



Aura & Transvestment

aura-transvestment.art



Application for time ship earth

by Pablo Somonte Ruano

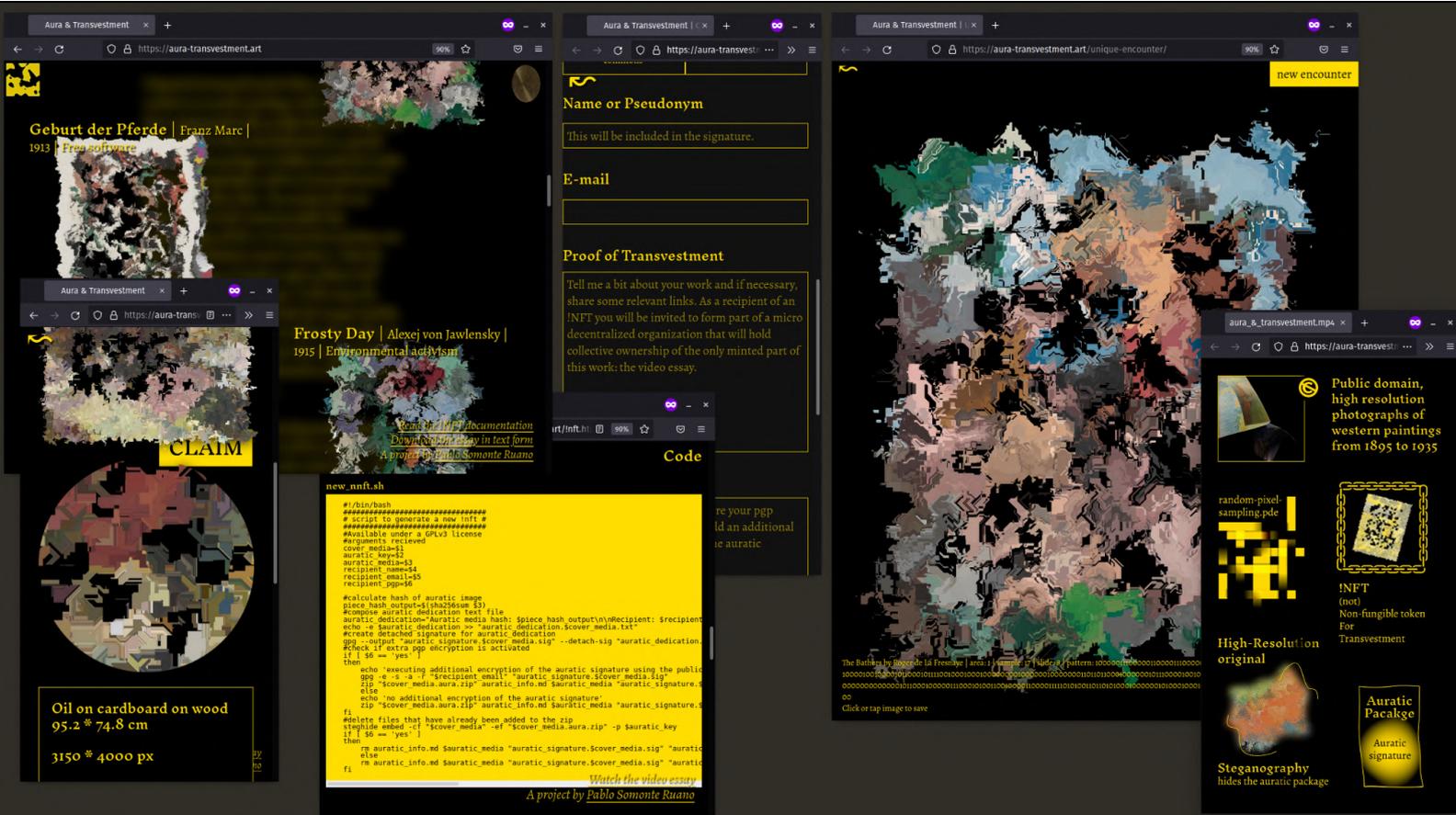
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Description

