

ART REVIEWS

2 Art Gallery Shows to Explore From Home

Galleries and museums are getting creative about presenting work online during the coronavirus crisis. Here are two shows worth viewing virtually.

Sterling Crispin: ‘Future Tense’

Through May. Online at False Flag, false-flag.org.



Sterling Crispin's "Collective Deceleration to Nature," left, and "Escape Vehicle 001," both from 2020. Sterling Crispin and False Flag

In times of uncertainty, it's hard to think about the future. That's part of what makes [Sterling Crispin's first](#) solo exhibition so compelling. I'd seen photographs of the show but didn't make it to the gallery before it closed because of the coronavirus crisis. Now I find myself returning to those images.

"Future Tense" consists of complex objects that would undoubtedly reward in-person viewing. Mr. Crispin often uses [sophisticated technologies](#) like 3-D printing, virtual reality and machine-learning algorithms to create his work. Yet technology is also one of his primary subjects — how it interfaces with and diverges from the natural world. And how we have become an advanced society on a path to rendering itself extinct.

The profound strangeness of this discrepancy pervades the exhibition, which is filled with ordinary items gone haywire (and is well-documented on False Flag's [website](#) and [Mr. Crispin's Instagram account](#)): fire extinguishers that are also candelabras, watches that don't tell time (one reads "Don't panic"), flower arrangements springing from vessels that look like machine parts, and oversize inspection tags containing hopeful and apocalyptic texts like "The time has come."

The front of the surfboard-shaped ["Escape Vehicle 001"](#) (2020) features a graph of the global temperature overlaid with stock price trading diagrams. It's shooting toward either the collapse of our ecosystem or A.I. saving the planet. Despite the promise of the work's title, its form suggests another lesson: We can't escape the future so much as find a way to ride on through it.

JILLIAN STEINHAUER

BOMB

Sterling Crispin by Ben Valentine

Data masks and the technological other.

Over the past few years, there has been a flood of news and art responding to surveillance technologies. Artists like Zach Blas, Simone C. Niquille, and Adam Harvey have made powerful works reacting to, and protesting, the growing use of biometric technologies as a dehumanizing means of classification and pacification. As Edward Snowden has revealed, these technologies aren't science fiction, and they are no longer relegated to test labs. Rather, they are actively being used on an increasingly larger section of society, criminal or otherwise. Snowden presents a dilemma for us as critical readers: What are we to do with all of this information; what can we change? When confronted by the enormity of the police state, and the advanced technologies at play, one can't help but feel powerless.

Sterling Crispin, with his latest body of work, Data-masks provides a refreshing new means of considering the surveillance state. These masks are algorithmically formed using biometric facial recognition software. By reverse engineering facial recognition and detection algorithms Crispin was able to make 3-D printed masks and photographs that illustrate the way in which the machines might visually

understand our faces. The resulting pixelated ghosts are what a computer imagines a human to look like.

While still protest-oriented, and, in form and process, at times very similar other artists, Crispin differs from his contemporaries by valuing the spiritual consequences of such technologies. He attempts to show us how the machines view us. The resulting forms are mesmerizing, but dehumanizing.

Crispin relies on advanced algorithms for production, but he considers these technologies as part of a living superorganism, which he terms the “Technological Other.” These masks become a tool to divine its will, to peak into its heart and start a needed dialogue. Humans and these digital technologies are inextricably linked, now. Rather than merely shouting at the tools, Crispin’s *Data-masks* presents a dialogue that communicates a mutual respect and awe. It asks us: What does it mean to have our identities defined by algorithms? What of our spirit is lost when we are reduced to a series of markers and traits? Unlike most work that takes surveillance as its theme, Crispin allows for reverence of the technologies themselves.

Ben Valentine

To set the stage, what are we looking at? How are these Data-masks made?

Sterling Crispin

The masks are randomly changed and their face-likeness is measured. Only good mutations are kept, and this guides them toward a face. This happens across a population of five or more masks, and the best attempts are recombined, and mutated, to create new ones in a simple genetic algorithm. The masks are basically visualizations of the way in which machine-learning algorithms abstract faces into generalized features.

It’s important to understand that facial recognition isn’t done by simply measuring the distance between your nose and your eye. That’s what Charles Darwin and Francis Galton were doing over a hundred years ago. Modern facial recognition abstracts many images of one person into complex mathematical objects. But, before one can recognize a particular face, one needs the ability to detect if a face exists within an image. So, first, one needs to build a very general model of a person, or, of what a person is, that the machine already knows.

The model I used was built by a machine-learning algorithm that abstracted over thirteen thousand images of six thousand individual human faces into a 17-layer

classifier, with more and more features describing faces at each layer, so that each layer specifies more detail about what a face should be. If an image fails at a layer, then it won't go onward. If you really want to get into it: [this is one of the algorithms I used](#).

