WHERE HAVE ALL THE COWBOYS GONE?

On the fall of the poor image and the rise of the NFT

[Schwede66](), Old Christchurch Railway Station demolition, 2012. Licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0]()

Lachlan Taylor
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IN 2007, I saw *Transformers* at the Moorhouse Avenue Hoyts in Ōtautahi. That cinema, my local movie theatre growing up, no longer exists. It was one of the many structures in that part of the city lost to the Christchurch earthquakes. It sat boarded and unoccupied for two years after the first quake, until it was eventually razed in late-2012. Before its premature closure, the Hoyts had lived in the bones of the city's old central railway station—a 1950s construction in brilliant red brick with a clocktower that watched over the light industry and big-box retail blocks of the CBD's southern edge. After that first earthquake, the four clocks of the tower were stuck reading a constant 4.35am.

The station itself ceased operation in the early 1990s and was split into a number of commercial properties. The cinema occupied most of the space, joined by a *Timezone* arcade and *Science Alive!*—a museum-cum-infotainment-centre mostly remembered for its vomit-inducing gyroscope and a vertical slide. The three met in the building's foyer, an expansive lino-clad void that once welcomed passengers travelling up and down Te Waipounamu. The Moorhouse Ave Hoyts is no 'Fighting Temeraire', but it holds its own as a

symbol of the old replaced by the new—the transition from an industry and economy of matter to one of experience. It was there as a twelve-year old that I sat through Michael Bay's 143-minute CG-soaked technogasm—paean to a cinema of flash, effect, and high definition.

A year before the Christchurch earthquakes, in 2009, Hito Steyerl wrote ['In Defence of the Poor Image'](#). Here, the artist-philosopher praised an 'alternative economy of images' that contrasted with a fetish for high-resolution pictures—in Hollywood cinema and the worlds of media beyond. Her 'poor images' were the degraded, pixelated, and pirated cousins of conservative high-definition mass media:

> The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place.[1]

She saw in the poor image a renegade promise, a rich alternative to the media of big business and official culture, in the hands of myriad users. Access to the internet was the only barrier to entry. If you were a certain kind of internet user in the 2000s, you're intimately familiar with the poor image. It had a name like 'wedding_crashers_2005_HDCam_480p.avi' and you found it on LimeWire or in the W-Z folder of your friend's external hard drive. But poor images were so much more than just camcorder rips of Hollywood cinema bearing an obtrusive 'FOR AWARD CONSIDERATION ONLY' watermark.

They didn't only look different from the gloss of mainstream media, Steyerl's poor images were illicit, on the margins, political and proletarian in their position at the bottom of a hierarchy of quality. They were passively suppressed for both their illegality and for their irrelevance to a neoliberal image culture which had progressively eliminated the non-commercial from our available stores of imagery. And, crucially, they were defined by a connection to technology, their easy flow along P2P networks beyond the reach of traditional gatekeepers. The wild west of the poor image kept alternatives like political and essayistic cinema alive, while also generating new forms of art outside the constraints of IP or state-sanctioned production. The communities of the poor image retained the notion that images could be tools of resistance and remembrance, not just conformity and entertainment.

But Steyerl was careful not to go all in on the promise of poor images, warning of a tension between progressive potential and oppressive commodification:

> The networks in which poor images circulate thus constitute both a platform for a fragile new common interest and a battleground for commercial and national agendas. They contain experimental and artistic material, but also incredible amounts of porn and paranoia. While the territory of poor images allows access to excluded imagery, it is also permeated by the most advanced commodification techniques.[2]

Twelve years on, it seems clear which side has won. The poor images championed by Steyerl are still out there—you can still watch Harun Farocki putting out a cigarette on his arm in 140p on YouTube. But poor images are much more likely to lead you into the algorithmic labyrinths of conspiracy and prejudice—to use the vocabulary of degradation and pixilation as manipulative shortcuts for immediacy and truth.

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[1] Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' *e-flux journal* 10 (November 2009). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/

[2] Ibid.