Aura & Transvestment is a transmedia project consisting of a series of generative images, an experimental form of crypto media and a video essay. By describing its own powers and contradictions, the work explores notions of value, ownership, authenticity, artificial scarcity and abundance in the digital realm. The project is a critical analysis of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) used as proof of ownership for digital art, taking Walter Benjamin's concept of aura as a starting point. It argues that, for tokenized art, cryptography serves as an artificial source of auratic power that reverts the political potential of reproducibility falling back to a magical and ritual notion of aura. This time around the ritual performed is that of property, authenticity, ownership, markets and commodification. Finally, the essay outlines alternative uses of cryptography and Distributed Ledger Technologies (DLT) to support artistic labor and proposes transvestment as a temporary counter-action for the reallocation of value from capitalist forms of production and into commons-based models of social coordination.

The generative images are based on public domain photographs of various western artworks created between 1895 and 1935, visual works that were around at the time when Walter Benjamin wrote his work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. The images are modified with a simple, yet resource intensive algorithm and released as “not Non-fungible tokens for Transvestment” (!NFTs) an experimental crypto format that stands in tangential opposition to NFTs by repurposing some of their mechanisms for alternative outcomes. As a celebration of anti-scarcity, Digital pirates, commons workers, artists releasing work with copyleft licensing, free-software contributors, environmental activists, women, LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC people working in the DLT space are encouraged to claim one of these ‘authentic’ signed pieces. Additionally, the recipients are invited to join a micro organization that will hold collective ownership of the only tokenized element in this work: the video essay.

In essence, this project seeks to shift the narrative in the crypto-art community: To transcend the commodifying approach of common NFT implementations and consciously utilize DLTs and web3 as revolutionary technologies that can help us expand beyond neoliberal mechanics, precarization and speculation.



Desktop screenshot with the different elements that make up the project.



Physical installation of an older version of the video-essay as part of the exhibition "Temporal Redirections" shown in Domshof, Bremen in August & September of 2021.

