The Art of Technology, the Technology of Art

Simon Denny and Sonal Chokshi

ARTS & CULTURE PODCAST TECH TRENDS

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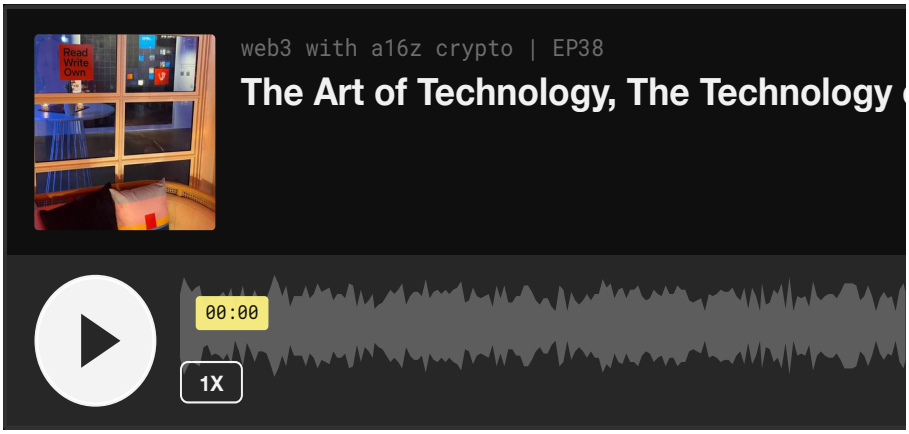

We know that technology has changed art, and that artists have evolved with every new technology — it's a tale as old as humanity, moving from cave paintings to computers. Underlying these movements are endless debates around inventing versus remixing; between commercialism and art; between mainstream canon and fringe art; whether we're living in an artistic monoculture now (the answer may surprise you); and

So in this new episode featuring Berlin-based contemporary artist Simon Denny — in conversation with a16z crypto editor in chief Sonal Chokshi — we discuss all of the above debates. We also cover how artists experimented with the emergence of new technology platforms like the web browser, the iPhone, Instagram and social media; to how generative art found its "native" medium on blockchains, why NFTs; and other art movements.

Denny also thinks of entrepreneurial ideas — from Peter Thiel's to Chris Dixon's *Read Write Own* — as an "aesthetic"; and thinks of technology artifacts (like NSA sketches!) as art — reflecting all of these in his works across various mediums and contexts. How has technology changed art, and more importantly, how have artists changed with technology? How does art change our place in the world, or span beyond space? It's about optimism, and seeing things anew... all this and more in this episode.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to web3 with a16z, a show about building the next era of the internet from the team at a16zcrypto – we're excited to be back with all new episodes! I'm Sonal, editor in chief at a16z crypto, and today's episode is all about how technology has changed art, and how artists change with technology – from the emergence of the browser, the iPhone, and social media to generative art and blockchains to NFTs; We also discuss debates that seem to come up in every art & tech shift — including between inventing vs. remixing; between commercialism and art; between mainstream canon and outsider art; whether we're living in an artistic monoculture now; and much much more.

Our special guest is Simon Denny, and we recorded this

live in London (a few days after we opened our London office) — which is fitting since Denny is a global artist, based in Berlin, but has shown his work in various countries' biennales, museums, and galleries — including: a metaverse landscapes show called 'Read Write Own' at Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco last year...

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The first half of our hallway-style conversations tours through the evolution of art with technology; and the second half goes deeper into blockchains and art — but we begin with Denny's tech journey, and how he thinks of entrepreneurship as an aesthetic!

Sonal: Obviously this is a crypto show, and, it's also a technology show! <mhm> I mean crypto is all about technology — one of the reasons I'm in this world is it's a very multidisciplinary field: <yah> It brings together economics; it brings together philosophy; it brings together networking; it brings together security, cryptography... Like there's so many layers to crypto? <Simon: yah>

And I definitely want to focus in on the art aspect... Tell me a little bit more about your actual practice today, too. And then we'll go back to the evolution.

Simon: At the moment today I work across lots of different media, in lots of different contexts. So, I make both kind of installations for museums and art galleries. I paint as well. But I also am very involved in crypto and crypto art. <yah> So I design NFT projects...

But, I guess maybe where I really specialize is I make

things that join the museum world with the crypto world — So, I'm interested in the history of art and artists who make for new technologies as they emerge, to kind of explore what's possible on them that wasn't possible on other platforms <exactly> previous.

But I personally got really interested in people — the people who were making the platforms, the people who were designing the systems — because these were new systems, we were experiencing them; we were feeling different ways, doing different things on them.

One of the first times I encountered entrepreneurial culture, for example, that just inspired me unendingly, right; because it was soo different than the attitude of my artist peers that I encountered. They were bullish about the future. You know in my world at the time (I think it's actually different now, but at the time) in my art world — it was very common to be incredibly critical and cynical <Sonal: right...> cynicism was the go-to. <yah> And I get that culture. I kind of love that culture. It's sort of like indie rock or something like that, you know.

But then I encountered all these incredible optimists and I was like Wow, this is a force that I can't understand culturally, <Sonal: Ohh! That's fascinating> you know?

Sonal: I never thought about, that your coming from a cynical, kind of default-cynical art world — and then being totally inspired by the optimism <Simon: yah> — 'cause I feel like those of us in Silicon Valley take that for granted!

Simon: Yah, I guess I'm really attracted to value systems, aesthetically — because I'm an artist and I think visually and culturally that I don't know everything about and I don't completely understand, you know?

So, I started to go to technology conferences. And the first thing that I did is I went to a prominent conference in Munich called DLD. And I made an artwork about DLD in 2013 — a one-year history of the conference a year later — I made a maze that people would walk through in this museum space (just down the road from the conference) <mhm>, where there was a graphic panel for every talk panel, basically. <Sonal: interesting>

So you would look at pool courts that I pulled out from the entire conference and encounter things that Jack Dorsey was saying, <yah> things that the founder of Wikipedia was saying, Pavel Durov was saying — like, interesting entrepreneurs that they were able to kind of gather there — and the things they were saying about the world.

And it was kind of overwhelming...<Sonal: Sounds really immersive, too> It was super immersive, but very digital; I also leaned into the design interfaces that were contemporary at the time — which look really ancient now, <yah> which is really interesting, too <mhm> — Because it was like iOS when it was skeuomorphism <right>: So it was like all of these kind of bookshelves as stages, as whatever digital buttons; and there was the kind of graphic language I used, it was like cartoon font <yah> that looks very strange –

But it gave us overall sense of this really vibrant community, which I hadn't really encountered before as an artist. Again: the art world's a little different in terms of culture, and that was one of the first times that I was like, Wow, this is incredible. There are people here who are really optimistic, super excited about the future. Yes, they're critical thinkers as well, but they really want to build something.

And that was the first time I encountered that culture.

Sonal: Tell me a little bit about how you actually came as an artist to the technology world.

Simon: So yah; I grew up in New Zealand; I went to university at the University of Auckland to first study art — like that was the thing that I fell in love with as a painter when I was younger –

New Zealand's amazing but it's also very small, <yah> and quite remote. And I learned about how big the kind of contemporary art world was, which made me want to go study in Germany. Germany is a really special country for contemporary art: Every little town has a major contemporary art museum — which is really unusual — in the post-war period, it's been a really important place for lots of different artists internationally to kind of do museum shows early.

There's also an incredible education system there; So I went to art school then in Frankfurt at this very special school called the Städelschule in the mid-2000s. And at that time, the director of the school was also the director of the Venice Biennale <Sonal: oh, wow!> and, all the teachers that I was learning from there were these international artists that I saw on the cover of all the magazines that I was reading. So, it was a really exciting hub of international practice.

And there I got super interested in the history of technology and art <yah> — because: I moved there in 2007, the year the iPhone came out.

And, like, I moved with a laptop — didn't have an iPhone, because it was a brand-new, very expensive thing — but we were all just starting to use social media (like Web 2) in a really interesting way. And of course because I moved away from all my friends and family, that was one of the things that really kept me connected: Laptop I used for education, watching movies; but also keeping

on top of friends in a really intense way.

And so a bunch of artists that were studying at that time got really interested in this new wave of like technological stuff that was enabling a different type of engagement. And Berlin's a — for those who don't know Germany — Berlin's like, I guess, a place where a lot of contemporary artists live and work. And there were like this little hub of people that were really interested in the history of contemporary art — the history of art made for digital platforms — like web art from the 1990s, which is a very interesting specialist field: So, when browsers came about, when the worldwide web started, when people started using Mosaic <chuckles> <yah!!> and Netscape, there were artists designing for that as a specific medium.

