Art, Blood and Tokens: How Kevin Abosch's *IAMA Coin* Redefines Selfhood in the Age of Blockchain Art
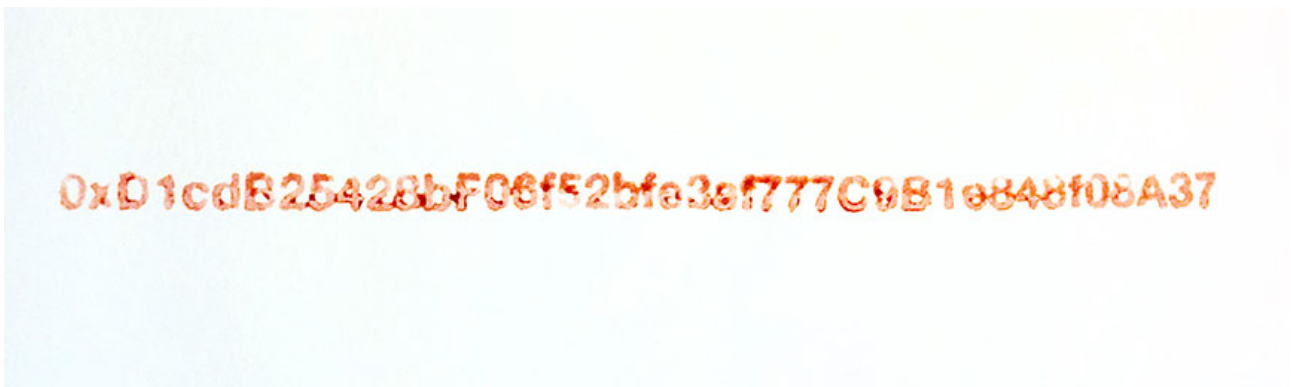

Fig 2: IAMA Coin, by Kevin Abosch (2018).

Dissertation submitted for B.A. History of Art and Curating

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I explore the history of self-portraiture in art to assess and explore the meaning of Selfhood in a contemporary context. Due to our increasing reliance on technology and the dominance of emerging technologies such as Distributed Ledger Technology and Artificial Intelligence, I have chosen to focus my area of study on an artwork by Kevin Abosch titled *IAMA Coin* (2018).

IAMA Coin consists of both physical and virtual artworks, in which the artist uses traditional means of representation such as print and the use of blood as a medium to represent the virtual artworks which are made of Ethereum ERC-20 smart contracts. I begin my research by exploring the history of the technology used, before comparing it in juxtaposition to the more conventional art historical practices the artist used to create the physical artworks.

My main arguments focus on the role of technology in art and its potential to bridge the divide between art and the real world, as the art sector is often considered as an isolated, timeless entity free from external influence. As the blockchain sector is still very new, I am concerned about the lack of perspectives within the space and feel that more influence from artists is vital to ensure the technology works in a positive way for all of us, which is difficult to achieve with little representation. Considering the polarising effects of both art and the blockchain, especially cryptocurrencies, I have chosen to explore themes surrounding self-hood and identity as it allows me to combine a variety of themes that have and continue to persist throughout art history.

As the artist merges himself with the artwork through the withdrawal and printing of his blood, he sacrifices himself and his sense of authority to the artwork leaving it, instead, dependent upon the whims of the audience. As the artwork predominantly consists of cryptocurrencies, this ignites questions of value, commodification of the self and agency within our current and future societies.

Introduction

In 2018, Kevin Abosch created a cryptocurrency token called *IAMA Coin* in which he turned himself into a coin in response to the growing commercialisation of the Self in art following the sale of his work, 'Potato #345' *(Fig 1)* for $1.6 million in 2015.[1] IAMA Coin consists of 100 physical artworks and 10 million virtual artworks. The physical artworks depict the contract address of the wallet corresponding with the virtual artworks, with the address stamped in the artist's blood *(Fig 2 - cover page).* The virtual artworks are standard ERC-20 tokens, built on the Ethereum blockchain, which can be shared wholly or fractionally by token holders.

The use of the blockchain in this artwork is crucial to its understanding, so it is necessary to ensure the reader is aware of this emerging technology and its real-life application at the time of writing. Although blockchain technology is comparably new, having been first mentioned in 1991 by Stuart Haber and W. Scott Stornetta,[2] it's reputation today is due to Satoshi Nakamoto who conceptualised the blockchain within the Bitcoin whitepaper in 2008.[3] Despite its history, blockchain and cryptocurrencies saw little recognition until 2014, when people began to explore the potential of blockchain outside of Bitcoin and cryptocurrencies.[4]

The blockchain requires many computers to confirm transactions. If any alterations are made, all subsequent blocks reflect that alteration, making transactions transparent and easy to audit. Utilising the blockchain removes the possibility of infinite reproduction from an asset, confirming that each value was transferred only once, solving the issue of double-spending.[5] Due to its reliance on the network of computers, no one centralised authority has control over the information. The blockchain is one type of Distributed Ledger Technology (DLT), which includes

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[1] Sophie Haigney, *Portrait of the artist as a bitcoin: When cryptocurrency meets conceptual art* (2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/kevin-abosch-cryptocurrency-art-bitcoin-blockchain-conceptual-potato-photograph-a8396001.html> [accessed 24 April 2019].

[2] Arvind Narayanan, Joseph Bonneau, Edward Felten, Andrew Miller, Steven Goldfeder, *Bitcoin and Cryptocurrency Technologies*(USA: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 15.

[3] Satoshi Nakamoto, *Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System*(2008) <https://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2019].

[4] Swati Goyal, *The History of Blockchain Technology: Must Know Timeline* (2018) <https://101blockchains.com/history-of-blockchain-timeline/> [accessed 24 April 2019].

[5] Atul Kahate, *Crypt & N/W Security* (USA: Tata McGraw-Hill Education, 2008), p. 307.

other systems like Holochain, DAG, Hashgraph and Tempo, to name a few.[6] The blockchain is undoubtedly the most popular form of DLT to date, mainly due to Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. As people began to experiment more with this emerging technology, its limitations were quickly realised.[7] It was in 2013 when Vitalik Buterin began to create a second public blockchain, Ethereum. Ethereum launched in 2015 and offered the ability to develop 'smart contracts' that process automatically based on set criteria within the Ethereum blockchain. The use of Ethereum smart contracts allows companies or individuals to create their own cryptocurrencies which can be utilised within their ecosystems, much like a reward system, and often traded like other financial assets. Abosch built his artwork onto an ERC-20 Ethereum smart contract.

Although cryptocurrencies are presented as radical and anarchic within the mainstream media,[8] they are also accused of being Capitalist,[9] said to be just another 'form of elite defection',[10] which is difficult to oppose when, in its current state, over 75% of the Bitcoin network is controlled by only six mining pools, five of which are located in China.[11] According to David Golumbia;

'Like many digital anti-institutional organizations, Bitcoin hollows out the practices of what had already been a massively corrupt and dangerous organizational form—that is, an organized cult like Scientology—and replaces them with remarkably thin simulacra. To begin with, the language used to maintain belief in Bitcoin is viciously circular, self-justifying, wildly metaphorical, and difficult if not impossible to link to fact. And as with many cults, those selling this gospel most

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[6] Hasb Anwar, *Distributed Ledger Technology: Where Technological Revolution Starts* (2019) <https://101blockchains.com/distributed-ledger-technology-dlt/> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[7] Erik Hofmann, Urs Magnus Strewe, Nicola Bosia, Supply Chain Finance and Blockchain Technology: The Case of Reverse Securitisation (Germany: Springer, 2017), p. 4.

[8] Martin Wolf, *The libertarian fantasies of cryptocurrencies* (2019) <https://www.ft.com/content/eeeacd7c-2e0e-11e9-ba00-0251022932c8> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[9] David Golumbia, The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[10] Vinay Gupta, *Twitter Status* (2018) <https://twitter.com/leashless/status/982551332723847169> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[11] Francisco Memoria, *Mining Oligopoly: Six Pools Control 75% of Bitcoin's Hashrate, Data Shows* (2019) <https://www.cryptoglobe.com/latest/2019/03/mining-oligopoly-six-pools-control-75-of-bitcoin-s-hashrate-data-shows/> [accessed 27 April 2019].

vociferously are also those who stand to profit disproportionately from its acceptance—an interest they fail to disclose in their evangelism.'[12]

Considering Golumbia's perspective, it is necessary to remember that this technology is still at an early stage, with many comparing it to the 'tech boom in 1994'.[13] It comes as no surprise that people remain cautious and pessimistic, especially given the volatility of the cryptocurrency markets. When he mentions 'those selling this gospel most vociferously', I think this is articulates precisely why we need to embrace the use of this technology in other fields, such as in art, as a means to develop the conversations surrounding blockchain and cryptocurrencies to be more inclusive, and designed to benefit us in ways that surpass mere economic wealth as, according to Golumbia, those evangelistic beliefs remain a distant dream.

