

# My Digital Combines Story

By Claudia Hart

In 2020, I imagined myself as a player in a fantasy game. In that imagined world, I was a forger, painting copies of famous works by the masters of 20th century Modernism. My goal was to forge them and then mint them, thereby reproducing them as unique and non-fungible, and quite ironically, securing by contract, my individual authorial rights. Later that year, I fabricated this series in the tangible world. I invented an elaborate process, using a computer-controlled air-brush machine. First, I built a series of 3D computer models, then “painted” them with a digital brush that simulated watercolors. Using the models as subjects, I arranged to create dimensional still lifes in virtual-reality rooms. From this set up, I rendered them out as source-files needed to drive my machine. The machine and I then produced a painting very much like the one you stand before right now. It was illusionistic and uncanny, meant to evoke trompe-l’oeil paintings from the 19th century. My first forgery paired one of these paintings with its source file, the digital picture that I actually minted, thinking of it as half of a mixed-reality whole I then called “Digital Combine.”

The more I thought about this Combine, the more I realized that my true source file was not the digital production file that I just described in the previous paragraph, but rather, the story I am telling you right now. A “Digital Combine” is not a forgery but instead quite real, a poetic resolution of the mind-body problem, of a concept plus a tangible object. Although “Digital Combine” is a term that I invented to describe an artwork of my own, a work that is mixed materially - part painting and part digital file - I realized that it also could be used to describe the work of other artists who also make a certain kind of hybrid artwork.

A Digital Combine is a liminal object, part immaterial and part tangible. The immaterial part is a digital file minted on a blockchain. A Digital Combine mixes tangible materials, like paint, wood, or paper, with a digital file like a jpeg, video, audio, or text file, or even a piece of software - anything an artist might imagine. The digital object is then encrypted and distributed across a Web 3 network in a space now known as the “Cloud,” accompanied by an encoded contract - dubbed a “smart” contract in the common vernacular. This smart contract can, in the case of a Digital Combine, marry a digital thing and a tangible thing together once it is minted.

A Digital Combine is a strange beast, an unusual variant of an NFT: a non-fungible token. Commonly, NFT are purely digital and don’t try to synthesize into a hybrid form. However, here a “normal” art object and an ephemeral digital object are determined by contract to be one singular thing. In this essay I will try to describe why I invented this term, and how art objects like this fit into art history. I am writing it in order to both explain my own version of why I think NFT are important, but also to critique them. To build my argument I will walk you through several thoughts. Please imagine them as links in a chain.

The interesting thing about smart contracts is that they aren’t really smart. They are more like a “gentleman’s agreement” than a contract, because they aren’t enforceable nor are they quite legal according to current laws. But I

think that nevertheless they are quite convincing because of their forceful and obscure literary style. Once encrypted and minted, an NFT of any variety is declared 'non-fungible,' meaning unique and one-of-a-kind, in the same way that a traditional painting or a hand-carved sculpture is. This is a powerful and seductive idea. In addition to being connected to a contract, NFT are encrypted on a blockchain that is linked to a cryptocurrency, then stored in a cryptocurrency "wallet," meaning a software application that allows for the purchase of that particular currency and whatever NFT might be offered as an extension to that brand.

What I personally like about NFTs is that they manage to turn difficult liminal things - "impossible objects" - into ordinary, tangible things. I think of them as a kind of magical enactment or an act of prestidigitation or perhaps a ghost, but now substantiated - something metaphysical.

Also important to my story is the history associated with the term "Combine." I borrowed it from Robert Rauschenberg, inventor of the form in the late 1950s. I follow him, in that he was also strategizing an art-historical category based on his own practice. One of Rauschenberg's signature Combines is *Monogram* (1955-59), which consists of a stuffed goat plunged through the center of a rubber inner tube then glued standing up to a wooden plank roughly painted with crude brush strokes and including elements of paper collage. *Monogram* is monstrous, a piece *grotesquerie*, and an impossible object, coming into existence as an artistic concept when Rauschenberg also granted it the status of a literary trope by naming it. A "Combine" transforms a weird implausible thing into a knowable, although very odd, thing. I decided to do the same for my own hybrids, part digital file, part tangible painting, hence *Digital Combines* were born. This story, in the form of a text file, has now transformed into my digital counterpart.

I chose Rauschenberg as my point of origin because of his position in the timeline of the history of art. He produced his Combines between 1954-1964, a time of transition and social upheaval in America. With them, he launched a cultural trajectory that I believe finds its end point in NFT. Rauschenberg was part of the team that initiated another event relevant to my story, the *Experiments in Art and Technology* (E.A.T) sponsored by Bell Labs in the mid-1960s.

