

"How does the originality of Beeple's 'Everdays: The First 5000 Days' cryptoart, or what Walter Benjamin would call its "aura," affect its market value?"

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On March 11th of 2021, Mike Winkelmann, known more commonly by his pseudonym, *Beeple*, auctioned off a single jpeg file for \$69M, becoming one of the wealthiest living artists in the world.¹ The British auction house Christie's helped Beeple find the buyer. The digital image, sized at 21,069 x 21,069 pixels, is a photomontage of 5,000 individual images created by the artist over the past 13 years. (*Figure 1*) The title of the work, "Everydays: The First 5000 Days," calls attention to the creative process used by the artist and the "everyday" movement his method helped inspire. He creates a new image every day and shares it with the world through social media and his website. Since starting the project in late 2007, he has not missed a single day. Winkelmann shares his motivations for the project on his website:

"These pictures are all done from start to finish every day. The purpose of this project is to help me get better at different things. By posting the results online, I'm "less" likely to throw down a big pile of ass-shit even though most of the time I still do because I suck ass."²

These "everyday" images, ranging from hand-drawn sketches of a demonic Mickey Mouse to computer-generated renderings of a dead Elon Musk dressed as an astronaut being dismembered by chimpanzees, make up the large photomontage. (*Figure 2*) The purpose of this discussion is to examine how the unique cryptographic minting process used to authenticate this digital media not only affected its market value, but also transformed this seemingly soulless array of sketches, spoofs, and pastiches into a body of work with what Walter Benjamin calls an aura.

At first glance, the jpeg appears as a disorienting collection of squares and rectangles, with a variety of colors and indiscernible forms. When viewing the image more closely, or scaled up on a computer, it does become clearer that each image has its own unique composition. While

¹ "Beeple: A Visionary Digital Artist at the Forefront of NFTs," Christie's, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7.aspx>.

² "EVERYDAYS | BEEPLE | the work of mike winkelmann," BEEPLE, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>.

there is no apparent sequence for the images, they do appear to be clustered somewhat chronologically and by the medium used. The top-left corner of the square canvas features a collection of scanned or photographed hand-drawn sketches and cartoons, most likely created with a combination of pens, colored pencils, crayons, and markers. (*Figure 3*) This represents Beeple's earlier work where he focused on improving his drawing skills. Mid-way down the frame, a series of photographs, including portraits of people, man-made objects, and landscapes, are grouped together as well. (*Figure 4*) These photographs were pulled from Beeple's 4th year of *Everydays* where he focused on photography. Near the bottom-right of the collage, more recent computer-generated work from 2020 and 2021 fill the frame. (*Figure 5*) Beeple has managed to garner more than two million followers of his work on Instagram, a noteworthy milestone in the age of social media. Most of his images feature computer-generated imagery using 3D technology. The subjects he covers in his visuals include trendy, and typically controversial, pop culture references and science-fiction scenes of lonely figures facing large, bizarre, and mysterious forces. (*Figure 6*)

While some may be able to derive artistic value from this collection of visuals, art critics had difficulty calling this work "art." Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic, Sebastian Smee, referred to Beeple's collage as a "marketable digital product" and "soporific cliché" with "no discernible aesthetic merit."³ Art writer Jason Farago, of the *New York Times*, lamented what was "lost" as a result of this art sale, noting the immense environmental impact of the cryptographic minting process. He cites a recent statistic that the carbon footprint of a piece of cryptoart is "equal [to]

³ Sebastian Smee, "\$69 million sale of Beeple's digital 'artwork' won't change much in the art world," *The Washington Post*, last modified March 16, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/beeple-digital-artwork-sale-perspective/2021/03/15/6afc1540-8369-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a_story.html.

the average European citizen's power use for a month."⁴ In essence, critics like Smee and Farago suggest the banality of this digitally minted "product" is hardly worth the art world's attention and the environmental impact, let alone the nearly \$70M Singapore-based NFT maker and collector, Metakovan, paid for the work. Adding to the spectacle of this recent contemporary art transaction is the craze surrounding digital art incorporating cryptographic technology into the work via *non-fungible tokens*. Just as the art historian or critic may examine the signature of an artwork, along with its placement, size, and legibility, it is important that this same examination be applied to the non-fungible token (NFTs) applied to this cryptoart.