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STEYERL'S ESSAY CAME OUT before the raid on Kim Dotcom's mansion, before the Snowden leaks, before the 2016 US Election. If the first decade of the twenty-first century was the one in which the dreams of the internet looked like they might come true, the second was when they were well and truly shattered. Instead of a new Eden of community and the free exchange of information, the internet is a walled compound of surveillance and stratification that sorts us into increasingly oppositional and antagonistic camps. The poor image is much more likely to be a tool of this system than one used to escape from it. And the cowboys of the poor image, idealists and grifters who gave us access to this content, have been punished, assimilated, or run out of town by cheap legitimate alternatives. The internet is home to a whole lot of porn and paranoia.

Though that outlook alone might be too bleak, the internet has never been a monolith. It's also home to Yancey Stricker's [Dark Forest'](#), a space between the extremes of the dark net and the public-facing zone controlled by state and corporate interests, where groups thrive in the safety and enclosure of private messaging apps, newsletters, and podcasts—decentralised communities that communicate and create outside of the 'high risks, high rewards, and limited moderation' of the mainstream web.

Blockchain technology has slowly emerged as a significant force (or at least a potentially significant force) that is difficult to place on the plane of this new internet. The world of blockchain is full of competing aims and what sometimes feel like total and irresolvable contradictions, flicking between poles of digital liberation and oppression. What is undeniable is that there are actors using blockchain technology to colonise more and more digital space than ever with the values of capital, and not just of the transactional commerce accompanying online retail, but the hyperfinancialisation that is fuelling the property and art markets globally: witness the arrival of the NFT.

When *Transformers* was over, I came out into the Hoyts' foyer to see three men fully decked in Crusaders-brand athleisure, surrounded by a small crowd. Provincial rugby is a flimsy construct around which to build an identity but, as a child in Christchurch, I'd made a pretty solid go at it. And if that identity had a core, it was in the shape of a man who could [throw a Vortex Mega Howler thirty, sixty, even ninety metres.](#) Sheepishly standing next to Richie McCaw and Andy Ellis was Dan Carter, my *hero*. Had he just been to the same film? I couldn't be sure. The square-jawed trio had found themselves trapped by a throng of fans beseeching them for sharpie scrawls on t-shirts and the bills of baseball caps. I was too shy for that, and I left. I moved past the small crowd, past the flashing lights of *Timezone*'s claw machines, and onto the sun-soaked footpaths of Moorhouse Ave. But I swear that as I walked past, just for one magic moment, I locked eyes with Dan Carter.

That was as close as Dan and I would get. We both changed, drifted apart. I left rugby, and Ōtautahi, and learned about art. He won two World Cups and made some cash in Perpignan. I thought our separation was for good. And then, amid all the chaos and frustration of 2021, he found his way back into my life through the eight words of a [Newsroom headline](#): 'Dan Carter kicks off crypto art investing platform'.

The September article revealed the former All Black as a co-founder of Glorious, an online dealer gallery selling NFT art and other cultural tokens, scheduled to open this November. Glorious has big ambitions for the status of NFTs in Aotearoa, and the blockchain technology they're minted on. Dan told Newsroom he wanted the platform to be a space for 'NFTs with high artistic and experimental value.' No Cat GIFs, no save the dates. The gallery has already partnered with popular names in Aotearoa sports, art, and music to produce NFTs, including Six60, Dick Frizzell, and Dan himself.

There are many reasons to take an interest in NFTs, and just as many online hot-takes about whether the technology represents a paradigm-shifting recalibration of the way we assign and exchange value, or if they're just another financial instrument to help a few people make a lot of money at the expense of many others. In the art world, you can find stories about how NFTs are a revolution in artistic agency and equity, and carbon-vomiting world-devourers on the same platforms.

Contemporararyary, Non Fungible Token Mule: how to protect your NFT! The future of NFT transportation and storage, 2021, video, 2:51 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

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NFTS ARE STILL a relatively new thing in the art system. It is important to understand that they are not really an *art thing*. They are a means of assigning value to digital as well as physical assets, outside of traditional markets where value is tied to state-backed currencies. What they have already achieved in this sector is to bring a new kind of artist—the online native, net-based, digital artist who has not previously been welcomed by the fine art system—into the game, resulting in the cultures of the poor image and the exclusive fine art original uncomfortably rubbing shoulders. And, the non-fungible token has cut into the history of artistic value with unexpected rapidity, and with such loud volume, that art spaces are now roiling in discussions about the technology that have similarly consumed multiple sectors and platforms.

