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## **Introduction**

*This document collects my thoughts on NFT art that were composed in the spring of 2021.*

*These thoughts are scattered, casual, misguided, naïve, and at times reckless. At the very least, I hope they will inspire discussions and debates.*

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*Also included here are some guidelines and principles for appreciating non-fungible token art. These are also scattered and casual, but at least they are a start.*

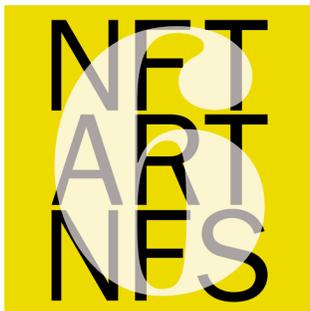
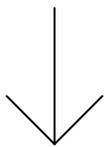
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# Ryan McGinness

## Non-fungible Token Primer



# 30 Thoughts on NFT Art

## 1) Hope

The promise and hope of cyberspace was that we would leave behind the trappings of the old world, including property rights. The sins of greed, pride, and envy that drive ownership will always poison all realms of humanity. *Let us embrace our sins as we dissolve into the digital metaverse.*

## 2) The Wall

NFT artworks are not the shadows on Plato's cave wall. They are the wall. They are blank virtual canvases upon which we can project our desired reality. Anything can be an NFT, if you can conceive of it. *I think of it, therefore it is.*

## 3) Le Petite Mort

NFT artworks are pure orgasm, without the extraneousness of love, passion, stimulation, or even simulation.

## 4) Spirit in the Sky

This is spiritual commerce. It is the endgame of consumerism. This is buying as a concept, distilled down to a feeling without any real exchange. **Money is society's lowest common denominator to facilitate exchange. Now art can be that low.** NFTs are art that transcends itself. It is art that is not locked into a condition.

*This is Schrödinger's art—art that is simultaneously art and money.*

30 Thoughts on NFT Art was originally published by [Instagram](#), March 21-May 3, 2021 as NFT ART NFS (1-6)

### **5) Meaning in Gesture**

The meaning of an NFT artwork is meaningless, because *it is the gesture of purchasing and selling that is the real art*. Humans express themselves through exchange.

*The symbolic gesture of purchasing and selling an NFT is the creation of value and mainlines self-actualization.*

**I shop therefore I am. Is there any better use for art?**

### **6) Cover Art**

The artwork is attached to the concept of the NFT. It is an album cover.

*NFT artworks are investment products adorned with a visual.* As such, their value comes from their market value which is imbued with subjective aesthetic values as well as the psychological variables that contribute to the collector mentality.

### **7) Indigenous Art**

The best NFT artworks are purely digital, and not mere reproductions of previously expressed mediums.

*They should not be premised on simulation.* And, an NFT artwork increases its integrity by refusing to be associated with an object IRL.

Furthermore, the ultimate NFT artwork would have *no retinal image at all*.

### **8) If Digital, Then Free**

Only in Heaven. We live on Earth.

### **9) Entertainment**

Markets are spectator sports. Finance is entertainment. The best entertainment exists in the service of the audience. *The best art does not.*

### **10) Aggrandizing**

“Rare Digital Art” = “Giclée Print”

## **11) Ownership as Thought Experiment**

NFTs allow us to more efficiently **separate ownership rights from possession rights**, because there is nothing to possess.

*Ownership is a concept. A mindset. A feeling.*

And, feelings are real. Feelings are the result of having a human spirit. This is nothing new in art nor in other areas of culture. Have you ever purchased a work of art and immediately stored it? Have you ever purchased an oil tanker and never seen it in person? Or a share of stock in a corporation? If you haven't, then at least you can *imagine* doing those things, and your imagination allows you to own your conception of doing those things.

*You own your own thoughts (and nothing else).*

*Art only exists in your mind.*

As it exists in *more minds*, art becomes *more artful*. This is why new art is not immediately accepted. It does not yet exist in enough minds as art. But as more minds agree, the collective consciousness will the initially unaccepted art into a state of art. This is also true of ownership.

*Ownership only exists in the mind, and if we all agree someone (or something) owns something, then they do. With NFTs, that agreement is written to the blockchain.*

## **12) Artists now sell shares, not artwork**

NFT artworks are shares of stock in an artist, but with no market cap. Artists, be careful about how many shares you want to issue.

## **13) Practical Obscurity**

These NFT shares in an artist are on offer to the public. They are not transferred privately. The auction model for bringing NFTs to market does not allow the artists to select their collectors. Often in the old art world, artists, brokers, and dealers were careful about who got to own an artwork.