Sonal: Yes! I want to go back to how, when you were in art school, you and your cohort came across the iPhone for the first time. <Simon: Oh my god> And you don't necessarily immediately think it viscerally about the iPhone as a creative medium, the way one thinks about caves for cave painting, <right> or paper for drawing, or canvas for painting, <yah> or... LED lights, electronic art installations at mass scale or whatever; neon.

It's funny that you mentioned that — because it's just sort of like this little tiny...like, it's a device, it's a computing device <right> — So can you tell me a little bit about how you and your cohort at the time experienced the advent of the iPhone as the moment that tipped into your interest, in the intersection of technology and art?

Simon: I mean, I think it was a conflation of a few different things that I was really compelled by when the iPhone came out. One was like the really strong marketing component to that. <yeh> I think I was particularly impressed by that. Like the Steve Jobs

moment was very compelling.

Sonal: The narrative part of it?

Simon: The narrative part of that; you know like the way that Steve and other entrepreneurs around him at the time seemed to be offering a really cohesive vision of the world.

But also the aesthetics; it was kind of a design hegemony that got installed.

But also, as a person who was like looking at the history of artists designing for particular mediums — you could do stuff with mobile and social that you couldn't do before. Right? Artists had been making amazing artworks for browsers; there's an incredible history of that. They'd even been making artworks that dealt with the culture of companies: There was an amazing browser-based group in the '90s who were called "etoy". <oh!> And etoy was a real company, <Sonal: right, I remember that actually> and etoy started before e-toys.

But they tended to be quite antagonistic. A lot of browser-based work from the '90s came from artists who were really resistant to the commercial aspects of the internet — they were really anti-commerce?

Sonal: They were, sort of, purists about the internet for just communication.

Simon: Exactly; and I think they really idealized moments where it was a more collective experience, and the commercial part seemed to be a difficult thing.

But Etoy I think was an amazing collective because they were completely anonymous, and they basically ended up coordinating a DDoS attack on Etoy, the real company;

Sonal: That's like activist art in some ways... right.

Simon: Exactly; activist art was really close to that browser-based work. <Sonal: right>

Now me and my cohort were less anti-, right? Like I'd come up already through a commercial art world that was offline; I really valued the work that commercial agents were doing <right> to like make the work known... and I didn't have a problem with that. <yah>

And I think a lot of the people who were using social media, early, were also okay with the idea of promoting themselves...

So, we were less against. We designed things that didn't necessarily have this kind of anti-commercial message.

Sonal: I mean, There's always been this long history and tension, as you obviously know, <yah> with artists and the commercial aspect. I mean Andy Warhol's the most obvious, <exactly> example that comes to mind for that. And it's interesting because we'll get to how this may play out with the NFT world.

You talked about the early days of Web2, browser-based art as maybe the moment in your age and demographic.

Simon: That's like Web1 art in a way.

Sonal: Web1: browser-based; Web2: <Simon: Social> Some of this Instagram/ social and mobile.

Simon: One of the greatest examples, I think, of people making artwork for social media + mobile was this work that a friend of mine, Amalia Ulman, did — a little bit later like in the early 2010s <yah> — And this is when Instagram was really the medium that everybody was using in the art world (at least, in our art world).

And we were all posting our exhibition photos on there, posting selfies of ourselves, <yah> whatever — but she was using it in a different way where she really occupied this proto-influencer idiom. She started taking photos of her, and then gradually over time like her image changed. It was less art-world girl, more kind of like "basic" quote-unquote-looking person: Like you know her makeup was more extreme. Her body became more extreme. And then at one point, she was announcing that she was going to have surgery on her body <Sonal: whoa...> You know?

And then we, as a community of artists that knew her, were like Wow, Amalia's really changed; like this is like really super difficult... And then she had these incredible pre- and post-things of an operation or whatever. <yahh!> And then it came out that it was all a performance.

And we were all completely duped by the whole thing — it was really, really believable — <uh-huh> and, again, it used all of these emergent properties of that medium <yah> to really do something that said something about the way that the world was going.

Sonal: Yes! That sounds like performance art... <Simon: It is performance art!> I actually think I heard about this. <yah!> Right, exactly.

And speaking of the specific properties of that medium — you also mentioned the word "proto-influencer" <mhm> which I think is very interesting — because obviously, there is this element of influencers today on Instagram and in social media, and influencer culture.

So this is sort of pre that sort of phase?

Simon: It was emergent with it, I would say, you know?

Sonal: Emergent with it? Okay.

Simon: And I think this is what artists are good at doing. They're good at seeing emergent properties that are happening <Sonal: mhm> — both in visual conventions like how photos are looking, because that was another thing — Like visually, there was a particular style to these images: it came from the hardware, came from the way that the phone looked, came from the lighting that was common in a bedroom <Sonal: ah, right!> or whatever...

All of this also was, kind of, an aesthetic layer to it.

Sonal: Yes, yes; it was also constrained by the technology at the time, right?

Simon: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And all of those things come together to make a particular medium possible, including the network — <yah> right, which I think is also interesting if we're thinking in the future about NFTs.

Sonal: When you say the "network", do you mean the network as in the community <yah> around her, or the network of her followers and her social graph — or what do you mean by network?

Simon: I think there's a few different layers to the network thing. <yah> The performance (if you categorize it as a performance piece), happened kind of first to her friends that knew her — because the strangeness of experiencing that change was the thing that made the affect, right.

But that network of friends also had a second-order network of people that knew of her –So this kind of classic social network/ kind of social-graph world it kind of spread out into.

But also the hardware: The technological layer of the network where you couldn't have these distributed, perfomative moments — without iPhones, without satellites, without cables ...So, it's really quite a lot of things coming together <right> in this network, I think.

Sonal: Interesting. So then Simon, on that note, what are some of the other milestones for your experience

Simon: I mean, artists have been dealing with technological changes, and expressing the visceral feelings of inhabiting new technological moments for a very long time.

Surrealism and Dada as an early 20th century moment that dealt a lot with the changes, both in advertising language <ah!> and mediums around communication: Surrealism really leaned into the illustrative aspect of that. But like Dada and stuff — artists like Picabia and people making images of machines, of post-industrial revolution kind of worlds — a lot of early modernism is depicting machinic worlds.

When you then jump, let's say to the post-war period in the 1960s and '70s, you started to have groups of artists around pop art and neo-pop — dealing again with the language of advertising and ambivalence toward commercial culture <right> — Artists like Robert Rauschenberg, who was a kind of proto-pop artist, working with people like in collectives like E.A.T. like the Experiments in Art and Technology, which happened in dialogue with Bell Labs at the time.

Sonal: Oh, I didn't know about that. <Simon: yah yah> Tell me a little bit more about that.

Simon: I mean I'm not an expert, but there was this

really amazing moment where these very prominent people were in dialogue with people in Bell Labs. And so they made experimental, technologically-enabled sculptures.

There was one Rauschenberg piece that I'm thinking of actually (I don't know if he made it in E.A.T. or not) — but it was like a bed of mud that was bubbling, that then had a kind of like a sensory component on it as well. Like, really amazing kind of machine and kind of object-based work — but also a lot of theater-based experiments and performances, which were also done with early computer systems.

There was also people being given, for example, early Porta-Paks — which was the first kind of video equipment, by Sony — So Sony was donating to artist groups, and there was an artist group that was in New York that was really adjacent to the Whole Earth Catalog and the Stewart Brand world, <Sonal: yes, yes> right?

There was another magazine called Radical Software, which was produced at the time as well — and Radical Software was run by an early artist corporation, called RainDance Corporation; they incorporated themselves <Sonal: yah;)> — and they had a space in New York where several Porta-Paks were that artists could come and use. They would make footage, they would bring the footage back. And then they would make artist libraries that you could pull as stock footage <whoa> and make montages from — that was also a really interesting early moment that inspired me a lot.<yah>

And out of that group came early experiments in broadcast television and cable network television. There was an amazing collective called Top Value Television, and they for example produced one of the most amazing artist-made documentaries that was then screened on cable television at the time — looking at Madison

Avenue and advertising producers. But also a Nixon convention; they went and made a political documentary. <yah>

And then of course, there's more famous examples like Warhol television and stuff like that <of course> and cable networks.

Sonal: When you said that the example of the early stock library type of idea <yah!> that people could take, and you said that inspired your work. <mhm> What really stuck in my mind about that is that's like an analog version of remix culture. <Simon: Absolutely> And so tell me about how it inspired your work, specifically.

Simon: Well, I'm a bit of a historian and I actually made a show here in London in 2012 at the Institute of Contemporary Art (the ICA) —

Where, I managed to convince the broadcasting network who were changing over from analog broadcasting to digital to give us one of the old analog broadcasting machines. <mhm> And I dumped that in the middle of the Institute for Contemporary Art, and put all of these libraries of old network videos (made by people like Randon's Corporation and their peers) around in a video library where people could watch them.

