

Cabinets of curiosities for the postcolony II: tokens: collections I-V

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Abstract

This paper offers a discussion and reflection on my work titled "Cabinets of Curiosities for the Postcolony II: Tokens, Collections I-V" (hereafter referred to as "Tokens") which was exhibited in 2022 both physically in a gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa, and virtually on the non-fungible token (NFT) marketplace OpenSea. The physical component of "Tokens" consists of five entomology cases, each displaying a collection of unique, handmade objects, and an artists' book, and the digital component takes the form of 51 NFTs. I describe the origin, development and nature of the project and explain the reasoning behind the creative decisions that I made. Initially the project was driven by my need for tactility and experimenting and crafting with physical materials, but it evolved into an exploration of the question of what is considered "new knowledge" in creative practice. This exploration eventually led me to the world of NFTs and resulted in a final creative project that engages with further questions around uniqueness, the aura of physical and digital art, and value.

I propose that by making and naming new objects, I created new knowledge, which I then attempted to validate by minting the objects as NFTs. However, I realised that by digitally reproducing the physical objects I ran the risk of destroying their "aura" as postulated by Walter Benjamin in his 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". I consider Benjamin's concept of "aura" in relation to physical and digital art and highlight more contemporary views that refute his claim. This leads to a brief discussion of the financial value of NFTs and the importance of community in creating value in the NFT world. I conclude by noting that many questions remain on what blockchain technology can do and become for artists and the study contributes one such perspective and experience. Creative practitioners are encouraged to become acquainted with this technology.

Author keywords

Non-fungible token; NFT; digital arts; crypto art, uniqueness; aura; knowledge; value

Introduction

In this paper I discuss and reflect on my work titled "Cabinets of Curiosities for the Postcolony II: Tokens, Collections I-V" (hereafter referred to as "Tokens") which was exhibited from 20 September to 26 October 2022 in real life (IRL) at the Art Gallery of the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in Johannesburg, South

Africa, as well as virtually on OpenSea, the largest marketplace for non-fungible tokens (NFT) (Fries 2021).

The physical component of Tokens consists of five Iroko wood and perspex entomology cases, accompanied by an artists' book digitally printed on ILFORD Fine Art Textured Silk paper and folded into a leporello format (figure 1).



Figure 1. Physical display of "Tokens", FADA Gallery (picture by author)

Each entomology case displays a collection of unique, handmade objects organised according to formal qualities such as colour or material. The objects are small, ranging in size from approximately one to ten centimeters and were created through the combination of existing things, or the manipulation of natural and found materials. Figure 2 shows a close-up of one of the collections of objects, Collection I. The objects in Collection I were made from a variety of materials, including air dry paper clay, acrylic paint, felt, beads, plastic animals and figures, safety pins, a rose thorn and bra components. Their creation was prompted in 2020 by my need for experimentation and crafting with physical materials as I missed the tactility of making following decades of primarily creating art and design with digital media. I was inspired by developments in art jewellery design and interested in applying various traditional and non-traditional jewellery making techniques and materials to craft beautiful and intriguing objects which blurred the boundaries between sculpture and jewellery.



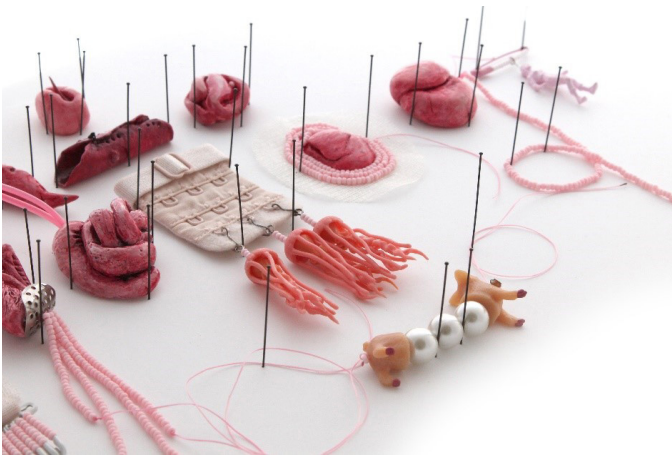


Figure 2. Close-up of Collection I (picture by author)

The objects contained in the collections are documented in the artists' book by way of 51 photographs captioned with the object's name (figure 3). The word tokens in the title refers to both the dictionary definition of token, which is "...a thing that you give someone, that expresses your feelings or intention, although it might have little practical effect" (Cambridge Dictionary) and the NFT component of the work.