By choosing to focus my dissertation on a blockchain artwork, I hope to highlight the potential art has to challenge the compartmentalisation of emerging technologies such as blockchain by offering a different perspective to a discipline that has so far been dominated by the finance and technology sectors, with little emphasis on its humanistic qualities. I will also explore the potential blockchain has as a medium to challenge existing notions of self-portraiture and, ultimately, selfhood in art. By doing this, I will touch on themes such as value, agency, authorship and post-humanism throughout this dissertation.

Blockchain art as an area of study is still very new and unexplored compared to other art historical genres, so I will rely on a combination of traditional and contemporary resources when considering the placement of blockchain art within an art historical context. I will begin by exploring the history of self-portraiture within painting, such as during the Renaissance with the writings of Giorgio Vasari and Albrecht Dürer's *Self Portrait at Twenty-Eight* (1500). As *IAMA Coin* is a contemporary artwork, I will focus mostly on more recent examples of self-portraiture in art, although I think the addressing the history of painting is crucial for understanding where the tradition of self-portraiture and artist agency emerged from, as a means to establish the context in

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12 David Golumbia, *Zealots of the Blockchain* (2018) <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/zealots-of-the-blockchain-golumbia> [accessed 27 April 2019].

13 Ari Paul, *It's 1994 In Cryptocurrency* (2017) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/apaul/2017/11/27/its-1994-in-cryptocurrency/#572e9af6b28a> [accessed 27 April 2019].

which *IAMA Coin* exists. Within the twentieth century, I will explore Surrealist subjectivity and performance art before assessing how we choose to represent ourselves in society through the selfie and within an online realm. After considering the rich history of self-portraiture in art, I will analyse the use of blood within art, as it is a prominent formal aspect of the *IAMA Coin's* physical artworks.

To connect to the technological aspect of the blockchain technology within the artwork in question, I will proceed t explore the evolving notions of selfhood in a post-human environment, such as the role of the machine, agency and the representation of 'human'. The generative art movement of the 1960s and 1970s will provide a substantial base for my exploration of attitudes and the reception towards the use of machines and computers in art, leading up to the use of the blockchain in Abosch's *IAMA Coin.* The reception of such kinds of artwork is especially important within the case of *IAMA Coin,* as it seeks to challenge our existing ideas of self and identity in what I believe to be a far more forceful manner than generative artworks.

Regarding the use of blockchain and cryptocurrencies in art to date, initiatives like Dadiani Fine Art Gallery, London, and Codex are undoubtedly relevant to my research, as they seek to solve problems that have persisted in the art industry since the Renaissance, such as authenticity, ownership and asset liquidity.[14] These themes continue through Abosch's *IAMA Coin*, as he challenges preconceived notions of ownership and authenticity while aligning issues of value, commodity and Capitalism with philosophical ideas of selfhood and identity. However, I prefer to focus on examples from art history rather the contemporary context as I feel that this is stepping too far from the purpose of my dissertation. Without focusing too much on the ongoing debates surrounding blockchain and cryptocurrencies, being aware of them and their current status provides a good foundation for considering *IAMA Coin* and the climate in which Kevin Abosch released this artwork. Like art, blockchain and cryptocurrencies are polarising, provoking strong opinions around its use and status within our society.

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[14] Anna Tummers, Koenraad Jonckheere, Art Market and Connoisseurship: A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and Their Contemporaries (Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 167.

Selfhood in Art

Within the opening pages of *The Self-Portrait - A Cultural History*, James Hall refers to Plotinus's (AD third century) discussion on self-portraiture as one of the first philosophical discussions on the subject, in which Plotinus states that they 'are produced not by looking out at a mirror, but by withdrawing into the self'.[15] To take this literally, through the act of withdrawing blood, I will consider the role of Kevin Abosch's *IAMA Coin* as a new expression of selfhood as the artist connects himself to the artwork physically. Throughout this book, Hall explores the undulating role of self-portrait within art history; including the role of mirrors, mock-heroic self-portraits, sex and, finally, the body. As Abosch's work is new and maintains only an abstract connection to the artist through the use of his blood, I will focus more on the latter chapters of the book that explore self-portraiture from the twentieth century onwards.

According to Hall, Frida Kahlo has come to bridge the practices of self-portraiture between the early and later half of the twentieth century, marking the shift from 'masking culture' to an 'obsession with the body of the artist'.[16] Kahlo's self-portraits 'look out to the viewer with almost always the same mask-like face',[17] despite their glaring vulnerability expressed instead through symbols rather than through expression. Colour plays a profound role in her works which, prior to 1939, predominantly used neutral earth tones with only red dominating the composition,[18] as seen in her pieces *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* (1936) *(Fig 3)* and *Frida and Diego Rivera* (1931) *(Fig 4)* Often deemed a Surrealist, Kettenmann argues that her works, despite containing 'surreal and fantastical elements… can not be called Surrealist, for in none of them does she entirely free herself from reality.'[19] What Hall quotes as 'masking culture' refers to the fixation on artists' faces that dominated the discourse around self-portraits in the early half of the

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[15] James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (UK: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2015), p. 9.

[16] Hall, p. 249.

[17] Andrea Kettenmann, Frida Kahlo, Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and Passion (Germany: Taschen, 2000), p. 20.

[18] Nancy Deffebach, María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art (USA: University of Texas Press, 2015), p. 36.

[19] Kettenmann, Kahlo, p. 20.

century, arguably due to the legacy of 'the popular 'science' of phrenology.'[20] Masks and mask-like faces have become a prominent feature of modernity, and the influence of caricature on artists like Picasso[21] *(Fig 5)* and Ensor[22] *(Fig 6)* is undoubtedly influential in the evolving definition of selfhood during the first half of the twentieth century.

Caricature relies on the 'essentialised self'[23] as a means to communicate a message quickly to a broad population, capturing the essence of the subject with as few details as possible *(Fig 7).* By using his blood as a medium, Abosch effectively creates an essentialised representation of himself, identifiable only by DNA and rather than aesthetics. This, while being unique to him, as is the contract address of the token, could belong to anyone as the colour of blood is uniform across all humans and most animals. Ultimately, this connects the artist to his work while acknowledging his vulnerability by sacrificing himself to his artwork through the physical act of drawing blood. This is emphasised by the economic value of the cryptocurrency, the fate of which depends on the public who could use the token however they choose, alongside its role as an artwork.

As mentioned, I am eager to explore the use of blockchain in art to emphasise its potential as a new medium but also to encourage important discussions around humanism, ethics and society within non-art related circles. Currently, those who are interested in blockchain and other emerging technologies are predominantly from technology or finance backgrounds,[24] meaning that the projects we now see within the space lack focus on human behaviour, their societal and environmental impact, and ethics. With *IAMA Coin* by Kevin Abosch, I hope to reveal the precarious relationship we have with identity; both from a philosophical perspective and a digital

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[20] Hall, p. 231.

[21] Peter Read, *Picasso and Apollinaire: The Persistence of Memory*(USA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 30.

[22] Sandra Mackenzie, *"I'm a creampuff gone rotten" – James Ensor on art and life* (2016) <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/james-ensor-on-art-and-life> [accessed 26 April 2019].

[23] Amelia Faye Rauser, Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity, and Individualism in Eighteenth-century English Prints (USA: Associated University Presse, 2008), p. 129.