Before discussing NFTs, it is important to have a clear understanding of the underlying technology that makes NFTs possible: blockchain. Blockchains are "publicly distributed ledgers," initially created to serve as a database for the cryptocurrency Bitcoin. All transactions on these ledgers are verified and require no third party (like a bank in the case of cryptocurrency) to prove a transaction took place. This is made possible by new bits of code added to the ledger constantly that get shared with all members of the blockchain. This means that anyone attempting to tamper with the historical data on a blockchain (like attempting to move funds from your account to their account) would have to tamper with the data on every blockchain member's device. The level of compute power to do this is impractical, and for the time being, has made blockchains hack-proof.⁵ Non-fungible tokens are collections of computer programming instructions, or code, that provide the data and metadata necessary to attach a unique digital asset to a blockchain. Since historical data cannot be falsely manipulated, deleted, or transferred on the blockchain, it stands to reason that NFTs hosted on a blockchain provide the

⁴ Jason Farago, "Beeple Has Won. Here's What We've Lost." *The New York Times*, last modified March 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/arts/design/beeple-nonfungible-nft-review.html>.

⁵ Daniel Cawrey and Lorne Lantz, *Mastering Blockchain*, (Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2020), chap. 1, <https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/mastering-blockchain/9781492054696>.

strongest method for establishing the provenance of a digital record. Beeple took advantage of NFT technology to generate a unique digital certificate of authenticity, uploaded that record to the Ethereum blockchain, and linked it to the jpeg file. In essence, Christie's auctioned off the NFT rather than the jpeg file alone. After all, jpeg files can easily be replicated with almost any computing device. Moreover, as Farago continues his examination of the recent Christie's auction, he points out another powerful attribute of the NFT that was sold: the ability to create a new investment vehicle.

It [an NFT] is, in this way, like a work of art -- this Monet can't be replaced by that Monet, and certainly can't be replaced by that Warhol or that "Dogs Playing Poker." The NFT produces what digital art has always lacked: limited editions. The actual images remain in circulation, and any citizen or curator can print them out or project them (unless Beeple, who remains the copyright holder, objects). What Christie's sold was a related asset, which can be resold or even chopped up like so many Beeple stocks.⁶

The NFT is as much a part of Beeple's artwork as the signature is on a Monet. While one may not be able to analyze the Solidity source code used to create the NFT on the Ethereum blockchain, it is important to recognize that without this token, this large digital media file would not have been able to garner as much attention, and money, as it did.⁷ The reason for this has little to do with the new technology and everything to do with the originality it generated, what theorist Walter Benjamin called the aura.

Benjamin, a German Jewish philosopher, witnessed the rise of the Nazi party in 1930s Europe, eventually dying of suicide while attempting to flee from their capture. He observed a growing trend among politicians to use technology to create art that could easily be reproduced, notably the sound film. It was at this time he also called for people to recognize the role art

⁶ Jason Farago, "Beeple Has Won. Here's What We've Lost." *The New York Times*, last modified March 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/arts/design/beeple-nonfungible-nft-review.html>.

⁷ "Solidity 0.5.1 documentation," Solidity, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://docs.soliditylang.org/en/v0.8.3/>.

traditionally played in society, with its roots being in religious and cultural tradition. This sacred role meant that people would assign a certain level of sanctity to works of art. This created a special “otherness” for the work themselves, to the point where the work could seem to have a life of its own. Derived from Latin and Greek words for “breath,” the *aura* of a work of art describes life breathed into a work by its creator. While the work’s likeness might be copied, the work’s aura cannot. For Benjamin, living in an age when work like photographs and film were easily reproduced, manipulated, and distributed, he noted the loss of the aura as each reproduction distances itself from the original.

In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence at the place at which it is to be found. The here and now of the original constitutes the concept of its authenticity... The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the history to which it testifies. Yet what is really jeopardized thereby is the authority of the thing, the weight it derives from tradition.⁸

Benjamin did not mourn the loss of the aura. He celebrated art’s departure from its role as a sacred relic of tradition in society. Benjamin notes, “for the first time in world history, the technological reproducibility of the work of art emancipates the work from its parasitic subservience to ritual.”⁹ Advances in technological reproduction made it simple for political powers to manipulate the masses by leveraging the value assigned to works of art. Professor Howard Eiland has translated many of Benjamin’s writings and alongside Princeton Professor Michael W. Jennings, explains one of the principal problems Benjamin highlights when people assign aura to a work of art, particularly a reproducible work that can be politically driven and easily manipulated.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version],” trans. Michael W. Jennings. *Grey Room*, no. 39 (2010), 11-37.

