

RIGHT CLICK SAVE

Esoterick, Alex, “NFTS AND THE TECH RESURRECTION,” *RIGHT CLICK SAVE*, November 7, 2022

Interviews Community Crypto Histories

November 7, 2022

NFTS AND THE TECH RESURRECTION

Simon Denny and Guile Twardowski conjure the ghosts of business past with Alex Estorick



Credit: Simon Denny, Guile Twardowski, and Cosmographia, Dotcom Séance at Outernet Arts, October 2022. Courtesy of the artists and Outernet arts

Simon Denny on his collaboration with Guile Twardowski:

*In 2018, I initiated the exhibition, “**Proof of Work**,” at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin, which followed a strategy of decentralized curation. Ahead of the event, Distributed Gallery suggested we include **CryptoKitties**, which had dominated the Ethereum network earlier in the year with its viral cat NFTs. Borrowing a now odd-seeming hardware wallet version of a special CryptoKitty, I became aware of the role of artist **Guile Twardowski** in the genesis of the project. To me, the Kitties represented one of the key aesthetic touchpoints in the formation of PFP culture — cute generative animals in a flat graphic style. After producing a few artworks about that sale for “Proof of Work,” I proposed the idea to Guile for a new collaboration, which became **Dotcom Séance** (2021). Back then, I was obsessed with time and feeding histories of the Web back into itself. For the project, we used Cosmographia’s CLIP-guided diffusion to generate reimagined logos of dot-com era companies. I thought Guile’s interpretation of these logos would build a bridge*

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between Web1 aesthetics, remembered through the CLIP training sets, and Web3. He agreed, subsequently producing amazing graphic interpretations of the AI logos, which we issued as NFTs with **Folia.app** in December 2021. Other exhibitions of the project have since taken place at MAXXI, Rome; Kunsthalle Charlottenborg, Copenhagen; and most recently **Outernet Arts** in London.



Simon Denny, Guile Twardowski, and Cosmographia, *Dotcom Séance* at Outernet Arts, October 2022. Courtesy of the artists and Outernet arts

Alex Estorick: Guile is a figure of historic importance within the crypto art community as the principal designer for CryptoKitties. Simon, you and Guile have worked together more recently on a project, *Dotcom Séance*, that reimagines the logos of failed Web1 businesses for the Web3 context. This starts a conversation about how we narrate failed technologies at a time when failure itself has become a cult among Web2 entrepreneurs. As you've shown, the failure of technologies in Web1 does not render that failure terminal.

Simon Denny: I first had a conversation with Guile when we were exhibiting his work as part of "Proof of Work" in 2018 — one of the first art and crypto exhibitions in the legacy art world. We exhibited a special CryptoKitty that had been developed for a hardware wallet and **sold at an early NFT auction**, just as CryptoKitties was having its first moment of network success via the **ERC-721 token**.

It was a real honor to be able to show that in dialogue with the early projects of **Harm van den Dorpel**, **Billy Rennekamp**, and **Terra0**, as well as other, perhaps more canonical, versions of what crypto art might look like. Ultimately, I approached Guile to collaborate with me on this crazy idea of resurrecting dead companies from the dot-com crash by generating a bunch of assets with text-to-image AI.

These companies included **cashwars.com**, **funbug.com**, and **bizbuyer.com** — crazy things which had business models which were crypto-resonant, but had long been dead intellectual property.

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Simon Denny, Guile Twardowski, and Cosmographia, *Dotcom Séance* at Outernet Arts, October 2022. Courtesy of the artists and Outernet arts

Guile would take these suggestions for designs and work from the AI to produce his own alternative logos for these dead companies. The project was then launched as a series of NFTs of the AI outputs as well as Guile's original designs. Ownership of an NFT qualifies the collector to claim that they are partly responsible for resurrecting the dead company. We had an initial launch of the project exclusively as an NFT on Folia.app, which is one of my favorite publishing houses for those NFTs that have a dialogue with the art world.

The project now has another life after we launched a giant advertising-screen version in central London at Outernet Arts, which opened during Frieze. This is another insane way to bring meatspace to the metaverse — allowing passersby to interact with these resurrected companies in another type of commercial hub. One of the things that links *Dotcom Séance* with my recent project with Karamia Müller, "*Creation Stories*," is that it also tries to reconfigure and reposition crypto-interactive commercial histories as cultural histories. They are both claims to culture from finance.

Guile Twardowski: My personal experience with blockchain was quite interesting because I saw things unfolding while I was in the eye of the storm — when I was working on CryptoKitties at *Dapper Labs*. It was lovely to meet Simon and chat with him because he was looking at the storm from an outside perspective, and had different insights regarding where it was going. We spoke briefly in Berlin, where we talked about the importance of people developing technology in companies *in dialogue with the art space*.

