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URBAN VALUES IN THE DIGITAL SPACE THE STREET ART ROOTS OF NFTs AS A PROBLEM

Abstract

This text is an attempt to describe a growing interest in transferring street art into digital art in the form of NFTs. By examining several urban values associated with graffiti and street art, it is possible to see how these phenomena affect new technologies. First, however, it is important to consider some street art NFTs and distinguish between their different types. We may identify three ways of presenting street art as NFTs: transferring the character to a different medium; assembling a collection of street art NFTs in a museum-like environment with each piece having its own characteristics; writing street artistry into the wider metaverse. I describe five urban values of NFTs: preservation, accessibility, illegality, money, and uniqueness. In conclusion, it is clear that NFTs change how viewers may perceive street art. NFTs are supposed to be eternal rather than ephemeral, and they lose street art's association with spontaneity and illegality as well as its critique of commercialism. Street art as NFT is just another form of profit-making and one of its new values is money. It is possible to notice artistic values as well. NFTs are marked by diversity, and have their own rules (such as the importance of movement or looping), which are impossible to implement in traditional street art.

Keywords:

NFT, street art, mural, metaverse, Blockchain

INTRODUCTION

Since 2019¹ we have been experiencing a phenomenon that I am calling “the Blockchain craze.” Cryptocurrencies, NFTs, and everything else that has awoken in the metaverse, have been taking over the world. NFT is an abbreviation for non-fungible token. It is a non-interchangeable asset which is stored

¹ This is the year that Blockchain started selling services for cryptocurrency, though it had been operating since 2011.



on a Blockchain. This good can be collected and is subject to all organizational, technical, legal, and financial activities related to paid delivery and purchase. One of the groups of people it has attracted is street artists, who were looking for a new niche to present their projects and ideas. Their migration to the “realm” of NFTs was also provoked by the dream of capitalism – the simple desire to earn more money. On this basis, it is important to ask how these NFT worlds behave and if they have the same laws as the street.

There are not many sources in which authors consider this topic and all of them are online (Shirodkar, 2022; Houser, 2022; Bambić Kostov, 2022; Rabimov, 2021). This essay is an attempt to examine the place of street art NFTs in comparison to what we see on the street or in museums. However, the main issue is in identifying the values of street art and comparing these values to those of digital media. Do NFTs change anything? Do the street artists working online just take directly from the urban scene or do they develop it in a new way and add something to the urban reality? I begin with street art in order to demonstrate that the phenomenon with which I want to compare NFTs is tangible. I then present several important aspects of NFTs. Finally, I will consider how street art as NFTs relates to the world of urban values.

STREET ART AND ITS URBAN VALUES

NFT is a hot topic, both for Internet users and within the art world. Street art NFTs depend on and owe a great debt to the street art in which they are rooted. This relationship, however, is not homogeneous, but is constantly being transformed by the extremely dynamic development of both street art and this new technological and artistic field. It is worth considering the degree of proximity, or perhaps distance, between the two worlds with which we are dealing. This new phenomenon may finally be a way for street art to become even more established in the second area – the Internet. In addition, street art has been instrumentalized and institutionalized by offices, advertising, the Internet, etc. We still need the concept of street art to talk about this kind of NFT.

First, it is important to at least try to define what street art actually means and how we might look at it. For many, street art is an umbrella term, which has for years embraced many creative actions in the public space – not only in the *street*, per se, but also in museums and in the form of digital images or across other new media. Halim Bensaïd has compared street art to a tsunami that is “sweeping across the world” (2016, p. 156). It encompasses such creative techniques as stenciling, stickers, murals, and many more (Gralińska-Toborek, Kazimierska-Jerzyk, 2014, p. 167). It is important to point out that, for some researchers, it is a mistake to add graffiti to this list (Gralińska-Toborek, 2019; contrary to: Mettler, 2012; Cowick, 2015); however, I am including it in this

article because the developed values of this form of performative and semantically loaded art are significant both to street art and the view on street art NFTs which I am proposing.

To discuss street art NFTs, it is also of great importance to consider briefly several urban values (aesthetic and artistic) that will allow us to understand the nature of the graffiti and street art that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s respectively. Above all, graffiti brought aesthetic values to a wider audience. Graffiti artists, who were mostly artistically uneducated and unknown (generally by their own will), had sought to generate new ways of communicating with the world through characteristic forms and colors. Later, they started to become masters of their trade, however, their work was still mostly vandalism. Artists' reluctance to change put them in a bubble in which they had to start meeting certain artistic criteria.