[24] Ruth Catlow, *Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain: Introduction* (UK: Torque Editions and Furtherfield, 2017), p. 21.

security perspective, as these issues will only become more prevalent with the rise of Distributed Ledger Technologies, Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things.[25]

I feel that *IAMA* Coin best-integrates themes of identity and value by forcing the audience to consider the relationship between the artist and their art but also the opaque relationship between art and money, namely the lack of acknowledgement of the role of money and economic value within the art world.[26] In *Art After Money, Money After Art*, Max Haiven articulates the role of art within society as;

'an internalised exception within capitalism where the virtues and exercises like creativity, cultural expression, imagination, autonomy and critique are preserved alive within a system where elsewhere they are ruthlessly hunted down and killed… Art must exist both inside and outside of capitalism at once.'[27]

With this, I also find Haiven's exploration of 'encryption' a fascinating use case in which he applies Derridian theory to the art sector as a whole, in which a 'constitutive and essential part of subjectivity [is that it] … must be sealed in a structure, a crypt, where it is simultaneously dead and alive.'.[28] Art, albeit a marker of economic health and prosperity due to its role as a generally illiquid asset amidst galleries and dealers, is often granted the sacrosanct status of something which, although relevant, remains unaffected and immune to the fluctuations and shifts of everyday economics and politics. Haiven analyses an array of artworks in which he explores the way in which contemporary artists engage with cash, debt, and credit,[29] in an attempt to break down existing romantic notions that surround art and value.

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[25] Parikshit Narendra Mahalle, Poonam N. Railkar, *Identity Management for Internet of Things* (Netherlands: River Publishers, 2015), p. 85.

[26] Boris Groys, *Art and Money* (2011) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67836/art-and-money/> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[27] Max Haiven, Art after Money, Money after Art: Creative Strategies Against Financialization (UK: Pluto Press, 2018), p. 169.

[28] Haiven, p. 142.

[29] Haiven, blurb.

Although Haiven only briefly mentions cryptocurrencies in the latter half of Chapter 4, he raises several key points which I feel relate directly to my dissertation theme.

First, the role of art as a currency in and of itself, as a means to barter and trade. Kevin Abosch stated in an interview with Jason Bailey, of Artnome and the Dank Rares podcast, that he was approached by vendors who wanted to use his cryptocurrency to buy and sell artworks,[30] emphasising the shift from artistic value to monetary value which remains a controversial and taboo subject when considering the influence of money laundering within the art sector.[31]

Secondly, I am interested in the way Haiven analyses the ever-evolving relationship between the artist and their audience. In particular, the reliance of the audiences' role on determining the meaning and value of the work, reminiscent of Barthe's writings on the death of the author.[32] This applies to Abosch's work, as it could be argued that his cryptocurrency relies on the interaction and use of the audience, potentially like all contemporary art. The artwork is divisible by eighteen decimal places, meaning that, theoretically, millions of people could own *IAMA Coin*. In the same interview with Jason Bailey, Abosch explained that the artistic value of the artwork remains the same, regardless of how much someone owns.[33] It is interesting to consider the practical exchange value of the cryptocurrency as well as the artistic value of the artwork itself and how that might encourage or deter certain vendors from interacting with the artwork.

Finally, Haiven explores what it means to dismantle the barriers between life and art by bringing art into the every day in a way which is practical and relevant for society, rather than reserved for traditional art galleries and elites. The history and rituals surrounding self-portraiture in art history and considering it adjacent to Haiven's deconstruction of art and value will undoubtedly inform

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[30] Jason Bailey, Kevin Abosch, *Interview with Artist Kevin Abosch* (2018) <http://dankrares.com/interview-with-artist-kevin-abosch> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[31] Graham Bowley, William K. Rashbaum, *Has the Art Market Become an Unwitting Partner in Crime?* (2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/19/arts/design/has-the-art-market-become-an-unwitting-partner-in-crime.html> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[32] Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, Image Music Text (USA: Fontana Press, 1977).

[33] Bailey, Abosch, *Interview with Artist Kevin Abosch.*

my exploration of the impact of Kevin Abosch's *IAMA Coin* and what role blockchain art has on the construction of selfhood in the 21st century and onwards.

The problem of selfhood within art is one that has persisted for centuries. Many consider the writings of Giorgio Vasari as the foundation for scholarly literature on art history and yet, his most famous text is one which documents the lives of renowned Renaissance artists. *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550)[34] outlines the ideological connection between the life and personality of the artist and the quality, or purity, of his work. The role of the artist in the Renaissance period was one of religious devotion, in which the artist's talent was considered as a gift from God.[35] With that in mind, the artists' life should be irrelevant, so the very thought of focusing on the artists' biographies was novel.[36] The Renaissance period birthed one of the most well-known self-portraits in art history; *Self-Portrait at the Age of Twenty Eight* by Albrecht Dürer (1500) *(Fig 8).* This painting, which features the artist in a pose typically reserved for Christ, elevates the artist to the level of gifted intellect, emphasising his eyes and his hands as the essential tools for his profession.[37] The artist depicts himself more like an architectural structure than as a reflection of himself in a mirror or as an idealised representation for the public,[38] further emphasising his interest in art and science working in collaboration rather than as isolated subjects.

Although this painting is unusual for the period, the same themes persist through to the Modern period, such as the exploration of the inner world of the artist, which became a prominent theme for the Surrealists who experimented with the notion of self through the psychoanalytical approach of the ego. This theorises that the ego, or self-identity, is established according to 'the

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[34] Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects (1550 (Italy: Lawrence Torrentinus, 1550).

[35] Douglas Biow, Vasari's Words: The 'Lives of the Artists' as a History of Ideas in the Italian Renaissance (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 117.

[36] Biow, p. 7.

[37] Dr. Steven Zucker, Dr. Beth Harris, *Dürer, Self-portrait (1500)*(2012) <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/northern/durer/v/albrecht-d-rer-self-portrait-1500> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[38] Joseph Leo Koerner, The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 63.

subject's encounter with alteriority.'[39] They explored this through the Uncanny *(Fig 9)* which would place familiar objects in unfamiliar circumstances. By doing this, they sought to make a social critique of the ordered and familiar to encourage society to recognise themselves as a first step to fixing the problems of the world, following the first world war. Surrealists used an array of techniques to uncover aspects of the Self that had otherwise been suppressed, including 'waking dream' seances, automatic drawing and writing, and the exquisite corpse, that sought to create in a way that was free from conscious efforts.[40]

Focusing on the body became a prominent tool used by artists by the twentieth century. Although the term 'performance art' was used predominantly from the 1970s onwards, many scholars believe it originated through the Dada, Futurist and Russian Constructivism movements of the early twentieth century.[41] By using the body, artists were able to explore unconventional mediums with which to create art while making political statements about gender, race and sexuality. This was especially profound in the post-war period, with artists using the body as a tool, such as in Yves Klein's *The Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (1958) *(Fig 10)* or Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) *(Fig 11)* both of which sought to accentuate the act of making rather than the end product.

By focusing on the process of creation, artists rarely had a final object that could be sold or collected, further leaning towards 'dematerialisation',[42] and as a critique of the increasing commercialisation of art. As articulated by Michael Cothren and Marilyn Stokstad, 'conceptual art literally 'dematerialized' the art object by suggesting that the catalyst for a work of art is a concept, and the means by which the concept is communicated can vary',[43] with many were hopeful that conceptual art was capable of breaking past the confines of the gallery and growing commercialisation to fulfil political and social ideals.

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[39] Eugene de Klerk, 'A Striptease in Pink Limelight: Removing the Veil between the Subjective and Objective', *eSharp: Borders and Boundaries*, .5, (2005), in<*https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41165_en.pdf*> *[accessed 27 April 2019]*.

[40] Leslie Jones, *Drawing Surrealism: Techniques of the Sublime*(2012) <https://unframed.lacma.org/2012/10/17/drawing-surrealism-techniques-of-the-sublime> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[41] Roselee Goldberg, Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present(UK: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2011).

[42] Lucy R. Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (USA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 42.

[43] Marilyn Stokstad, Michael W. Cothren, *Art: A Brief History* (UK: Pearson Education, 2016).

Unfortunately, dematerialised art was often ephemeral, ceasing to exist except during the time it was performed. Many artists documented their works through photography, video and other media, such as Robert Smithson's footage of *Spiral Jetty* (1970) which, although existing primarily to document *Spiral Jetty* from an aerial perspective, is often treated as a work of art on its own accord, due to the remote, hard-to-reach location of *Spiral Jetty* itself. In turn, the footage, or documentation, of the artwork acts as a non-site and instead works on 'reconstructing "the inability to see"'.[44] Lippard addressed the ambiguity of the term 'dematerialisation' in the opening pages of *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972…* stating that 'dematerialisation is an inaccurate term… a piece of paper or a photograph is as much an object, or as "material" as a ton of lead.'[45] indicating that the documentation of the artwork that soon came to replace the artwork itself lead audiences to rely on the representation of the piece rather than experiencing it for themselves in person.