⁹ *Ibid*, 16.

If the work of art remains a fetish, a distanced and distancing object that exerts an irrational and incontrovertible power, it may attain to a sacrosanct inviolability within a culture. It also remains in the hands of a privileged few. The auratic work exerts claims to power that may parallel and reinforce claims to political power made by the class for whom such objects are most meaningful—the ruling class.¹⁰

In the 80 years since Benjamin's death, advances in technology have hastened the reproduction of art to levels where someone like Beeple can create in image, likely comprised of 3D models other people created, and publish the image on multiple websites in a matter of hours. (*Figure 7*)

In Beeple's interview with Christie's, he discusses his creative process for each of his images.

It really feels like a kid who's got a big, big toy collection. With a few clicks, I can take and compose a scene that shows what the final picture will look like. On average, the pictures take about two hours. It really needs to fit into everyday life to sustain something over a very long period of time like this.¹¹

Beeple's work typically re-uses pop-culture references and even digital models other people have created. Fast Company editor Lilly Smith published an article about a website that was specifically built to allow visitors the ability to generate their own "artwork" fit for an NFT auction. (*Figure 8*) "The Beeple generator takes the hype of the NFT world and doubles down. Click 'new Beeple' and the site auto-generates a surrealist, bizarro landscape with figures from news, pop culture, and internet culture in Beeple's typical style."¹² Perhaps this re-use of visual ideas and assets is what makes it difficult for art critics to refer to Beeple's work as art and instead use words like "digital product" to describe it. The work is comprised of reproducible work itself and thus, how could it possibly have an aura of its own? After all, Beeple does admit that these images are not meant to be standalone works of high art. In an interview with *The*

¹⁰ Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014), 514.

¹¹ "Beeple: A Visionary Digital Artist at the Forefront of NFTs," Christie's, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7.aspx>.

¹² Lilly Smith, "This Beeple Generator could bring the next big sale in NFTs," *Fast Company*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90619536/become-the-next-nft-multimillionaire-with-this-digital-art-generator>.

Atlantic, Beeple said, “Art is like taking a dump, it’s not always fun or convenient but it’s something you gotta do everyday and you shouldn’t get to[o] hung up if the product looks like a pile of crap.”¹³ With statements like these, it is logical to assume that Benjamin would consider work like Beeple’s to lack aura. The reason would likely have to do with the degree of reproducibility found in the work itself. Many of Winkelmann’s computer-generated work involves the appropriation of pre-fabricated 3D models designed and generated by other artists. It could be fair to argue that the 3D models used by Beeple have no more of an aura than a mannequin in a department store. Winkelmann’s self-deprecation of the work attempts to reduce the status of the work to the point where it loses any sacrosanct significance tied to an aura. There has been a debate about the persistence of Benjamin’s theory of the diminishing aura, especially as computers and the internet have made the reproduction of art much easier. When it comes to wrestling with the concept of the aura in the digital age, Douglas Davis is prolific figure that must be considered.

An artist and educator, Davis was an early explorer of the internet and pioneered several original works that involved large-scale collaboration between many people. His most popular piece of “internet art” was launched in 1994, *The World’s First Collaborative Sentence*. As more people gained access to the internet, it was clear to Davis that people could and would find ways to contribute to each other’s work in new ways. He created a digital form that permitted anyone with internet access to add text, images, and sounds of their own to a web page he hosted. It is unclear how many people contributed to the sentence, but one can browse through the sentence and even make contributions to it today.¹⁴ In his seminal article about digital art’s originality,

¹³ Kasia Cieplak-Mayr Von Baldegg, “Creativity is Hustle: Make Something Every Day,” *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2011/10/creativity-is-hustle-make-something-every-day/246377>.

¹⁴ “Douglas Davis: The World’s First Collaborative Sentence Launched 1994, Restored 2013,” Whitney Museum of American Art, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://whitney.org/artport/douglas-davis>.

The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction, Davis argues that “the dead replica” and original work are merging, whereby the artist and the audience share in the performance. Davis builds on Walter Benjamin’s theory of aura in an internet age, suggesting that unlike Benjamin’s belief that the aura would perish with reproducible art, the aura endures in a digital age.

