,” Simchowitz said. “The pimples of a teenager are coming out in NFT aesthetics.”

And the real art world (if that’s such a thing) is now getting the same treatment that the media, Hollywood, the music industry, GameStop, politics, and every other industry that has been disrupted by tech has experienced over the past decade. As places like Christie’s and other auction houses jump into the fray of NFTs, trying to get some of the wealth that is flowing so freely through the bowels of the internet for themselves, the art world is left questioning whether it should join this new form of “art” or if it should wait and pause while the pimped teenage Bitcoin billionaires buy racist and xenophobic digital artworks, until this mess sorts itself out.

Then there's the Unnamed Artist, whom we can just call John Cleese for the rest of this story. "The main purpose of art is supposed to give people some sort of emotional experience," Cleese told me. "If I stand in front of an important painting, I feel something, I feel some sort of emotion, and that's what I'm interested in." This NFT stuff, he argued, is just another commodity. Another investment vehicle for the über-rich. Another way that our culture is eroding because technology is changing and moving so quickly that we can't even see we're standing in quicksand as we stare at a bunch of pixelated JPEGs, wondering what they might sell for next. "The world has gone terminally insane," Cleese said. "This all reminds me of Henry David Thoreau, when he said, 'Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end.'"

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