Further dematerialisation of art can be seen with the increasing use of the body which provided its own opportunity for experimentation. Although it is used in place of a paintbrush in Klein's *The Anthropometries of the Blue Period,* taking the body as a medium saw the emergence of more graphic artworks that include self-mutilation, menstruation and, in the case of *IAMA Coin*, blood prints. Stelarc, renowned for his 'suspension' artworks in which he hangs, suspended from the ceiling of the gallery by shark hooks in his skin *(Fig 12),* challenges the physicality of his body through technical intervention. By piercing the skin, Stelarc erases the barrier between the skin, or 'interface' and the soul, 'enhancing the body'[46] through ritualistic techniques that merge the tribal and the technological. Given the graphic nature of blood, artists began to use it to address taboos, namely those surrounding menstruation and female sexuality during the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.[47] By making art about menstruation, often using menstrual

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[44] Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel* (USA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 72.

[45] *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* opening pages

[46] Paolo Atzori, Kirk Woolford, Stelarc, *Extended-Body: Interview with Stelarc* (1995) <https://web.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/stelarc/a29-extended_body.html> [accessed 24 April 2019].

[47] James M. Bradburne, James Clifton, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, *Blood: art, power, politics, and pathology* (Germany: Prestel, 2001), p. 275.

blood as paint, artists like Carolee Schneemann *(Fig 13)* and Judy Chicago *(Fig 14)* brought themselves into their artworks by using their physicality as a medium, much like what Abosch does in *IAMA Coin*, amplifying feminist discourse around the female body by drawing attention to profound social issues through their own subjective experience.

By using blood as a medium, the artists of the later twentieth century were referring back to an archaic art historic tradition that continues to be evocative regardless of time and location.[48] According to Rose George in her book, *Nine Pints: A Journey Through the Money, Medicine, and Mysteries of Blood*, there is an inherent 'two-faced nature of blood' which, 'despite our science and understanding... we look to blood to tell us who we should fear.'[49] In art, we are perhaps most familiar with seeing depictions of blood in early examples from Medieval *(Fig 15)* and Gothic through to Renaissance and Baroque pieces which, aside from images of Christ on the cross fig, are usually fraught with violence, such as in Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes* (1614-20) *(Fig 16).* The styles that followed generally avoided any depiction of blood directly, and instead preferred to use symbolism such as wine or pomegranates.[50] Violent paintings, such as those depicting historical or mythological battle scenes also remained relatively devoid of hematic imagery, suggesting a resistance against such depictions as industry and science began to gain prominence.

Although using bodily fluids as a medium presents an initial shock value, it also emphasises the uniqueness of the works. This direct connection to the artist exaggerates the aura[51] while forcing the viewer to remember their own corporeality. Contemporary artworks that use bodily fluids are often political, such as in Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) *(Fig 17)* which provoked a strong reaction for its alleged blasphemous nature,[52] with other works in the late 1980s and early 1990s

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[48] Victoria Pitts-Taylor, Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body (USA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), p. 11.

[49] Jerome Groopman, *The History of Blood* (2019) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/14/the-history-of-blood> [accessed 24 April 2019].

[50] Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), p. 97.

[51] Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (UK: Penguin Books Ltd, 1935), p. 4.

[52] Elizabeth Burns Coleman, Kevin White, Negotiating the Sacred: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society (Australia: ANU E Press, 2006), p. 35.

using blood to challenge the stigma surrounding AIDS.[53] Other pieces, such as Marcel Duchamp's Paysage Fautif (1946) *(Fig 18)*, suggest a more humorous approach in which the artist is aware of his ability to offend, despite the audience being unaware that he used seminal fluid to create the what has been deemed a 'readymade self-portrait'.[54] Similarly, Abosch's use of his own bodily fluid, in this case, blood, acts as a self-portrait and as an act of self-sacrifice, as the fluidity of his *IAMA Coin* virtual artwork, once sold, are out of his control and dependent on not just the art world but the general public, who could use his tokens as a currency rather than an artwork, regardless of the artists' wishes.

Such debates surrounding identity are a popular topic in recent years,[55] with the influence of the internet and the ability to curate our identities online. In his book, *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed,* Will Storr ponders the impact of economy and our cultural environments as a means to determine and define our idea of success and what qualities our situation demands from us to flourish. He argues that there is an inherent element of propaganda in presenting a particular ideal that we should aspire to, especially as the majority of us are unaware of the influence of economy and instead accept it as a law of the universe, leading to alarming rates of suicide in recent years.[56]

The impact of data, the internet and large corporations have had a profound effect on the way we define ourselves, no longer comparing ourselves to an intimate community of 150 people but rather to billions of people globally. The popular idea of us becoming products of our environment and, therefore, the average of those around us is warped when pondering the effect of the internet and social media on defining who constitutes our immediate circles. With this in mind, our sense of self is affected increasingly more by external factors that should offer us feedback and alignment in combination with our own self-awareness and assessment of our thoughts and

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[53] Dominic Johnson, Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey (UK: Intellect Books, 2013), p. 32.

[54] Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation, and the Self in Modern Culture (USA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 197.

[55] Ullrich Kockel, Máiréad Nic Craith, Jonas Frykman, *A Companion to the Anthropology of Europe* (USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 140.

[56] Will Storr, Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed (UK: Picador, 2017).

feelings. With the increasing reliance on the internet and social media in our daily lives, internal influence is overshadowed by our external community. As articulated by Dr Jim Taylor;

'Instead, popular culture manufactures "portraits" of who it wants us to be. Tapping into our most basic needs to feel good about themselves, accepted, and attractive, popular culture tells us what we should believe about ourselves… Additionally, self-identity is no longer self-identity, meaning derived from the self, but rather is an identity projected onto us by popular culture and in no way an accurate reflection of who we really are.'

This connects directly with Abosch's *IAMA Coin*, as he aims to challenge the value ascribed to us from birth, and what this means when considering human currency.[57] Considering the prominence of social identities as a topic at the forefront of discussion in recent years, it is worth considering the impact of technological progressions that blur the line between the virtual and the physical,[58] and the emergence of smart devices into our homes. This, combined with scandals, such as Facebook's Cambridge Analytica case,[59] emphasise the speed at which we are increasingly reliant on technology as a means to not only curate and present our social identities but also to prove ourselves as active and successful members of society. We are beginning to see the realisation of such technology being used to create a rating system for citizens,[60] seen with the implementation of China's Social Credit system. By combining big data and mass surveillance, the system monitors and assesses Chinese citizens in an attempt to create a universal structure for 'raising the awareness for integrities and the level of credibility within society', in other words, creating and documenting the reputation of its citizens. Although China's Social Credit system appears dystopian, some proclaim that the media in the West has sensationalised the story and that citizens are not especially bothered by their government's imposition. According to sociologist, Zhang Lifan, Chinese society suffers from lack of trust and fear of being cheated or falsely

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[57] Kevin Abosch, *I am a coin.* (2018) <https://iamacoin.com/artist.html> [accessed 25 April 2019].

[58] Daniel Waterhouse, *How Technology is Merging with the Human Body* (2017) <https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/22/how-technology-is-merging-with-the-human-body/> [accessed 26 April 2019].

[59] Carole Cadwalladr, Emma Graham-Harrison, *Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach* (2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election> [accessed 26 April 2019].

[60] Nicole Kobie, *The complicated truth about China's social credit system* (2019) <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/china-social-credit-system-explained> [accessed 27 April 2019].

accused which is what the reputation-building Social Credit system seeks to combat by promoting 'trustworthiness' within the economy and society.[61]

Again, we are presented with the theme of trust which links seamlessly to Kevin Abosch's *IAMA Coin* and the technology behind it. Cryptocurrencies are the internet's solution for economy, offering an alternative way to transact money without the need to rely on a central authority, like a bank or other institution. In a sense, China's Social Credit system effectively turns every interaction into a transaction. This concept was explored by Kevin Abosch and Ai Weiwei in their project *Priceless* (2018) which seeks to assess the way in which people ascribe value by giving monetary value to intangible, mundane moments in life such as *'Sharing Tea' (Fig 19)* and *'Walking in a carefree manner down Schönhauser Alle' (Fig 20)*.

'On the other hand, the focus shifts from the artistic value to monetary value of the work – and for most artists the art is an extension of the artist, so you yourself start to feel commodified… In order to sort of control that, I began to think of myself as a coin.'[62]

In a sense, Abosch sacrifices himself to his artwork, surrendering to the commodification of his identity by subverting the power dynamic between artist, gallery and audience. As a coin, Abosch has more agency and self-awareness of his fate than as a mere artwork, which is subject to the whims of the public and reliant on practical uses. As a coin, however, Abosch faces the commodification of himself face-on, thereby critiquing and challenging the art world, the economic systems and blockchain as a technology, simultaneously.