And one of the things that I found in an archive of theirs was a way of categorizing different types of tapes. They made early data versions representing what was being made in those libraries. So, I found those resonant with what people were doing on YouTube, what other artists, peers of mine were making which were kind of remixed things and appropriated things.

A bunch of my work is very liberal with ownership — I believe that one doesn't invent something; I believe that

one finds things and combines them with things. So I prefer the notion of like “a value add”, than a kind of invention.

So, I don’t believe that you can invent things. This is why I think movements like pop art were so profound? Because the direct appropriative touch of making an image of a Campbell’s soup can <yah> and claiming that as an original thing, <yup> recontextualizing it was one of the biggest things.

And I think sampling culture and all of that stuff like builds like on the back of that assumption.

Sonal: I find that so personally fascinating, too. <yah>

So we talked about some of the pre-influences <mhm> in the technological side. Let’s talk about some of the post-influences, <yah, yah> post-iPhone. Are there any other technological moments?

Simon: Yeah, so I think the next big moment: In the mid-2010s, I was lucky enough to do the Venice Biennale Pavilion for New Zealand. The Venice Biennale is kind of like the biggest art show in the world, and there’s country-by-country pavilions. So, I got to do New Zealand.

And in order to do that — it was 2013, ’14, I was working on it; and ’15 I presented it — I was interested in the WikiLeaks moment at that time. Artists like Trevor Paglen were involved in those communities, so I was sort of peripherally aware of those groups — around transparency and stuff like that —

Sonal: By the way, I was at WIRED at that time, <there you go!> when that was playing out. Keep going.

Simon: When they released all these documents, I found the kind of like clip art on the internal NSA documents, I

found them really aesthetically surprising. <wow!> They were these very playful images that were representing kinda very serious things. <Sonal: That's so interesting, I never thought about that!> You had literally like a magic card standing in for a big offensive that was kind of looking in on everybody's privacy or whatever.

But I was so interested that I really wanted to find some concrete example of who was making those images. Who were those artists, right? <Sonal: right> And I found this one guy's LinkedIn page, this guy called David Darchicourt. And David Darchicourt — was self-proclaimed on his LinkedIn; this is, again, social media art in a way — he claimed that he was the creative director of the NSA, for the 20 years preceding the leaks.

And he had a really big Adobe platform portfolio with his work on it as well; so he had designs he'd done for the NSA, slip mats, mousepads, <right!; chuckles> training posters, all these things.

And I made copies of all of them... <okay> I made giant interpretations of his work. I changed medium from them. So, I made kind of sculptures out of things that were diagrams. <wowww>

And I situated them in this library — right in the middle of Venice, next to the Doge's Palace (which was designed by Sansovino, this very important architect then) — And, that is a very ornate room that has images of druids and wizards and all these fantasy things that went into Tintoretto and all these artists that were working in that period. <right> ...And I put his work alongside their work — and there were these crazy synergies: bearded men, strange books...

Fantasy imagery that was throughout the NSA material, in clip art form, was very close and resonant with these

kind of like Renaissance images, you know <right!>

And also, I guess the key thing was it was a performative piece — because Darchicourt didn't know that I did this work —

Sonal: I was about to ask you if he knew, and if you talked to him.

Simon: No... So it was all appropriated, and the only moment that he found out that that happened was when The Guardian called him on the opening day <laughs> and said, Hey, did you know there's a bunch of stuff with your work?

Sonal: What did he react by the way?

Simon: I think he was a little confused.

Sonal: <laughs> He's like, What is this guy doing with this? <chuckles>

Simon: Yeah I mean it was really important to him at the time — and this came out in The Guardian article too (when The Guardian spoke to him) — it was really important that he was attributed, which he was; His phone number was on there just like it was on the web. That was part of my gesture. <Yes>

And I think he found it was interesting of course as the gesture was a little bit like performing something like what the NSA was performing on all of us <right, right> — but on an artistic work.

And I think that was again complicated by the fact that I was from New Zealand. This is U.S. culture in a certain sense. So I think there was a lot of really interesting tensions around ownership.

Sonal: Right. And it's funny, the technological

underpinnings are fascinating to me <mhm> because you said briefly that, in a way, him putting that he was a creative director for the NSA on his LinkedIn profile <yah> is almost performance art. <Simon: Exactly>

And then the other point is that these materials you're talking about, these artifacts were leaked online.

Simon: Yah. And I think this brings up the kind of art networks that preserve and take care of culture — I think they take care of things that are otherwise not seen, and not cared for.

So I really like to act in that domain. But of course, that's a sort of object-based medium in itself — you want to go into a room in a museum, and you want to have a to have a rich experience in there — translating browser-based work into a projector in a room doesn't always work so well, right?

Sonal: Right... Did you create it for the Biennale?

Simon: I created it for the Biennale. The way that it works, you get commissioned. You can kind of do whatever you like, you work with a curator. The government of the country sponsors that, and then the Biennale kind of acts as a presenter in a way.

Sonal: By the way, one more note, you mentioned a couple times that you're from New Zealand, <yah> and you were- in this Biennale, you were representing New Zealand's pavilion.

How do you think that influenced your work? Because you live in Berlin today; <right> we're recording this as we speak in London; you presented your work in a show in San Francisco, and you're very global.

But I am curious about — I have a question here, that's why I'm leading up to this — how being a New Zealander

influences your art; do you think there's any kind of influence there?

Simon: I do, and I think it's quite a deep one, actually <Okay!>

So I grew up in New Zealand, but all of my ancestors did things which I find complicated and difficult. And while I grew up in a place where I felt a kind of a homeliness too, I also always felt like it wasn't really totally my home. <right> And I was always a part of a kind of a global world.

And that was honestly one of the reasons why I was viscerally attracted to global community, you know "found" community; the internet as a kind of a tool for challenging the notion of a nation-state as a body, as an identity. I very strongly identify to that. I feel more connected to the people that I work with around the world than I do to one particular location.

Sonal: That's fascinating...

So, it's funny, the reason I mentioned it, too, is my first time at Art Basel was 2006.

Simon: Same. <laughs>

Sonal: Oh, you too? Same year? Oh fun!! I wonder if we crossed each other's paths. You never know; I always think of sliding door moments. <yah>

But it's funny because that was a year that Marc Newson was named Designer of The Year. And it was also right about when Art Basel had finally — it's been established for a number of years — but it started now to finally hit the mainstream awareness. I remember this because I was behind Vanity Fair who was covering it for the first time <right, right> when they were touring the floor — they were on a tour that the Art Basel group had

actually curated and I was like on one of the tours with them. <Amazing> (I wasn't working for them or anything; I just happened to sign up for that time slot. So, that's why I got to follow and hear; so it was very interesting that year.)

It was also the year that they started to...you know how now like Art Basel is all about the satellite fairs and everything that surrounds it locally — which is amazing because it spawned millions of other fairs.

Simon: Particularly in Miami.

Sonal: Oh-especially in Miami. I'm sorry. I'm speaking specifically of Art Basel Miami. Exactly. Now they have NADA, and they have all these other things.

But at the time, they started Design Miami, <yah> and they gave Marc Newson Designer of The Year. <right> He's like a sculptor essentially; the famous Lockheed Lounge chairs... and then obviously people might think of him in a tech sense because he was good friends with Jony Ive's and so there was some collaboration there on the technology side. <yah>

And he's Australian. <right> And he said something that really blew my mind, which is that he felt that, growing up in Australia, <mhm> he was liberated as an artist because he didn't have the legacy and influences that one would have if you grew up in a place like Italy — where you have like Renaissance history; or you're surrounded by all these like sculptures that were created like thousands of years ago. <mm>

So he felt that he had almost an unopinionated journey to art <hmm> — and a lens on it that... it almost gave him a more neutral palette growing up in a place like that.

Which is why I asked about New Zealand.

Simon: That's so interesting. I mean, I would frame it slightly differently. <Sonal: Great. I want to hear it.>

I found that there was definitely a weight of the situation and the history <ah... yes> that was definitely there — but it wasn't of course the same one as the kind of canon.

At the same time, in a parallel way, you have this other influence of indigenous culture playing out at the same time. <right> So I remember one of my key inspiration moments when I was learning art at the first time at the University of Auckland — I had this incredible professor, Michael Parekowhai, and he is an incredible sculptor; grew up in a Maori context — but he was making work that resonated with '80s and '90s pop artists like Jeff Koons. He was making big shiny things that used the language of advertising that also spoke to indigeneity <yah... right> in New Zealand at the time.

So that was actually drawing from a canon — but also kind of coming from a place which had other information to bring to that canon. <right!> You know what I mean? <totally> I think that's the thing that I was really inspired by.

Sonal: I love that.

Okay, so then going back now to the moment at the Venice Biennale, <yah> when you did that WikiLeaks moment, <ok...yah> were there any other technology milestones <yah yah> on the way to crypto and blockchain art?