The 1980s saw changes in the view of *street* artistry through the amplification of previously established values and the addition of new ones. Urban values associated with this period are: illegality (freedom); non-commercial aspects; contextuality (the nature of the place – the first examples of site-specificity); dialogic abilities and spontaneity (strongly connected to involvement in the city's/community's affairs). It is also important to mention the ephemeral nature of the art.

ENCOUNTERING NFTs ON THE BLOCKCHAIN AND THEIR FORMS

For the longest time, it was believed that street art led a kind of double life, operating both on the street *and* on the Internet (cf. Gralińska-Toborek, 2017; Libel, Sidorek, Tórz, 2020). It is clearly the case that modern street art often incorporates additional arts and technologies and it is not new to suggest that street art can exist primarily in a digital space (Bambić Kostov, 2022). There are already endless visual archives of street-based artworks across different platforms. It is important to realize, however, that there are potential problems in the digital space regarding both the possibility of image manipulation and the lack or vagueness of commentaries on a work of art (Kazimierska-Jerzyk, 2019, p. 187).

Although NFTs may resemble memes, they must not be confused with them. A meme is a highly informative medium that is responsive to reality, but it is not exclusive and nor is it of high quality. It is difficult to find a strong relationship between memes and NFTs, as they are both still new and unexplored phenomena. Nevertheless, NFT creators would be wise to take something from the humor of memes, just as meme creators could learn something from the sense of luxury that tokens are supposed to provide to users. The bluntness of memes distinguishes them from the general decorativeness of NFTs.

From the reality of the wall to the reality of digital animation: Transferring the character to a different medium

It is essential to state that I, as an author, am aware that NFTs are more a digital art than a street art, urban art, or Independent Public Art (Schacter, 2014). They resemble street art and are similar to photographs but offer the characteristics of a GIF – things move or “emerge” from the walls. An example of this is *UP*, by the Latvian artist (and his team) working under the name KIWIE 1001 (Fig. 1–3).



Fig. 1–3. KIWIE 1001, *UP*, screen shots from KIWIE’s page on Rarible. Located in New York. Images courtesy of the artist. Photo source: rarible.com

An interesting work by KIWIE 1001 is *BARONG*, which was made in partnership with LG (yes, the tech company) (Fig. 4–6). It is located in Bali island. NFT-street art works do not look like “typical” street art – they are not murals or graffiti in the form of an image or a tag. Most often they feature a character – in this example, a kind of bear with sharp teeth and a rather large belly. The artist describes it as “the funny, usually smiling pudgy critter” (KIWIE 1001, 2021). Sometimes the characters are “using” the city – spinning on the power lines, falling down stairs, etc. (Fig. 7–15).



Fig. 4–6. KIWIE 1001, *BARONG*, screen shots of an “spinning” NFT and photos of the mural in Bali from KIWIE’s web page. Images courtesy of the artist. Photo source: kiwie1001.com