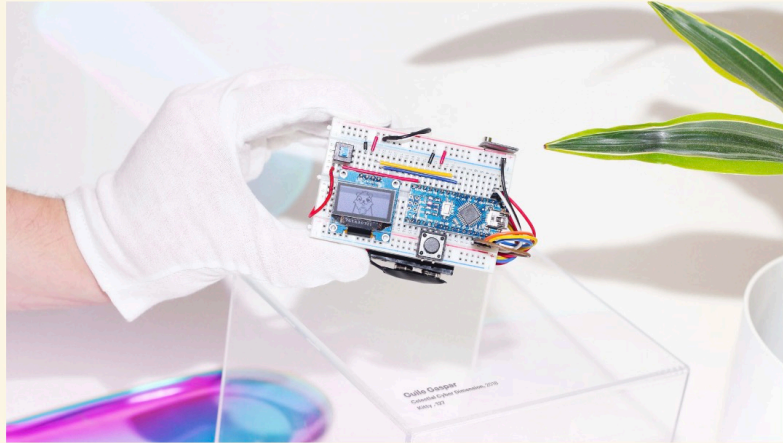
The sale in New York of that special CryptoKitty was the first time I experienced the general enthusiasm for this technology. I was also fascinated by how close it was to worship and belief.

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Guile Twardowski, *Celestial Cyber Dimension*, 2018. Hardware wallet by Richard Moore. Courtesy of Guile Twardowski

People were saying things like: "I believe in blockchain, I believe we're going to change this and that." There was a lot of enthusiastic energy similar to the early 2000s about the possibilities that the Internet offered. I was very excited to develop *Dotcom Séance*, which critiques itself in a way for bringing back the history of the dot-com boom. While its mood and aesthetics resemble a ritual, it also invites the viewer to guard against naive optimism about our technological future.

With any technology big enough for people to think it's going to change things in society, people tend to draw premature conclusions that the technology is either going to save us or destroy us. With blockchain, although it has changed since 2018, a lot of faith is still invested in the technology. That is a continuous source of inspiration that keeps me exploring the language of religious art and how its symbols accumulate such value over centuries.

AE: It seems that, by collapsing time, *Dotcom Séance* offers a critique of techno-solutionism, whereby new technologies are offered as essential solutions to problems we didn't realize existed. When we wrote the *aesthetics of crypto art*, we determined based on the tags used by artists on SuperRare that technostalgia was fundamental to the early movement. Guile, what was it like to inhabit that early crypto art hurricane? And Simon, how did it feel to be an outside observer?

GT: It took me a long time to realize the size and impact of the events that were going on at the time. My experience was governed by a hyper-focused production mode while being in the middle of a storm. This left little mental space for deeper analysis and proper digestion of surrounding events. One thing I do remember, which relates to nostalgia, was the importance of creating something people could relate to. This was essential to building something during a paradigm shift when we didn't have words or visuals to describe some of the new concepts. Early computers developed the "trash can" icon as part of the UI [user interface] to help people understand the new digital concept. Our project [CryptoKitties] was built as an experiment that was designed to test how people would perceive the NFT and how it would evolve in the wild.

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I only got really excited about blockchain a few months after we released the project, when I realized we had created a possible future between technology and art — a new way for digital artists to monetize their work. Back in 2018, that was only a possible future, we still didn't know if it was feasible or not. To have helped this vision become reality is a source of great pride.



Simon Denny, Gulle Twardowski, and Cosmographia, Dotcom Séance at Outernet Arts, October 2022. Courtesy of the artists and Outernet arts

I grew up through the 1990s and I was always amazed at how many types of art were done using the computer as a tool. It always puzzled me why we valued it so differently to traditional art. I understood that it was easier to replicate than fine art and I understood how hard it was to track and sell, but on the other hand, that's the type of art that resonated with me the most. In general, as a society, I think we appreciate the value that computers and computational power have brought to many different areas of life, from healthcare to transportation. But when it comes to visual art, that value is not recognized, despite the untapped power of image creation tools.

With NFTs, I envisaged people producing digital art that could enter the traditional art market or else find other ways to create revenue. I tried explaining to my friends that I hoped NFTs will do for digital art what vinyl did for music.

When I was researching the history of music, artists used to make money either by playing live or through the sale of sheet music. This is similar to the digital image — music was in the air but you couldn't really catch it or own it, somewhat like the Internet. The NFT was a way of creating a more tangible way of monetizing and establishing provenance. It's amazing to see the potential of computers as a tool to do different types of art.