Simon: I'll say one more. So I mentioned this piece that I made where I was looking at entrepreneurs through DLD, through going and hanging out at conferences;

that was really inspiring aesthetically and everything for me.

Sonal: That's so funny to hear about entrepreneurship as an "aesthetic". <chuckles>

Simon: Yeah, I love it. So this is the thing: I leaned into the Berlin of that time as well. And I made a series of works about young startups.

So for example, I took a WIRED Roundup like top 10 startups in Berlin, and I made almost like a deal toy, meets a gaming computer, meets a piece that might go in a trade fair booth or something like that. <right!> And I would make these pop-art-inspired sculptures that were celebrating the culture of entrepreneurship.

That was something that I ended up culminating in a big show that I did also in 2015 at MOMA PS1, which was called the innovator's dilemma. It was like named after–

Sonal: Clayton Christensen's famous book.

Simon: — Exactly, Clayton Christensen book; where it kind of brought together a bunch of different projects that are doing in general about entrepreneurship.

I made something about South Korean entrepreneurship. I made a big project about Samsung during those years as well, which looked at their turn to be more global in the 1990s. <right>

I also did a really big round of work based on Peter Thiel. It was inspired by a moment in New Zealand where it was realized that Thiel was a citizen. And I made like a big group of artworks that were based on board-gaming and the language of gaming — <right> which mapped out ideological narratives that came from Peter's world — which is very, very influential in entrepreneurship.

So, I did a show that was at a small gallery in Auckland in New Zealand, not a kind of big space; but Peter ended up coming there. He ended up seeing the show. We ended up getting in touch after that (when he was still based in San Francisco). And that was, again, this really interesting moment of bringing the way that certain ideas were received in the local space — with something that was very influential in the business world and the technology world.

I also made artworks about Kim Dotcom — who was this German-Finnish entrepreneur who built a platform called Megaupload — which was one of the most-used piracy network things for downloading Hollywood content. <yah>

And he was sued by the U.S. government (I think in 2013, 2012 even maybe?), and there was a massive bust on his home — which was a collaboration between the New Zealand armed forces, and police network, and the U.S. — and they tried to extradite him ever since.

Sonal: Of course. We did a cover story on Kim Dotcom at Wired–

Simon: –That cover story I was very inspired by at the time... and also because he was based in New Zealand. And the whole bust went down in this kind of very glamorous property in Auckland. <right right>

I have to say he's still living in New Zealand. <oh!> They never managed to actually successfully extradite Kim. And he made other platforms since.

I was also watching all of my content on his platform actually at the time. <Sonal: oh funny... yah yah yah> It was another thing; living in Germany, you couldn't get Netflix at the time.

Sonal: Yeah, we were all pirates at some point, especially if you grew up in any point in the ’90s and onward. It was all pre-Netflix, like that was the only way to get things.

Do you remember burning CDs?

Simon: Oh, of course I remember burning CDs, exactly.

Sonal: Yeah, now I look back on it...

Simon: You wouldn’t download a car, you know?

Sonal: Well, now I look back on it as a creator — there’s a big difference when you talked about how you were doing literal appropriation art in the case of that NSA artist; that’s like a specific performative type of thing.

Simon: It’s a gesture. Yeah.

Sonal: It’s a gesture, exactly. — Now I’m mortified as a creator at how I treated other creators’ works when I realized that we just burned CDs, passed them to our friends.

Simon: This is like a Web2 question as well, right, a little bit. Because it’s also about like, what is promotion? What is popularity? What is attention value worth? And where do you monetize that? Burning CDs is a proto-expression of that problem.

Sonal: You’ve mentioned a few times actually this tension between art and commercialism <mhm> and I want to go back to it. <yah> It’s quite fascinating as a thread in your work. You seem very inspired by advertising culture.

Simon: Oh my god yes, yeah.

Sonal: And like a lot of people would argue advertising is

not art. <yah> So clearly you fall in this other camp. Tell me more about that.

Simon: I mean I think it's also not so unusual within the art worlds that I occupy. But, essentially, pop art is a really great example because everybody's heard of Warhol.

But there's many practices that came in the wake of that big idea, and also kind of the scale that he was able to bring to that big idea.

I think the notion that pop art proposed — that your role as an artist is to describe how it feels to occupy that contemporary world <yes> — and you're not an ethical agent; it's just like, I go into the street, and I see a giant billboard, and it does something to my heart.

And that is culture, right? <Yes!> That is the claim of pop art.

Sonal: That is culture. <yah>

But one thing I do have to ask you about on the advertising and also globalization, so two themes here:

And I think back to like when I used to go to India and I'd see like Bollywood posters, which is its own aesthetic —

Simon: Yeah, hand-painted often.

Sonal: — Totally. And that actually is dying art now; but it was an incredible thing to see that art form, especially in my parents' tiny village.

Simon: Yeah, incredible.

Sonal: It's like this pop of color in this kind of almost desert landscape.

Simon: Yeah, and glamour as well. It's very glamorous.

Sonal: Its glamour...exactly, exactly! I edited one of my friends... She's also an author, Virginia Postrel. She wrote a book called *Glamour*, which actually... It's funny to use the word glamor because it has certain specific connotations to it, which I think is great. <right right>

But I do have to ask you, Simon, like do you think there's also this kind of... monoculture that's happening because of that globalization, and in that aesthetic?

Because I feel — especially in the case of pixel art <mhm> — that there was a point when everyone got a little too digitally influenced <Simon: yah, chuckles> and everything started looking like the 8-bit thing. <right> And I got very bored of that aesthetic. <yah yah>

And so I just wonder if you think there's this sort of homogenization happening as well <sure> in the aesthetic.

Simon: Yeah, I guess this is a narrative that comes up from time to time; I mean, it's not only in art that it comes up, right?

Sonal: Right. I mean Netflix culture is a great example.

Simon: Netflix culture is a great example too; But I think people bring it up politically, which is the most charged context for it, right? <Sonal: Oh, yah, yah, totally> You know, there's these kind of conversations about how homogenous things are becoming because of the speed of travel, the ease of travel, <yes> these kinds of things.

But I don't really believe that that will ever make a true homogenization.

And my understanding of the way that cultures have emerged — is they always emerge in hybridization

Right? <yesss> There is no such thing — again this is another originality question — there's no such thing as a true original flavor of X or Y.

There's no first anything, and there's only kind of encounters.

And I tend to think — I'm sort of like an "encounters maximalist" or something like that —

Sonal: I like that, an "encounters maximalist"!

Simon: I mean, that's something I literally just coined <Sonal: I love it; we're inventing things on the podcast; that's how we roll.>

BUT, I tend to think that more hybridization is always positive, and I don't believe that this true homogenization really ever happens.

There are kind of trends, and moments, where certain "boringnesses" settle into a market or whatever <right> where a lot of people try and do that thing. And yes, I get very bored about that very quickly.

Boring homogenous stuff is boring and homogenous, and I think the way that NFTs stratified very quickly in 2021 into particular genres bored the hell out of me. I mean this is true in the art-art world as well as the NFT-art world — like, expensive things are considered to be important.

But, on the edges of those things, I could tell you ten examples of things that did *incredible* stuff with the kernels of things that went into those strata.... but then did something truly amazing on the side of it.

At the fringes — at the side of those movements — are always something where there's somebody mixing that, with something that's never been seen before. <Sonal:

that's great> And then they make something new.

And I think that's a very old story. I also think globalization is a much older story than is often assumed colloquially; cultures have been mixing across Eurasia for example, for very long times...

Sonal: Oh, totally; I love that you pointed out that this kind of intermixing has been happening for like, eons. That's great.

Simon: There are many examples across the history of art and culture of things that happen on the fringe of those environments that are a little harder to see at the time <yah> — that certain enthusiasts get really excited about around them as they happen — but don't scale in the same way; don't reach the same price points; don't enter the same museum collections... That are then kind of later looked back on, and seen that there's things that happened there that were just super exciting, right.

Sonal: That's fascinating. When I think of even the outsider art movement <right!> — and this is a very literal interpretation of fringe, and I know what you mean "fringe" as more nuanced than that — But, I have a piece by Howard Finster.

Simon: Oh, interesting.

Sonal: It's one of his dinosaurs, <yah> it's like this little cardboard cutout dinosaur on like a little platform <wow>, and he's handwritten in Sharpie all these biblical verses like kind of like fire and brimstone... <wow...wow> And it's really fascinating because he was an ex-minister;

And to me, that's an encounter between like Christian faith and thinking — combined with this encounter with evolution <right> and what it means — because it's so

bizarre to have like biblical verses on a dinosaur. <Simon: Yeah, that's incredible> It's like so great.

Simon: Oh my god, I want one.

Sonal: Oh, yah!