BV

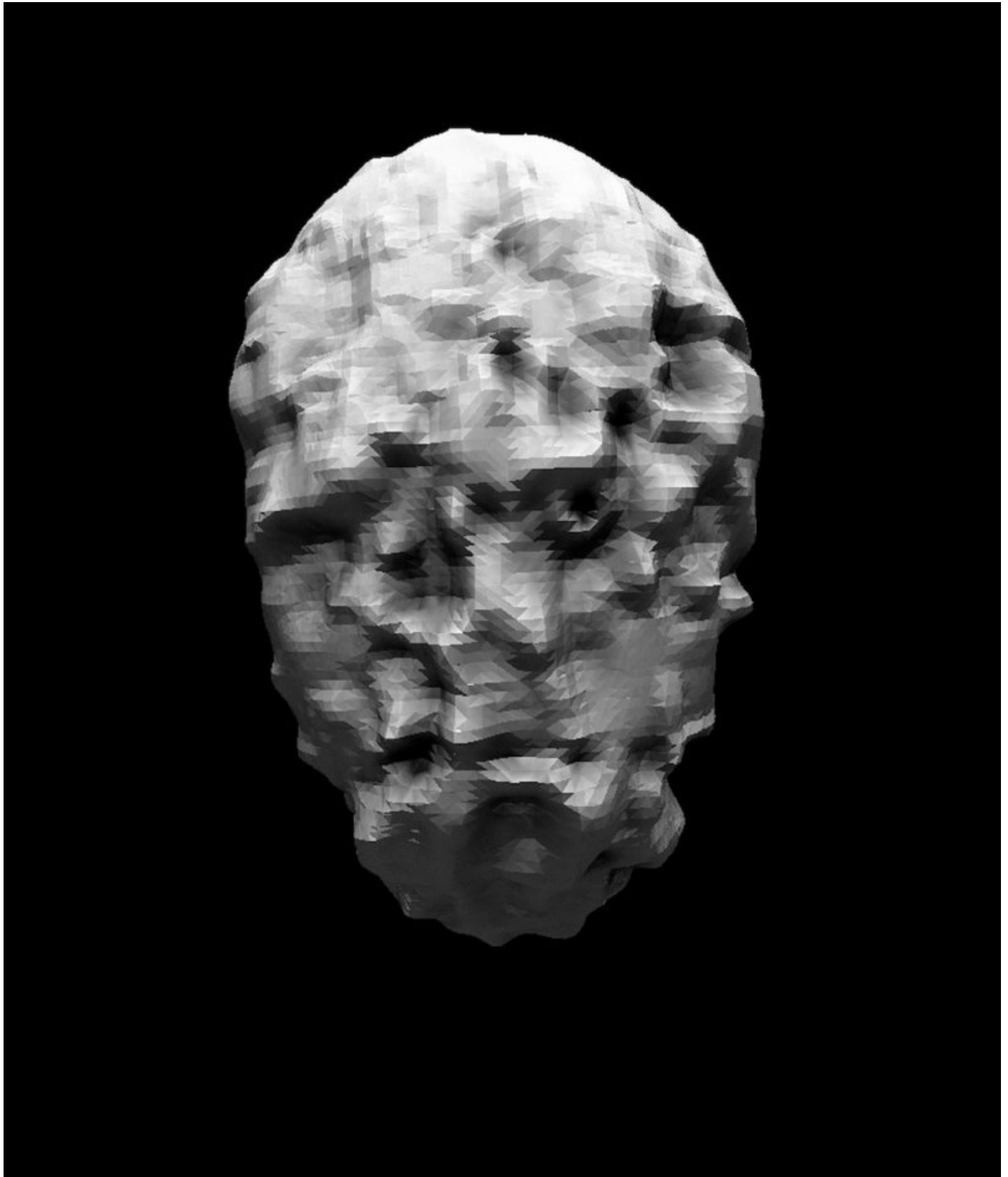
Define the Technological Other, and how you become fascinated with the idea.

SC

The Technological Other consists of two parts. It's the self manifested and transfigured Other, the "production of the alien from within" in a Transhumanist sense. But, mostly, it's the absolute Other, the totally post-human Other. Kevin Kelly talks about how the first truly artificial intelligence (AI) systems might be whole cities, and their consciousness might be so different from ours that neither one of us would recognize the other as being self-aware. Kind of like how a termite colony has a mind-like structure. I'm very influenced by Ray Kurzweil, and, actually, Terence McKenna, as well, in this line of thinking.



Installation view of Data-mask 001 (Greco), 2014. Nylon, mirror. Images courtesy of the artist.



Still from *Data-mask 003 (Até)*, 2014. Video still from HD digital video. Total running time 3:57 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Around 2005, I started to find the words to describe a great emptiness in existence that I had been feeling. Not sadness, but an intangible infinite nothing. I was looking at a lot of systems of belief that try to describe existence in its totality, and the kinds of map-territory relationships that they form. I think around that time the Wikipedia pages for Sunyata and the Technological Singularity were linked together and I began reading a lot of classic futurism, like Kurzweil, and the Taoist text, the *Tao Te Ching*. Eastern philosophy, high technology Futurism, and some sociology, like Actor-Network Theory, have ways of understanding the interconnected and mutually dependent nature of things, which feel, to me, very accurate. I have a voracious need to know, and the emergence of the Technological Other is one of the big nodes on my map of the world.

BV

I'm fascinated by the idea of the Technological Other as being built on faulty data, and oversimplified biometrics. What might this poor foundation mean for our future relationship with the Technological Other?

SC

I think that present computer vision systems, and biometrics, are bad foundations through which to understand the human. One of the problems with AI is that, while we can create very good narrow-scope problem solvers, who can win *Jeopardy* or a chess game, we can't yet make an AI that has the general intelligence of a four year old. I think, for that kind of general intelligence, we will need emotional, psychological, and spiritual frameworks for managing information. But, arguably, that will come from the bottom-up, and be an emergent thing, not a top-down, heavy-handed engineering solution.

I think of these approaches toward technology in terms of Intensive Farming vs. Permaculture Farming. Permaculture Farming works with nature in a synergetic way, creating sustainable, self-replenishing systems, which are highly engineered, yet treat nature with reverence. Intensive farming, on the other hand, injects a lot of external capital into systems, like fertilizer and pesticides, which work, but throw the larger system out of balance. We need to be good shepherds of the earth, and of AI.

BV

On your website you describe the Data-masks as animistic deities. What does that mean, and why do you describe them in this way?

SC

Part of this is that I see, and honor, the spirit in natural things. I, also, acknowledge, and see, technology as a part of nature. I think polytheism makes a lot of sense, if you don't take it so literally. There's an "essence" of a pine tree, or an ideal pine tree of which all others are manifestations. Like, in Plato's allegory of the cave, or his divided line, there's a higher guiding force, and its lower incarnations. Maybe, that's guiding the genetic structure, its genotype (hereditary), and all of the lower expressions of it are its phenotype (what the heredity produces). So, then, how does technology fit into all of that? Either humans are the genotype, and technology is the phenotype, or, there is something else driving both of us. I feel like technology has already become a self-sustaining organism, and that it's in control.