Figure 3. Page from artists' book

Figure 4. NFT "card"

Each object was minted as an NFT in the form of a "collectable card" containing, within a frame, a photograph of the object captioned with its name and the title of the artwork at the top (figure 4). The collection of 51 NFTs comprises the virtual component of the exhibition and each token was available for purchase on OpenSea (figure 5) for the duration of the exhibition at <https://opensea.io/collection/tokensi-v>. The NFTs can be viewed on OpenSea where they have been given, in the words of Friedman and Hawkes (2021) an "after-life where it is no longer subject to mortal decay" because, as Betancourt (2006) observes "[t]he limit for a digital work is not based on its physical demise, but rather on its availability within contemporary technology." In minting the NFT on OpenSea a unique token ID number was generated providing proof of the uniqueness of the NFT and therefore I exhibited a list of these numbers in the FADA Gallery alongside the physical work.

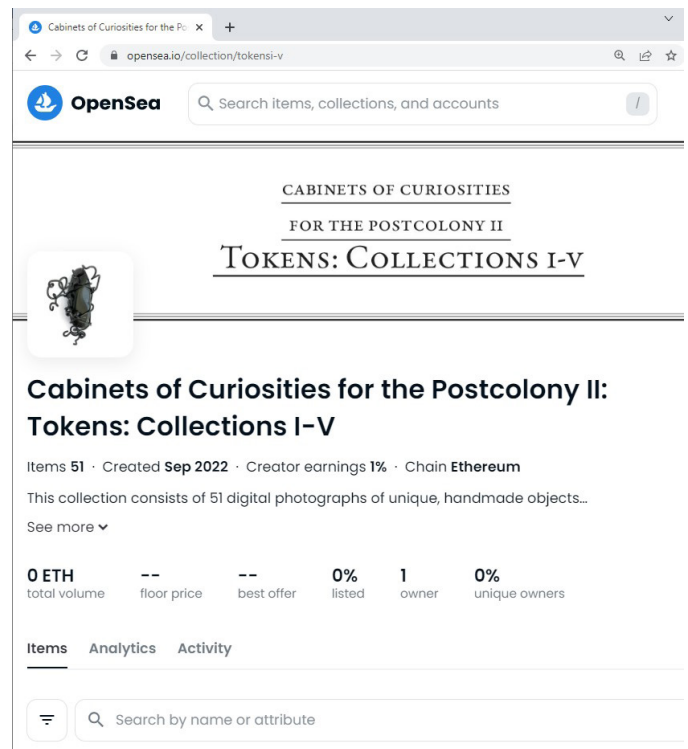


Figure 5. Collection of 51 NFTs on OpenSea

While creating the physical objects during 2020 I considered a variety of display methods, including entomology display cases and creating a cabinet of curiosities. These experiments would eventually lead to a project named "Dead Living Things: A Cabinet of Curiosities in the Postcolony" (hereafter "Dead Living Things") (Pretorius, 2023) which was exhibited at the FADA Gallery as part of the 2021 staff exhibition "Interventions in Practice". While the objects served as a starting point for "Dead Living Things", I did eventually move away from creating new and unique objects, to collecting and displaying existing objects in a cabinet of curiosities (Pretorius 2023). "Dead Living Things" aimed, amongst other things, to understand the role of colonial collection practices in constructing knowledge and to show how our understanding of the world is mediated through existing objects, text and language. "Tokens" builds on this interest, but in addition, explores the question of what is considered "new knowledge" in creative practice and how objects can help us to understand this question. The process of working on this question led me to the world of NFTs and resulted in a final art work that engages with further questions around uniqueness, the aura of physical and digital art and their value.

Creative practice and new knowledge

Exploration of the question "what is new knowledge in creative output?" was prompted by the purpose of the 2021 and 2022 FADA staff exhibitions, which aimed at creating opportunities for FADA academics to exhibit creative work with the purpose of applying for creative output as research production. Since 2019 the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has acknowledged, through policy implementation, that creative work can be formally recognised as research output through a process of peer review, as is the case with textual research (Pretorius 2023). As part of the required documentation for peer review the crea-

tive practitioner must “demonstrate the contribution to new knowledge” which the creative output makes (DHET 2017:9).

