

NFTs: WTF & Are They Ever Useful?

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In the early days of the internet, many things that are not free today were free. YouTube did not shove ads in your face, social media did not invent new ways to manipulate you into seeing more promoted content every other day. It was mainly a shared community, sure it was sometimes chaotic and utterly disappointing if you occasionally came across the worst of humanity, but it was more or less silently agreed upon that people were there as a hobby. People made content for free, and others consumed that content for free and gave feedback and validation in return. As time went on, as expected, people found ways to make money from it. Shared hobbies turned into commissions (not that I blame the artists, but you see what I mean), freely volunteered validation turned into a trick to get people addicted. And now, we have Non-Fungible Tokens, or NFTs, the most recent fad in this increasing monetization of online content.

NFTs are basically people paying to “own” the pictures online. Yes, that is literally it. It feels like you do not understand it, and there might be more to it if people are paying thousands or tens of thousands of dollars, but there really is nothing more to it. You see a nice picture, or a gif, or whatever you like, you save it or take a screenshot and go about your day happily. With NFTs, you can buy it, and if you are wondering, yes, other people can still view, download, distribute, and modify it as they wish, but you just... Own it, I suppose. You can blurt out that you own that viral meme your friend just sent you, for example. Is that worth thousands of dollars? I will leave that decision up to you.

The strange thing about NFTs is that they make absolutely no sense when you think of the whole thing in today’s context, the only use they seem to have is for the artists. However, I believe it starts to make a little more sense if you think of it as an investment for a future change these buyers are expecting, at least from their view. NFTs are essentially the process of collecting digital art. When you go to museums, most paintings you see are replicas; the original ones are either stored away and belong to governments, private organizations, or persons. What NFTs do is that they carry this whole process of obtaining art over to the digital world. That might seem pointless now, but it may not be so in the future.

As you might be familiar with, it is frequently discussed that we might live in increasingly virtual environments over the decades. Perhaps, even a fully virtual environment where we no longer require a physical existence for the continuation of our consciousness. That sounds far-fetched and philosophical when we say it, but there are real-world people actively working on making this possible, so it could potentially become a reality. If this does end up being the future, and we move on to live in a virtual world, purchasing digital images no longer sounds that ridiculous. Especially since, by then, these products would likely hold increased historical value as being the first-ever NFTs.

Refik Anadol ([1](#)) ([2](#)), as an artist, ties into this conversation in an interesting way. Not only are his works digital and obtained through NFTs, but they are also primarily designed to be displayed physically. Additionally, the philosophy behind his work ties into discussions of what the future might look like and how data and machine intelligence can be experienced by us as sensory beings. He is ultimately working on conjoining physical and virtual experiences by using machine learning algorithms to visualize data

and machine intelligence, and using architectural structures as a canvas for his work. As such, his team builds visual poems out of wind data, designs visual representations of the data of Twitter feeds, re-imagines the potential architecture of the post-digital world, and puts on display a machine's inner "thought process" as it tries to reconstruct nature. This comparative and artistic study of human senses and digital existence evokes various ideas that could be implemented in a potential virtual world or that could become the building blocks of what that world might look like. The studio's recent work, *Melting Memories*, is another vastly intriguing addition. Inspired by Anadol's uncle's Alzheimer's diagnosis, the team collected brain data of the process of remembering and visualized it by implementing machine learning algorithms. With its team consisting of artists, neuroscientists, computer scientists, musicians, and storytellers, the studio continues its work in combining technology, art, and humanity in a way I have personally never seen before. I believe that in the context of NFTs, this type of work is what they were meant for.

In short, as the internet grew and started encompassing more and more of the human population, people have found new ways to monetize previously-free content shared on platforms. NFTs are the most recent version of this where people have begun to pay for the ownership of digital images. While NFTs seem like a waste of money in the context of current mainstream digital media, they might become the new way of art collection in the future, should we continue to lead increasingly virtual lives. Additionally, they might also be considered a reasonable way to obtain digital art that relies on physical environments for display.