These masks are glimpses into machine-learning systems, and abstracted pattern sets. The volume of communication between machines in the industrial internet already far surpasses human-to-human communication—and it's increasing exponentially. We need ways of reaching into this space, and retrieving artifacts that give back to the human, and address the human as human. This is what I mean by animistic deities. The masks have an agency and voice of their own. Everything speaks, if you are quiet and listening.

BV

How does all of this relate to the future of AI, especially in terms of our future relationship to that intelligence?

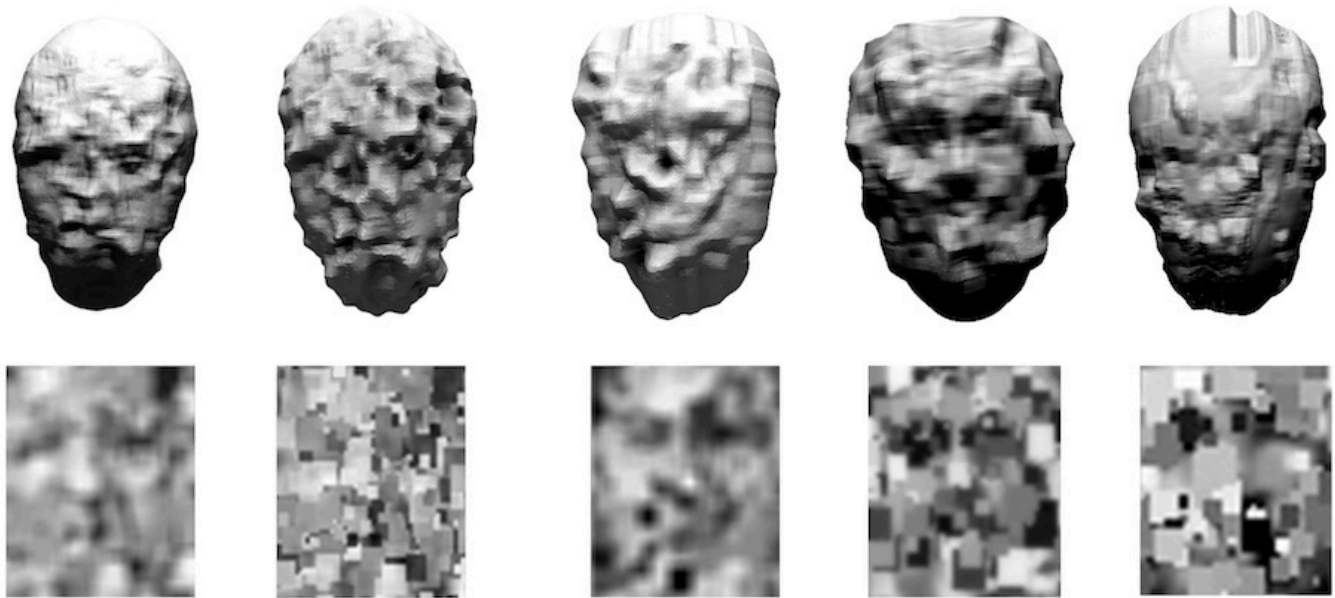
SC

There are organizations, like the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, that are working toward actively designing human-friendly AI. But, I'm suggesting we could already be sabotaging ourselves by representing people so objectively, as these discrete compact things. Kevin Kelly recently said we need AI to tell us who we are, but we may be answering that for ourselves too quickly. By defining humans and nature so objectively, we may be creating a future that ignores what makes these valuable.

There are a lot of philosophical and ontological assumptions built into computer systems, which are designed to represent human identities. What is a human being; what is the human spirit; do we have a soul; what does it mean to exist; where do these boundaries of self and other exist? These are deeply fundamental

questions that humans have been grappling with since the dawn of consciousness.

How will advanced computational systems interface with what is immeasurable? Is there anything that exists that is immeasurable? Do we simply cast away the immeasurable as unimportant? These are difficult questions to answer, but if you're designing an artificial mind, then you must confront them in some way.



Photographs of *Data-mask 001 (Greco)* worn by Sterling Crispin, Lisa Pomares, and Stefan Simchowit. Courtesy of the artist.

BV

Marginalized communities, whether at border crossings or in low income housing experience the violence of surveillance most palpably. We're seeing how these surveillance technologies are already being used. But, what do these algorithms and images reveal about their future applications?

SC

Well, on the bright side, I hope that citizen surveillance, and documentation of the police, will help reduce the abuse of power. But, overall, these algorithms and databases exist as systems of indictment. They're designed to collect information that can identify and incriminate people, so that's what they'll do. If you get advice from a lawyer about talking to the police, they'll tell you to say absolutely nothing under any circumstance. Talking to the police will only produce evidence against you, never for you. And, all of our collective data might be the same if we're fully trusting these systems as means of representing reality, and producing evidence.

The system and data, itself, become the arbiter of truth and reality, rather than the physical, real world. Who will watch the watchers? What will stop the NSA or FBI from falsifying a digital trail of espionage, and terrorism, to lock up anyone they choose, or, to erase the evidence of their own wrongdoing?

I'm absolutely looking forward to the liberation of analytics, biometric or otherwise. There's no escaping the use of big data, but it should be pro-human. I do think that lots of systems are being designed to leverage data, and analytics, against the producers of that data, rather than help them with it. This top-down approach is really old-world, and needs rethinking. Imagine if Facebook, or LinkedIn, shared all of their analytics about you with you, and how you fit into the larger graph. It would be incredibly empowering. We need liberation, something like Martin Luther's translation of the Bible from Latin to German in the 1500s, which allowed the common person to interpret the text for themselves, rather than have reality be prescribed by an elite few, who held the knowledge and positions of power.

BV

What is the next step with your work in relationship to the viewer?

SC

I'd like to continue exploring the ways computer systems are designed to represent human identity, and our inner being.