Simon: I think what's really interesting about outsider art, in general, <yah> as a category, is really interesting; Because I think a lot of people that came from the art world that I've been talking about up until now, like the world that kind of circles around museums and art fairs and galleries <yes... yes>,

When they looked at NFTs for the first time, I think a lot of them saw outsider art, right. <Sonal: Ahh, interesting!> Because it was people who are not trained in the art tradition, who were given a certain technological stack who were then able to create and promote and sell whatever work. <yes!> And that kind of opened up to a whole lot of creators that were definitely not schooled in the canons.

And then lots of super interesting, weird stuff happened on the side of those — which I, personally, found as a wealth of compelling examples of emergent culture. And then there became own kind of homogenizations and canon-buildings <yes> within that kind of sub-community around NFTs. And those things I found often a little less interesting, you know what I mean, uh?

Sonal: Yes, I totally agree. And I'm about to ask you about blockchains and NFTs in just one more minute. <Sure> I'm also trying to think of when outsider art becomes establishment in other ways...

Simon: Yah, Henry Dodger is a very canonical example. It's a very strange hierarchy that gets established, especially with the use of the term "outsider" — It also

kind of brands somebody as kind of not legible and they kind included them in the canon but as an outsider, right?

I mean, these tensions are very strange: It's about academy versus not; <yes!> and, certain people who are able to say that's important and that's not; and value, and where money lies... and all these other things that are really interesting around culture.

Sonal: One example that comes to mind for me, it was in India when I went to Chandigarh, <yah> which is in North India.

Simon: I know it, yeah.

Sonal: Okay. And they have like this thing called the Rock Garden, <mhm> which is designed by Nek Chand. And that was also a form of outsider art. He literally collected garbage and recycled materials for years — like glass, <amazing> and shards, and rocks — and he built this incredibly fantastical, like fantastic fantasy garden.

Simon: Yah, yah.

Sonal: It's in Chandigarh... Which Chandigarh itself — speaking of layers of history and culture — was designed with the help of–

Simon: Le Corbusier, right?

Sonal: Yes, Le Corbusier. And also the Eames. <Exactly> Very influential in the '50s and that period.

Simon: Yah; modernism meets the built environment <Sonal: Exactly> meet urban planning meets the history of colonialism. It's very- very intense.

Sonal: Exactly; it's very fascinating; like layers and layers

of things.

Okay great — let's talk now about blockchains, and crypto art. So you mentioned like all these technological milestones on your way to your evolution as an artist. Tell me about how you came to blockchain art.

Simon: Yeah. So of course, if you're muddling around in Berlin, in the communities that are building new products and new companies in the early mid-2010s, you come across Bitcoin.

And the more I dug into Bitcoin culture, the more fascinated I was. <right right> I was just like, Wow, As somebody who's looking for new, inspiring narratives, there's a notion of sovereign-free money... I then started to pay attention to people who were kind of advocating around exit versus voice. And also self-sovereign — I read *The Sovereign Individual* as a book.

And then of course, in Berlin, you heard about Ethereum as it emerged, because the Ethereum Foundation was getting set up and started there.

So for the 2016 Berlin Biennale, I made my first kind of big piece about crypto. And that was three different fictional trade fair booths, based on three different entrepreneurs, that were looking at three different narratives that were emerging from blockchain: One of them was Blythe Masters. So, Blythe Masters was coming from the banking world, right? She came out of securities in the 1990s, and she made this company at the time called Digital Asset <okay>; I made a big kind of installation about her. I made a big installation about Balaji and about 21 [dot] Inc before it was changed or whatever. <right> And then I made a big one about Ethereum and Vitalik. <oh wow>

And it was like those three narratives that I was kind of

looking at the same time. <yah>

I made little postage stamps that I worked on with the German postal — because I thought postage stamps were *both* expressions of sovereignty, right <uh-huh>; they were also design objects; and they were also kind of a currency, like a parallel currency.

Sonal: What's also by the way fascinating about postal stamps is that they are an expression of sovereignty — but they're also like ways to get out: They move objects around the world, too... so fascinating.

Simon: Exactly — they're infrastructure. <Right, exactly > So I thought they were the perfect sculptural form for work about this emergent network.

Sonal: So far you described how you were using blockchain and crypto <mhm> as inspiration for your art, <yah, yah...> the subject matter of your art;

But now blockchain as a medium, let's talk about that.

Simon: Yeah. So there were a few people at that time who were starting to design kind of web-based art — like browser art that I described earlier or Web2 art, let's say <yup> — that was based on coding on emergent blockchains.

So there was a project called Ascribe — which was actually something Vitalik worked on as well at the time — which was an early system that tried to put artworks and link them to the Bitcoin network. <yah>

There was a conference in 2014 at Seven on Seven that Rhizome did <mhm> — which was connected to the New Museum — where they pair an artist with a technologist. <okay!> And at the time, they designed something based on colored coin[s], which was essentially an NFT

And then I started to kind of learn about other projects... I'd learned about terra0, which was a really interesting project, which was a group that were proposing to make trees own themselves as entities.

Sonal: Trees own themselves! Wow!!

Simon: Yeah exactly- They were like look, if you can do a blockchain system based on Ethereum, if you can have smart contracts, then why not give the sovereignty of ownership to the trees? Why not have a commercial forest own the produce of its own work.

I was fascinated by that. So I curated a little show in 2018 at a space in Berlin called The Schinkel Pavillon. And that was about artists that were doing these experiments.

Also included in that was Cryptokitties. <okay> I don't know if you remember this, but Christie's did a weird little collaboration with Consensys where they sold a hardware wallet with a specially designed CryptoKitty on it. Where Guile Twardowski — who was the guy who invented the visual aspect of the CryptoKitties projects and not the kind of mechanics, but the actual cats <the aesthetic, yah> — made a special one and they sold it as a hardware wallet, which was also specially designed, <right> in an auction. And it was like big news in the New York Times.

And so I included that in the show. I included terra0, this forest project in the show. I included other artists like Kei Kreutler, <yes... yes> who was also working at Gnosis at the time doing interesting designs for that.

And the whole show was set up — the curatorial premise — was also based on blockchains because I didn't want to decide everybody in the show. I asked somebody else to choose two things, and then they would choose two

things. <yah yah> And then we did a transparent publishing of all of the decision-makers on the wall as a curatorial protocol.

Sonal: So you turned curation — the act and art of curation itself — into a form of art <yes>... that actually also showed the process behind the outcomes.

Simon: Exactly; transparency, networks — all of these things that are kind of so important to blockchain. <fascinating>

Decentralized decision-making, right? And so, yeah, we had this kind of protocol that we designed where everybody knew who picked them for being in the show, and I wasn't making all the decisions.

And that show was called Proof of Work... But that was way before NFTs were a thing.

Sonal: Yes. And before we talk more about NFTs, <yah> what do you think is unique about blockchains as a medium for art?

Simon: Mmm... You know, one of the interesting things about blockchain as a medium, I think, is that the cultural asset and the financial container is the same thing <yah> Right? That's sort of true in art, in a way... but literally, as an NFT, those things are much more structurally combined, right? <right>

And Web2 art, and like art designed for social networks, they also are like networked objects; they're connected to other things.

And settlement is immediate, right? I mean, one of the things that artists got really, really excited about with the emergence of blockchain art — and this is really going into the NFT moment now — but the idea that you could have settlement immediately on sale. <mhm> And

that you wouldn't have to have an intermediary — because you know gallerists and whatever, it's a very complicated system. <yes!> — so the simplicity and the directness of that was really attractive.

But also this notion of resale royalties, the idea that you would sell something on a secondary market and immediately the original creator would receive some compensation for that? That's been something that the art world's been dreaming about since the 70s; there's a conceptual art piece by a very famous curator, Seth Siegelaub, that he did in the early 1970s, called The Artist Contract.

Sonal: So let's talk about about NFTs, specifically. <mhm>

So we've obviously been dancing around that this entire conversation <right>, but I think crypto art is bigger than just NFTs, to be clear. <Right, agreed> And blockchains as a medium is bigger than just NFTs.

Simon: Right. Agreed.

Sonal: So we agree on that... But let's talk about NFTs, specifically, because that's the thing that really captured the mainstream attention — and actually maybe even catapulted crypto into much more mainstream awareness.

And to be clear, I mean this well beyond the financialization aspects <Simon: No, no, totally; yah> I'm talking about it as an artistic thing: This includes multiple auction houses, like doing NFT auctions, <yah> like participating in it. Multiple people who only came to crypto for the first time and set up a wallet in order to buy NFTs.

Like who knew? Of course, we knew that culture <well- >

would be the thing that brings people to technology.

Simon: I mean retroactively, it looks logical, but I don't think that was a given, you know.

Sonal: Oh interesting, tell me why.