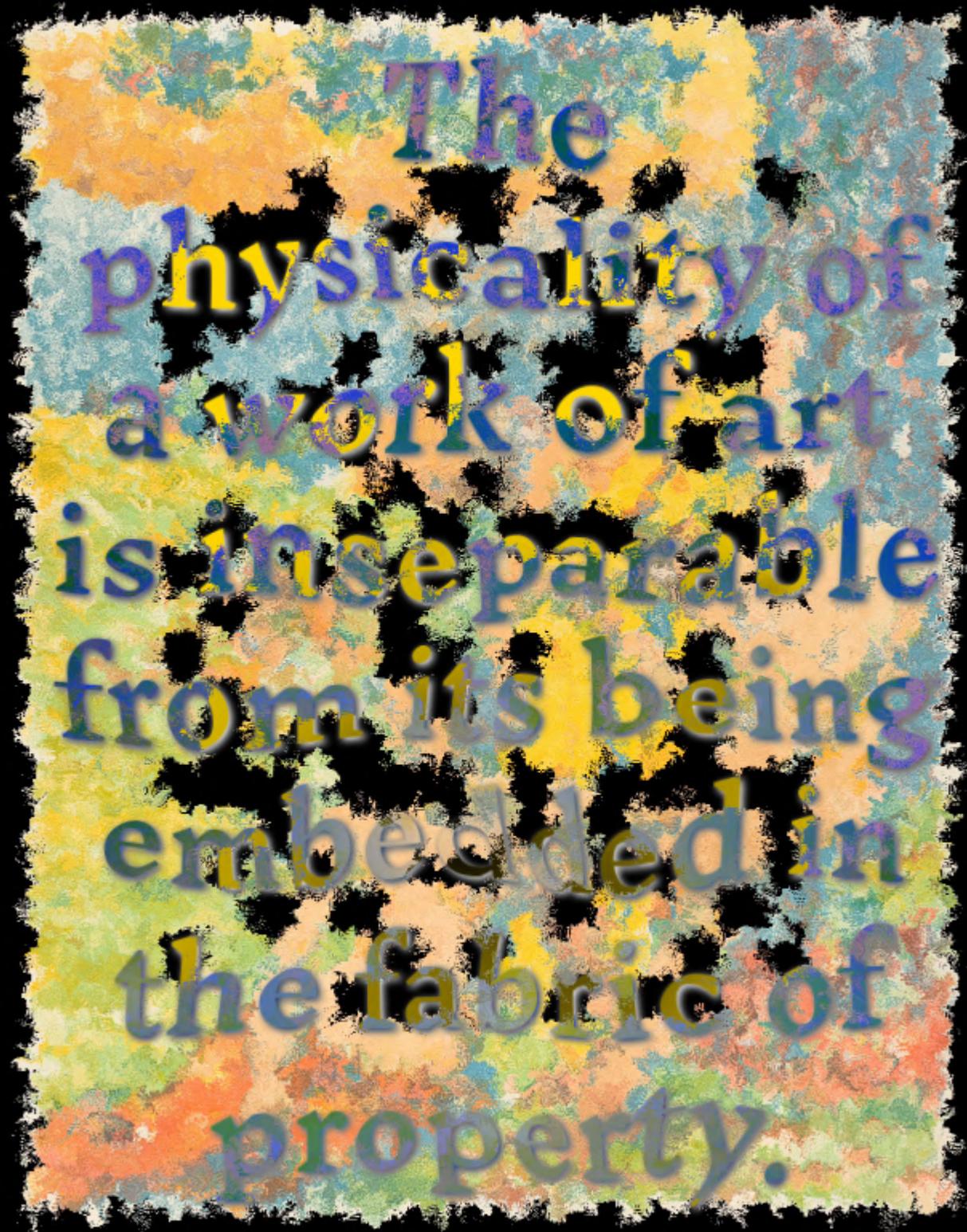




Photo of someone watching the video essay on a mobile device.

**“What kinds of
subjectivity do
we want to
algorithmically
inscribe into
our systems?”**

Screenshot of the video essay with a quote by Rachel O'Dwyer, 2015.
From *The Revolution Will (Not) Be Decentralised: Blockchains - Commons Transition*.



The
physicality of
a work of art
is inseparable
from its being
embedded in
the fabric of
property.

Screenshot of the video essay with a quote by Michalis Pichler, 2019. From *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Digital Reproducibility*.



Example of one of the generative pieces and a zoom of it. The algorithm was applied to the painting *The Bathers* by Roger de La Fresnaye (1912). Available under a public domain license as part of the National Gallery: United States of America, Washington D.C.

Why claim ownership over the intangible?

Why conjure a market into existence through the illusion of authenticity?

Why build platforms, communities and infrastructure around enforcing property rights?

To willingly carry the weight of physical matter?

To knowingly emulate the unfair structures of capitalism?

To surrender the infinite power of abundance in favor of commodity fetishism?



Distributed Ledger Technologies are becoming crucial to create a new ecosystem for creators and their audiences, but how does this future look like? Perhaps as a federated, mutualist network of non-rivalrous forms of art making financially supported by solidarity-based collectives of patrons, decentralized institutions, anti-copyright funds and democratically run artists cooperatives.

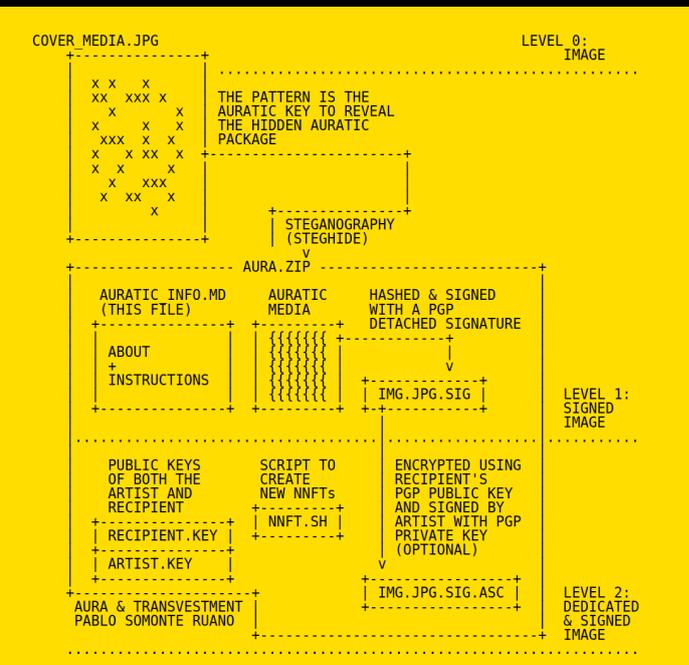
We have the technological capacity to renounce individual ownership and to dismiss property as a by-product of our material past. We can use the power of cryptography and distributed ledger technologies to foster a culture of commons-based artistic practices and fund institutional alternatives that act outside State and corporate logics.

