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This is Art: A Perpetually Relevant Response

It was the sale heard round the world: in March 2021, an NFT created by a largely unknown name – at least to those in the traditional artworld – sold for $69.3 million at Christie's, making it the third-highest price achieved at auction for a living artist. Overnight, a digital artist by the name of Mike Winkelmann (aka Beeple) joined Jeff Koons and David Hockney at the top of the contemporary art canon.[1] A predictable hyperwave of NFTism followed suit with blue chip artists, emerging artists, performing artists, and non-artists all joining in on minting their work as non-fungible tokens on the blockchain. The wave of criticism of the medium and digitally-native art and artists came along. All at once, everyone, everywhere seemed to be focused on debating the good and evil of NFT art.[2]

For Elias Wessel, whose practice is rooted in observing and questioning the tools of digitization, the rise of NFTs and the accompanying artworld sensation posed an inescapable challenge, engendering the need for his immediate response.

Wessel's work, *Quick Response* (2021), is an NFT in three parts: three slightly asymmetrical QR codes, each presented on a white background, and each linked to an orchestrated Google search. The medium is an echo of the original intent of QR – "quick response" – technology, developed in Japan in the 1990's to answer the desire of an expanding consumer society for automated, shorthand access to more information.[3] In his *Quick Response*, Wessel's clever use of the technology is a triptych inquiry which, when scanned, takes the viewer to a corresponding page of search results based on the artist's programmed command. *Schwarzes dataistisches Quadrat* [Black Dataistic Square] searches for the words, *"Netz, du hast das Bild gestohlen, gib es wieder her!"* [Net, you stole the picture, give it back!]; *Rotes Quadrat* [Red Square] leads the viewer to the results for *"Dass dich färbt die rote Tinte und dann bist du tot."* [So, you're tinged with red and then you're dead]; and *Schwarzes Quadrat* [Black Square] links to the results for the phrase, *"Nimm, du brauchst nicht alles haben, mit der Maus vorlieb."* [You do not have to have everything, be content with the mouse.] Together, they form Wessel's adapted verses of "Fuchs, Du hast die Gans gestohlen" [Fox, You Stole the Goose], a 19th century German nursery rhyme that teaches children about the repercussions of stealing from the human race.

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[1] Reyburn, Scott. "JPG File Sells for $69 Million, as 'NFT Mania' Gathers Pace." *The New York Times*, 11 Mar. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/arts/design/nft-auction-christies-beeple.html.

[2] Schacter, Kenny. "Kenny Schachter Wades Through the Booze-Soaked NFT Mecca of Miami Beach—and Wishes He Could Escape to the Metaverse." *Artnet*, 15 Dec. 2021, https://news.artnet.com/news-pro/kenny-schachter-art-basel-miami-nftism-2047689.

[3] https://www.qrcode.com/en/history/.

"Contemporary art deals with its time–and our age is digital." (Alfred Weidinger)[4]

From the moment digital technology entered our lives and the World Wide Web was unleashed, the human experience was dramatically upended. Most days, for most of us around the globe, start with a tender reach – for our cell phone. Digital devices have become ubiquitous prosthetic extensions of our bodies, omniscient containers of our cognition and memory, and infinite spaces for our social interaction.[5] The Internet has become a part of our human toolkit and, even, our sense of self.[6] The real world we now inhabit is not just what is visible and tangible, but a hybrid space between the physical and virtual, and "the idea that the body is in one place has gone."[7] We spend our lives on the screen, bombarded by a continuous deluge of emails, texts, news, and popular culture from every corner of the globe; the regular work day of 9 to 5 has turned into a 24/7. We are reachable anywhere, at any time, and most of our experiences are immediate.

