
ART IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A LOOK AT HOW BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY CAN ASSIST CREATIVES TO CAPTURE AND RETAIN VALUE

In the world of art, more specifically visual art, proving authenticity, or provenance as it is called in that sphere, lies at the centre of the business of selling art works. Thus, there are art fundis who act as middlemen and women to verify the originality of art pieces. These are people who have studied art and are experienced in the business. They have been relied on by the art world to prove the provenance of art pieces of galleries and auctioneers such as the Sotheby's. In fact the likes of Sotheby's have built their businesses on their reputation of being sellers of original art especially rare art pieces by celebrated old and new artists. On their platforms, art pieces can fetch tens of millions of dollars. According to Artnews.com, Amedeo Modigliani's Nu couché (sur le côté gauche) fetched \$157.2 million in 2017, making it the most expensive work ever to sell at Sotheby's.

Art in the digital age

The question is, what if the work of art is forged? Well, the answer most likely will be that there are art experts to prove the provenance. Blockchain technology as envisaged by startup Blockchain Art Collective founded by Jackie O'Neill makes certain with its ground breaking nascent technology that, for example, a Claude Monet or Dominic Benhura piece is really from the master's hands and not the work of a forger.

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What is blockchain technology?

Blockchain technology underpins digital currency (Bitcoin, Litecoin, Ethereum, and the like). Blockchains were created in 2008 and they are a system of recording transactions and account information related to crypto currencies like Bitcoin.

What the Blockchain Art Collective identified was a niche in blockchain technology's ability to store information about artworks. This information spans records of sales and provenance as well as supplying an unadulterated record of the artwork's history. The importance of this can be seen in the words of celebrated Zimbabwean sculptor Dominic Benhura whose pieces grace international sites such as airports and whose works can command a high price, "The problem with our art is that we have people coming from overseas to buy our art (Shona sculpture so called). It is known throughout the world and they have commoditized it as to bunch it up. This kills the uniqueness of it in a sense because there are forgeries of my work by imitators in such far-flung places as the United States."

How blockchain technology would help

Because with blockchain technology an accurate record of the artwork (via a chip) travels with it, it becomes impossible for a forgery to be mistaken as the original. But this means of course that the artist must first subscribe to the blockchain technology to mark all their art works. The hurdle in registering art on a blockchain to date has been that of matching a blockchain entry with a

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specific and tangible piece of art. The Blockchain Art Collective has technology to deal with this with the tamper proof adhesive seal, which is affixed to the art work. This seal will correspond to the digital entry record on blockchain. In this way, no one can make claims about ownership or originality that are false. Thefts and forgeries will surely die out. For the technology to work, a critical mass of art works needs to be registered to reach a point where the system becomes industry standard for recording and proving digital provenance.

Creators of the nascent technology hope that in the future art buyers will not buy an art piece that is not registered on blockchain. Artists such as Benhura will benefit from this development because their works will be protected from art vultures who live off their works. Benhura shared with us the name (withheld) of a gallery in Pennsylvania that is selling fakes in his name. Blockchain technology saves artists from exploitation and enables fair trade. The so-called global village created by the advent of the Internet of Things poses the danger of homogenizing information as well as culture.

The cost factor

To date, the Blockchain Art Collective sells starter kits on their website that provide seals to register two art works to the blockchain. Other services offer certificates of authenticity for free but lack BAC's strong security. One has to consider that, because there is an industry value chain, people make a living out of authenticating art and will likely resist the development. Besides that, art connoisseurs charge premiums to authenticate art with prices said to range

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from US\$250 to over US\$5000. Naturally, auction houses offer this service to art collectors or whoever is interested.

Record keeping

The data or information is individually stored as numbered entries on several computers across a shared network. The technology prevents individual entries from being changed or deleted. Transactions are digitally recorded and digitally identified for authentication. Thus, though the information can be distributed digitally, it may not be copied. Blockchain is also known as a digital ledger. In a sense, the manner in which vehicles and their chassis and engine numbers are recorded at Central Vehicle Registry for identification is how blockchain technology works. The only difference is that in the case of blockchain technology, there would be several registries storing the same information to prevent anyone altering the particulars of the vehicle ownership.

Bucking the trend

Blockchain technology in principle is antithetical to decentralization and what is known as best practice. The World Wide Web has catalyzed globalization and, in one aspect, the Web is a global library of information. It is an interconnected information superhighway. Take Wikipedia for example, with its tendency to allow communal updates by individuals or entities to the information available on the platform. A Google search will yield the same Wikipedia

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information. Blockchain works in reverse. Imagine a spreadsheet that is duplicated many times across a network of computers, which is designed to regularly update. The data is instantly updated and regularly fed into the database and is most importantly stored in several locations constantly reconciled into the database, which is stored in multiple locations and updated instantly. It is thus publicly accessible and easy to verify. It cannot be hacked because of the spread of the locations!

Technology and art

Blockchain is admittedly disruptive but it is the future especially for visual art. Middlemen and art connoisseurs may likely react to it in the manner that the music industry reacted to file sharing technology when it was first introduced by Shawn Fanning's Napster twenty years ago. The startup was embroiled in litigation as an alarmed music industry sought to shut it down. The technology genie was thankfully out of the bottle and Steve Jobs' Apple found a way to bring the music industry on board with his iTunes, which largely borrowed the file sharing concept. Disruption means carnage for those who refuse to adapt. Blockchain technology admittedly will suit certain genres of art more than others and, in the book publishing sector, ISBN numbers have long helped with issues of identification. Each art genre has specific challenges that technology can help solve. Moreover, the technology also allows for fractional ownership of art works, which can be recorded on the blockchain. This enables artists to raise funds to fund other projects.

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Local reality

Not many Zimbabwean or African artists are as celebrated and sought after as Dominic Benhura and the technology is still a dream away for most. It is however best suited to those artists who have a name and a business to protect. Many artists are as imitated as Benhura, which is a problem because it affects income and, of importance to the highly successful creative, the ability to raise up other artists. Benhura, who trains other artists in his Harare studio in Greendale, was initially worried about the “elitist nature” of the technology but, as a world-renowned artist, ultimately conceded the reality of the need to lead the way and protect his brand. “I think actually this technology is very interesting because I am taking my works to Dubai soon and such exposure means that my work needs to be properly authenticated besides my physical presence.” Many local artists able to afford the starter kits that are being offered by the Blockchain Art Collective are at the stage at which they need to have the technology. Established artists who operate in the rarified realm of Benhura are able to at least afford to purchase the technology. In our view, they need this technology to fend off the art vultures.

Leading light

Benhura’s works are on display in a number of countries including the USA at Benson Park, Colorado and Atlanta Airport, Netherlands at FMO Bank and South Africa at Nelson Mandela Foundation just to mention a few. Aside from being a multiple Zimbabwe National Arts Merit Award winner in his discipline, his accolades include the ‘Key to Delray Beach’ received from

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the honourable Mayor David Schmidt (March 2001, USA), Franco COMESA Club Award for the best sculpture at the Franco COMESA Club Art Exhibition (2004, Lusaka, Zambia), Cornell Museum of Art and History at Old School Square Cultural Arts Centre USA Certificate for Outstanding Commitment and Accomplishments in the 2002 Mentor programme & Cornell Museum Inaugural Outdoor Sculpture Exhibit and the World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child Art.

Conclusion

VISUAL ART sells on the basis of exclusivity, scarcity and rarity. Blockchain technology at least ensures that uniqueness.