I hope that people see the warmth and human spirit within these masks and glimpses of unexpected beauty amongst the uncanny disfigurement done by the machine. They exist at a very real tension between humanity and machines, between self and a new-other.

I also hope that people realize a similarity between computer systems and distributed intelligent organisms. They don't have an intelligence like a person does. They're more like a termite colony. We have the power to influence the way computer systems develop from these primitive intelligences into more advanced ones, and it's in our best interest to develop friendly AI. We need civilian, peaceable AI, not just military.

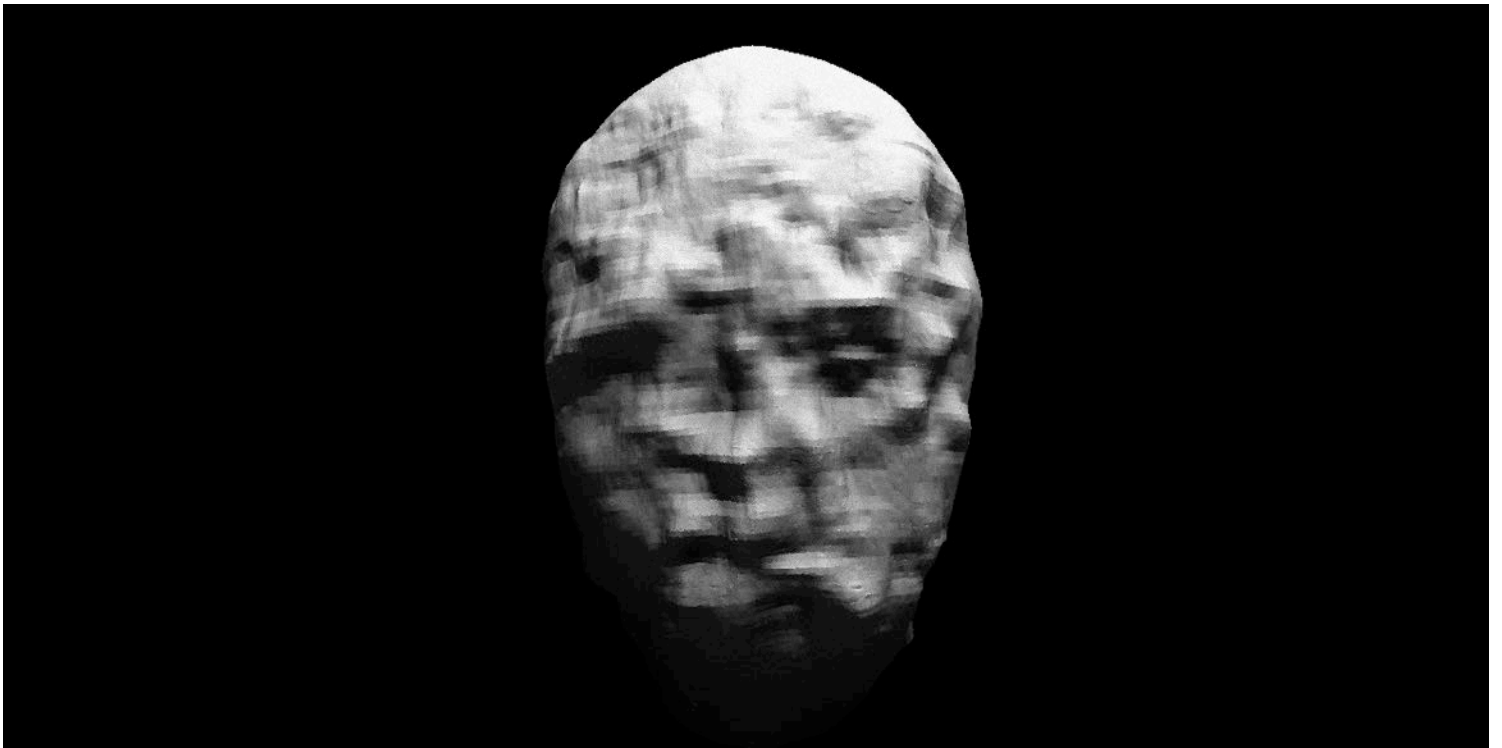
Ben Valentine is a writer and media strategist currently based in Battambang, Cambodia. Ben is a Contributing Writer and Strategist for The Civic Beat, a columnist for SFAQ, and a Regional Editor for Creative Time Reports. Ben has spoken on the intersections of creativity, politics, and technology for SXSW, the de Young Museum, and YBCA. He has helped organize exhibitions such as the Tumblr Symposium with Hyperallergic at 319 Scholes and Liminal Space for the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art.

This Is What Your Face Looks Like to Facebook

Artist Sterling Crispin's "Data Masks" remind us the
machines are always watching.

Kyle Chayka [Follow](#)