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[61] Simina Mistreanu, *Life Inside China's Social Credit Laboratory*(2018) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/03/life-inside-chinas-social-credit-laboratory/> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[62] Haigney, *ibid*.

IAMA Coin

As previously mentioned, the *IAMA Coin* artwork consists of both physical and virtual elements. The virtual elements will be impossible to formally analyse due to their intangible nature, but I will consider them from a more conceptual perspective later on in this section. The physical artworks, which consist of one hundred prints made using the artists' blood, refer to more traditional methods of inscribing, moving away from the technological influence of the blockchain and towards the history of object-making, engraving, and text within art.[63] The virtual artworks, or tokens, are only available to existing collectors at the time of writing,[64] with physical artworks being offered to token holders 'from time to time', according to the artist's website.[65]

The scale of the physical artworks is small, created using a hand-held rubber stamp *(Fig 21)* onto artist's paper**.** Considering the reach of the virtual artworks, with their intangibility and digital presence giving them access to a global ecosystem, it is interesting to consider why Abosch chose to create small physical artworks to accompany them. The smaller size of the works allows for a more intimate connection to the pieces, emphasising its private ownership which could counteract any fears the art owner might have over the intrinsic value of the artwork. Although small, the prints mostly consist of negative white space with only a small amount of the canvas occupied by the print itself. The long, uninterrupted number forms a red line cutting-through the central horizon of the image, with the alphanumerical sequence taking the form of a pattern on the page.

Although the typeface of the contract address is in a basic, Sans Serif font, the quality of the print itself is rough and almost illegible in places. Blood is a notoriously difficult medium to work with,[66] but its texture allows for a vivid juxtaposition between the pure white of the canvas and the blotted print, further exaggerating the human hand behind the pieces as they lack the rigidity and

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[63] Liz Kotz, Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art (USA: The MIT Press, 2007).

[64] Kevin Abosch, *I am a coin.* (2018) < https://iamacoin.com/faq.html > [accessed 26 April 2019].

[65] Kevin Abosch, *I am a coin.* (2018) < https://iamacoin.com/about.html > [accessed 26 April 2019].

[66] Ana Cecilia Alvarez, *All the times artists used blood for radical work* (2015) <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/27205/1/a-history-of-the-relationship-between-blood-and-art> [accessed 25 April 2019].

precision of machines. Although the prints are recent, the use of organic matter as a medium has dried to an orange-brown colour, rather than a more vibrant red or oxblood, which appears aged and muted by time, further contrasting the new technology they represent.

To accompany the prints and virtual artworks, Abosch also exhibited a foil pouch with a soiled cotton cloth inside - a byproduct from his blood drawing to create the prints - at the `Perfect & Priceless - Value Systems on the Blockchain'* exhibition that ran from November 2018 - February 2019 at the Kate Vass Galerie in Zurich, Switzerland. The words 'I AM A COIN' are handwritten onto the pouch in black marker pen, with the artists' signature below, again reiterating the artists' had in the creation of the artworks *(Fig 22).* This piece stands as a readymade, even so far as the artists' blood on the cloth, reconnecting to the process of the art-making and the artists' craft, rather than relying on the final product to determine the conceptual outcome. According to Abosch:

"While the virtual work could exist without the creation of the physical work, the physical artworks could not have a meaningful existence were it not for the creation of the virtual artworks. In this sense, the work mirrors the unidirectional mechanism of a cryptographic algorithm — With a private key you can deduce the wallet address, but with the wallet address you cannot deduce the private key."[67]

There are a total of one hundred physical *IAMA Coin* artworks in existence, stamped with the contact address for the creation of the IAMA token that exists on the Ethereum network *(Fig 23).* This stamp consists of a combination of letters and numbers, unique to the IAMA wallet, printed using the artists' blood. There are also ten million virtual artworks available, all divisible by eighteen decimal places, theoretically allowing for *IAMA Coin* to be owned by millions upon millions of people. As the physicality of the artwork is limited to the stamped contact address, exploring the use of blood as a medium is necessary for understanding the conceptual context of

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[67] Georg Bak, Kate Vass Galerie, 'Perfect & Priceless: Value Systems on the Blockchain', (2018), p. 14, in<https://www.katevassgalerie.com/usr/documents/exhibitions/list_of_works_url/25/perfect-and-priceless-exhibition-catalog.pdf> [accessed 25 April 2019].

the artwork alongside the existing art historical canon, before exploring the implications of using an impalpable virtual medium in a contemporary setting.

By choosing to use his own blood to stamp the contract address, Abosch embraces the paradoxical nature of blood as a medium. Blood is both pure and impure, life and death, capable of evoking a sense of excitement and passion while instilling disgust and shock in the audience.[68] His choice to use blood in his physical artworks connected his 'physical body to the virtual works',[69] acting as an extension of the artist himself. The static, mechanical aesthetic of the contract address further juxtaposes Abosch's intention to add a human element back into his work, as it continues to blur the boundaries between humans and computers - a pressing issue for those in circles surrounding emerging technologies such as blockchain, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning.

Blood, while capable of being used to identify individuals based on their DNA, is the common fluid for all humans and animals and, therefore difficult to discern one individual's from another's. Although Abosch's blood directly connects him to the artworks and acts as an extension of himself, it could also belong to anyone, challenging notions of individualism and identity on a fundamental level. Blood is an infamously difficult medium to work with, being difficult to obtain and preserve, which makes the mylar foil pouch containing a cloth soaked with the artist's blood an interesting piece within the IAMA Coin series *(Fig 22).* By exhibiting the byproduct of the stamping process behind the physical artworks, Abosch forces viewers to engage directly with his involvement and connection to the pieces as parts of himself while creating a juxtaposition between the tangibility of blood on the physical works with the impalpable state of the virtual works/currency.

In the case of *IAMA Coin*, Abosch connects the virtual artworks with the physical, which could be interpreted as the creation of indexical signs as a representation of a real object or, in this case, person. According to Abosch, virtual artworks that exist without any physical counterpart, such as

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[68] Alvarez, *ibid.*

[69] Haigney, *ibid.*

his other project Forever Rose (2018) are 'the purest form of art –it's the idea, without the baggage of a vessel'. This takes on a new meaning when considered alongside an artwork that acts as a new form of self-portrait. Abosch, as a virtual token, exists as the idea of himself rather than as a physical representation, taking the intangible, undefinable features of himself and elevating them into something untouchable by conventional artistic practices that are typically dictated by centralised institutions such as galleries and auction houses.

Technology in Art

The role of emerging technologies in art is undervalued and often overlooked in favour of other concurrent art movements. When I speak of 'emerging technologies' in the context of 2019, I am mainly thinking of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Distributed Ledger Technology, Internet of Things, Robotics and 3D Printing, to name a few. Throughout history, artists have utilised new technologies to make their artistic processes more efficient,[70] to reach a wider audience, and to explore new mediums with which to express themselves.[71] However, one of the most profound developments the world has seen in recent decades is the introduction of the computer and, specifically, the internet, into our everyday lives.

I find it interesting then that, despite its prevalence within society, the role of technology within art is generally ignored by the dominant art history canon.[72] Distributed Ledger Technology and blockchain would cease to exist without the internet, due to its reliance on connected networks. I have chosen to focus this dissertation on an emerging technology artwork, specifically blockchain and cryptocurrencies, to bring attention to the influence of blockchain and emerging technology as a whole on the art world, stemming from the legacy of the generative art movement from the 1960s through to Abosch's *IAMA Coin* 2018 artwork.

It is logical to draw parallels between blockchain art and the generative art movement that began in the 1960s, through the likes of Hans Haacke, Sol Lewitt,[73] and Harold Cohen's AARON. In Cologne, 1965, Haacke stated:

'…make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is nonstable…make something indeterminate, which always looks different, the shape of which cannot be predicted

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[70] Jonathan Sawday, Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine (UK: Routledge, 2007), p. 83.

[71] Helmut Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography* (USA: Courier Corporation, 1986), p. 86.

[72] Dr Jacob Wamberg, Dr Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam, Art, Technology and Nature: Renaissance to Postmodernity (UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 1986), p. 5.