Our age is overwhelmingly digital, and one of its profound effects is what Carol Becker calls, "Crushed Time."[8] We live with the unrelenting feeling that time is running out and there is never enough. Caught floating in the continuous stream of fragmented information, we have ceded our agency for focused observation and a sense of being firmly embedded in one place at a time. The demand for our attention is all-encompassing; wherever we go, wherever we look, we are asked to instantaneously process and adjust to "more input than any human being can comfortably assimilate."[9] What we have lost in the process is the ability to pause, absorb, reflect on our experience, and understand the consequences of our digital life. What we have really lost is "Contemplative Time."[10]

"But we understand our condition most clearly when artists, writers, and thinkers elucidate it, reflecting it back, making it more visible to us." (Carol Becker)[11]

Quick Response is not only Elias Wessel's personal lament of the demands of NFT technology on contemporary art practice and the Net's attempted theft of two-dimensional work. *Quick*

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[4] Schlossmuseum Linz. *Proof of Art – A Short History of NFTs, from the Beginning of Digital Art to the Metaverse*, edited by Alfred Weidinger, Distanz Publishing, 2021, pp. 4-5.

[5] Colomina, Beatriz, and Mark Wigley. *Are We Human?* Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016.

[6] Wegner, Daniel M. and Adrian F. Ward, "How Google Is Changing Your Brain," *Scientific American* 309, no 6, 2013: pp. 58-61.

[7] Colomina, Beatriz, and Mark Wigley. *Are We Human?* Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016, p. 243.

[8] Becker, Carol."The Agitated Now: Perceptions of Time and the Contemplative Space of Art." *L'Officiel,* 16 Oct. 2019, https://www.lofficielusa.com/intermission/carol-becker-the-agitated-now-officiel-usa.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

Response reflects the digital condition of our world and asks the viewer to take the time, and participate in the contemplation. In most recorded civilizations, artists have played this critical role. They march along with the zeitgeist observing cultural shifts, incorporating them into their work, and illuminating potential warning signs. Kazimir Malevich called this process the effect of the "additional element" on artistic practice. As new and unfamiliar environmental cues are introduced into the world, they are absorbed and filtered back as a "professional response," expressed through new forms, methods, concepts, and visual aesthetics.[12]

Artists are continuously faced with a choice: to resist the call of the additional element or accept the challenge. By formulating his *Quick Response*, Wessel, as many of his contemporaries, reluctantly decided to "strap [himself] to the raft of the moment and ride the digital flow."[13] When it comes to our era, then, it is no surprise that the digital has entered the domain of art. In fact, in March 2021, what seemed to be a sudden maelstrom of digital art in the public arena, had a long trajectory. The dematerialization of the artwork and the expansion of art into intangible space is not a new phenomenon. Artists have long been experimenting with modes of production, incorporating and interrogating the possibilities of digital tools and the web. In the 1960's, there was Herbert W. Franke, one of the pioneers of generative art, experimenting with code and randomness to produce computer art.[14] Nam June Paik, the father of video art, presented *Electronic Superhighway*, a neon prophecy of the pervasive transformation that digital media would eventually have on our lives. Contemporary artists of the 90's, witnessing the birth of web 1.0, gave us Net Art.[15] And since the early 2010s, following the release of the Bitcoin Whitepaper by the mysterious Satoshi Nakamoto, the blockchain, cryptocurrency, and NFTs provided contemporary artists with a new element, paving the way for the widespread response.[16]

"The question of what is the part of the art that is worth its value, may be a good place to start when we come to ask what is the actual artwork." (Nili Lerner)[17]

With the proliferation of art in code, the inevitable questions followed. What constitutes a purely digital work? Where does it exist? What is its real value? In the case of Wessel's *Quick*

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[12] Malevich, Kasimir. *The Non-Objective World,* edited by Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy, *Bauhausbücher* vol. 11, 1927. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers (English edition reprint), 2021.

[13] Gavin, Francesca. "Douglas Coupland and Hans Ulrich Obrist." *Buffalo Zine*, issue no. 14, Autumn/Winter, 2021.