The hype isn't helpful. The claims of both supporters and detractors are overblown and disproportionate, and debates about NFTs' artistic and aesthetic qualities are rudimentary if non-existent. For my part, when it comes to form and content, I'm an NFT cynic. I don't think the technology is going to revolutionise art as we know it any time soon. Though if I'm wrong, I eagerly await your theses nailed to my door. The launch of a platform like Glorious is interesting in that it heralds the arrival of the art NFT as an accessible and collectible commodity in Aotearoa. And if we're about to mainstream the art NFT in this country, it's important to be thinking about these fascinating, complicated, and deeply contradictory *things*. For me, the really interesting dimension of the debate is how, more than any Marvel film or HD Instagram filter, NFTs are both the opposite of the poor image, and perhaps the inevitable conclusion of its promise.

Steyerl's poor image is degraded because it belongs to everyone, and belongs to everyone because it's degraded. It has been zipped and compressed and thundered across the internet so many times that it barely registers as it's 'original' referent. As she put it, their aura 'is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy.' The poor image has gone beyond the reach of hierarchies and gatekeepers. It is post-original, post-quality, and post-ownership.

The NFT is the perfect antithesis of these ideas. And yet it has been packaged in a very similar way, and with very similar language. At their most evangelical, supporters see the technology as a harbinger of an artist-led revolution that will sweep away the old cultural arbiters of galleries and museums, ushering in a new era of decentralised, democratised art managed by self-regulating blockchain communities. But isn't there a paradox here? The essential characteristic of an NFT is that it confers ownership and originality—it is quite literally a token designed for that purpose. And, for the most part, NFT art is an art of high-definition. At the Glorious end of the spectrum, these works are intended for display on high-resolution monitors in high-resolution homes. How is this world of individual property and exclusive originality more democratic than an art gallery?

One answer is simply that capital can encroach upon even the most alternative of enclaves. The internet is as open to capitalisation as any art gallery—the old hierarchies have just been technologically expanded. Let's go back to the bang that started this conversation in earnest, the [March sale of Beeple's Instagram collage] 'Everydays: The First 5000 Days' for US $69 million at Christie's. The work itself—a subject that is tellingly rarely discussed in the NFT conversation—is a JPG of all the images the artist had posted online since 2007. It looks like a jigsaw I had as a child, except all the little tiles in mine came together to look like the Mona Lisa when you were finished. Looking at Beeple's image now, it really does seems so much like 'just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all.'[3] Oh, wait a minute.

What makes Beeple's work worth that eye-watering sum and not the identical screenshot that sits on my desktop, or Steyerl's true poor images? The answer is that originality is a market fetish, and in the world of digital images, originals are back baby. And this time, we can make them, assign them value, and exchange them without a single unit of traditional currency ever getting involved. Beeple's work was purchased for 42,329.453 Ether, the dominant cryptocurrency used in NFT trades, which had an exchange value of US $69 million at the time of sale.[4] The Beeple auction was about value in a world where state-backed currencies are not the only form of exchange or means of wealth generation. This has enormous social and political consequences if the technology truly makes it into the mainstream. For art and the world of images, however, it was a reminder that this new system of exchange is caught up in some much older ideas about the relationship between an artwork's status as a unique artefact and its worth.

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[3] Steyerl, 'In Defence of the Poor Image'.

[4] That same quantity of Ether would be worth US $186 million at time of writing.

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IF NFTS CAN PLUG a gap in the existing art market for how we assign value, it might be worth looking again at exactly what that gap is. I would suggest this has two dimensions. The first is uniqueness, or in the case of the reproductive image, scarcity. The status of authenticity in the art market has always relied on the social magic of consensus. There are five prints of this image because we agree that there are, and the market agrees that an identical object not sanctioned by the artist or gallery wouldn't *count*. Digital and digitally stored artworks have been stretching the edges of this system for the past three decades, but it has found ways to produce value by limiting access and controlling circulation. A purchased video work might make its way to a collector on a flash drive or be sent over WeTransfer. And yet we've held fast to the belief that there can only be a limited number of authentic versions of a work, even when a perfectly identical copy is only two button combos away. The magic has held, mostly.

This is to say that artificial scarcity produced by arbitrary limits has always been baked into the art market. There are good reasons for this too, chiefly protecting the prices that artists rely on from primary sales. For the most part, NFTs have inserted a different looking layer into an existing system.[5] Instead of guaranteeing scarcity through a handshake, or a written contract, or any of the myriad ways that the traditional art market builds material consensus, the NFT provides its guarantee through a line of code—tying an image or idea to a traceable and incorruptible series of numbers and letters.