By focusing our efforts on building infrastructure that helps in the decoupling of artistic labor from the monetization of the artworks, we can fund artists while reverting the neoliberal mechanisms of commodification and intellectual property.

(Screenshot of the video essay depicting a possible ecosystem of art-funding.)

!NFT (experimental cryptomedia format)

Disguised among the pixel data, each !NFT contains an auratic package with a set of files that cryptographically certify that the media was signed by the artist and dedicated to a specific recipient.



- * An !NFT is not just a digital file. It is a form of cryptomedia with a specific set of characteristics regarding its configuration and distribution.
- * Individual ownership is instrumentalized as an acknowledgment of belonging to a collectivity.
- * Artificial scarcity is challenged allowing for an organically determined number of works based on interest and engagement.
- * Trustlessness is inverted by requiring personal communication between the artist and the recipient.

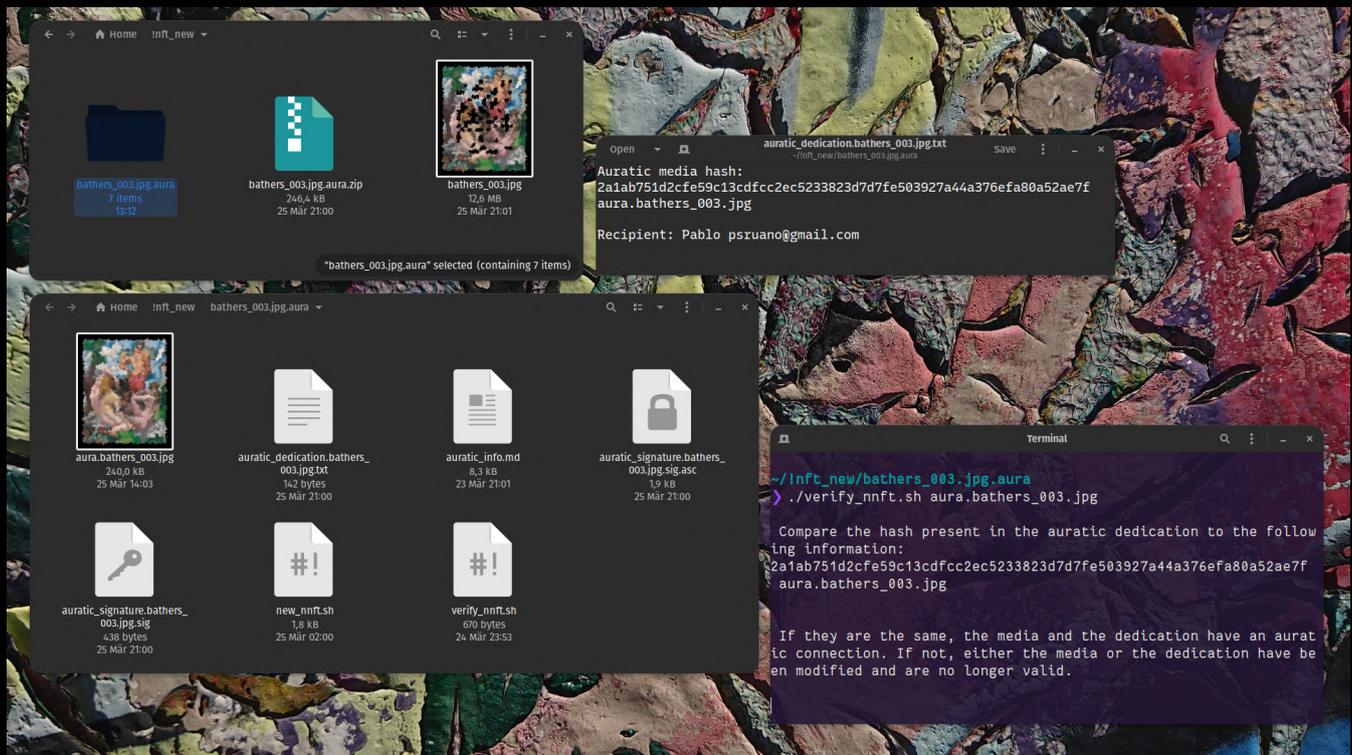
* Financialization and speculation are discouraged by disincentivizing secondary market sales and aiming to create support for alternative forms of production and organization.