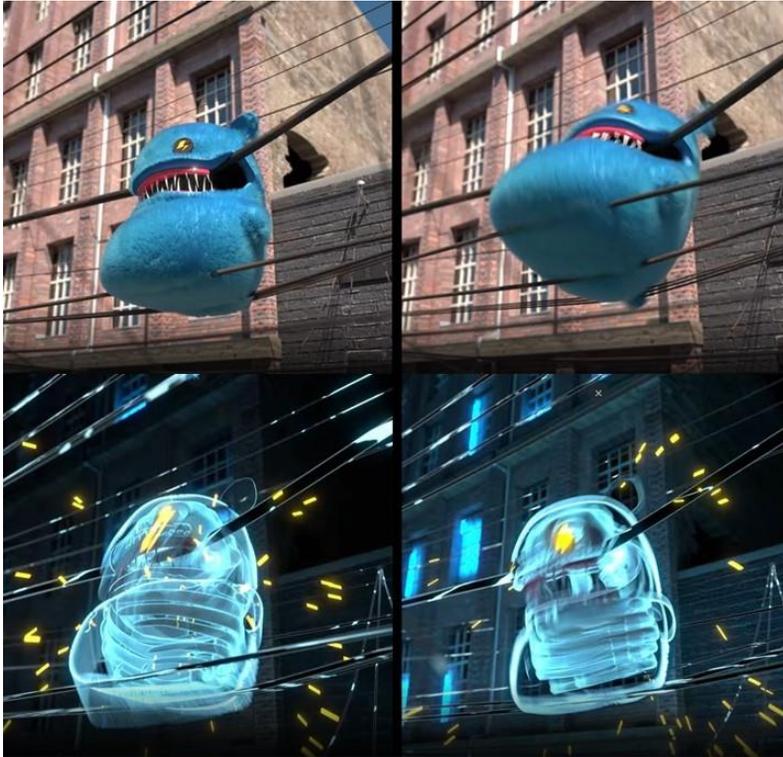


Fig. 7–10. KIWIE 1001, *VOLTAIC*, screen shots from KIWIE’s page on Rarible. Images courtesy of the artist. Photo source: rarible.com



Fig. 11. KIWIE 1001, *VOLTAIC*, photo of the character made in New York, from his webpage. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo source: kiwie1001.com



Fig. 12–14. KIWIE 1001, *STEPS*, screen shots from KIWIE’s page on Rarible. Photos courtesy of the artist. Photo source: rarible.com



Fig. 15. Photograph of the original piece *STEPS* in Montenegro. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo source: kiwie1001.com

The “museum” of NFTs

There is, however, one more way of presenting street art as NFTs. We may encounter it as a gallery or a museum wall. As an example we might consider Street Art Alive Gallery, a webpage created (and perhaps we could even say – curated) by @artflowNFT. It looks nothing like the urban environment in which we are used to seeing street art. It’s a white cube, with a ceiling made out of windows, light floor panels, and huge doors (Fig. 16–17).

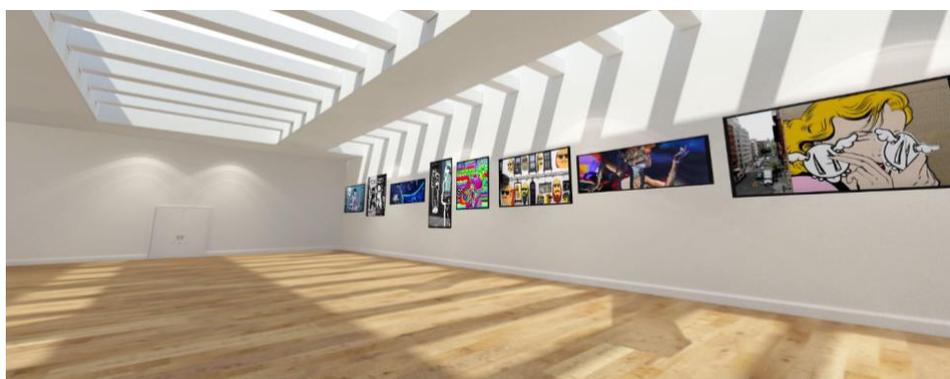


Fig. 16–17. Screen shots from the webpage Street Art Alive Gallery. Images courtesy of Artflow NFT. Photo source: oncyber.io

There is even a soundtrack. Inside the room, we see both known and unknown pieces of street art that we may have seen in the traditional forms, such as D*Face’s (Dean Stockton’s) *Behind Closed Doors* (Fig. 18–23), *Going Nowhere Fast*, and *‘Til Death do Us Part*, Dscreet’s *The Other Side* (Fig. 24–29) and *Two Birds One Stone*, as well as works by ELLE, Michael Fikaris, Tom Gerrard, and the duo Rose Staff and Nick Azidis. The pictures run in a loop, constantly changing.



Fig. 18–23. D*Face, *Behind Closed Doors*, screenshots of a moving NFT. Images courtesy of Artflow NFT. Photo source: artflownft.art



Fig. 24–29. Dscreet, *The Other Side*, screenshots of a moving NFT. Images courtesy of Artflow NFT. Photo source: artflownft.art

The piece *Behind Closed Doors* shows a woman who is peeking behind the doors. She is not the one who is opening them; rather, we see the a hand of an unknown, mysterious skeleton man – a well-known character created by D*Face. The animation emphasizes the dismemberment of the wall by the movement of the hand. In the work *The Other Side*, the lyrics of the song *Break on Through (To the Other Side)* by The Doors are presented in a style similar to a karaoke screen – the words “flow by” but without the music. Similar to KIWIE 1001, the mural was transferred into a different medium. We may also see a similarity with typewriting, especially because in the background we hear a sound reminiscent of a typewriter but more rhythmic. These murals exist in the real world. The first one is situated in Las Vegas and the second in a famous street art area – Shoreditch, London. The same pieces may be “spotted” in the Street Art Alive at Home (Fig. 30–32). The surroundings look like a modern minimalist house and the works sit in contrast to their environment.