Secondly there's that special quality to the unique material object: what Walter Benjamin called its *aura*. This originally had a lot to do with the fact that artworks had to be seen in situ (in churches or palaces, then museums) and this lent them the mysterious power of a sacred relic. Once an artwork could be reproduced and circulated anywhere, it lost its aura, and something else was made possible—a new kind of spectatorship and consumption could ensue. We are yet to see how NFTs function as material artworks: whether Beeple's images placed on the walls of homes and museums will verify his status as *an important artist*. But we do know that aura can be re-ascribed to artworks by their materialisation as objects to be encountered on the occasion of their exhibition: as a unique event to be experienced. The transition between cult value and exhibition value doesn't only move in one direction. The grainy image can exert a particular power when we witness it at scale in an immersive installation. Or as that bankable rascal Banksy proved, the public self-destruction of a work can be a [source of immense value itself](#).

Steyerl was both excited for and wary of poor images for this very quality of the art market—and capitalist markets in general —to adapt to, and ultimately co-opt and consume ideas that ostensibly oppose it. In 2009, she looked back at the history of conceptual art to see this cyclical force in action. Though the dematerialisation of art emerged as a way to resist the cult value of the autonomous art object, the systems and performances of conceptual practices were eventually brought into the fold of

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5 It's worth noting that one of the genuinely innovative prospects offered by NFTs is the capacity to embed an automatic secondary resale royalty into all future sales of a work—a capacity that Glorious is employing with its own NFTs.

the traditional art market.[6] Auction houses sell wall paintings and lists of instructions, having found the means to commodify art that has no physical existence or trace. The market loves to have its cake and eat it too, and NFTs might be a vehicle for just that—a decentralised commodity fetish, or possibly a decentralisation fetish commodified. NFTs can be both clean and
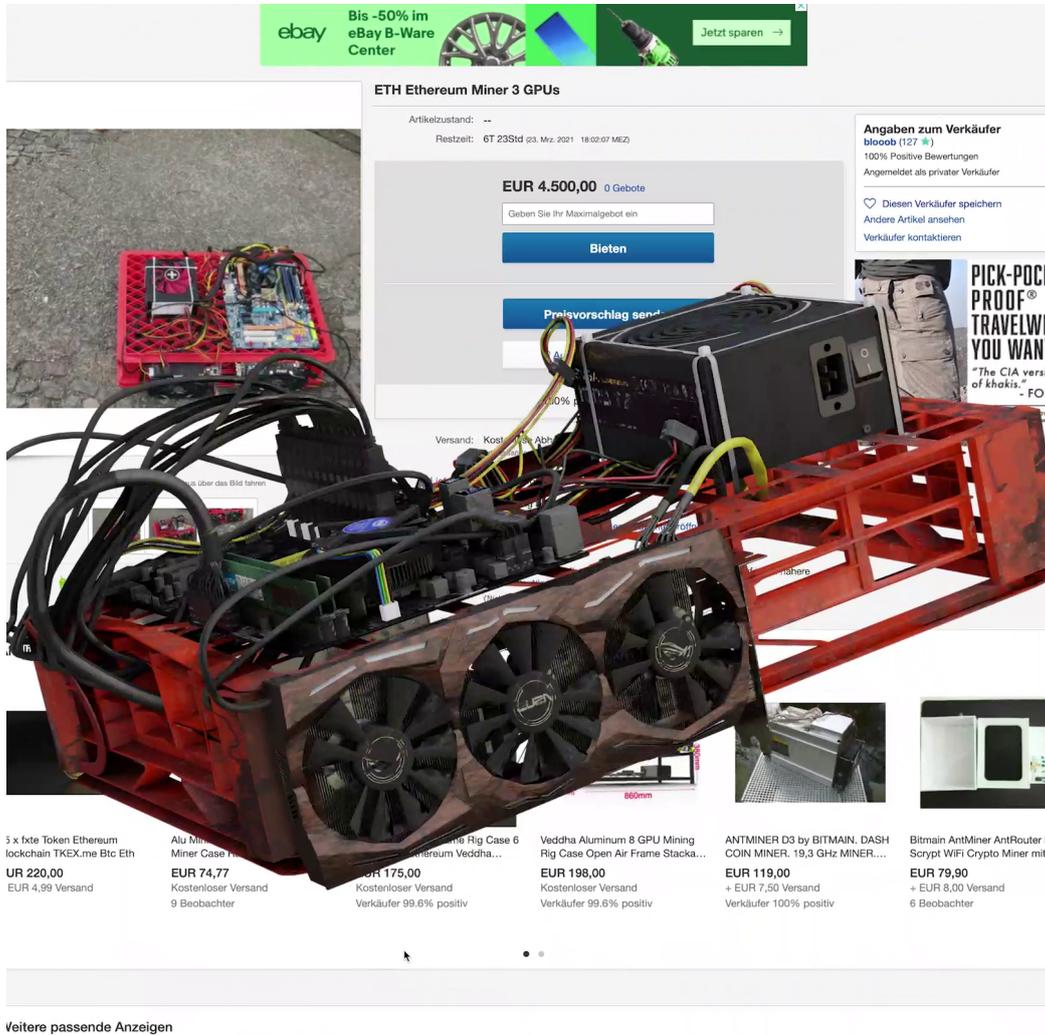
dirty, conservative and progressive, a token for the old art market and for the wild west of the internet, poor and rich images.