[73] Juan J. Romero, The Art of Artificial Evolution: A Handbook on Evolutionary Art and Music (Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 2008), p. 318.

precisely… make something which cannot 'perform' without the assistance of its environment… make something which reacts to light and temperature changes, is subject to air currents and depends, in its functioning, on the forces of gravity…make something which the 'spectator' handles, with which he plays and thus animates…make something which lives in time and makes the 'spectator' experience time…articulate: something natural…'[74]

This statement was released alongside what is arguably one of Haacke's best-known pieces, *Condensation Cube* (1965 - 2008) *(Fig 24)*. *Condensation Cube* is a prime example of generative art, despite not relying on any computer systems or coded algorithms. Generative art is art that has been created with an autonomous system, which often includes computer algorithms and mathematics, but could also include biological and chemical solutions also. In the case of Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, the artwork portrays the ever-changing cyclic process of water condensation within the cube, operating without the need for intervention from external forces. This statement could also apply to *IAMA Coin*, as the artist has created millions of virtual artworks that can fluctuate in value according to the whims of the spectator. The audience has an influence in determining how the artworks are used and distributed and how their value is perceived which, in turn, means that *IAMA Coin* responds directly to its environment and place in time, and can fluctuate according to factors that exist outside of the art world.

Sol LeWitt, on the other hand, combined combinatorial number systems with simple components like lines and geometric shapes. His wall drawings, *(Fig 25)* for example, were installed according to his instructions, effectively applying generative techniques to organic matter, by forcing humans into the role of the machine and relying on chance and randomisation to determine the outcome. In his 1967 essay, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, LeWitt says that 'all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.'[75] This approach could be viewed in parallel with *IAMA Coin,* as the public can use it in ways outside of the artists' control in place of existing currencies. In a sense,

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[74] Wendy Doniger, *What Reason Promises: Essays on Reason, Nature and History*, ed. by Peter Galison, Susan Neiman (Germany: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 239.

[75] Sol LeWitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (USA: Artforum, 1967), p. 1.

the idea of the artwork is at the forefront of its meaning, rather than its physicality, which is connected to the artist by the use of his own blood to stamp the token wallet address.

One of the most famous examples of generative art, however, is the work produced by AARON - a computer program written by Harold Cohen that has been in continual development since 1973.[76] AARON is an AI system that creates artwork according to input. Through AARON, Cohen continues to create artworks posthumously, although debates of authorship persist as it is unclear whether AARON acts as a tool to be controlled by another or a device that is capable of making its own decisions.[77] The relationship between Cohen and his creation emphasises the tenuous role of authorship and authenticity within art history, although AARON is perhaps one of the first examples in which the artist gives autonomy to another entity, aside from humans.

By combining the use of blood as a medium with an emerging technology like the blockchain, Kevin Abosch has amalgamated the traditional with the current in an attempt to encourage audiences to reassess and redefine identity in our current political, social and technological climate. Whereas the use of blood, text and inscription refer back to various points within the western art historical canon, the use of machines in art remains a comparably new phenomenon. This is especially apparent when focusing on computers and current emerging technologies rather than artists' tools throughout history and, more recently, the camera and the influence of photography since the nineteenth century, although I would argue the difference is the definition between a 'tool' and a 'device'.[78] IAMA Coin surpasses the conventional art canon by escaping the somatic realm, as the physical artworks 'could not have a meaningful existence were it not for the creation of the virtual artworks'[79]. Therefore, it could be argued that the physical artworks act as a representation of the virtual works, which exist exclusively on the blockchain network as intangible, yet valuable, matter.

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[76] ACM SIGGRAPH, ACM SIGGRAPH Awards - Harold Cohen, Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement (2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Xbt8lzWxIQ> [accessed 27 April 2019].

[77] Harold Cohen, 'the further exploits of AARON, Painter', (1995), in <https://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/4-2/text/cohen.html> [accessed 25 April 2019].

[78] Romero, p. 290.

[79] Bak, Kate Vass Galerie, p. 4.

To discuss the notion of selfhood with artworks that exist primarily in a virtual realm is daunting, but I will begin by considering the concept of the entire piece - namely the relationship between the physical and virtual works - in connection with the artist's deliberate act of connecting himself biologically to the IAMA tokens. Using a medium that is both intangible and that has the potential to be used as something independent of art, as a currency, allows the artworks to adopt a role within society that is independent of the artist. The tokens could be used by society in ways which surpass our conventional understanding of art, such as trading or exchanging value rather than to exist solely as an artwork.

As a currency, the virtual artworks can be used to exchange value or make transactions between parties. Although *IAMA Coin* is primarily an artwork, its potential uses and measurement of value reach beyond the artists' control which, when combined with the drawing of blood for the prints, could be considered as a form of self-sacrifice to the public. This self-sacrificial nature of the piece is implied by Abosch, following the success of the sale of 'Potato #345';

'As an artist, you see your work as an extension of yourself… So in a sense, you start to feel commodified… I started to feel like I was a coin',[80]

Connecting himself to the artwork addresses an array of discussions surrounding value and economy, as he has commodified something which remains a taboo topic. The idea of commodifying humans is uncomfortable for many of us, leading first to thoughts of prostitution, trafficking and slavery rather than our daily sacrifice of ourselves to our work, despite the same economic exchange. The increasingly popular trend of branding our identities makes sense as a means to stand-out amidst our peers on social platforms which provide us with the opportunity to connect to a global population instantly. However, it encourages us to commodify aspects of ourselves that were previously separated from work in an industrial context, resulting in a framed and carefully-curated representation of lifestyle and relationships to construct an image of aspiration. This, ultimately, works in favour of business and economy in our current climate where all data is now considered a 'valuable commodity, and one which businesses are eager to channel

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[80] Oliver Smith, 'Kevin Abosch: The Artist Who Became A Bitcoin', (2018), in<https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliversmith/2018/06/27/kevin-abosch-the-artist-who-became-a-bitcoin/#2feb3536647b> [accessed 25 April 2019].

in ever-more-lucrative forms'[81]. With *IAMA Coin*, Abosch creates a paradox insofar that he is self-sacrificial to the piece and society, but also regains agency of his self in our current social and economic climate by reclaiming his awareness and manipulating the way he is represented and used by society. Abosch has explored this theme further in his collaboration with Ai Weiwei in *Priceless* (2018), and *This is a Bank* (2019).

Furthermore, the artist's statement for *IAMA Coin* directly addresses the social aspect of the artwork, stating that:

'We come into the world like newly minted coins -- perfect and priceless. Yet we are constantly being ascribed a value. The most unfortunate are deemed "worthless" by those who exploit human currency.'[82]

Abosch articulates his motives for the piece clearly, as the self-sacrificial nature of himself into his artwork addresses the question of value and ethics while challenging the audience to assess their own status and to question their own identity. Although Abosch suggests that we are moulded and constructed according to our environments, being ascribed value according to archaic notions of human value including wealth, ethnicity and gender - particularly in the west, I will take this statement a step further and consider it in relation to post-humanism. The use of blockchain technology is inherently future-oriented and touches on a range of pressing themes that we are yet to adequately address within our contemporary society.

I will explore the notion of post-humanism in the context of *IAMA Coin* in a variety of ways. Firstly, I am interested in the interconnection of the human and the machine, or the organic with the man-made and the potential impact that will have on our society. Secondly, the role of ethics in such a landscape that acknowledges the shift in the relationship between humans and non-human entities, such as Artificial Intelligence. Finally, considering the role of *IAMA Coin* in our current

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[81] Anja Bechmann, Stine Lomborg, The Ubiquitous Internet: User and Industry Perspectives (UK: Routledge, 2014), p. 54.

[82] Kevin Abosch, *I am a coin.* (2018)

environment and within a post-human context, I will explore the evolving notion of selfhood in art as a means to represent more substantial social, political and technological demands.

By using blood to represent himself as a part of the artwork, Abosch has, while referring to a loaded archaic symbol within art history,[83] connected himself to an intangible artwork through his biology. Blood, while being used as a means to trace DNA of an individual, has the same aesthetic across all humans and most animals which lends ambiguity to the piece. The influence of the machine is present in the physical works, despite being intangible, as the line of numbers that represent the Ethereum contract address hold the same rigidity and mechanical qualities of machines. This, combined with the reliance on the audience's existing connotations of numbers, ensures that people will be able to make sense of the themes within the artwork without needing to understand its reference to the blockchain and cryptocurrencies.