Walter Benjamin saw accurately the logical implications of mechanical reproduction. He ignored antilogic. He erred in assuming that the world would bow to logic, that the endless reproduction of painting or photograph would diminish the “aura” of the original. We reach through the electronic field of ease that cushions us, like amniotic fluid, through the field that allows us to order, reform, and transmit almost any sound, idea, or word, toward what lies beyond, toward the transient and ineffable—a breath, for example, a pause in conversation, even the twisted grain of a xeroxed photograph or videotape. Here is where the aura resides—not in the thing itself but in the originality of the moment when we see, hear, read, repeat, revise.¹⁵

To Davis, the audience’s interaction with the art is what gives it an aura, rather than the aura being “born” when the art is created or reproduced.

Professors Peggy Bloomer and Courtney Marchese also revisit Benjamin’s theories about aura and technological reproducibility and apply them to digital art. To them, rather than thinking of computer-generated art as a representation of reality, digital art is its own reality, potentially perverting the reality we know to create something entirely different. Their view provides a more contemporary take on the concept of aura and digital art, having witnessed a successful attempt of a traditional artist producing and selling digital works of art. They note how painter and printmaker David Hockey was able to sell eight digital drawings completed on an iPad for \$28,000 each. While they do not mention non-fungible tokens, they did have the foresight to recognize that with certificates of authenticity and the ability to limit the supply of a digital work, it could become possible for digital work to become a more respectable form of

¹⁵ Douglas Davis, “The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *Leonardo* 28, no. 5 (1995), 382-384.

commercial art. They call for digital art to gain a “broader definition of authenticity and artistic artifact” noting that “the convenience of our digital world could be deteriorating the value of creative work produced today.” For Bloomer and Marchese, authenticity was as much about preserving an object’s right to *testify* to its genuine existence as it was ensuring an object was genuine. The aura gives the object a voice, a permission to tell its history.

The essence of a thing is determined by all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its lifespan to its testimony to the history which it has lived through. Since historical testimony relies on provenance, when there is not a clear path of individual creation, the testimony is jeopardized. If history is jeopardized, it affects the authority of the object. So, the act of reproducing an art detaches the reproduced object from tradition.¹⁶

While Davis saw the aura as more of a connecting force between art and viewer, Bloomer and Marchese agreed with Benjamin that aura provided a provenance for the work itself. What Davis, Bloomer, and Marchese did not foresee was how the non-fungible token would become such an integral part of digital art like it is now, helping to establish a digital provenance and viable application of Benjamin’s aura to digital art. The reason NFTs are so important to digital art is not just because the NFTs help create scarcity, a key component typically found in objects of monetary and intrinsic value. NFTs also provide evidence of the *creator’s* involvement with the work. Rather than wondering if the jpeg you are buying is just someone else’s copy of 0s-and-1s in a digital file, you can *know* that the artist yielded their time, labor, and attention into that copy. The fact that someone would pay tens of millions of dollars for a minted jpeg file indicates that perhaps we have not evolved the concept of the aura from its religious roots like Benjamin thought we would. The aura, or the work’s originality, has evolved into a certificate of that artist’s connection with the work. Therefore, the digital art collector no longer needs a signature

¹⁶ Peggy Bloomer and Courtney Marchese, “Reconsidering the Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *The International Journal of New Media, Technology and the Arts* 12, no. 2 (2017), 27-32.

or a lock of hair from the artist to feel connected to the digital artist. For one of Beeple's earlier NFT auctions, the product auctioned off also included a sample of his hair.¹⁷ All that is required to feel connected to a digital artist is to know that through a string of cryptographic characters, you are exclusively connected to the artist in a way that cannot be replicated or taken from you. In a strange way, it is as though the aura persists in digital art *because* of the NFT. Without it, and the digital provenance it provides, there is no way to ensure the exclusivity and rarity of this artist-collector connection also persists. When it comes to Beeple's Everyday "sketches," apart from the time spent making them, there is no intention for a soul to be injected into the images. They are thought experiments shared online, meant to test Beeple's skill and generate publicity for his graphic design services. However, the collection of the sketches calls attention to the work itself, and the larger message carried throughout the project: *ship something every day*. The NFT cements the triangulated connection between the creator, their work, and the person who purchased it. Ultimately, this connection with the artist is the desire of the collector. The non-fungible token provides proof of this connection. It is important to note that the motivations for this connection can vary. For some, it may be sentimental, obsessive, or just diversifying a financial investment strategy. In the case of the Beeple NFT, it is plausible that financial interests were the source for the desired connection to Beeple. The buyer of Beeple's NFT goes by the pseudonym, Metakovan.¹⁸ A joint press release with Metakovan and Christie's indicate the buyer owns his own NFT production studio and largest NFT fund in the world.¹⁹ With Beeple's decision to pursue the digital art market with NFTs, Metakovan stands to gain much from the