Simon Denny, Mine Offset: Ethereum Kryptowährung Mining-Rig 45 MH/s, non-fungible token ERC-721, MP4 0:23 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York

A PETROL STATION and a car yard now occupy the site of the former Christchurch central railway station. It's an odd return to transport infrastructure, albeit of the individualised, car-centric kind that feels especially fitting for the Ōtautahi setting—to borrow from a meme, a trace of the old self exists in the false self. There's a new Hoyts now, further into the CBD—a sprawling mall-like multiplex with a food court below. Glossy as it is, even that feels out of date.

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[6] Steyerl specifically drew on the writing of art historian Alexander Alberro to make this point.

Simon Denny minted his first NFT in March this year. 'Mine Offset: Ethereum Kryptowährung Mining-Rig 45 MH/s' is a short video showing a digital model of a cryptocurrency mining rig spinning against a shifting background. The purchase of the NFT came with the promise that Denny would retire a real-world mining rig operating on the Ethereum blockchain, and then donate the rig's processing power to climateprediction.net, a not-for-profit climate modelling project. Denny's switch wryly complicates the narratives around energy consumption that have arisen in the wake of the NFT boom, drawing attention to the entangled mess of production and consumption that entwines both the causes of the climate crisis and its possible solutions. The work is a good reminder of how twisted and fraught the relationship between images and their value is in this new space, and that it always has been. There are no pure heroes and villains, no guarantee that a work made inside the old system must be totally captured by the interests of capital, or that one produced outside is inherently virtuous.

The film industry once thought it might go out of business because of piracy. It saved itself by adapting to the aesthetic and technology of the pirates—affordable streaming on laptops and other small screens. But in doing so they put *cinema*, the idea of a big-screen experience like when I watched *Transformers* in 2007, in jeopardy. The success of streaming services has led to a stratification of content across too many subscription platforms, and we are witnessing a media piracy comeback as a result—a renewed increase in torrenting and other P2P piracy has been underway since 2018. And as the art market reaches into every pocket where artists produce their work, so too are there places where new and renewed modes of digital resistance are taking shape. Maybe the cowboys aren't *back*, per se; but maybe the poor image hasn't been totally consumed, yet.

About the Author
Lachlan Taylor is a writer and curator based in Pōneke Wellington. He is currently the Commissioning Editor of ArtNow Essays. Lachlan was the inaugural Adam Art Gallery Intern, working towards an exhibition and publication on the New Zealand works of Christopher Perkins, *Looking for a New Country: Christopher Perkins in New Zealand* (2018). Lachlan went on to take up the Assistant Curator role at Artspace Aotearoa in 2019, and then worked at Michael Lett before returning to Pōneke in 2021 to complete an MA in Creative Writing through the International Institute of Modern Letters at Te Herenga

Waka Victoria University of Wellington. He has also completed an MA in Art History through Te Herenga Waka in 2018. Lachlan's writing has been published in Art + Australia, Art News New Zealand, Art New Zealand, the Art Paper, and the Pantograph Punch.

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