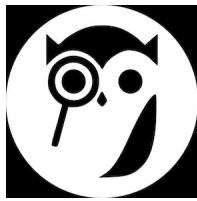Cover image generated by DALL-E2 AI crated by @OpenAI

# Phenomenology As Framework For Thinking About Encountering Art NFTs

## by dPhilosopher

*I argue that an encounter with Art is like the encounter with an Other as described in Phenomenology, and imagine how NFT marketplaces, now modelled on e-commerce platforms, could evolve to support a rapidly emerging NFT digital art aesthetic.*

Can we agree that the internet, as it currently stands, is an information and product mall? Our creations, including the ways in which we create ourselves online, have become commodities. But in the midst of this wasteland of late capitalism, a creative renaissance is afoot. NFTs have become a cornerstone of Web3 and the decentralized web that some of us are imagining, and hoping to build. NFTs are non-fungible tokens, a blockchain technology that can be used to anoint creative works, including visual art, with verifiable uniqueness, provenance, and rarity.

1.

When the marketplace is capitalism, anything whatsoever found there will show up as a product. But the funny thing about Art, and something that it shares in common with

personhood or personality, is that it is *irreducible*. The encounter with Art is like the encounter with the Other that is described so well by Phenomenology, a school of philosophy born at the tail end of the 18th century European Enlightenment.

Phenomenology begins form the assertion of (first hand) experience as the grounding for all knowledge. As such, one of its first concerns is with giving an account of subjectivity (and the structures of subjectivity), since everything we know we know as subjects and through our embodied sense perception. The idea that knowledge is perspectival, limited, and situational is developed through phenomenology.

Husserl, the father of Phenomenology, meant to give a more rigorous account of objectivity, but in the course of this account, he ended giving a lot of definition to subjectivity. His student Heidegger developed his own version with "existential phenomenology," which is then picked up in the French context (and later promulgated in Latin American and Japanese contexts) where his "existential phenomenology" is shortened to "existentialism." This is the framework I want to use here to examine a possible encounter with art works as NFTs.

To make a long story short, a key structure of subjectivity, according to Phenomenology, is our encounter with others who are also subjects, our recognition of others akin to us in a shared world. The problem of the Other, often referred to as the problem of "intersubjectivity", has a long history that I have already written about(1). The part that interests me now is how the existentialist Sartre describes the encounter with the Other as one that shakes us to our foundations, often depicted as falling in love. (The feminine Other is an oft used and abused trope.) The Other who is a subject like you is irreducible to an object in your world.

This Other, whom you immediately recognize as another Subject, acts as a mirror for your own self, and as you see them seeing you, you are swallowed up into their perspective. In this tradition, and in Sartre's account in particular, the Other is a menacing Other who challenges your independence and your "take" on the world. But the punchline is this: We are unknowable to ourselves except through the oft distorting mirror that is the Other's perception of us. Our subjectivities are structured in and through this encounter with the other. Without them, we cannot reflect on our own subjectivity, a reflexive self-consciousness that is the hallmark of the subject.

We can try to turn the Other whom we find threatening into an object, minimize their humanity, make it so they don't matter, but we cannot ever achieve this, even if we are

willing to kill them. (Here we enter Levinasian territory, and the Ethics of the Other.) The Other is irreducible to either an object or to our own selves. Not only can we not know anything except as subjects, but we can't know *that (our own subjectivity)* except in and though an Other who mirrors us.

Why do I give this summary account of subjectivity in Phenomenology? Art is an object ensouled with its historical roots in rituals. [See Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."(2)] Art too is irreducible to simple object, object-hood, or to any subject's interpretation or perspective (including that of the creator). As such, art works can also act as mirrors for our selves. A good art work opens itself up to multiple interpretations — indeed, all the interpretations — because it opens and reveals us to ourselves.