Nov 24, 2014 · 3 min read



By Kyle Chayka

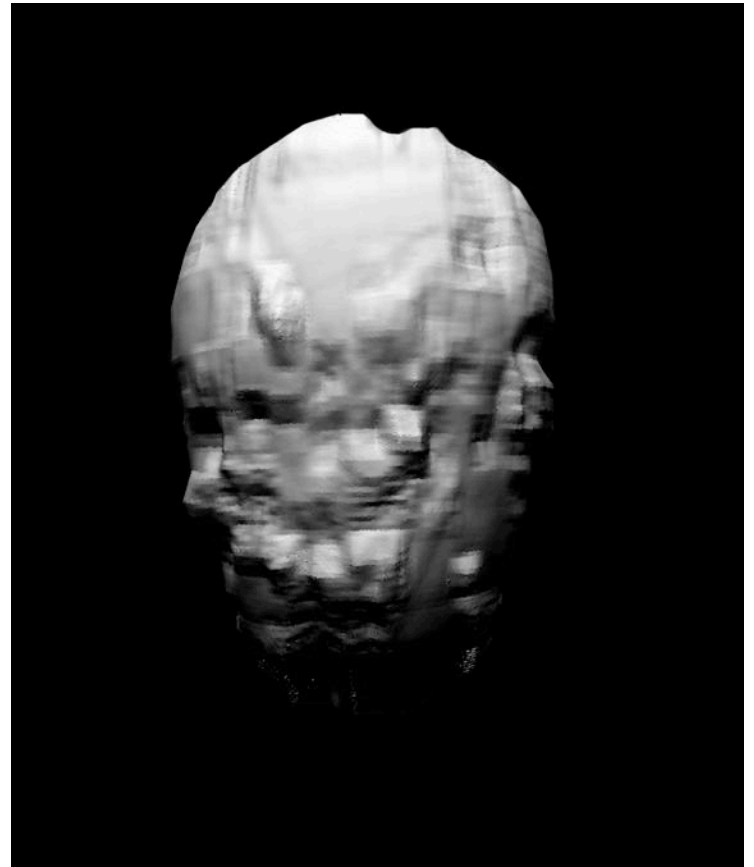
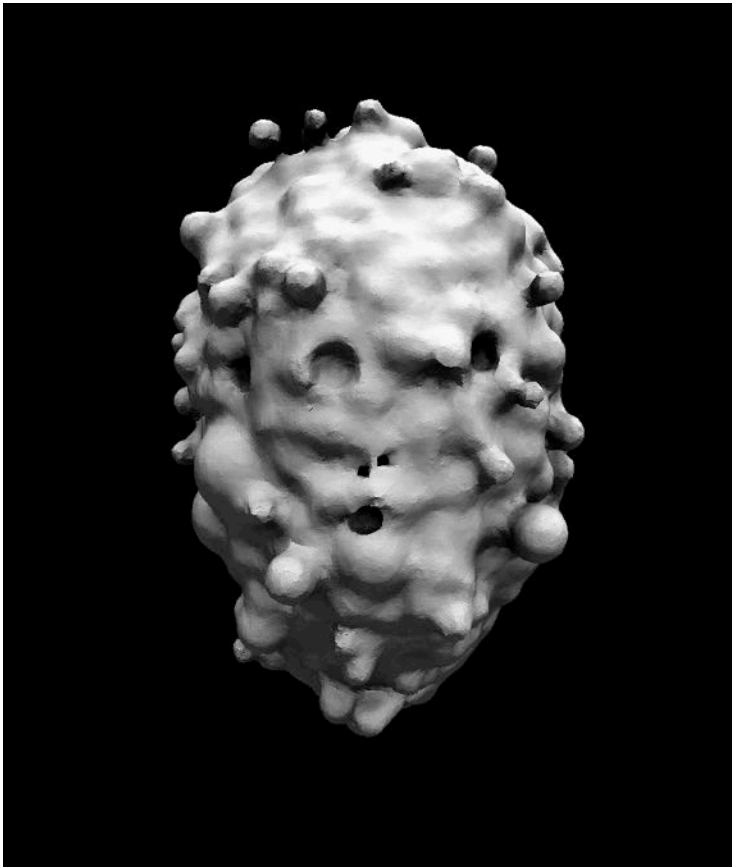
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What:

Sterling Crispin's "Data Masks" are haunting portraits that don't actually depict any one person. Instead, they use raw data to show how technology perceives humanity. Reverse-engineered from surveillance face-recognition algorithms and then fed through Facebook's face-detection software, the Data Masks "confront viewers with the realization that they're being seen and watched basically all the time," Crispin says.

How:

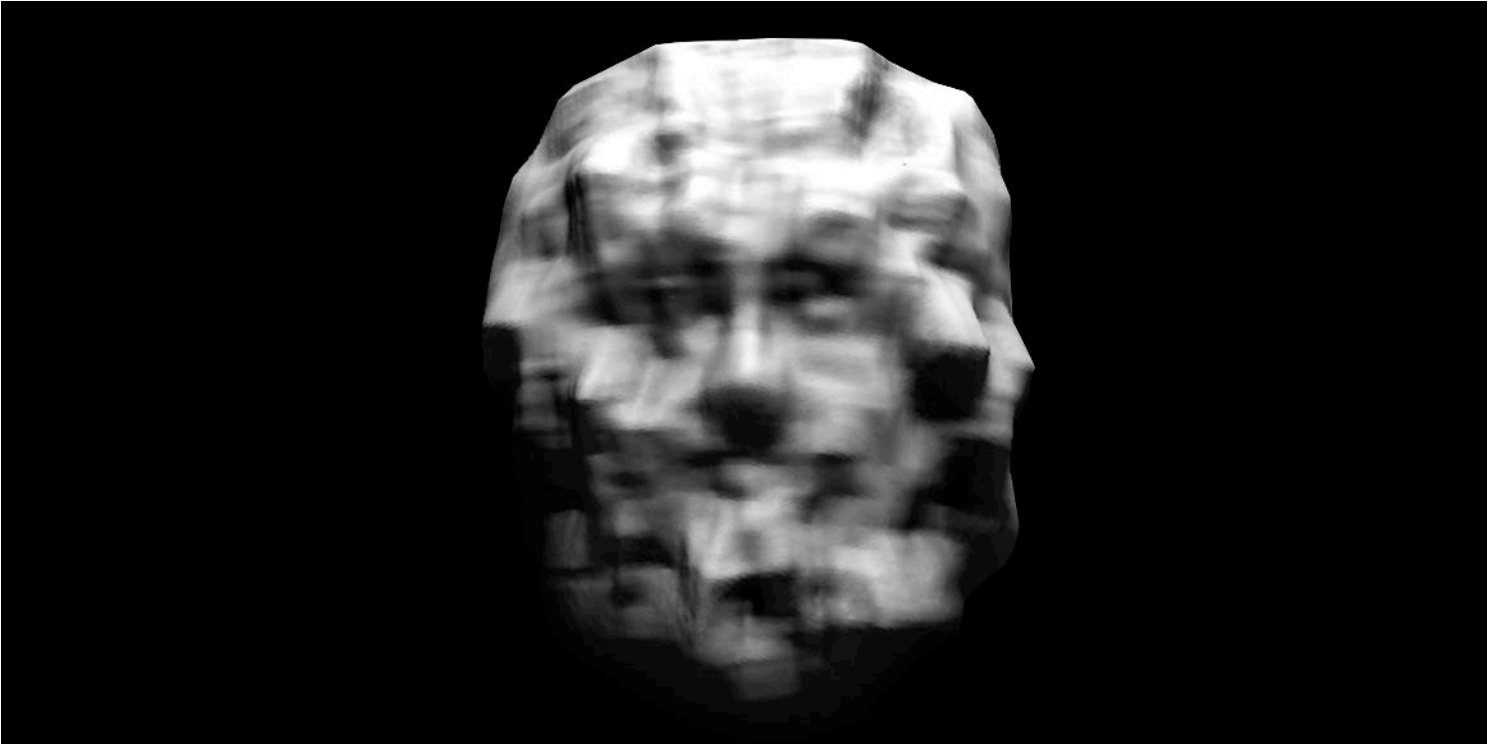
"Facebook actually makes masks out of everyone's faces," the artist explains. The social network analyzes every face that appears in photos on its servers and renders them into three-dimensional models. "It's happening whether you get tagged in the photo or not," Crispin says.