Simon: Well, I don't know. I mean, I think the moment that changed for me from knowing about a small group of people messing around with blockchains, <yes, yes> making art with it, to like the post-Beeple auction moment. I guess that's maybe like the...

Sonal: Beeple is the right thing. Pre- and post-Beeple. BB and PB. Yeah.

Simon: Right, exactly. And that was also in cahoots with the auction houses; I mean Beeple was not an unknown entity before that auction, but he was known in the graphic arts world, right, like he was a very, very well-known figure there.

But then with the signal from the blue-chip art world — you know, from those auction houses — I think those are the things that kind of created that change in awareness.

Sonal: Yeah, say more — like why you think it wasn't a given that this would happen.

Simon: Well if I think back to Web2 for example, I don't think culture was the thing that kind of like brought that into like mainstream awareness and usage. <Ah!> I mean, unless you count kind of "sociality" as a layer of culture, which I guess one could, <yah yah yah> and I guess I do in a way.

But it's not high culture. Like you didn't learn about Facebook or MySpace because of an Exponent Art — whereas I think a lot of people's mainstream adoption

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But it's not high culture. Like you didn't learn about Facebook or MySpace because of an Exponent Art — whereas I think a lot of people's mainstream adoption

and understanding of web3 came around that moment which was associated with art and an artist.

Web1 also didn't happen like that: You know, you didn't hear about the internet because you heard of some artist piece being made by an artist.

Sonal: No I agree; I totally agree with you.

You've said multiple times throughout this conversation that culture emerges. <mhm>

And so what do you think about this moment made this like the time — like why now?

Simon: Well I mean, I think auction houses are always looking for new things, new markets. They've constantly done that. You know before the 1970s and 80s, they didn't sell contemporary art, for example; they only sold old masters. <yup> So moving into new areas is kind of like a textbook thing.

But then Defi Summer came... And there was all this liquidity created in the ecosystem from people who'd been successful, which then they started to filter into these cultural assets, <yes> right? And I think that was what built up to the crypto moment we're talking about.

Sonal: Yes but why the art? Because they could have also funneled that liquidity to something else.

Simon: You know, I can't answer that question. <yah> But I think I think people want to buy art that support the cultures that they believe in.

Sonal: It's about identity and belonging and affiliation. <Simon: Yeah, exactly>

Simon: And people who had been excited by what was possible within this DeFi world, within the kind of crypto

world in general, saw an emergent cultural package that that kind of embodied the value of that — and they were like, okay, I believe in this culturally.

And I think that mostly really happened around PFPs...

Sonal: Yes, like profile-pic type art...

Simon: Profile-pic type art — like CryptoKitties and CryptoPunks — Artistically, it's really an interesting mechanism:

You sell something, initially, to a large community; a bunch of people hold the same thing. <yup> And then, that also moves around in networks; it changes ownership, owner to owner, right? And with that, the community grows, the people who have touched that asset. <yes>

And that means that a large group of people are suddenly almost fractal participators in kind of one cultural moment, <totally!> right, one cultural asset. You know what I mean? <yes, exactly!> They're designed to participate in networks that the provenance is important: You know where it came from, where it's going to <yes... yes...yes>; tracing these relationships as a part of the medium <right!> is what's so super interesting about that.

Sonal: It's fascinating. And the networks themselves are in the cloud <yah>, or blockchain — One of our colleagues, Tim Roughgarden, calls blockchains "computers in the sky" <yah>– because they operate without any central intermediary, they're accessible to all —

You talked earlier about coming from New Zealand, and this idea of the borders and the inspiration for you being almost global by default — <yah yah... exactly, exactly>

this is that exact very example — like the portability of the asset, it's not just that: It's like the portability of your humanity, your identity, like who you are, your network... Or even belonging in a network, regardless of border/ place/ location, into a different kind of identity online.

Simon: Yah. And I mean there's a sort of more humanities side to this argument as well, like you know the Donna Haraway notion of the "community of kin". But it's that within a digitally designed kind of artwork-network... I mean that's so- beautiful.

Sonal: Say more on "community of kin".

Simon: Well, one of the cool things that I found in art school was like me and this one other person loved this one artwork by this one artist. <yes, yes> And we found a passion in there that meant we were compatible across all sorts of different things. < Oh my god, you're so right!> You know?

Sonal: Yah one of my absolute favorite artists is this New Orleans artist named Rebecca Rebouché <yah> I'm a big fan of her work, very fantasy. She has a lot of portals. <yah> I love that type of thing, and I collect a lot of her pieces. <Simon: Oh, interesting.>

As I went to her Art Patron Dinner (and I've been to multiple shows of hers), and I feel like the community that comes around the art — these are people I've never met before, I have no history, no demographic in common — it's like an instant affiliation and true *connection*. <Simon: Yeah, exactly> Because like what better proxy for the...understanding that kind of like-mindedness, then having that same shared love? Oh my god, I totally agree.

Simon: It's a really precise cultural signal.

There's also another artwork that I want to mention here that is maybe less known and is working differently <yah> than many NFTs in terms of like dynamics,

It's a project by Sarah Friend — which I actually showed in another curated show that I did later on called Proof of Stake; and that was all about ownership, in particular — And she did this piece called Lifeforms, which were designed on Polygon.

But the NFTs were designed to only "live", quote-unquote <yah> — if they were transferred. And so they had like a like a time-life programmed into them, <yah> where if they stayed in one wallet longer than three months, <yah> they would completely self-destruct.

Sonal: Yeah, got it. I don't know if you've heard of this, but OG:Crystals? <Simon: Oh yeah, sure> And the artist is Michael Joo, and he did it with Danil Krivoruchko... <mhm>

Anyway, what's really fascinating about it is that the NFT, to your point — like that's an example of like kind of it has to be transferred in order to exist.

Simon: Yeah, with Sarah Friend's Lifeforms. Yeah.

Sonal: I love that it's called Lifeforms.

This was really interesting on the coral reef diversity side, where every time you transfer this NFT, like the properties of other things in that person's collection, <yah> inhabit... it's like an organism, inhabit that NFT. So what happens is, for instance, if you own like MeeBits, then that NFT... the crystal, the form it expresses, will have like this like 3-D, like kind of cubic element to the coral.

Simon: It will respond to that shape.

Sonal: Exactly. And it evolves. And so the art itself evolves as it gets transferred, <Simon: love that> which I think is so fascinating. That is so beautiful. <yah it's beautiful> I have goosebumps talking about this because that is the essence of truly being native to the medium.

Because it's not just taking something and then taking it and like, oh, I'm going to apply it to blockchains — <right> — it's taking the inherent nature of blockchains and evolving that with the art. It's just incredible to me.

Simon: Yeah, I agree.

And the online-offline connection's also still really important <yes> because even the virtual is so physical, right? Because screens are real, pixels are real, <yah> you know, like networks are made of kind of like atoms as well as bits, you know. <yes yes>

And you know the recent body of work that I made — that was actually named a little bit close to this book from Chris — So I made oil paintings of other people's metaverse property tokens... that was like,

Sonal: Ahh, so you made the digital physical!

Simon: Yeah, in a way; because I thought about I thought about territory, I thought about community, I thought about history.

And I thought about like the fact that these tokens — when I looked at something like Decentraland or Sandbox, these very popular you know <yup> crypto-based metaverses — when I looked at the ownership tokens for owning a piece of property in those worlds, I saw a grid that looked to me like mid-century painting.

Because it's a grid, these projects, <yah> if you buy a token, you kind of get an NFT that looks like a part of

the map of the project.

But I was thinking oh that's so interesting because it looks so much like mid-century painting, and then I was like oh wouldn't that be funny to paint that actually. And then I was like that would be a landscape painting, of a piece of property, in the metaverse; that's so weird.

And then I was like, what is landscape painting? And that, again, goes back to my background: I grew up in New Zealand, the first thing we learned about is colonial landscape painting... And I was like oh my god when I see these NFTs, this gridded system, it's like modernism is being projected onto the metaverse, you know. <That's fascinating!> So it's taking an old modernist trope and putting it onto the mirror.

But, it was important for me to underline the networked element as well. So while they were paintings of somebody else's property, I included two QR codes on the side of each painting. And the first one links to the original property — so you can kind of look at the property <right, you can see what it is> — because that's interesting as well about metaverse interfaces: It's already gone through a few rounds of UX so the painting is often kind of early version of a landscape, and then you have a link to what the real one looks like now.

But then I designed an NFT that that looks like an ownership card that you would get in Monopoly for owning a piece of property, <oh! right> — and tells you who owns that piece right now. And it links you to the person that owns that piece, but it's also permissionless. So it's a painting, which is permissionless, of a property that you don't own; that then you have a kind of other piece of ownership property that kind of always links you to the person who currently owns it. <chuckles>

Sonal: It's like so fascinating exploring the nature of

ownership. <yah> So this is the exhibition you debuted in San Francisco [at Altman Siegel]; why did you title it "Read Write Own"?