A collector was given *permission to buy*. A collector was *allowed* to be the artwork's custodian. **NFTs turn off your permissions.**

*The old art market benefitted from a practical obscurity that benefitted the artists by ensuring that the work of art was secure and protected—that it was in the right collection, collected by the right patron. **Price was secondary to place.***

When the market is open and public, that level of protection is gone. However, with NFT artworks, that protection is not needed, because an NFT artwork only exists when it is exchanged. *It only exists in a market.* It needs the market to survive, because *its only place is in the marketplace.*

#### **14) Weeds**

Advertising, porn, and entertainment will invade. It is inevitable. Those things grow everywhere. Corporate collaborations that blur the line between sponsored art and art-as-advertising will go Gaussian. This is actually exciting, because the medium is not art for art's sake. *NFTs are art for money's sake. Embrace the medium.*

#### **15) Material is Immaterial**

Digital art has, up to this moment, relied on materialization and singular playback tools to be appreciated in the market. Not anymore. Even still, some collectors of NFT art are curious and anxious about how to display or live with their assets. This is natural, since we still inhabit bodies and therefore relate to a universe of things. NFTs, however, exist only in the digital realm and are on-demand. *This urge to materialize speaks to our inability to escape our bodies.*

The materiality of a work of art has traditionally contributed to its appreciation—the often difficult-to-explain “isness” of a work of art.

*To fully appreciate an NFT, you must transcend the prison of your material world and cut your tether to the istigkeit.*

Art has now entered the spiritual realm secured only by faith (and the blockchain). Art can now be as cold as code.

## **16) Outsider Artists**

Gallery-represented and institution-collected artists IRL are now outsider artists in the NFT art world. Those pedigrees do not transfer across the border.

## **17) The Market is the Medium**

The purchase of an NFT artwork is a symbolic gesture that creates the work. *The gesture means something, and therefore the buyer participates in the work of art by giving the work of art utility through value attribution.* Before this happens, the value of the work of art transcends money. *The initial buyer lassos the work, pulls it down to earth, and cages it into the market.* The NFT is used to create value.

Celebrating and embracing the vulgarity inherent in this **collapse of art and commerce** is akin to any number of subcultures posing as degenerate members of the society.

*Pretending art is priceless is bourgeois. Crassly selling art is punk as fuck.*

## **18) Artists, hold the purse strings!**

**Always mint your own creations.** Make sure your wallet is the one associated with the NFT. This ensures the integrity and authenticity of the work and ensures you get paid. The artist is the one who should pay out the gallery, broker, consultant, or any other third party that has added value to the exchange.

## **19) This was supposed to be a culture war.**

But it was lost before it even began. This could have been the biggest fuck you to the art industry in a long time. Art marketing middlemen have already descended upon NFTland to teach the savages about the old art world religions, with their usual unsubstantiated claims about art and aggrandizing terms to describe the work. Money is made by middlemen by *exploiting the inefficiencies in the market.* In the art market, those inefficiencies have traditionally been

found in the gap between the artists and collectors. Therefore, it is in the interest of brokers to widen and maintain that gap, **often going so far as to manufacture ignorance about art** with art-speak instead of providing plain-speak insights. In the NFT marketplace, those inefficiencies do not exist. *This could have been a realm where the artist shaman could speak directly to peers while encouraging everyone to participate. This was not supposed to be about organized religion.*

If only there could be a place where artists could be their own advocates, speaking with accountability and responsibility for their own work directly to the people interested in protecting that work. And, if only there could be a place where collectors could ask questions about the work directly to the artists. If only.

## **20) Why gatekeep the gatekeepers?**

But most people *want* organized religion. Artists and collectors alike crave validation. Artists rely on the brand association of the art stores, and collectors like luxury goods. *Luxury means freedom from the pain caused by critical thinking—freedom from choice.* This requires the appearance of curation. And, many artists benefit from having their work explained by third parties, for obvious reasons.

Middlemen are inevitable as tourists need guides. These middlemen can serve to respectfully preserve and protect or exploit the natural resources.

*They can even destroy the natural environment and replace it with an all-inclusive simulation of what was once there.*

## **21) Artist-designed Tokens**

The NFT is a medium that is not unique to works of art. Anything can adorn an NFT. After all, NFTs are simply investment products. And so, NFTs are akin to “artist-designed” products. The novelty will wear off, and *the medium will be more properly relegated to the realm of the goofy products we artists sometimes like to make.*

## 22) Community Immunity

We can no longer refer to “The NFT Community.” We must now refer to the “The NFT Core Community.” And, even that is fragmenting. Platforms want to remain neutral and unassuming by accepting (almost) everyone.