However, an understanding of the blockchain and potential use of cryptocurrencies in a post-human landscape provides fertile ground for further exploration of the role and relevance of humans. Although we currently rely on the existing monetary and bartering systems, the use of cryptocurrencies as a means to exchange value with others will almost certainly not be limited to humans in future. Furthermore, a variety of initiatives exist in which the ecosystem built around the smart contract can operate autonomously or from machine-to-machine, free from human intervention. In such an environment, the role and influence of humans and, particularly, individuals, is compromised. *IAMA Coin* encourages us to consider these dynamics and the status of humans in an environment in which we may be subordinate to machines in the same way we consider animals subordinate to us now.

As technology progresses, the fundamental elements that have defined the dynamics of our societies for centuries will continue to evolve. With the shifting concept of money and value combined with the implementation of technologies such as the blockchain, cryptocurrencies and Artificial Intelligence, the role of humans will also evolve, potentially from our current authoritarian status to one which incorporates the agency of both human and non-human entities. The usual

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[83] Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color* (USA: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 61.

markers we use to define ourselves, such as culture, language, and heritage will be skewed, forcing us to redefine our sense of self according to the demands and pressures of our increasingly technologically-advanced surroundings. *IAMA Coin*, as an artwork that combines the most fundamental elements of organic, individual matter with a new technology, forces audiences to reassess their position within society which, ultimately, will encourage further explorations of selfhood and notions of individualism.

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IAMA Coin directly addresses the relationship between the artist, the artwork and his audience while provoking discussions on identity, value and selfhood within contemporary society. The use of both organic and intangible materials to form the piece allows for Abosch to control the way in which audiences interact with his artwork, ultimately redefining the role of the artwork and the artist as an individual within the art historical canon. This surpasses the influence of the art gallery as an institution and, due to its multi-disciplinary nature with the use of the blockchain and cryptocurrencies, *IAMA Coin* exceeds the confines of the ephemeral, isolated art world,[84] instead of penetrating the other sectors, including finance and technology.

Art, despite being treated as an isolated phenomenon, naturally overlaps with many themes that affect everyday life. Considering the psychological and sociological impact of the artist in their works is a common approach within art history, regardless of the genre or point in history. The cross-disciplinary nature of art and the discourse surrounding it provides an ample opportunity for alternative perspectives to penetrate the development of blockchain technology. This is especially apparent in *IAMA Coin* which merges such discussions with the human self with problems surrounding both the art world and the technology and finance worlds which, despite their similarities, do not often overlap. This ultimately forces audiences to address their own status within society as we interact with technology and economy on a daily basis, compared to the common perception of art as something separated from society and that, for the most part, could be avoided.

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[84] David Inglis, *Culture and Everyday Life* (UK: Routledge, 2004), p. 64.

By emphasising his own vulnerability and lack of agency within the art, technology and finance sectors, Kevin Abosch challenges existing notions of identity, agency and power by offering an alternative representation of the Self. He essentialises what will be his defining feature in a post-human landscape by stripping his identity down to his blood and the ephemeral idea of his existence, as represented in the virtual artworks that make-up *IAMA Coin*.

Word count: 9947

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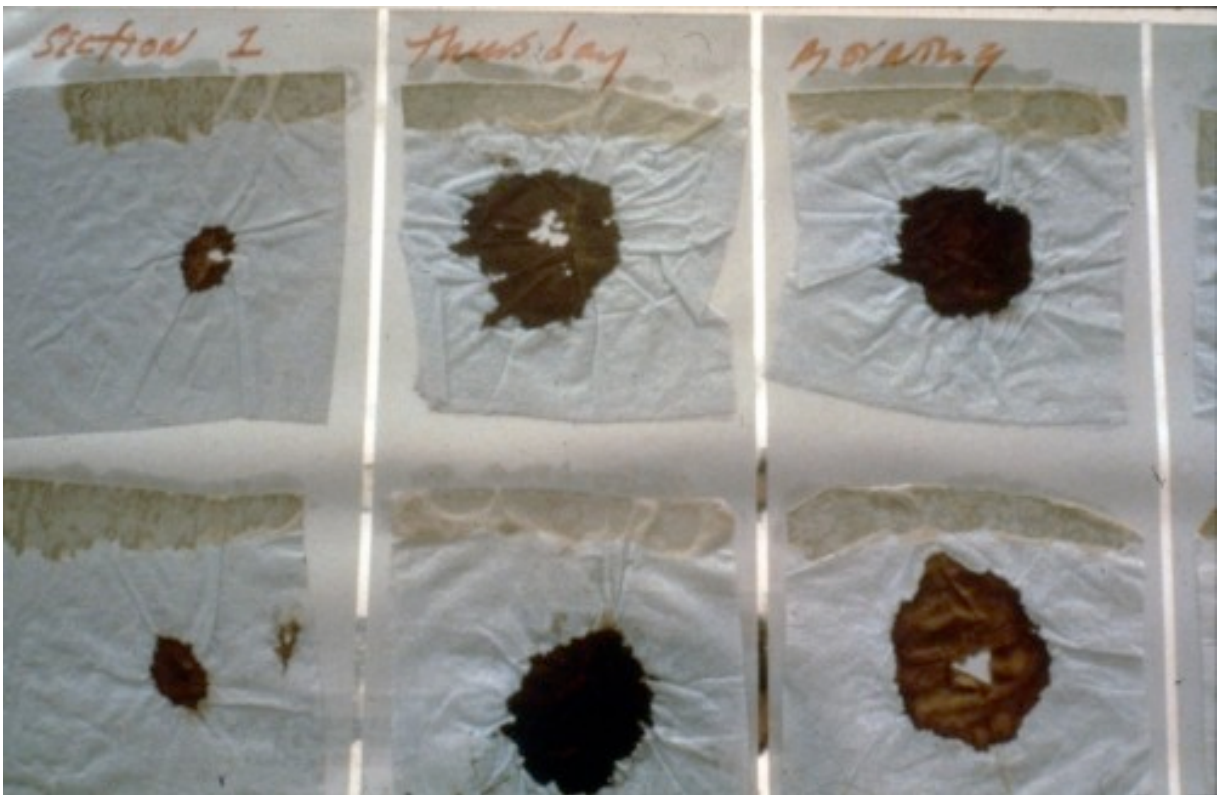
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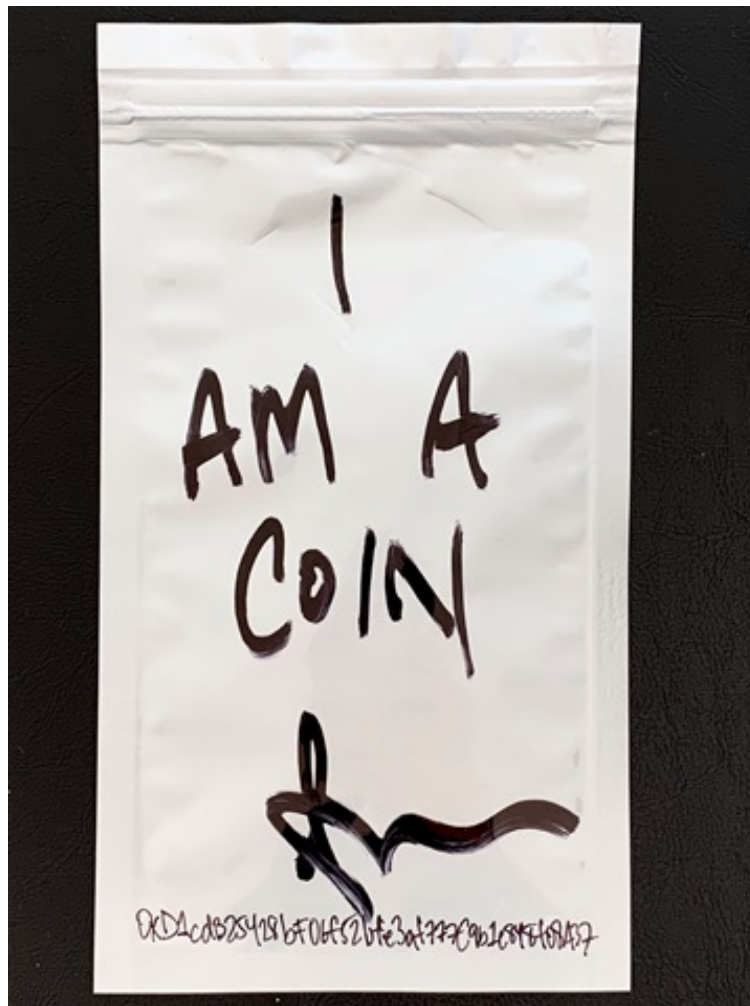
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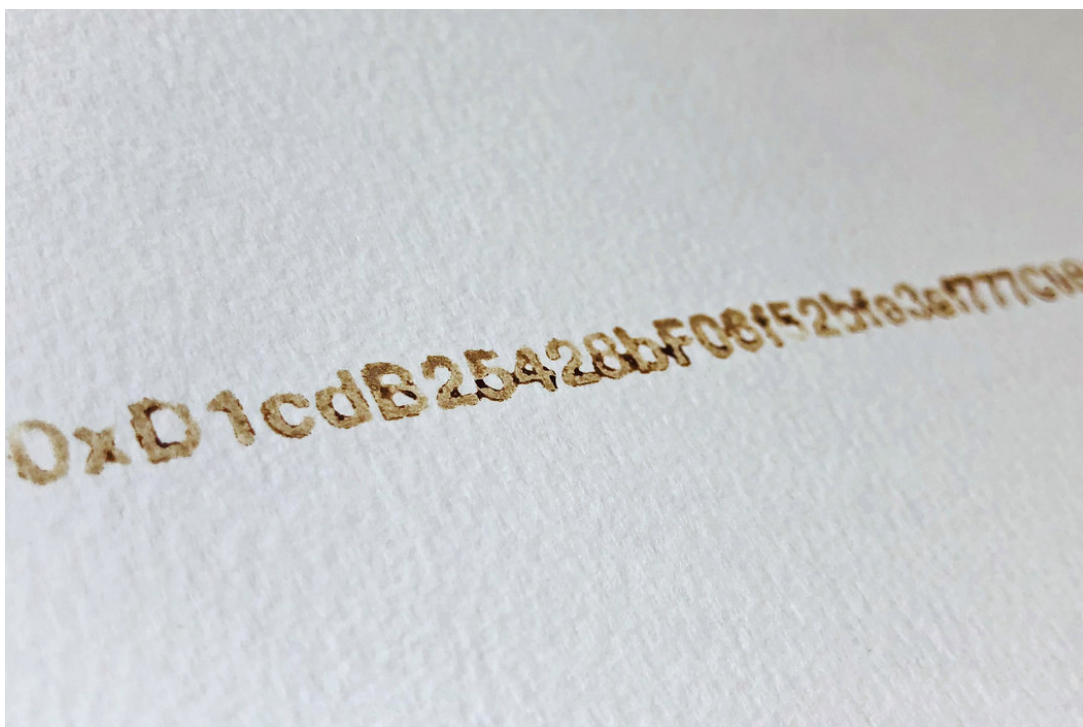