Simon: Well, I was really interested in always like what are good descriptions of what's different about networks. <yah> And when I read about Chris's book coming out, and Read/ Write/ Own was kind of like underlined as a way to summarize you know Web1/ Web2/ and Web3.

It was the title of the book; It resonated with also the design of the cover; it was a little square in the middle and a kind of landscape-like object around it. And I was like oh my god, this is what I've been painting: I've been painting the difference of ownership <wow> in Web2 and Web3, and kind of how these things kind of layer up.

Also like ownership is really something that's really important in art. It always has been important. You know? <yes>

And so, people owning properties, people owning images of other properties. Again, these notions around landscape: When you paint a landscape, it doesn't mean you own it, right? It's a picture of something you often don't own.

Sonal: The other thing that's fascinating to me about what you're saying about this — is that this idea of ownership and what you're doing with the paintings in your exhibit for Read Write Own <yah> — is the idea too that we ourselves are transient humans. <mhm> And the ways we put our stamps on the world, sometimes like the only thing that endures is art. Whether physical or emotionally, like the things we leave behind. <yah>

And it's funny because I used to be a huge fan of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. <oh yah sure> Big fan, because I

love landscape art.

You would think it's so inane, like you're putting plastic to cover trees... <yah> like how is this art? <yah> But I love this idea that humanity is conquering nature in a way that's not like extractive <right> — but that's actually beautifying it and showing our presence. <yah> And I find that building, like, it's just beautiful. <Simon: It is so beautiful> There's something extremely exquisite about it. <Yah>

Which I'm bringing it up because it resonates with what you're describing with the Read Write Own exhibit you did.

Simon: Well, exactly. I mean, Jeanne Christo Claude, for those who haven't heard of them, they basically, as a giant sculptural gesture, would wrap significant things — for example, the Bundestag in Berlin, that was like a really big one.

Sonal: That's right. They just did in Paris. Well, actually, one of them obviously died but the spouse is still alive...

Simon: Yeah, Jean-Claude.

Sonal: Yes, and they just did like the wrapping of the...

Simon: ...Arch de Triomphe. Exactly. So often symbolic things but also whole islands.

Sonal: Surrounding the Florida Keys; yeah, right.

Simon: Yah it makes a monumental gesture, but it's also at the same time a light touch, right — You occupy it and then you unoccupy it, right? And it kind of comes back.

Sonal: Exactly! It's like ephemeral. It's light touch, but it's so heavy <exactly> in the moment that it's there. And by the way, logistically... <Simon: Oh, huge>

And I think that is not necessarily the case for all culture, right; like, there's a term like "priceless". Often you talk about priceless cultural works. <right> But also, there's this notion that something cheap can also be something valuable, you know.

And I think that's harder to like express in the current technological stack of NFTs.

Sonal: What do you think the opportunity is to build there?

Simon: Well... I think that there should be another layer of accruing and showing value in NFT projects that is not about how much they cost. I'm thinking about like something that could be like a curatorial infrastructure for giving different signals that aren't only expressed in how expensive something is.

Of course: Expensive things that are in museums are important culturally and valuable in that way as well. And part of the price of them being so expensive is about how much they're loved as culture. But you can make something experimental that might not sell at first — or that might not be expressed as something expensive at first <right> — that will later be something that is cherished and really valuable. <yes>

There's this notion of the avant-garde; which is something really important to modernism <yes, yes, yes>, where you can have a small group of people doing an experimental thing <very forward> that is really unpopular and very hard to understand at the time — that then later gets interpreted and valued in a different way. <yes yes>

And I think that's a little bit missing from the NFT art world. Where financial success is the only expression of cultural value.

It's not that I want to divorce that completely. <Sonal: No, you can't... no, totally> I just think that it needs to be more complex than that.

Sonal: I would say multi-dimensional <yah, right> —

Because it's basically like, if you think about all these properties — like there's community, there's belonging, there's expression, there's the aesthetic, there's the technological underpinnings, there's so many different dimensions — you can assess something on, there's a reputation. I totally agree that there needs to be more dimensions on that.

One example that I think is really fascinating here, so I co-edited a piece by Cuy Sheffield, who works at Visa. And he wrote a very thoughtful piece on "Fantasy Hollywood" and this idea that you can essentially create characters <uh-huh> that can be represented by NFTs, and essentially create a whole set of storytelling around these characters. <uh-huh>

So the idea is that NFTs are characters; <yah> and the other point is, it's really about who gets to make — this is a recurring theme in what you've been talking about <yah> — who gets to make these characters. Because right now it's like centralized Disney, or like a certain type of artist.

Simon: Right, the IP world, right?

Sonal: Exactly; And so this idea that you can actually share and create this IP...

But, the real idea here is that the NFT in that case is that the NFTs in that sense represent community, belonging, character creation, collaboration, and then a community of storytelling. <yah>

And it's funny because I was debating this with Bob Iger

a couple of months after we did our podcast together with Chris Dixon, that we did on the show, which he kind of brought up like, is it really possible to tell really good stories in a decentralized way? And I was like you know it's funny you say that because you acquired Lucasfilm, <right> and we talk about Star Wars like this franchise that was created by one person — and after that many people took over and extended the canon, and did different things with the stories. <yah>

But there's actually a pre-story that no one talks about, which is that Star Wars itself is oral myth and storytelling that's been propagated over centuries.

Simon: Right, based on these hero story archetypes; yeah

Sonal: Exactly, like the Campbellian myths and the archetypes, exactly, the Jungian ideas — And that bubbled up into what became Star Wars, which now has become: There's a canon and then that went beyond canon. And then we went back to a new canon, and it's like continuing. And if you think about the NFT aspect, like this is very empowering for people, and you could add value that way.

Simon: This relates back to my kind of pop art thing and also the best parts of NFT art, which is this permission listing that I was leaning into with my canvases, you know. <yes, yes>

This notion that you can kind of take something that has a powerful effect in the world — like a Campbell soup can or whatever, that has like a cultural effect that you live in and live with — and you can work with that and make kind of expressions of your own. I mean, that's kind of what Andy Warhol did, right, in a way.

And there was no kickback to Heinz... But in a way, there

was an attention kickback or a kind of valuation...a branding kickback maybe eventually, because it's like the notion of the candle soup can is like...<totally, totally> it's retroactively...

But I think that there could be a more... *nuanced* ecosystem around defining where value is added in that exchange.

Sonal: That's right.

I do want to ask you a question <sure> about like where you think generative art and blockchains intersect.

Simon: I think we get to a little bit of a problem here with like term definitions <yes> as well. Because I understand the broader definition of a generative piece is where you set up a protocol, you put something through a protocol, and it has a series of outputs. And those outputs are artworks, right? <That's right>

But I think generative art now has come to mean, colloquially, like a particular aesthetic actually. That it's not about the process, it's rather about like, oh this looks sort of like an abstract shape, it has a gradient to it, it... you know. <yah you're right!>

I find that trope, unfortunately, a little dull <I agree> because this is where the homogenization question comes in, and it actually starts to get really boring.

But the notion of like artists setting up protocols, and kind of having outputs, and that being a methodology — that I find super interesting.

Sonal: I agree. So I would say there's three layers: So one is the generative, as like you actually have a beginning of something and it sets up a protocol, and it creates a certain output. And there's a dynamic nature. I mean, the QQ:Crystals project that evolves is by

definition generative.

Simon: And a lot of PFP projects <yah, yah> are also generative by definition, even though that's maybe not what you think of generative art <right> — because this is a by-necessity thing as well, right?

If you want to make a collection of a thousand things, you're not going to design every single one from scratch, the same one. You make up a protocol, and then it produces a thousand of them.

Sonal: That I would argue, is a different definition because this comes to the debate between customization and configuration <uh-hunh> which is... there is something that's truly generative when it's like unknown what the output is going to be. <Yah right> Some of the PFP projects fall in this category, not all but some of them, just to be even more nuanced about it.

It's actually, in that case, more that you have a set of attributes <right> that you're just applying like Crypto Coven, like each of those witches, like they have a very thoughtful...they've actually written some beautiful pieces, I'll link them in the show notes. And how they thought about like sort of the properties that would manifest as different people minted the witches, and how they sort of constrained them. That's another aspect of that, so I agree with that.

And then there's a third part — which you're saying you're kind of bored by, <Simon chuckles> and I don't disagree to some extent — which is sort of this aesthetic <yah!> where now this is all what generative art looks like. I personally do love that aesthetic, I have to say.

Simon: There's nothing wrong with the aesthetic, there's just a lot of it.

Sonal: No no, I agree, I agree! But like there's Zancan and there's like really interesting people who are doing very interesting riffs on it. Those are the people that emerged throough the bubble. And Helena Sarin, I love her work. There's a lot of artists whose work bubbles up in that sense and they bring a certain element to it.