**But artists want to stand next to other artists they admire, are friends with, or feel aligned with.**

In a market of utility goods, value attribution is easy, and the market self-regulates. However, NFT platforms should not be eBays or Craigslists for digital art.

*Art appreciation is much more nuanced than toaster appreciation, for example.* The variables for evaluation and valuation of art are more complicated and subtle. Art is not a commodity in which the cream will rise to the top in a free market. Just look at other areas of culture to see if popular opinion has celebrated the best of what culture has to offer. Laissez faire platforms foster this injustice.

In fact, NFT platforms can claim that they are simply the parking lot for the flea market, but, in fact, they decide which stalls get placed close to the gate, and they decide how the rows are configured. And while deciding to not chime in on what’s for sale in each stall (because “art” should not be influenced by outside forces, for some reason), *the unregulated content creates an unstable marketplace.* As an artist, I am looking for my work to be valued in a stable market. Instability does not benefit the artist or collector. It is inevitable that NFT art platforms will have to morph into something more like the old-world gallery model.

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### Side Note: Platforms or Publishers?

Web 2.0 companies benefited from not being legally categorized as publishers. They asked for that non-status. Accordingly, they were not responsible for the content they were publishing. Claiming to be simply platforms for user-generated content absolved them from being held accountable for that content. This was in the interest of growing the internet. Growth without guidance. That is not how you raise anything. Now as the internet enters adulthood, it is stuck in a state of arrested development, like most of society.

*It’s time to grow up.*

### **23) Day-trading Art**

Money and art can co-exist in spiritual harmony.

*Now we can sell art without all the messiness of art.*

This is the gamification of the art market. This is nothing new, except now we can day-trade art. Imagine art-buying bots trading at lightning speed. We can even remove decision-making when it comes to art.

### **24) Faith**

Demonstrating faith decreases the need for faith.

*Spending money on NFTs is a symbolic gesture that conspicuously demonstrates one's faith in cryptocurrency and the blockchain. It strengthens one's resolve and increases the perceived value of the new systems.* And in this new system, our faith in the blockchain will supersede our faith in the real world. Some people think NFTs should be used to authenticate and reinforce our faith in material works of art, but actually that will flip. **Physical works of art will reinforce the faith in the NFT.**

### **25) The New System Is A Brave New World.**

“On the blockchain,” “on the chain,” or simply “chained” will be a ubiquitous term to assert that something is registered and *a part of a shared and agreed upon official canon of reality.*

*The chain will validate everything and become the dominant mechanism by which we record reality.* Conversely, an alternative, underground, and unofficial parallel reality will emerge that will be populated and visited by those who do not want to live saved or recorded lives.

Outside the chained World State (Huxley) will be an exhilarating place to visit. And, that “off the chain” world will be ticketed.

*What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.*

## **26) It will soon be all over.**

Meaning, it will soon be *all over the place*. Minting an NFT is a bit complicated now, but it will soon be drag-and-drop easy-peasy. Supplies will flood culture, thus bringing NFT market prices down to pennies. Imagine buying an NFT is as easy as “liking” an image, and it only costs 2¢. An infinite number of people may “like/own” an NFT through micropayments. (Snapshots did not undermine fine art photography, but it is not yet clear if a new value system will emerge to ensure the value of the “art” NFTs.)

## **27) Flow**

Now imagine each “like/own” were a share in a DAO (Decentralized Autonomous Organization), and that DAO were auto-liking/owning other NFTs throughout the internet.

*Money will finally achieve its desired liquid state and flow in currents around the world.*

## **28) Arty McArtface**

Keep imagining: **A DAO comprised of hundreds of millions of micro-investors could swell up to express the absurdist whims of “the people.”**

*Collective urges in popular culture could influence cultural institutions* (or auction houses) to displace the values of the intelligentsia.

(Or has this already happened?)

(See “*Boaty McBoatface*” and “*50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can’t Be Wrong*”)

## **29) Utility**

On the other hand, DAOs could be used for good. See *PleasrDAO’s purchase of Edward Snowden’s NFT that benefited the Freedom of the Press Foundation*. This, in my opinion, has been the best use of an NFT yet, although not the best NFT art. The utility was excellent. The art was meh. This disconnect underscores the *isness* of an NFT.

### **30) Transactional**

In my talks with different platforms, each and every one of them wanted to “see examples of my digital art” first and foremost. Not one wanted to speak about the concepts first and see if those concepts are best expressed as digital works.