* The use of money as the exclusive means for acquiring a piece is discarded, recognizing invisibilized forms of work and allowing people to contribute in accordance to their means.

* Yet, an imposition of 'authenticity' and 'ownership' through cryptographic means remains.

The auratic package is hidden inside the !NFT with the open-source program for steganography: steghide, while the rest of the generated proofs are implemented using the GnuPG program, an implementation of the OpenPGP standard. To retrieve the package one must run the media through steghide and provide an auratic key. This key must be visible in the media itself so that anyone can retrieve the package and verify the authorship and ownership of a given !NFT, or can also be excluded by the creator.

By using steganography, the auratic package is held inside the media itself by slightly changing the pixel data. In this system, the media is present as both a cultural artifact and as a vehicle for the auratic power that cryptography provides.



The auratic package contains the following files:

Auratic media

This is the actual file that is being hashed and signed by the artist. It must hold a clear connection to the cover media, either thematically or more explicitly as a smaller thumbnail or a lossy compression of the original. To fit inside, the filesize of the auratic image must be of around 10% to 15% of the cover media.

Auratic dedication

This is a text file that contains the result of a SHA256 hash of the auratic media alongside the name and email of the recipient.

Auratic signature

This file is the result of generating a detached signature of the auratic dedication. It is a signed hash of the text file. This confirms that the sender (artist) intentionally signed that specific dedication at a specific time. In the !NFT system, these files act as a claim of authorship of the auratic media by the artist as well as a confirmation that the media is indeed intended for the receiver. If provided by the receiver, a copy of the auratic signature is encrypted with the receiver's public key, adding an additional level of confirmation of intention.

Relevant links

Project's website	aura-transvestment.art
Video essay	aura-transvestment.art/aura & transvestment.mp4
Generative pieces	aura-transvestment.art/unique-encounter
!NFT documentation	aura-transvestment.art!/nft.html

Portfolio	frugal.systems
Personal website	pablo.sx
CV	pablo.sx/cv/pablo CV 2020.pdf
Twitter	https://twitter.com/psruano

Biography

Pablo Somonte Ruano (Mexico City, 1992). Currently based in Bremen, Germany.

Pablo works with and develops ambiguous software, generative systems, experimental interfaces, transmedia narratives, p2p infrastructure and odd music. He's interested in subjects such as structural violence, mutualist economies, organizational theory, the commons, decolonial action, feminism, philosophy, art, media, games, memes and language.

At the moment he's enrolled as a masters student in the Digital Media Program for Theory, Technology and Design at the HfK Bremen. He's also working on neighbourhoods, a design philosophy for holochain apps that enables groups to articulate their own algorithmic culture through cultural computation.

Since early 2020 he develops the website and creates the online experiences of circa106 (Center for International Research on Collaborative Arts) an independent space in Bremen run by students of the University of Arts: Víctor Artiga Rodríguez, Aria Farajnezhad and Suyeon Kim. During 2017 and 2018 he taught an undergraduate course at CENTRO university in Mexico City: *Networks and Systems: Politics and Economics*. Since 2015 he worked in a collective project with filmmakers Analía Goethals, Nicolás Gutiérrez Wenhammar and Santiago Mohar Volkow called DERIVA.MX, a transmedia project approaching structural violence in Mexico. He has shown artistic work in collective exhibitions and festivals in various cities in Mexico and Germany.