Therefore, in preparation for the 2022 exhibition I revisited the objects I had made in 2020, and then, working from the belief that the existence of things IRL and in our minds are understood and expressed through naming and language, I named each thing with a pseudoscientific name in Latin using the binomial naming system used to name living organisms. I chose the binomial naming system as the process of collecting, naming and classification of living organisms is linked to the scientific project of new knowledge creation, which in the past was linked to the tradition of cabinets of curiosities and colonialist collection practices. Incidentally, entomology, the study of insects, and etymology, the study of a word's history, are words that appear somewhat similar, a pleasing coincidence which I thought appropriate for the project.

In the binomial naming system, living organisms are given a two-part name, where the first part refers to the genus, which the species belongs to, while the species name constitutes the second part (Amateur Entomologists' Society 2023). I assigned each object to a genus based on a similar material or colour as follows: Rubisco (pink) (Collection I), Margarita (pearl) (Collection II), Lignum (wood) (Collection III), Cuprum (copper) (Collection IV) and Tenebris (dark) (Collection V). The species was identified more broadly based on a characteristic of the object, such as medium, symbol, association, shape, or material. In cases where this resulted in two objects having the same name, I added a variety name. I included an x between the names to indicate that the object is a hybrid of materials, objects and techniques. I used Google translate to create the names by way of literal translation, therefore, Rubisco x polypus (figure 5), literally translated means pink octopus. I selected the translation for octopus as Google translate did not provide a Latin translation for jellyfish. My reasoning was that by creating objects and naming them, I had created new knowledge, although of questionable value. To ensure that this knowledge was validated as new and unique, led me to the decision to mint each object as an NFT.

The blockchain and NFTs

An NFT is “a unique digital item stored on a blockchain” and “can represent almost anything”, for example art, collectibles, profile pictures, and event tickets for events, and “serve as a digital record of ownership” (OpenSea 2022a). The difference between fungibility and non-fungibility is that fungible items are “interchangeable with another of the same item”, such as a \$1, whereas non-fungible items “has its own unique value” because the item is “totally unique” (OpenSea 2022a). On OpenSea minting “is the process of writing a digital item to the blockchain” through which “its immutable record of authenticity and ownership” is established (OpenSea 2022b).

The blockchain is a generic technology which, like the web, allows developers to “build almost any kind of workable system on top of it” (Vinay Gupta in Catlow 2017, p. 23). It is a powerful, disruptive technology which some argue has the ability to “change everything forever” (Catlow 2017, p. 31) due to its inherent features that include “decentralization, immutability, anonymity, traceability and transparency” (Del Vacchio and Bifulco 2022 2-3). Jones and Skinner (2017, p. 9) aptly refer

to the blockchain as “Janus-faced”, with one side holding the promise of “fairness and accountability” due to “its traits of transparency and decentralization”, whereas “on the other its monetary roots born as a financial payment system ... mean its implementations are often stridently capitalistic.” This duality between “art as currency and art as socio-political arena” (Jones and Skinner 2017, p. 13) runs through the literature on art and blockchain.

The literature on the blockchain, including NFTs, is vast and rapidly growing (Casino, Dasaklis and Patsakis, 2019). Del Vacchio and Bifulco (2022) provide insight into the impact of blockchain on art and cultural heritage by identifying three themes through a review of literature. The first is provenance and authenticity (Gipp et al 2017, Anagnostakis 2018, Angelova 2019, Ch'ng 2019, Whitaker et al 2020, Wang et al 2021); the second tokenization and fractional equity (Whitaker 2019, Whitaker et al 2020, Franceschet et al 2020) and the last, rights management and digital protection (Zeilinger 2018, O'Dwyer 2020, Ch'ng 2019, Huang and Dai 2019).

De Vacchio and Bifulco (2022, p. 6) define tokenization as “the process of converting a right on an asset (usually owned) into a token, digital information, which is then issued on a blockchain platform for its exchange between users.” Tokens may originate as a physical object IRL or be “digital-born” as is the case with “crypto art”. Franceschet et al (2020, p. 402) refers to “crypto art” as “a recent artistic movement in which the artist produces works of art, typically still or animated images, and distributes them via a crypto art gallery or their own digital channel using blockchain technology.” The tokenization process as explained by Franceschet et al (2020, p. 402-3), in which an artwork is uploaded to a crypto art marketplace and a transaction created on the Ethereum blockchain resulting in an NFT, is similar to the process I followed to create my NFTs on OpenSea. However, whereas crypto artists tokenize their work to create proof of uniqueness, ownership and authenticity with the aim of encouraging sales (Franceschet et al 2020, p. 402-3), my interest was less in selling work than using the blockchain to record and validate the creation of new knowledge.