¹⁷ Jamie Redman, "Acclaimed NFT Artist's Blockchain-Backed Digital Art Auction Raises \$3.5 Million," Bitcoin.com, December 15, 2020, <https://news.bitcoin.com/acclaimed-nft-artists-blockchain-backed-digital-art-auction-raises-3-5-million/>.

¹⁸ "NFTs: The First 5000 Beples," The Metapurser, March 18, 2021, <https://metapurser.substack.com/p/nfts-the-first-5000-beeples>.

¹⁹ "The First 5000 Days, sold for \$69,346,250 to Metakovan, founder of Metapurse," Christie's, March 12, 2021, [https://www.christies.com/presscenter/pdf/9971/Joint%20Press%20Release%20-%20Metapurse%20_%20Christies%20\(2\)_9971_1.pdf](https://www.christies.com/presscenter/pdf/9971/Joint%20Press%20Release%20-%20Metapurse%20_%20Christies%20(2)_9971_1.pdf).

recent flurry of media attention and the droves of digital “artists” seeking their crypto fortunes. Just as famous art collector Stefan Edlis purchased plastic art from Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons to boost interest in the plastics industry, Metakovan used Beeple to promote the use of NFTs.²⁰ Regardless of political or financial interests, the NFT has provided enough proof to the well-funded collector that an irreplaceable connection with the creator has been established, reinforcing Benjamin’s concept of the aura persisting in the digital age. Non-fungible tokens have preserved this hallowed connection between artist and collector, which will likely only increase the value of cryptographically minted artwork.

²⁰ Angelica Villa, “Who Was Stefan Edlis, and Why Was He Important?” *ARTnews.com*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.artnews.com/feature/who-is-stefan-edlis-collector-1234588227/>.