E.A.T. was launched in 1967 by Julie Martin, the engineers Billy Kluver and Fred Waldenheimer, Robert Rauschenberg, and the artist Robert Whitman. Their intention was to enable collaborations between engineers and artists. It resulted in *9 Evenings: Theater and Engineering*, including collaborating artists John Cage, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Rauschenberg, David Tudor and Robert Whitman. It represented an idealistic vision of utopian interdisciplinarity. That same vision, one that imagined the breakdown of institutional compartmentalization and bureaucracy, also fueled the idealistic, romantic culture that resulted in the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. This college was a project in experimental education initiated by many of the same people who participated in E.A.T., including Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Jasper Johns. These experiments reflect the German Bauhaus from earlier in the 20th century, a bubble that was burst by the autocratic regime of the Nazis. Likewise, just as NFT recently burst a certain trajectory of art history, the end-game of Black Mountain is concurrent, reflected in the phenomena of "MFA-ification." This term references the Masters in Fine Arts education offered by elite schools to aspiring artists for an exorbitant tuition fee, leaving students who risk them years of debt. The financial risk is made in order to obtain the branding required to compete in the high-stakes, tangible art market. Both the MFA-ification and NFT mania represent a hyper-financialization that is a radical inversion of the idealistic

culture that rejected American post-war materialism and that embraced the immaterial as a symbol of a profound anti-materialism.

Concurrent to E.A.T. were other new forms of art tracked by the art historian Lucy Lippard in her seminal text *The Dematerialization of the Art Object, From 1966-72*, published in 1973. In its preface, Lippard quotes Sol LeWitt:

*Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach...illogical judgements lead to new experience (1969).*

LeWitt's form of mysticism, in terms of his practice, was that the instructions to produce his wall drawings were the "real thing," his originating art object, or his "source file," rather than the drawings that other artists eventually produced by following his instructions. In this he coined an "impossible" work, which relates to a Digital Combine through the merging of language and the tangible. A Digital Combine uses the encoded NFT and its smart contract as a paradoxical framing device, transforming it into a non-fungible, liminal "thing." Both also symbolize the merging of body and mind, resolving this conflict by means of "instructions" that deploy a dry and somewhat obtuse form of language.

In her book, Lippard writes the first histories of conceptual art, land art, and performance art. One can also trace those legacies in other contemporary art practices that developed between the 1970s and the 1990s, through installation-based practices, intermedia art, identity art, and digital art, all in the tradition of Hippie liberation politics and the experimental art practices that were initiated by Rauschenberg with E.A.T and Black Mountain College in the 1960s. The 1990s also marked the birth of a speculative Wall Street stock market, and a speculative art market that developed in tandem, leading to NFT as their endgame. What started as breathless idealism has now finally transformed into something quite its opposite, a trading card serving as a financialized instrument made for currency trading. It is my wish with the Digital Combine to slow down the fast flip and create a reminder of some things that we have lost along the way.

I connect Digital Combines to these particular stories because I am also trying to locate them in the humanities rather than in the history of science or technology - within the history of art rather than within a history of algorithms. I believe that the vision and the impulse to produce art expresses the desire for transcendence, for a space of metaphysics as LeWitt well-noted. My own personal version of the NFT is a radical rethinking of the history of representation. It is a way to reframe the real within a history of art, a human desire to recreate the real, it is this story. I imagine Digital Combines as a new way to fake the real. Language as a vehicle allows the work to be located within the discourse of simulation, and of writers that I admire, from Marshall McLuhan to Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco.

To close my story, I would like to finally ask: why? How did the idealistic art-bubble burst, so absolutely and so suddenly, with this NFT thing? If we understand the why, we can redirect NFT and their historical flow. By prioritizing financialization, the NFT breaks with art history but hopefully not art in that process. I will therefore propose a few why's.

Precipitated by COVID-19, in a house-bound world with a computer as a lifeline, powerful mythologies came together in a concentrated way. All of them were delivered online, and all of them are mythologies about power itself. Together these conditions created a perfect storm, a perfect conjunction of signs - magic ingredients if you will - a peculiar species of metaphysics, endowed with the aura of a monstrous piece of 'grotesquerie.' In keeping with my language, and the story that I have spun, here is a list of these conditions:

1. Encryption: implying a mystical secret language, medieval monks, secret societies, and the Silicon Valley brotherhood of technology (self-branded as a race of superbeing billionaires and masters of the universe, and also masters of outer space, and the also the creators of a new form of artificial life).
2. The Cloud: in keeping with the language of Lippard's dematerialized art, I am proposing the Cloud as a new version of Robert Smithson's 'non-site', a place that is immaterial, obviously heavenly, existing but not really existing, a place desired and somewhere up there. I am proposing the Cloud both as religion and as the site of distributed encryption.
3. Markets: that which is impossible to predict, is irrational, emotional, and resembling an ancient mythological god-head in its wily ways, ie. the stock market.
4. Legalese: legal language, that which is encoded, and like Encryption, hermetic, but also requires experts to decode, the core of Anglo-Saxon culture from the Magna Carta to to the U.S. Constitution, etc.

These four ingredients have proven hypnagogic. They have re-mythologized dematerialization with an aura of financial and political power, now framed in the most conventional of terms. With that gesture, art, previously a site of idealism, has reemerged as a vehicle that metaphorically enables established codes of power and authority, prioritizing the fast flip as its goal, and transforming that which emerged from sixties counterculture with its vision of dematerialization as a form of liberation into the NFT that finally marks this story's close. As to its future - I think the ball is in our court.

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