When we get attached to an artwork, and here let us begin to imagine this artwork is an NFT, we are projecting into, and identifying ourselves with, that work. We speak of "falling in love" with a unique art work, a recognition of how similar art is to Others that we encounter in persons. These are others in whom we may place a piece of ourselves. Can you recall your first love, or the first time you encountered art that made you feel?

2.
When the marketplace is capitalism, anything whatsoever found there will show up as a product. Generally speaking, the marketplaces in which we currently stage an encounter with NFT art works looks and feels like an e-commerce site. It is clear that you can buy, sell, or hold NFTs. But also, some also have utility, and some grant access to carefully manicured and nurtured online communities. These last two things make art NFTs a special kind of art object, a new kind of art object.

When you view art works at a museum or even an art gallery, those spaces still have the scent of church and ritual from which the aura that artworks have originates. (The studio visit is perhaps a different and more interesting experience that still needs to be unpacked at another time.) In any of these IRL worlds, art works can be arranged and curated in space such that relationships between artworks emerge, and with this new meanings. Art works can "speak to" each other, and inform how we experience them. Another aspect of physical space placement is that the viewers experience is controlled also in terms of groupings, but also the order in which the works are experienced, making time and temporality a factor in the experience of art in these contexts.

When you move art to a virtual space, a lot of the encounter is lost, but also there are some gains. The contemporary art world of galleries and exhibitions is a largely walled-off experience. Even museums, that deploy marketing campaigns to bring in the public, have a troubling history in colonialism and the theft of culture by the West. When you think about it, having only their chosen objects count as art is very curious, when art is clearly everywhere….

The original museum was actually a curio cabinet: "places to gather together, interpret, and show off the riches of the world."(3) I'd love to see an online version of this, minus the colonialism bit. Can Web3 reimagine the user experience and innovate away from exploitation, alienation, objectification? Where could the experience of Art and NFTs fit in to this retro-futurism?

The traditional art world has, so far, largely rejected NFTs and NFT marketplaces, and I suspect this has a lot to do with the loss of control over being able to say what counts as art, and who (what kind of person, attendant privileges) gets to become (make a living in and through) art practices that are truly ubiquitous. The artists you will find on Paras, Apollo42, UniqArt, etc., are from many parts of the world, and they are able to find an audience hereto not easily accessible from their locations. I still worry about the dynamics of capitalism and colonial theft of artwork and labor here, and I see the dangers of replicating these as we codify Web3.

What if we combined this kind of access and meeting of hearts and minds with a user experience that is less like e-commerce and more like a curio cabinet? We have some models in the social media of web2 (Pinterest, Instagram, Youtube,  TikTok) for moving beyond e-commerce. The research they have done into how to capture and retain an audience is something we could re-deploy and put to better use.

3.
Working as an artist in a digital medium, working with AI and digital imaging tools, reminds me of the early days of YouTube. At the beginning of Youtube, most of the videos being shared were terrible - cat videos and locker room humor. And I remember thinking that we have this amazing tool to create and share videos, and this is what we are doing with it? Between the emergence of Youtube (2005) and Casey Neistat's daily vlogs (started in 2015), 10 years passed. It took that long for the platform to mature, and to create a form of videography particular to Youtube.

NFT platforms are still very young, we are innovating faster and it may not take 10 years for this generation to create a kind of art that is unique to NFTs, and for digital art to mature into fine art forms. I think it is clear that we have moved away from 10k collections, and we also know that 1-of-1 art NFTs are doing pretty well, even in this current bear market. I believe we are moving towards NFT art, and the development of this as it's own unique kind of art. We still need a platform that will support this, one that is built with the growth of a global cadre of working artists in mind.

4.
I am not a UX designed, but I give an awful lot of mind to how the design of our NFT marketplaces and applications enable or disable, support or fail to support, the art and creative cultures that are emerging. Healthy para-social friendships, collaborations, and communities are coalescing with little place to go, other than Discord (itself not built for us).