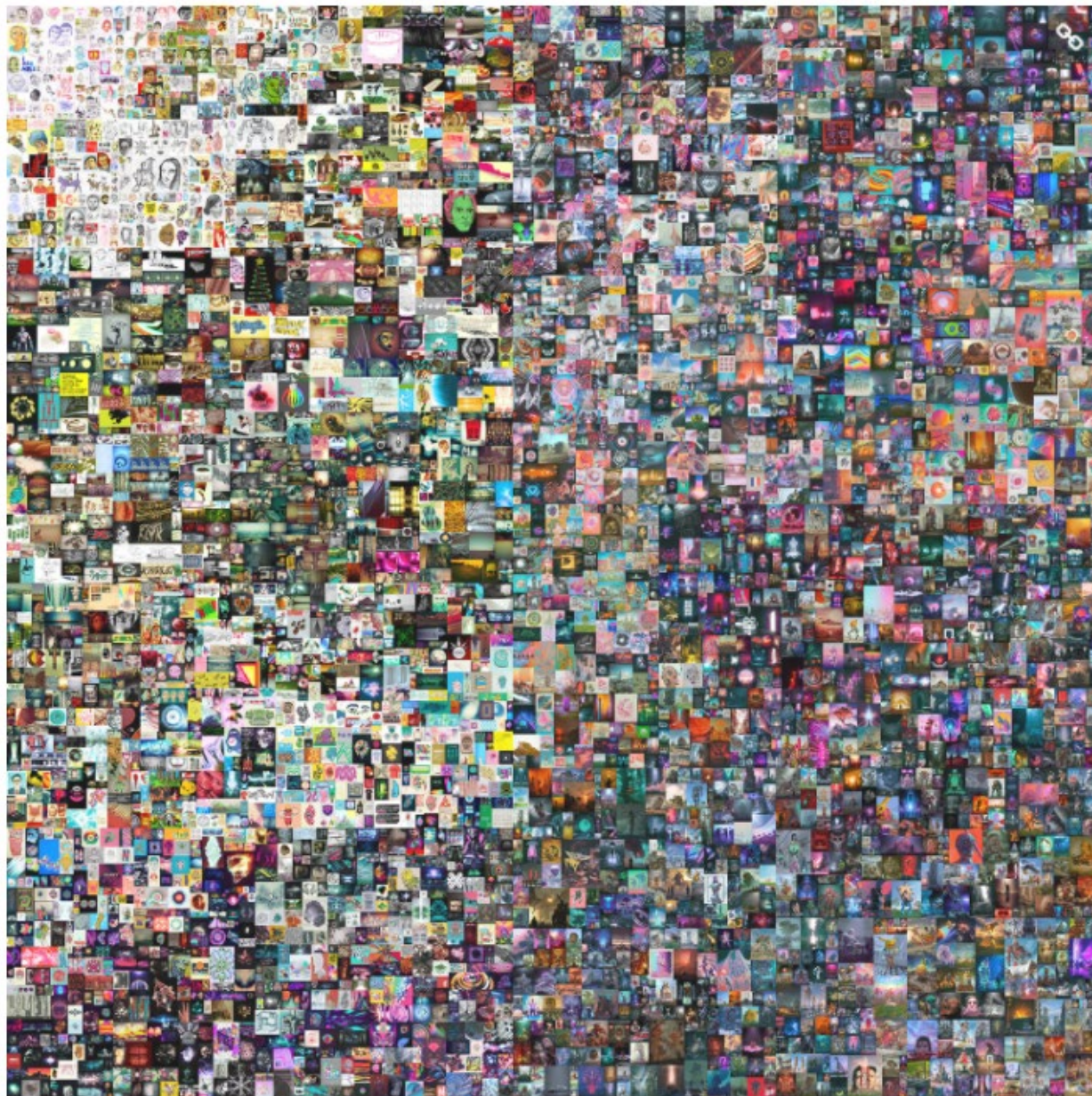


Fig. 1. Mike Winkelmann, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021, Digital Image, from Christie's website (<https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/first-open-beeple/beeple-b-1981-1/112924>).



Fig. 2. From left to right Mike Winkelmann, *demon mickey*, 2007, Ink on Paper, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>). Mike Winkelmann, *Not Welcome*, 2020, Digital Image, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>).



Fig. 3. Mike Winkelmann, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021, Digital Image, from Christie's website (<https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/first-open-beeple/beeple-b-1981-1/112924>).

A section of the NFT featuring early renderings, likely created by hand with pencils, pens, crayons and markers.



Fig. 4. Mike Winkelmann, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021, Digital Image, from Christie's website (<https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/first-open-beeple/beeple-b-1981-1/112924>).

A section of the NFT featuring photographs taken during the 4th consecutive year of Beeple's Everyday project.



Fig. 5. Mike Winkelmann, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021, Digital Image, from Christie's website (<https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/first-open-beeple/beeple-b-1981-1/112924>).

A section of the NFT featuring recent computer-generated renderings from Beeple's Everyday project. Social, political pop-cultural subjects serve as the primary source for inspiration, representing a shift from Beeple's focus on practicing his craft to providing social commentary.



Fig. 6. From top-left moving clockwise: Mike Winkelmann, *Vibe City*, 2020, Digital Image, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>). Mike Winkelmann, *Shit Show*, 2020, Digital Image, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>). Mike Winkelmann, *Streaming Wars*, 2021, Digital Image, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>). Mike Winkelmann, *Blue Tint*, 2018, Digital Image, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>). Mike Winkelmann, *Restart*, 2018, Digital Image, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>). Mike Winkelmann, *Fucked Future*, 2017, Digital Image, from artist's website (<https://www.beeple-crap.com/everydays>).

A collection of individual daily renderings featuring common themes among Beeple's work, providing social commentary about American culture and lonely figures facing large and mysterious forces.



Fig. 7. Mike Winkelmann, *Beeple: A Visionary Digital Artist at the Forefront of NFTs*, 2021, screenshot by author (<https://www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7.aspx>).

Winkelmann viewing his “huge library of 3D models,” capable of rendering at the “click of a button.”



Fig. 8. Vince McKelvie and Sam Newell, *Beeple Generator*, 2021, screenshot by author (<http://beeplegenerator.com/>).

Beeple Generator is a website mocking the recent hype around artists seeking to mimic Beeple's financial success by creating images with 3D software and selling them as NFTs.

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