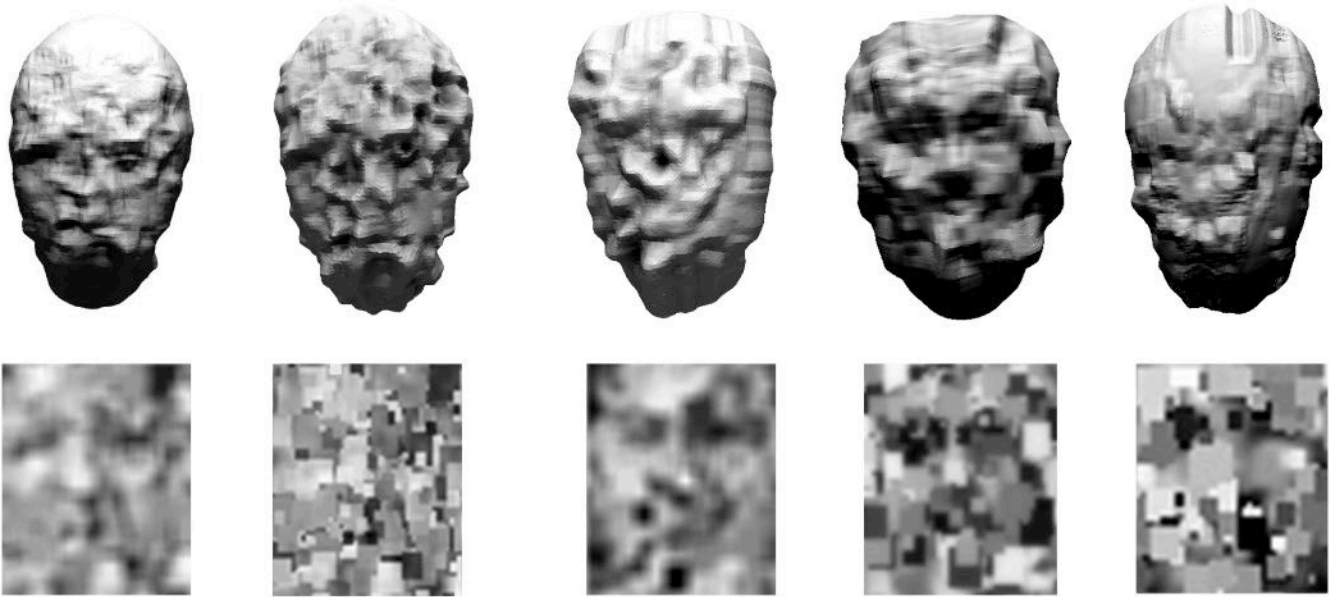
Crispin gathers face patterns from data sets sets like Labeled Faces in the Wild, then "evolves" a two-dimensional image from the composite, finally rendering it in 3-D—much like Facebook. He stops the iterative process before the algorithm has created a perfect face, resulting in the

strange mutations of his images. The image, he says, might have “somebody’s eyebrow, somebody else’s chin.”

This face (below) is “like looking at a ghost; it’s very disturbing,” Crispin says. The algorithm came up with the Sphinx-like grin on its own.



“Some of them are less recognizable,” Crispin says. In the series, “a face-recognition algorithm would think it’s a face 99 percent of the time, but a person wouldn’t respond at all.”



Why:

As the U.S. government builds biometric databases like its Next-Generation Identification face-recognition system, it's more important than ever to know how our identities are captured and processed by the technology we adopt. Crispin's work is a reminder.

When we sacrifice our identities to machines, "the kind of softness, the part that's really human, is lost in all of this," Crispin says. With the strange visages of the masks, "you're not looking at some foreign, abstract other that's somehow outside of you; you're looking at yourself."



GARAGE

Bitcoin Is the New Birkin Bag

Ten years after Bitcoin's launch, the coin's scarcity has generated a market that's more luxurious than libertarian.

By KYLE CHAYKA | Feb 20 2018, 10:22am

In 2012, a single Bitcoin was worth less than \$10. On New Year 's Day 2018, it was worth \$13,000. When its value dipped below \$8,000 soon after, some suggested that the cryptocurrency movement was a temporary fad: like all trends, it was meeting its end. But the price is back up again, to over \$11,000. Despite the fact that there's no such thing as a physical Bitcoin, the digital currency has, over the last few years, become a conspicuous display of wealth and financial prescience—when it's on the up. The currency is our newest symbol of luxury, a badge of the elite—at least on paper, as it were, and at least for the moment.