NFTs in the metaverse

There is also a visualization of how street art may look in the metaverse (Shirodkar, 2022). Created by Jeremy Patterson, it takes the form of a short animation, lasting only 15 seconds, of an original work by Rachel Wolfe-Goldsmith (Fig. 33–38). The name of the artwork is *Meta Turf* and it is a mural produced for the “Murals to the metaverse” series. It was part of an initiative intended to “bridge murals and physical experiences with the NFT marketplace” (Makersplace.com, 2021). The first thing that distinguishes this piece from the others is that it is situated in an environment that resembles a real one: a mural is actually presented on the wall and we may even see green hills behind it. The wall, which looks something like a billboard, is hovering and spinning above the ground so that the viewer can see it from every side. Beneath the art piece there is a plate which gives the name of the author, the title, the technique, and the year it was made. This is significant in light of the fact that we do not usually find such commentary on the Internet, as mentioned above. NFTs are an important corner of the emerging metaverse. Gita Joshi, independent curator and host of *The Curator’s Salon* podcast, states that some NFT owners might choose to decorate the metaverse, so that visitors might then encounter the art in the same way as people do on city streets – by surprise (Shirodkar, 2022).



Fig. 30–32. Screen shots from the webpage Street Art Alive at Home. Images curtesy of Artflow NFT. Photo source: oncvber.io



Fig. 33–38. Rachel Wolfe-Goldsmith (Wolfe Pack), *Meta Turf*, stills from NFT made for *Murals to the Metaverse* series. Images courtesy of the artist. Photo source: rare.makersplace.com

NFTs in the real world

Interestingly, NFTs sometimes penetrate the real world too. In Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a graffiti artist called Masnah created an NFT wall. It was one of the biggest initiatives for taking NFT imagery to the street (Brandom, 2022). The artist was also the first to be paid for a job in cryptocurrency. To commission such work, the owners of the pieces had to buy another NFT – a tokenized brick. People have called the wall a “collection of graffiti on chain”² (Brandom, 2022).

Concerning a wall or an urban landscape, street art as NFT lacks at least one important feature – expressive authenticity. As described by Adam Andrzejewski, this is a type of authenticity whereby the artwork shows “the values advocated by the artist” (2017) and said values influence the wall itself or the entire surroundings. Street artwork should thus affect the space that encompasses it, while still bearing a relation to its natural context, and therefore to its internal meaning. On this basis, expressive authenticity connects the space in which the artwork is placed with its function in this space and the values represented by the artwork. One of its manifestations can be artification, which

² It is obviously not graffiti in the historical sense of the word.

the author understands as a transformation and modification, both in connection to a space and to each other, if the work involves adding some “accretions” to the first piece. It changes the meaning and provides semantic differences. NFTs, however, cannot be changed; we cannot add anything to them. They are written in code and do not “evolve.” They do not affect their surroundings nor do they correspond with them.

This aspect of street art relates to one more ingredient – performativity (Bal, 1999, pp. 5–6). The act of painting, or act of writing (in the case of graffiti), is active. It is an ephemeral action, almost a choreography (Neef, 2007, p. 424). We usually do not see this with NFTs unless we consider coding along these lines. Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto, known internationally in graffiti as Vhils, attempted to give people a taste of what it looks like to create a piece of art (Overtheinfluence.com, 2021). His works of street art are designed and then burnt in a wall through the use of explosives. In his NFT, titled *Rupture*, he used slow-motion camera technology to show the unveiling of the original artwork to viewers. The destruction became part of the creation. The video shows chaos but its closure brings peace and beauty.

As owners or simply viewers of street art NFTs, there is another important aspect of the artworks that we do not usually see – nature. Tokens are not influenced by any atmospheric factors. Instead of nature, their variable is constituted by economic and market factors. To quote Agnieszka Gralińska-Toborek:

A photo of a work of street art associated with a particular site loses the specificity of the work itself (its medium, size, or non-visual qualities) as well as of the place itself (which has its own spatial, polysensory, functional and temporal characteristics). One cannot see all this in a photo” (Gralińska-Toborek, 2017, p. 104).