[14] Heiss, Daniel and Margit Rosen. "It's Not About The Money: Blockchain from the Museum Perspective." Schlossmuseum Linz. *Proof of Art – A Short History of NFTs, from the Beginning of Digital Art to the Metaverse*, edited by Alfred Weidinger, Distanz Publishing, 2021, pp. 12-17.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Schlossmuseum Linz. *Proof of Art – A Short History of NFTs, from the Beginning of Digital Art to the Metaverse*, edited by Alfred Weidinger, Distanz Publishing, 2021.

[17] Lerner, Nili. Interview with Georg Bak. Schlossmuseum Linz. *Proof of Art – A Short History of NFTs, from the Beginning of Digital Art to the Metaverse*, edited by Alfred Weidinger, Distanz Publishing, 2021, pp. 47-49.

Response, is its essence the NFT code? The QR image and its activation? Or the search results?

In both form and title, the three parts of *Quick Response* are a direct reference to Kazimir Malevich and Suprematist ideals. His seminal work, *Black Suprematistic Square* (1915), presented in the groundbreaking exhibition in Petrograd, *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10,* was revolutionary. The black square on a white background claimed the metaphorical space of the ideal form of art, and the physical space usually reserved for the most important icons in a Russian orthodox household.[18] It exemplified the tenets of Suprematism – based on Malevich's concept of what constitutes pure art – and it began from zero. In Suprematism, the essence of the work was found through omission. In *Black Square* and subsequent iterations, Malevich reduced all objective form, color, and composition "to zero." The real substance of the work was contained in its non-objectivity, "because the enduring, true value of a work of art (to whatever school it may belong) resides solely in the feeling expressed."[19]

With *Quick Response*, Elias Wessel continues the reduction – the black square in the form of a QR code minted on the blockchain is translated into the zeros of digital code. The work now exists in intangible space where its true form and real essence are unbounded. Each time the code is scanned, the work is generated anew in a continuously changing configuration, co-created through the action of the participating viewer. The output of the search is tailored by the algorithm; the work's uniqueness and authenticity are preserved even in its reproducibility. The NFT record, QR code, and linked inquiry programmed by Wessel remain the same, but the generated results – the answers to the quest – will change dynamically into the future, reflecting the time, location, and participants of the activated search. It is, and will continue to be, perpetually relevant to the cultural landscape; perpetually relevant in space and time.

What constitutes the work? All it encompasses now and in the future. Every transaction of the work on the blockchain, every scan of the code, every foreseeable search result is embedded in *Quick Response*.

What is the value? Its rightful place in the tradition of contemporary art in translating the shifts in our world, expressing the feeling of the time, and elucidating the threats to the human condition. In our present digital era, the core value of the work is encapsulated in the underlying message to the viewer: stop searching and incessantly consuming in the digital space, reclaim contemplative time, and use it to heed the theft. From Elias Wessel, the Internet is appropriating 2-D pictures. Now the question is: what might the Net be stealing from you?

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[18] Tolstaya, Tatyana. "The Square." *The New Yorker*, 12 Jun. 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-square

[19] Malevich, Kasimir. *The Non-Objective World,* edited by Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy, *Bauhausbücher* vol. 11, 1927. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers (English edition reprint), 2021, p. 65.

"Fuchs, du hast die Gans gestohlen" (Fox, You've Stolen the Goose)[20]

Fox, you've stolen the goose
Give it back!
Give it back!
Or the hunter will get you
With his gun,
Or the hunter will get you
With his gun.

His big, long gun,
Takes a little shot at you,
Takes a little shot at you,
So, you're tinged with red
And then you're dead.
So, you're tinged with red
And then you're dead.

Dear little fox, let me advise you:
Don't be a thief,
Don't be a thief,
Don't take the roast goose,
Be content with the mouse.
Don't take the roast goose,
Be content with the mouse.

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[20] Anschütz, Ernst: *Musikalisches Schulgesangbuch.* Vol 1. Reclam, Leipzig 1824, p. 38.