*The best art starts with a concept. Art is proof of concept.*

The art experience has traditionally been premised on contemplation and the search for meaning. However, NFTs offer very little room for pause, between the *speed of the space* and the *space of the space*. NFTs live fast and die young. They are never alone, removed from the price/bid figures, supplemental texts, website branding, or other windows on your desktop. **There is no calm context for contemplating the work.**

*NFTs are birthed in a marketplace, live in a marketplace, and (often) promptly placed back into a marketplace.*

There is no time for love. Only fucking. And that’s fine.

# Ryan McGinness

## Non-fungible Token Primer

# NFT Art Appreciation

## Introduction

A lot of mainstream media coverage of non-fungible tokens ends with the same punchline that goes something like this: “...and we still don’t understand!” This is dismissive and disrespectful to an audience that actually wants to understand. Understanding what an NFT is comes from realizing all the different things an NFT can do and be. **Art is just one of the things an NFT can be.** But, an NFT can only be art if you accept it as art. *That is how art works.* It is asserted to be art by one person and is accepted by at least one other person. That’s all it takes. Once we have NFT art, we can next have **NFT art appreciation.** That is what this section addresses.

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*Approach with an open mind. Leave your hang-ups behind. Be a critical thinker, not a negative thinker. Don’t allow your attitude to interfere with your understanding. The discussions about NFT art so far have been confusing and disconnected, but at the very least, they have served to signal and separate open minds from closed minds.*

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### Side Note: I am not a digital art pioneer.

Although I have worked digitally for over 30 years, I am by no means a digital art pioneer. I have always materialized by digital artworks by making C-prints and digitally printed canvases until my work took a more materialist turn relegating my digital vector drawings to just one stage of my process.

Most NFT artworks were born out of the coarse arts by those working in the service industry making work for clients. With NFTs, their “personal work” could finally easily be monetized without assuming much risk. Recently, more **digital art pioneers from the fine art world** have been making NFTs after having assumed a great deal of risk and suffered many years of swimming upstream to carve out a place in an art market ill-equipped to accommodate their work. *NFTs create an incredible opportunity for their fine art to be appreciated.*

However, while digital fine artists are contributing works, *NFT art is primarily a people's art*. And, it's quickly becoming even more democratized.

*NFT art appreciation begins with recognizing what is being asserted as art. That assertion comes from the creator, and must be respected. Appreciation begins with acceptance.*

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## Acceptance

How do we appreciate anything?

To appreciate anything outside the self, we start by appreciating the self.

If you *know thyself*, then you can know the world, since you can only understand the world as it relates to you.

### **Appreciating something involves asking a lot of questions that only you can answer.**

Some of these questions have objective answers, but more have subjective, personal answers only you can answer. What you appreciate is a reflection of you and your values.

## Values

Art aside, think about what you value, in general.

Do you value labor? Time investment?

Craftsmanship? Materials?

Are concepts and ideas important to you?

Do you value all of those things to different degrees? Are there any social principles you think should be embodied in a work of art?

*Your values are not right or wrong, but they need to be yours and come from you.* They inform your appreciation.

# Ryan McGinness

## Non-fungible Token Primer

### Concept Integrity

Does the NFT embody and express a concept, or only illustrate one?

How does the NFT art transcend the realm of neat ideas or entertainment?

Does the NFT art challenge what you may have previously considered art?

Is the NFT premised on simulation of artwork that exists elsewhere?

Is the NFT a work of art or is it a reproduction of a work of art?

To what degree does originality matter to you?  
Do you like appropriation?

How does a work of art fit into the history of art without repeating the research of past artists?

Is the NFT linked to or related to a work of IRL art? Does that matter to you?

### Material Integrity and Digital Craft

*These questions have more objective answers.*

What are your standards for digital files?

Do you even care? It's OK if you don't.

*(It's kind of like caring how archival a painting is or how colorfast pigments are.)*

Are there industry standards for NFTs?

What are the medium-specific attributes of NFTs, and does the NFT art exploit those?

## NFT Art Appreciation

Does the NFT address the medium in ways that make it unique and specific to being an NFT?

*(Think of RGB-specific colors, time-based work, screen resolution, and sound, for example.)*

How do we address the craft of NFTs?

Is the NFT artist an expert in the material?

Does that matter to you?

### Empathy vs. Magic

We appreciate material artworks, because we can imagine how those materials were manipulated.

Conspicuous material manipulation (a viscous brush stroke, for example) allows us to imagine having manipulated the material ourselves.

Empathy drives appreciation in the same way we appreciate athletes, because we know what it is like to run and jump.

**The challenge with digital art (NFTs) is that many of us cannot empathize.**

*They are magic tricks.* Many of us don't know how to use the tools or manipulate the materials. We are left to wonder at the warm glow of flickering lights.