My first professional experience of the computer was working as an artist doing motion design for advertising. Within the advertising, gaming, and film industries, you have huge corporations and a ton of amazing artists helping to build their projects. You might be an artist at heart but you're shifting your practice to fit the client's goal. You're using your tool for a specific purpose — a bit like using a guitar to play a single genre of music.

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But recently, I've seen close friends of mine who can use their tools in the way they see fit, not to fit any other company or project goal.



Guile Twardowski's collection of *CryptoKitties*, 2017. Courtesy of Guile Twardowski

Simon Denny: I resonate with that a lot, and that's exactly what attracted me to working with you, Guile — to bring together different types of conversations meaningfully. What brought me to your work from my position outside of the hurricane was that I saw it as the first clear example of an authored aesthetic in Web3. Guile's work for *CryptoKitties* became an icon of an emergent aesthetic and a meaningful crossover between what was visible in the digital art world — advertising for instance — and something that could be considered a Web3-native aesthetic. When I thought about how to bring different histories into dialogue with each other — histories of certain companies and business models, as well as the different aesthetic waves of the Web — I thought that we could bring the emergent hand of Web3 into dialogue with the history of Web1.

But while I sit outside certain contexts, I'm also inside of others. I still situate my discursive point of view from a particular type of canon, and I make work that is informed by my idea of what that canon is and my ability to dialogue productively with it. My work is also often explicitly about where value is assigned financially and culturally — on the one hand to a masterpiece and on the other to industry.

I'm part of various different canons and cultural spaces. When NFTs first emerged, I was making artwork from the museum tradition, working from a very different set of business models, media, and goals.

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CryptoKitties to me represented the first organic community-based form that moved assets around with a very visible social network. That is what I think is special about NFTs as a medium, which was more visible when the ERC-721 was first becoming a standard. When the NFT became tradable in this way, it bled the line between a collectible, a digital asset for sale, an artwork, and a community, more so than it had in its "**Monegraph moment.**"



Simon Denny, Guile Twardowski, and Cosmographia, *Dotcom Séance: pets.com (1998-2000)*, reimaged 2021. Courtesy of the artists

AE: From my perspective, if the NFT did anything important, it was to render transparent the relationship between art and money, which has been historically obscured, or otherwise fetishized, by Western canons. It seems to me that CryptoKitties, like *Rare Pepe Wallet*, disrupted pre-existing categories of images by situating itself at the nexus of art, collectibles, and gaming. However, I worry if the metaverse becomes the logical space for that development to continue.

SD: I'm currently playing around with *Decentraland*, because it poses such interesting questions about property and appropriation. This has involved doing landscape paintings of the metaverse because, while you don't have to own the land to paint it, in the history of colonial contexts, landscape painting has often been used to help naturalize the possibility of settler ownership.

GT: The NFT blurred many lines, and CryptoKitties frustrated people because they couldn't categorize the project and because it felt like collectors were driving new tastes. But the NFT is still creating new visions and canons of digital art, questioning where it should be displayed and who it's for. It's been interesting to see the frictions that it has generated. For me, it evades characterization.



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Guile Twardowski is an artist, futurist, and award-winning multidisciplinary designer. Originally from Brazil, after living in Curitiba, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, Barcelona, and Oahu, he happily calls Vancouver home. As a designer by training who grew up witnessing the emergence of the digital era, Twardowski uses design methodologies, leading-edge scientific knowledge, and the digital realm as lenses to explore the cosmos and the human condition. His research and practice focuses on understanding technologies, artifacts, and rituals, and how they are intertwined in the construction and perception of our reality. He is the NFT pioneer and artist behind the beloved CryptoKitties. His work has been exhibited globally, including at ZKM, Karlsruhe; Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin; and in other museum institutions around the world.

Simon Denny makes exhibitions and projects that unpack the stories technologists tell us about the world using a variety of media including installation, sculpture, print, painting, video, and NFTs. He has also curated exhibitions about blockchain and art such as "Proof of Stake" at Kunstverein in Hamburg (2021) and "Proof of Work" at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2018). Solo exhibitions of Denny's work have taken place at K21, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; OCAT, Shenzhen; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Serpentine Galleries, London; MoMA PSI, New York; and Portikus, Frankfurt; among other venues. Denny represented New Zealand at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. He co-founded the artist mentoring program BPA//Berlin Program for Artists and serves as Professor of Time-Based Media at the HFBK (University of Fine Arts) Hamburg.

Alex Estorick is Editor-in-Chief at *Right Click Save*.