The same rules apply to NFTs.

However, it is evident that artists still strive to preserve the aura of traditional street art in their NFTs. Artists using auratization try to create a situation in which the NFT uses the same motifs as street art and refers to its medium (cf. Biskupski, 2017, p. 110; Fischer-Lichte, 2014). The NFTs are intended to become an extension of the tradition.

THE URBAN VALUES OF NFTs

The development of Web 3.0. (Web3) was, above all, supposed to give people one urban value – *an illusion of preserving street art* (Shirodkar, 2022). It was intended to be anti-ephemeral. Many NFT platforms, or so-called “NFT auction

houses,” included in their bio or “mission” tab a claim that their work extends the life of the work of art or even immortalizes it forever (Houser, 2022). Is an NFT timeproof, though? Does it capture and collect artistic manifestations and grant them uniqueness and perpetuity? Does it give the art freedom (and hence make it an extension of *street art* values), because all censorship has been removed and it has been given a life “beyond” the wall? I am in agreement with the assessment of R. J. Rushmore, curator, street art connoisseur, and editor-in-chief of a street art blog, *Vandalog*, that NFT does not allow preservation (Bambić Kostov, 2022). He writes:

There are people who said street art NFTs are going to allow preservation in a way that was never before possible. I feel that’s a little overstated. I also feel that preservation is not always the correct move. Further – photographs already did that, preserve. You could still put a photo on IPFS without attaching it to an NFT, if preservation was all you cared about (Bambić Kostov, 2022).

Sometimes, however, it is perhaps not an NFT but a video turned into an NFT which makes us, the viewers, believe that preservation IS a value present in this case. Vhils’ NFT *Rust Belt* was made into four editions (Noorata, 2022). Each one is a video filmed from different angles with the use of a ballistic camera. The piece itself was a portrait of a local factory worker. Right after the explosion came the implosion; the entire structure of the building was demolished. Now it is only these videos, in the form of NFTs, that prove the existence of the piece, and record both the beginning and the end of it.

The value of **illegality** and bypassing censorship is not reflected in the world of NFTs. NFTs are exclusive, which stands in opposition to the universality of street art. In the world of NFTs, no space is created for social, political, or critical activities. Most important is their ludic character. NFTs do not operate under censorship conditions, so artists do not feel the need to “smuggle in” important content.

Another urban value of street art NFTs is **accessibility**, which, in combination with **appreciation/admiration**, works both with and against **contextuality**. For example, www.wallkanda.art, in their website bio, state: “We are the web3 palette of urban art, focused on bringing revolutionary tech to evolutionary artists. Tech is what we use, accessibility is what we build” (Wallkanda.art, n.d.). Accessibility is described as means of boosting art awareness. NFTs bring the *physical* street to the digital world. They “help” people accustomed to this environment to familiarize themselves with street art that can be admired physically and digitally. This is supposed to support a new form of *cultural tourism*, domestic and international (Rabimov, 2021). Street art NFT website CEOs still claim that digital technologies can and above all should improve people’s lives in the physical world.

It is possible to buy NFTs merely by taking a photo of a chosen mural. The website Wallkanda.art has built an app that recognizes a work of art and takes the user straight to the NFT on the Blockchain, where they can then purchase it using cryptocurrencies. These NFTs are called “digital representations” (Wallkanda, n.d.). However, we can also see an inversion of this situation. On Streeth.io users may bid to own a physical mural without leaving the comfort of their own houses (Streeth, n.d.). We must remember that the Web also offers protection and anonymity, and every user can use their alias to support the artists (a similar argument has been made by Sonja Neef; 2007).

One crucial value connected to NFTs is of course **money**, both in the form of **an income for the artist (monetization)** and **privatization/ownership of the artwork** (Biskupski, 2017, pp. 15–21). Halim Bensaïd writes that “young artists use the city as a marketing medium: they profit from this visibility” (2016, p. 155). The world of institutions and financial activities strikes again. Works of art are made and purchased with or without the support of the critics. Simultaneously, we may still see declarations that NFT practice will help to sustain a gallery or a street practice. The curators of Blockchain auctions make the street artists believe that they can have their cake and eat it too – that they can have the support of NFTs while remaining true to their roots and without losing street credibility. This is important, because, as Sonja Neef notes:

Graffiti [and other street-art kinds – A.B.] has been interpreted in terms of a reclamation of identity, challenging bourgeois identity as well as the anonymity of the city. Youngsters defend their personality by tagging, bombing or throwing up their signatures on available writing surfaces, with a crowning mark on a wall or a traffic sign at neck-breaking height (2007, p. 420).