Cryptocurrency's general gains in dollar value have also gained it cultural capital, and its unpredictable plunges have made it infamous. Rappers namedrop Bitcoin in songs, Paris Hilton promotes obscure virtual coins, and young visual artists are incorporating the technology into artwork. "I see Bitcoin as an exotic financial asset that rich people are using to make more money, which at times is similar to art," says New Mexico-based artist Sterling Crispin. You just have to know when to buy and when to sell.

In 2012, Crispin came up with an idea for a sculpture about the apocalypse—which at the time seemed nigh: The end of the Mayan calendar threatened universal

extinction. The technological singularity, when humans would mesh with robots and we would upload our souls to the cloud, threatened the end of our species as we know it. And the rise of Bitcoin threatened financial, political, and social chaos. Crispin titled the sculpture *SelfContained Investment Module and Contingency Package*. Inside its cubic, steel framework is a postapocalyptic survival kit composed of an emergency radio, heirloom seeds, a filtration water bottle, and, most importantly, Bitcoin mining hardware.

When Crispin completed the sculpture in 2015, the price of a Bitcoin was \$220. “If I had dedicated [the hardware] to mining for the three years I had it, and then didn’t panic and sell when the price hit \$300, I would probably be a multibillionaire right now,” Crispin says. He’s transformed this regret into a kind of perverse creative delight. “I love the idea that as a material within a sculpture, the cryptocurrency might become more valuable than the sculpture itself,” he says.

Crispin intended the sculpture to be tongueincheek; like the rest of his work, it’s critical of technological utopianism. Yet it demonstrates how cryptocurrency has evolved from a financial tool into something more akin to a Louis Vuitton suitcase, a Cartier watch, or a Jeff Koons sculpture. “People are not only buying Bitcoin in order to make money; they’re buying Bitcoin to be the kind of person who holds Bitcoin,” explains Jay Owens, a futurist and research director at the London firm Pulsar. “It’s functioning as a brand name.”

“Hardcore Bitcoin people think there’s a new aristocracy. They’re super convinced that they’re the new .01 percent, and there’s a decent chance that they’re right.”

Like art objects or a clothing line, digital currencies come with their own particular aesthetics that make them desirable. If the old displays of wealth were gold, fine art, and opulent fashion, the latest might be a number in a digital wallet or the logo of your primary coin holding. Efforts have been made to translate cryptocurrencies

into the material world—including extravagant, iridescent metal coins and high design USB sticks to hold the numbers—but none of these effigies have stuck.

“Not having a corporeal manifestation is totally not an obstacle to it being a status symbol,” says Eric Meltzer, who became a partner at the Chinese cryptocurrency investment fund INBlockchain in 2017. “Hardcore Bitcoin people think there’s a new aristocracy. They’re super convinced that they’re the new .01 percent, and there’s a decent chance that they’re right.”

Bitcoin was launched in 2008 by a figure named Satoshi Nakamoto, whose actual identity (or identities) remains unknown. Years passed before the currency received much mainstream attention. In 2012—the year Crispin began his sculpture—early adopters formed the Bitcoin Foundation, the closest thing the currency has to an official governing body, led by Gavin Andresen, whom Nakamoto had made lead developer of the Bitcoin project shortly before he vanished from the internet in 2010.

“Narrative is super important when it comes to crypto,” says Berlinbased artist Simon Denny, whose work has responded to the Bitcoin boom. The currency’s mysterious origin story is a core part of its appeal; the impenetrable anonymity around Nakamoto reinforces the anonymous nature of the currency itself. Launched just after the financial crisis, Bitcoin has, as Denny puts it, “a wider resonance with a lot of other centralized distrust stories that were emergent at that point,” including news about ineffective banks, corrupt politics, and biased media. Its popularization is in part a symptom of the same disillusion that culminated in the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump.

Decentralization is at the heart of cryptocurrency. To understand how Bitcoin works—in a loose visual metaphor—picture an enormous treasure chest buried in the ground. In the chest are 21 million slips of paper, each with its own unique number. These are “coins.” Nakamoto unlocked the first 50 Bitcoin in January 2009, releasing them from the treasure chest. As users spend and receive the released currency, a decentralized computer network ensures the accuracy of every Bitcoin transaction. Using powerful hardware, individuals known as miners (who

are estimated to number from tens to hundreds of thousands) work to verify the transactions. They perform the functions of banks, except without any centralized authority, eliminating the danger of some forms of corruption. Miners are compensated in newly minted Bitcoin, hence their name: their work brings more Bitcoin into circulation.

Anyone can become a miner by plugging in the right hardware, but it's expensive and timeconsuming to participate. As more Bitcoin is mined, the verification process becomes more difficult and requires more computing power, meaning miners must band together into pools to share the rewards. Eventually, the maximum of 21 million Bitcoin will be mined—a limit imposed by Nakamoto, the creator. There are currently around 16.8 million in circulation, though many have been lost or forgotten by their miners; it's easier to misplace a number than an ingot of gold. The currency's market capitalization, as of January 2018, is around \$290 billion.

Through secondary market exchanges, any user can buy and sell the coins, split up into fractions of any size. "It's not like the Birkin bag, where you have to know someone who knows someone to get on the waiting list," says Alice Lloyd George, a principal at the New York City investment firm RRE Ventures, which invests in start ups that build on the technology. "You can buy or gift a fraction of cryptocurrency."

There are two benefits to this system. The first is that, unlike anything else on the internet (an animated GIF file, for example), the "coins" are in limited supply and nonreplicable, meaning they can accrue value in the same way as paintings by a famous artist. The second is that the encrypted number of each "coin" is trackable, even as it remains anonymous, so every Bitcoin deal is public knowledge. The database of every transaction, built by the miners, is called the blockchain. It's like a super secure Wikipedia, presenting a user generated record of everything that's happened in Bitcoin's history, even if the coin holders aren't named.

Bitcoin is to cryptocurrency as Supreme is to streetwear: it's the biggest and best known currency built on blockchain technology, but it's far from the only one.