I came to the NEAR NFT world as a developer, looking at the apps built on near trying to decide if I wanted to learn how to build on this blockchain. I bought my first NFTs (Mr.Brown, Engineart, Prime Mother) and created a mini-collection with three NFTs just to test it out. Very quickly, I sold one to someone I had collected, and soon was hooked as a creator as well.

As a creator, I wish I could have a curio-gallery to show off some of the NFTs that I've collected on NEAR, and a gallery to show off my own works. I want to be able to curate this experience, and to interact with other's art works as well. I want discoverability and the ability to encounter work that will take me by surprise and make me feel, and think, and see a new perspective. I think we are definitely moving in this direction.

References

(1) "The Other Who Troubles Philosophy" by thinkPhilosophy https://philosophypublics.medium.com/the-other-who-troubles-philosophy-41f0bd6237c5

(2) Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

(3) "A brief history of the art museum" by DR. ELIZABETH RODINI https://
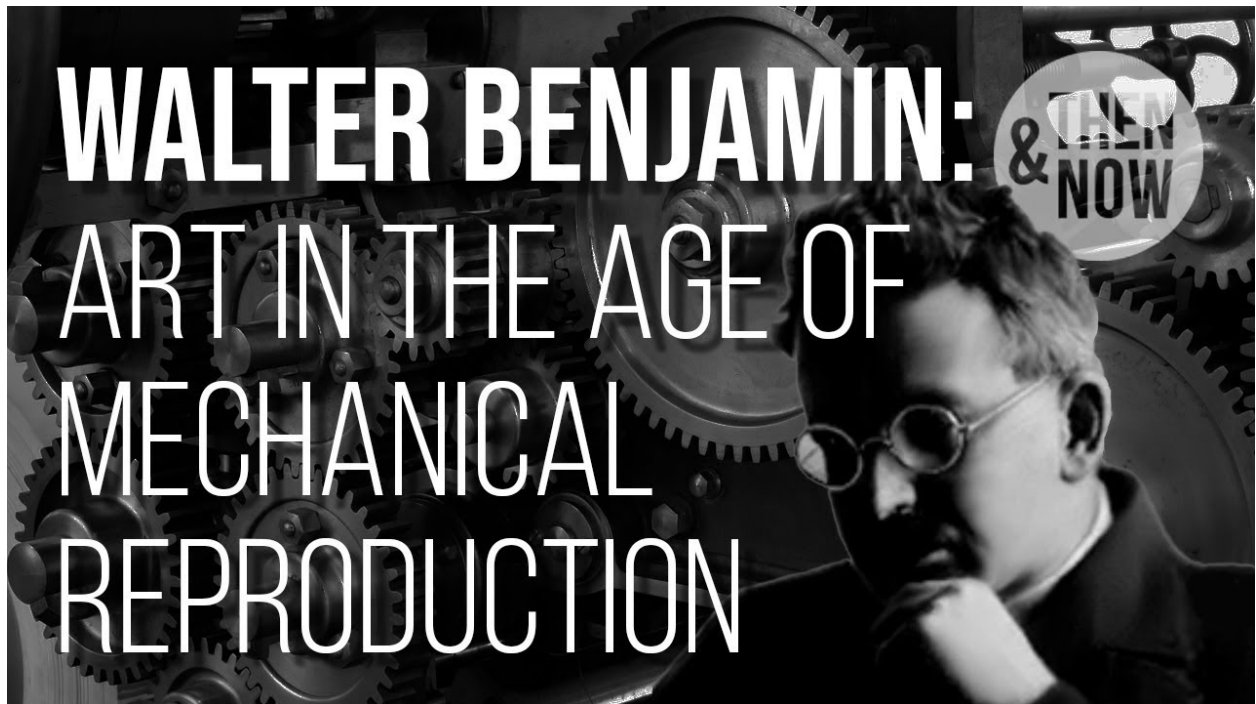
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