To be able to mint my NFTs, the physical objects which I created needed to be digitally reproduced, in this case into jpeg format by way of digital photography. I found it very ironic that in the NFT marketplace the act of placing a digital copy of my original object, and assigning a unique token ID to the copy, renders the copy unique. The infinitely reproducible digital image of the original object, with its accompanying ID, becomes the “original” work of art which accrues value in the digital space, whereas the true original, the physical object IRL is arguably of less value. The implications of the reproduction of a physical work of art in relation to its value was explored by Walter Benjamin in his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, first published in 1935.

Aura and physical and digital art

Benjamin (1969) argued that the reproduction of an original physical work of art, such as a painting or sculpture, by mechanical means, for example photography, robbed the artwork of its “aura” thereby diminishing the value of the work. According to Benjamin (1969, p. 3) “[e]ven the most perfect

reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." It is this existence that determines the artwork's history, including changes over time in its physical condition and ownership. For Benjamin (1969, p. 3) authenticity is dependent on the "presence of the original" and authenticity cannot be reproduced through technical means. Benjamin (1969, p. 4) describes authenticity as an art work's "most sensitive nucleus... the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced". The element which is lost in reproducing a work of art is termed "aura" by Benjamin, and, as Betancourt (2006) observes, it is logical to assume that aura is lost not only with mechanical reproduction, but also digital reproduction.

Friedman and Hawkes (2021) state that aura is linked to the "viewer's visceral reaction to the physical traits of the work" such as the "variable pressure of the crayon on paper, the thickness of impasto brushstrokes or their glossy translucency, the weave of the canvas showing through the loosely applied imprimatura, the mutable effects of light playing on the surface at different times of day." Such tactile qualities resulting from physical making was what I particularly craved when I initially started creating the objects, and it was these qualities that was remarked on and appreciated by visitors to the FADA Gallery exhibition in their comments to me.

A review of the literature examining digital art in relation to Benjamin's concept of aura shows that several researchers have concluded that digital art does not lose aura through mechanical reproduction, but instead, a new type of aura emerges which some ascribe to the difference between digital and physical objects (Bozkanat 2022:3, Emison 2021:13, Friedman & Hawkes 2021, Trice 2020:5, Bakker 2018, Betancourt 2006). Betancourt (2006) argues that digital and non-digital art objects are fundamentally different due to all digital objects consisting only of binary code, while physical objects take on many different and unique forms. Therefore, Betancourt (2006) argues, digital objects "constitute a new class of object" that contains the "aura of information", which refers to "the separation of the meaning present in a work from the physical representation of that work". Betancourt (2006) explains that "[b]ecause the material aspects of digital works are ephemeral, lasting no longer than the phenomenological encounter with the presentation of the digital object, (typically on a screen of some type), the 'aura of information' suggests that the digital itself transcends physical form. This illusion defines the 'aura of information'".

Similarly, Friedman and Hawkes (2021) argue that "NFTs simultaneously embody two kinds of abstraction: financial value and the aesthetic aura". They formulate this argument by referring to the controversy surrounding the burning of a Banksy print by its owner in 2021. The print was purchased for \$95,000 and after a reproduction in the form of an NFT was sold for \$380,000 the original was incinerated. Friedman and Hawkes (2021) maintain that when the original is destroyed "it becomes possible to package, market and sell the aura in the absence of the original. The destruction of the original allows the NFT to monetize the aura, imposing on it the form of financial value". The financial value of NFTs has

been a prominent preoccupation since the emergence of blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies and as Friedman and Hawkes (2021) observe, because financial value and the aesthetic aura are collapsed into "the same symbol at the same time ... they have become functionally identical. And if identical, then interchangeable."