But like Sol LeWitt, <yah sure> how would you connect him into this movement?

Simon: Well, Sol LeWitt is this mid-century artist who basically designed instructions. And when you bought an art piece of his, <yes> you bought the right to perform the instruction — or even the right to employ somebody to perform the instruction. So it's kind of an algorithm that you buy, which is really amazing. These are for wall drawings in the case of Sol LeWitt.

And, like coincidentally, they look like what we think of as generative art because...

Sonal: Its current like block-y aesthetic.

Simon: Yeah, it's based on kind of vectors and you know gradients and lines and patterns and stuff like that. <yup yah yah> So it has this kind of abstract element that reminds us of what we think of as generative art now.

But Sol LeWitt to me, the interesting part is, weirdly...so I'm going to say something maybe controversial here. <Sonal: Love it!> Like the notion of buying the idea is the thing that I like about Sol LeWitt. The way they look on the wall...

Sonal: Eh!

Simon: I mean fine...

Sonal: I'm with you.

Simon: ...but like, it's you know...

Sonal: Oh my god, I'm 100% with you, Simon.

In fact, this is a great example where I think people — and as a collector, I'm very careful to watch myself if I'm falling for the idea of the thing; <yah yah> and also the actual visceral response of the thing. So sometimes I have to hold myself back because intellectually — and definitely, that's a component of my decision-making for sure; I have to intellectually like respond to it, like the visual language, the symbolism, the lore —

But at the same time, I have to have a visceral response... inside that I feel something, <yah yah>

And, visual response that I really <really love> want to look at every day. And that's incredible and very difficult to capture.

Simon: It's very difficult to capture. But that's the holy grail of the art experience. <yah yah>

But I do think some projects in the kind of academic, let's say, conceptual art moment, which came up in the mid-century in the 60s and 70s, were explicitly anti-visual, right? The work didn't exist, you were only moved by the pure idea, right — that was like a kind of aesthetic notion that came up around conceptualism. <right right>

And I mean, the earliest example of that (that has actually been interestingly revisited in NFTs actually), is Yves Klein and this moment of the kind of invisible artwork. <Ahh!> He made a piece that was made in French. And basically, it was one of the first motions in the late 50s where people bought something that was actually invisible, and you were only buying the aura, <yah> as a kind of genre.

Interestingly an artist, Mitchell Chan, also revisited that in 2017 (prior to the protocols that became NFTs,) but he designed an immaterial artwork that was also based on that notion as mystery. <right right> Because what felt like, at the time, you were buying when you bought an NFT was very ephemeral.

And that work, for example, I love — even though there's no visual necessarily associated with it — I'm as moved by it as I am by a very visceral painting <That's amazing>... Sometimes just the idea is the thing that moves you.

Sonal: Yes. There's also this thing that happens with early technologies where people are limited. They think...they don't see the expressivity that's possible, <right> and so they almost go for the most reductionist way <yah> of interpreting that piece and thinking about it. <totally>

And that — to bring it back to generative art today — I think we're going to see a lot more very interesting things happen. One thing I will say, from a technological perspective, I ask everybody this question because I'm obsessed with generative art, <oh interesting> — again, for a very long time –

Which is: What is unique about blockchains? Generative art is not native to blockchains as a medium, <right, yah> but it seems like it's found its native new blockchains.

And one of the technological answers I heard from one of the people on our team, Michael Blau (and a couple of people made this observation) that at the end of the day, it was so compute-intensive to unfurl like the code and the package and the storage involved. <yah yah yah> So there's something really great about having this executable on-chain <yah> that lets you kind of unfurl

these things visually.

So I think it'll be really fascinating to see as like the technological constraints get lifted <yah> — and we advance blockchain performance, scalability, everything <yah> — what will then become possible <what will then become possible...> when you can unfurl things online, on-chain. <totally>

Because I think we're going to see, like the thing that you're frustrated by, which is a sort of a generic aesthetic, I think we're going to see a lot more expressivity, at that point.

Simon: I mean, one of the generative projects that I really, really love — that I think falls under your categories <yes> as well of defining it — is Terraforms by Mathcastles. I mean I think that is a project which really does all of those things. It plays with history as well <yah> because it's this ASCII component. It plays with complexity because of this territory component. <yah> Also, this notion that you have this kind of metaverse of Terraforms that you can kind of invert <yes... right> and participate in on different levels.

Like all of that, I think, is again pushing the medium of generative art to something beyond just an output of an algorithm that looks really boring.

Sonal: I agree.

So last question for you... Another recurring theme, especially with your own history, just come full circle to where we started, where we've been talking: <yah>

So you have kind of traveled from this legacy to digital art world. What are some of the things, if you were to tell people on the legacy side — about the digital side?

And then the vice versa, for the digital world, trying to

understand the legacy world, what would you sort of say, as a person who travels between both of those worlds.

Simon: I think about it a lot. because I do exactly that, <yah> and I value those communities as much as each other — I think that they're both really compelling places to be, and to care about culture, and to make things, and to learn about things, and to collect things.

So I would say, speaking to a legacy person about the digital art world, I would say: Take the time to get to know somebody who's passionate about what is going on there. And don't start with the New York Times or whatever. Don't just look at what you see first and come with your priors and biases. <right> Embrace the learning curve that is the exciting moment of getting to know somebody's passion, and why they think this project is interesting, and that project is boring.

Sonal: And what would you say, specifically, about crypto and blockchain art to that same...?

Simon: Well, one of the challenges I've always had with addressing the legacy art world with crypto and blockchain art is that people in the legacy world hear the word "crypto", hear the word "blockchain", and think A) Too complex. I'm not part of that community. I don't understand the technology, therefore, it's too much work to engage? And 2) they also have a whiff of kind of a scandal around it or a swindle; To a lot of art world people, that's really like a red flag for bullshit, you know? So, like, they just don't want to see that.

So I would also say like you know this is like a little avant-garde community that has its own aesthetic dimensions. <yes> Yes, there's a kind of a learning curve to understanding it —

But honestly, in the art world, there's always a bit of a learning curve. You have to study art for several years to kind of really get into histories of the avant-garde and whatever. And that's a rewarding process. People stay there because they love that. <I love that> They love to get into those complicated discourses and histories.

So there's actually a lot of rewards for legacy art people if they would kind of take the jump;

Sonal: And then what would you say on the flip side — for both the digital artists understanding the legacy world, and then specifically for crypto.

Simon: Yeah, so digital artists understanding the legacy world:

I think there's a lot more continuity there than they might imagine, right? I think that often around these worlds, the notion of new things has a high premium. And I think understanding histories that actually have played into those is kind of undervalued.

So I would say to those people (and I actually often do this), oh, you're really interested in this artist that made this kind of digital artwork? Here's this legacy art person who you probably never heard of <totally!!>, who did something, like Sol LeWitt or whatever, that resonates with exactly that gesture. And they're often really charmed by that, <yes yes> you know?

Sonal: And by the way, you're not saying that (and I'm assuming this), in a pedantic way of like grumpy, like, oh, that happened before. <oh no!> It's more, understand some of the previous movements because it might inform and inspire you.

Simon: Yah, I'm a pedagogue sometimes too, so I have to like watch my tone;

But the situation is more like: you love this, you'll also love this.

Sonal: Clusters of interest.

Simon: Exactly! It's like an Amazon recommendation or something like that. And that's about sharing passion again.

Sonal: And then on the crypto-specific side, what would you say to that group — not just digital, thinking about the legacy art world?

Simon: Well I would, I guess, do a more nuanced version of the same thing where I say, oh, you're interested in the history of networked artworks, based on this particular asset form. You know there's this amazing group of people that were making things for cable networks in the 1970s, isn't that incredible? Look at this Portapak art that was created around this thing... And again, it's about encouraging and getting the kind of infectiousness of the love that comes at the core of those projects.

Sonal: Well, I think that's a beautiful note to end on, Simon. <yes> This has been a fun conversation. And I'm so excited to see more of your work?

Simon: The next thing I'm doing is building a big project about space. I'm looking at kind of space networks and the way that people are imagining about building in outer space. <yes> I'm building an augmented reality work that is based on a sculpture of a megastructure that will kind of hang in the Auckland Art Gallery in New Zealand, but will hopefully travel in the future as well. And that is actually based on the work of a company as well.

Sonal: I love it because it's going all the way from the

outer worlds, the inner worlds, to like external like space world.

Simon: And technological paradigms enabling new types of culture and worlds.

Sonal: It's like a totally different kind of world-building. <exactly> Well thank you so much for joining this episode of "web3 with a16z".

Simon: Thank you very much; I've been a long-time listener, first-time caller, <Sonal laughs; thank you> Thank you so much.

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