**Mystery and magic replace empathy with digital art.**

Unless, of course, we do know.

In that case, digital art is most appreciated by digital artists the same way painters are the best people to appreciate painting. Ask artists who the best artists are. They are the "artists' artists" with peer-reviewed work.

*With NFT art, we can look at whom the pioneering digital artists appreciate most and follow their lead.*

# Ryan McGinness

## Non-fungible Token Primer

### Authorship

Was the NFT actually made by the artist?  
Does that matter to you?  
What *is* an artist to you?

Has the artist minted the NFT?  
If not, who has minted the NFT and why?

Do you believe the artist should be accountable and responsible for his/her own work? Or, does the artwork somehow exist outside of and separate from the artist? Is the artist simply a messenger of the work?

Do you think an artist should be allowed to be anonymous? Why?  
Does anonymity dehumanize the NFT, and what do you think about that?  
Do you think of artists as more like brands?

Do you value humanity in a work of art?  
Do you like to see evidence of the art having been made by a human?

What do you think about two or more people making a work of art?  
At what point does art become produced by committee?

*In the case of dead artists, what do you think about estates and foundations producing posthumous works of art as NFTs? Or would these be considered simply postcards or posters of art—NFTs as vehicles for reproductions?*  
How do you feel about that?

# NFT Art Appreciation

### The Artist

Who has made the work?  
Do you know anything about the artist, and does that matter to you?

Professionally, what is the artist's pedigree?  
Is the artist critically reviewed?  
Collected by institutions?

Are there personal characteristics of the artist that affect your appreciation for the work?  
What are the values of the artist?  
What does the artist stand for?

Has the artist offered any insight about the work or asserted any meaning?  
Has the NFT been made with intention?  
Does that matter to you?

### Other Collectors

*Perhaps you only value what other people value.  
This is the case with most people, and that's fine.  
It's much easier that way.*

In that case, you probably want to look at the provenance of the work. With NFTs, that's easy as it is all written to the blockchain.

Another way to look at what other people are looking at the most, is to think of the NFT's *cultural impact*.  
How popular is the NFT?  
Does this matter to you?  
What does this say about the NFT?  
What does this say about you?

# Ryan McGinness

## Non-fungible Token Primer

### Consider the other psychological drivers for most collectors:

- Feeling like they are supporting or patronizing an artist or “the arts.”
- Conspicuous consumption, now made easier with NFTs as all owners are written to the blockchain.
- Art collecting as atonement for how the discretionary funds for the art were accrued.
- Association with other collectors or institutions that also own work by the same artist.
- To tell a story about the work of art and use that story as social currency.
- To assert righteousness by believing that buying art is a way to right social wrongs.
- Adornment.

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#### Special Thanks to Sean Bonner.

Read his informed essay here:

[nftwtf.art](https://nftwtf.art)

Read about environmental concerns

[here](#).

# NFT Art Appreciation

## Conclusion

### **A work of art must gain attributes if it is going to be valued in the art market.**

Traditionally, those attributes have been bestowed by the art market industry to entice potential buyers. Indeed, they must be agreed upon by the buyer before the purchase. Those attributes are then bestowed upon the artwork by a buyer and then bought back.

*Artworks are mirrors, and buyers are buying their reflection.*

A work of art is valued if it embodies that which the market values. It is unclear what the NFT art market values. As of now, there is not much of an NFT art market industry beyond marketplaces.

*You are left to your own devices to appreciate NFT art.*

This is a good thing.

Those devices are in the form of questions, many of which I have tried to outline here.

*Your NFT art appreciation will help you differentiate NFT art from NFTs that have defaulted to the status of art.*

# Ryan McGinness

## Bio

### Non-fungible Token Primer

Ryan McGinness is an American artist, living and working in New York, New York. He grew up in the surf and skate culture of Virginia Beach, Virginia, and then studied at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as an Andrew Carnegie Scholar. During college, he interned at the Andy Warhol Museum as a curatorial assistant. Known for his extensive vocabulary of original graphic drawings that use the visual language of public signage, corporate logos, and contemporary symbology, McGinness is credited with elevating the status of the icon to fine art through the creation of his paintings, sculptures, installations, and books. Concerned with the perceived value of forms, he assumes the power of this visual language in order to share personal expressions. The *New York Times* noted, “In the past decade, McGinness has become an art star, thanks to his Warholian mix of pop iconography and silk-screening.” *Vogue* declared, “Ryan McGinness is a leading pioneer of the new semiotics.”

His work is in the permanent public collections of:  
The Museum of Modern Art  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts  
Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego  
Cincinnati Art Museum, MUSAC in Spain  
Taguchi Art Collection in Japan.

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