Blockchain activity should therefore keep street work alive and at the same time ensure an enlarged international audience and a fair compensation for the artworks in both their NFT and traditional forms. It is true that with NFTs, artists have more control and transparency in the sale of a piece than in a traditional auction house setting.

On the buyer’s site, a new value emerges – **uniqueness**: “Our uniqueness comes in providing real-world value-add opportunities to NFT owners through our physical venues around the world” (ArtflowNFT.art, n.d.). Street art in the form of NFTs is no longer received collectively. It is exclusive. NFT technology allows artists to permanently authenticate their pieces, regardless of copies – it is indisputable confirmation of ownership. This is a good way of collecting royalties from resales of the work too. Designing digital NFTs to be collectible also changes the perspective on physical assets. Depending on the artist, it is possible to buy either the digital NFT as just an independent physical piece, or with a certificate of street art ownership. Unfortunately, artists sometimes go so

far as to take such steps as deliberately destroying the piece to make it unique and available only as an NFT. As an example, we might consider Nathan Murdoch's work, *God Bless the NHS*. The piece was made in an isolated place and then destroyed. The image is accessible only by buying an edited NFT or a singular print. The viewer may confirm the existence of this mural only by looking at the timelapse footage showing the creation process (Shirbon, 2021).

A problem arises regarding the concept of uniqueness when we realize that in order to create a unique piece, another unique piece is destroyed in the form of a single artwork. Due to their roots in street art, NFTs try to take on the features of this original form, but *à rebours*. It is a case of undermining one medium while celebrating the other. It is a kind of game with the concept of uniqueness. There is also the paradox that reproduction, although it is not what we have left behind in the real world, still wants to preserve the aura of what has been destroyed. NFT artists try to save uniqueness as a quality, but in order to do so, they must destroy a piece themselves and thus testify to ephemerality. The Internet world tends toward repeatability but, in this case, it tries to recreate uniqueness in the digital sphere. However, it is difficult to talk about the issue of network homogenization because NFT technology is still too new and too massive a phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The expansion of street art onto the Internet did not stop with Web 2.0 tools and technologies. It took over Web 3.0 and its Blockchain technology with NFTs (non-fungible tokens) as a medium. This shift changed how street art is perceived, as well as how it is owned and/or funded. NFTs only partially draw from urban values, establishing their own based on the characteristics of digital art.

The value of ephemerality has been abandoned; street art is no longer thought of as a short-term artistic form. It even seems that there is no need to record physical works, since the idea of preservation has been entirely taken over by NFTs. This is evidenced in particular by cases where the work is destroyed shortly after creation in order to make the NFT unique. For obvious reasons, the NFTs are also devoid of spontaneity. Works taken out of their environment lose their contextual dimension. Under the guise of "accessibility," viewers are encouraged to shop when browsing websites rather than to actually get outside to see particular works.

Illegality has also ceased to be a value in the context of NFT street art. The works are completely free from censorship. Their appearance can take any form and express whatever views the author wishes. The same is true in terms of

possession. Both the author and owner are coded into the NFT itself, so tracing the history of one specific NFT is a piece of cake. There is no possibility that anyone else would try to claim the authorship or ownership.

Non-commercial aspects are also a relic of the past. Big brands and big entrepreneurs support the NFT market, just as they stimulate trade, which wins the favor of capitalism's giants. Sometimes money is more important than artistic values. The NFTs may move the viewer but they are also supposed to shock them and to generate profit. The dialogue between artists and viewers which was an important aspect of street artistry has changed its form. Artists are building a community that not only appreciates art, but wants to buy it too.

Artistic values still play a role, but artists' approaches to the NFT form are very different. The works lack an environmental context, and the wall itself is often not the basis for image manipulation. According to the artists, it is only what is on the wall, a specific painting, that offers the possibility of digitization. Artists do not limit themselves to specific forms or colors. The forms of their works are very diverse and reflect the private needs of artistic expression.

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