The entanglement of these two types of abstractions have led to NFTs being considered both a "craze" and "the future of digital art" with sales skyrocketing from an estimated \$12 million in December 2020 to \$340 million in February 2021, with collectors being prepared to pay millions of American dollars for a single NFT (Chohan 2021, p. 1). Chohan (2021, p. 1) rightly observes that "despite in essence representing little more than code" NFTs sell for millions because "a buyer has ascribed 'value' to the code". Chohan (2021:6) notes that this leads to the ultimate question raised by NFTs: "how valuable is an NFT in reality?" The answer, according to Chohan (2021, p. 6), is that "[i]t is as valuable as people express a willingness to pay for it".

NFTs and value

I put my NFTs up for sale on 22 September 2022 for the duration of the Interventions in Practice exhibition priced at 0.510 "wrapped ether" (WETH), a decision based on a cursory analysis of the pricing of NFTs on OpenSea, and symbolically on the fact that I was minting 51 tokens. WETH is a cryptocurrency and at the time of minting my NFTs 1 WETH, at closing, equated to \$1,267.87. Therefore, at that point in time, the price of one of my NFTs was \$647 US dollars, which I thought was quite a substantial amount.

However, this price was nothing compared to the oft cited example of \$69 million paid for the work "Everydays: The First 5000 Days" created by Mike Winkelmann (Kastrenakes 2021). Winkelmann, an American graphic designer working under the name Beeple, started creating an image every day from May 2007—a practice which he continues at the time of writing this paper—and posting the image to his Instagram account "beeple_crap". "Everydays" is a composite of the images which he created over the course of thirteen years and was auctioned off by Christie's (Gompertz 2021). Kastrenakes (2021) notes a development in Winkelmann's work from "somewhat crude sketches" to "evolving digital shapes and sceneries" while Gompertz (2021), in his review of "Everydays," grudgingly concedes "I won't pretend to have viewed each and every image, but I have seen enough to know it is of artistic and documentary merit".

Kastrenakes (2021) ascribes the value of Winkelmann's work to his "large fan base, with around 2.5 million followers across social channels", his productiveness, the staggering growth of the NFT market, and collectors and investors belief that digital art will continue to be traded in this way into the future thereby promising large returns for early investors. In addition, Christie's involvement in the sale legitimized "both Winkelmann's art and NFTs as a technology".

Winkelmann's enormous following—2.4 million on Instagram alone—indicates the importance of what Franceschet et al. (2021, p. 404) identify as engagement and community in the "Crypto-Artistic Movement". Participating in and building NFT

communities are considered essential for NFT artists (Lisa 2022) indicating the importance of connectivity between artists, collectors and other role players in the NFT world.

It is therefore not surprising that with my mere 482 Instagram followers and 301 posts—compared to Beeple's 3181 posts—and no presence on Telegram, Twitter, Reddit or Discord, I did not sell a single NFT. But then, selling art was not my intention when venturing into the world of NFTs and neither is it for many other artists who are exploring the possibilities offered by Blockchain in interesting ways. The publication *Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain* presents a diverse range of such projects from the speculative to the playful exploring the “meanings, possibilities and implementations” offered by the blockchain” (Jones and Skinner 2017, p. 12).

Chohan (2021, p. 9) laments the fact that the focus on making “a quick buck” through NFTs has “detract[ed] from the genuinely interesting idea that a decentralized mechanism can offer a public recognition of the specialty of an encoded object.” Chohan (2021, p. 9) observes the presence of “an exploratory, counter-hegemonic element to virtual participants engaging with NFTs” and it is this space which I believe is the more interesting area for exploration and creative work involving NFTs and the blockchain.

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Conclusion

I set out in this paper to reflect on my work *Tokens* and how in engaging with the question of what is considered “new knowledge” in creative practice I entered the world of NFTs, which resulted in further questions around uniqueness, the aura of physical and digital art, and value. In addressing Benjamin's view on the “aura” in relation to digital reproduction, current arguments refuting his claim were raised and I touched on the financial value of NFTs and the importance of community in creating value in the NFT world. As my reflection progressed, the questions proliferated, and these could, unfortunately, only be addressed in a limited way by providing my perspective and experience of venturing into the NFT arena. What did become clear to me is that blockchain technology cannot be ignored by creative practitioners. As Catlow (2017, p. 21–22) notes, “blockchain technologies are here to stay. They are overtaking the WWW as the next big network technology for speculation and disruption ...artist have a crucial part to play here”.

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