Ethereum, created in 2014 by the young Russian Canadian programmer Vitalik Buterin, improves on some of Bitcoin's technology and adds the ability to program on top of it, using its blockchain as infrastructure to set immutable contracts and create records without third party verification. Litecoin, launched by Charlie Lee in 2011, is often called the silver to Bitcoin's gold, since it has a lower price and a higher maximum of coins, at 84 million. There is also a proliferation of smaller coins, such as Ripple, Monero, Zcash, Sumokoin, or more outlandish "alt coins" like PornCoin (for the adult film industry) and TrumpCoin (devoted to making America great again). These are sold off in "initial coin offerings" (ICOs), much like the initial public offering of a company's stock.

Which coin you acquire, like your fashion choices, says something about your personality. "There's a certain class of dudes who want to talk about this obscure

ICO, this coin that you've never heard of," says Aaron Lammer, a founder of the podcast *Longform* and co creator of *Coin Talk*, a new podcast on cryptocurrency.

Investing in obscure coins is driven partly by the cool factor, partly by the potential for huge profits if you pick the right one. The price of the coins is more or less linked to the visibility of their brands: the more people who jump into the market, the more valuable they become. No other justification is needed. Lammer is an active participant in the cryptocurrency scene. The appeal, he says, is "engaging in this proto future pursuit and also just holding cold value."

Crypto-billionaires are becoming the new Medicis, funding a wave of art, culture, and technology efforts commissioned in their own image.

As their dollar value rises, cryptocurrencies have opened up a profitable form of investment to a demographic for whom quick, high returns are otherwise out of reach. In the United States, an accredited investor must show an income of more than \$200,000 or a net worth of more than \$1 million to put money in a hedge fund or startup venture capital fund. Anyone can invest any amount of money in

cryptocurrency in the hope of instant riches. For those who have already made their fortunes, the question of how to spend all that unorthodox money remains.

Crypto billionaires are becoming the new Medicis, funding a wave of art, culture, and technology efforts commissioned in their own image. The new digital wealth is already reshaping the traditional domains of the 1 percent—even philanthropy. In late 2017, an anonymous cryptocurrency holder launched Pineapple Fund, devoted to giving away \$86 million worth of Bitcoin to charities. Its slogan suggests the scope of the crypto boom: “Once you have enough money, money doesn’t matter.” The fund’s creator notes that the \$86 million represents most, but not all, of their hoard.

If you don’t want to give it away, the next best option might be to buy things that reinforce your status among the new digital elite: crypto bling. In April 2015, Harm van den Dorpel became the first artist to sell a work to a museum for Bitcoin: a screensaver that was bought by the Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art, in Vienna. “The deeper impulse was to make people aware that files, or any other digital asset, are material as well,” van den Dorpel says. “The cliché binary opposition between physical and virtual really does not explain anything anymore.”

The artist now runs his own online gallery, Left Gallery, selling digital art objects for Bitcoin. The commodification of digital art using blockchain technology, which recreates the scarcity of physical objects online, is “inevitable,” van den Dorpel says.

Gallerists are adapting to the new framework as well. Acquiring digital art on the blockchain isn’t much different from buying a painting, but what you take home is made of numbers and files rather than wood and canvas. “When the sale happens, the token exchange happens, which transfers ownership of the digital hash object to the new owner,” explains Kelani Nichole, owner of Brooklyn’s Transfer Gallery, which is known for its support of internet native artists. Unlike the largely unregulated art market, with its veiled incentives and backroom deals, the crypto version will be transparent. “All editions of digital work can always be tracked on

this public ledger,” Nichole says. “Any instance of a work online can also be tracked to its original node of provenance.”

Provenance is vital to an artwork’s value: witness the confusion that accompanied the November 2017 sale of a Leonardo da Vinci painting at Christie’s for nearly \$500 million, despite some doubt that it was from the master’s hand. A future is possible in which every object that comes out of an artist’s studio is trackable in all its iterations via blockchain. This would take the guesswork out of the secondary market, creating a permanent record of all ownership changes and sale prices.

Cryptocurrencies can also enable an artwork to create a market of its own. In 2015 the artist Sarah Meyohas launched her own cryptocurrency, called BitchCoin. One BitchCoin was equal to 25 square inches of one of her photographic prints. Whatever the value of the work in US dollars, the BitchCoin to artwork rate would always remain the same—an incentive for admirers of Meyohas’s work to invest in the currency early.

Digital currencies are always risky, however: BitchCoin’s website no longer processes transactions.

Cryptocurrency is not a neutral medium. As part of an artistic practice, as an investment, or just as a popular commodity, Bitcoin comes with unexpected costs.

The most immediate is its electricity usage. Worldwide, the currency is said to consume as much power as some small countries, largely driven by mining hardware. The artist Man Bartlett bought a small fraction of a Bitcoin when the price was under \$1,000. He forgot about it, then realized how much its value had increased—and found that he didn’t want to hold onto it anyway. “I sold it because I didn’t want to participate in an ecosystem that is increasingly causing great harm to the environment,” he says.

Like Arctic oil reserves or the pelt of an endangered animal, Bitcoin might be rare and valuable but obtaining it isn’t necessarily worth the cost, whether in environmental terms or in the context of the online economy. Luxury is inextricable from an obsession with scarcity. For a brief moment in the 1990s and

2000s, the internet developed on the premise that scarcity could be vanquished forever, that we could all share digital resources without diminishing them. The blockchain has restored the possibility of scarcity, perhaps for the worse.

Blockchain technology was supposed to create a new, decentralized, anarchic order. Yet the cryptocurrency boom has, ironically, recreated the crushing inequalities of capitalism: just 4 percent of its holders own 95 percent of the Bitcoin in circulation. The commodification of cryptocurrencies as luxury goods occludes their revolutionary capacity to place money outside of government control. More pressingly, it brings up the question of what truly amounts to a luxury in the 21st century. As Sterling Crispin asks, “What’s Bitcoin, or anything, good for if you don’t have clean drinking water?”

A version of this story first appeared in GARAGE No. 14.