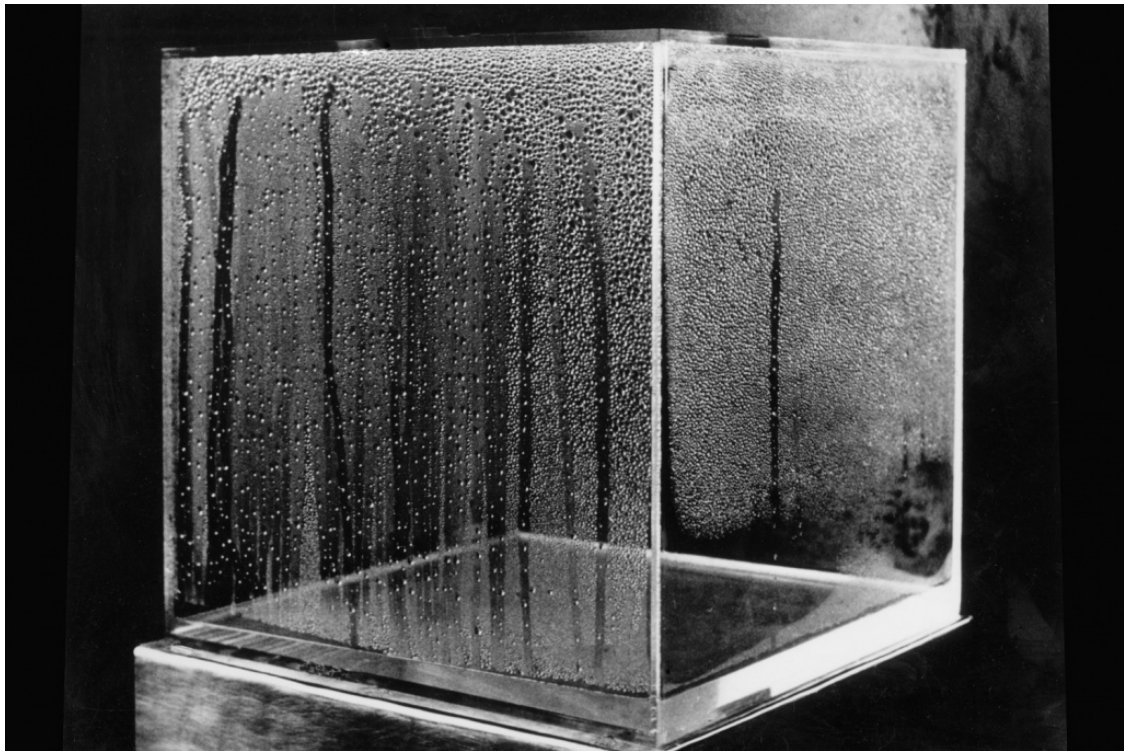Fig 23: *IAMA Coin (detail)*, by Kevin Abosch (2018). Courtesy of the New York Times
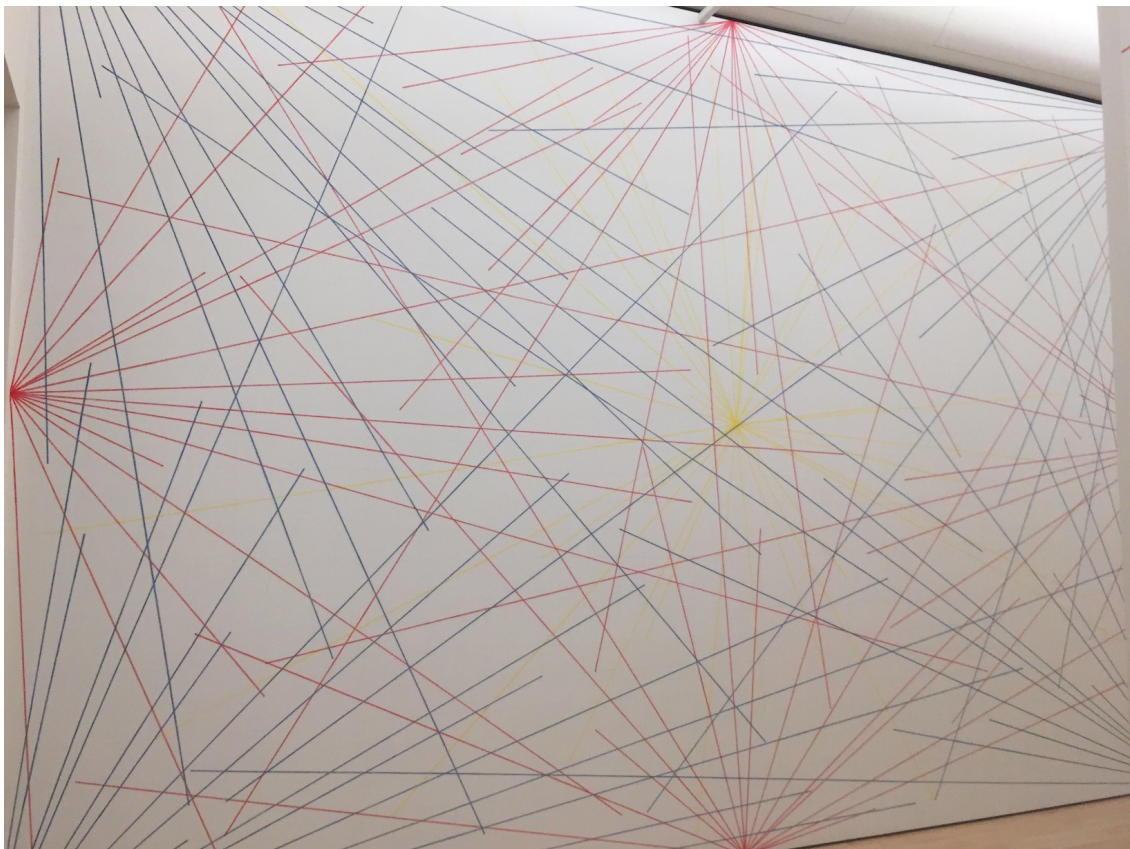
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