

Tina Rivers Ryan

Trustworthy and Trustless: Museums and DAOs

In 2021, the American Alliance of Museums surveyed more than 1,200 American adults—representing the country's entire adult population—about the trustworthiness of museums, including art, science, and history museums. As the final report summarized, *Museums and Trust 2021* confirms that the public continues to regard museums as highly trustworthy—ranking second only to friends and family, and significantly more trustworthy than researchers and scientists, NGOs generally, various news organizations, the government, corporations and business, and social media. For respondents who had visited a museum in the past two years (one-quarter of respondents), museums are the number one trusted source of information. This high level of trust is consistent for museums of all types, from art museums to zoos. The top three reasons cited as contributing to this trust are that museums are fact-based, present real/authentic/original objects, and are research-oriented.⁽¹⁾

While geographically limited and already somewhat outdated, this study provides a useful starting point for thinking through the future of museums in the wake of decentralization—and perhaps the future of a decentralized art world more broadly.⁽²⁾ Over the past few years, the idea of decentralization

has been embraced by the so-called Web3 community, which promotes using blockchains to make immutable records and automated transactions in the service of greater transparency. Blockchain technologies are often referred to as “trustless,” in the sense that transacting through a blockchain supposedly does not require us to place our trust in third-party verifications; they are therefore inherently opposed to traditional centralized organizational structures, which are seen as untrustworthy.⁽³⁾ During the popularization of blockchain-based cryptocurrencies and NFTs in 2021, many voices in the community even called for museums and other hierarchical “gate-keepers” in the art world to be eradicated. Some proposed a shift towards Distributed/Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs): groups of interdependent people who use decentralized technologies or structures (such as token-based quadratic voting systems) to work cooperatively towards a common goal. As early as 2018, a Berlin-based collective of creatives launched the Black Swan DAO, envisioning “a cosmos where wider communities and collectives of creative practitioners, not art bureaucrats sitting aloft of the community, benefit from the value created by their practices.”⁽⁴⁾ In practice, this looks like “peer support, artist-led funding and commu-

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nity decision-making” (none of which necessarily rely on blockchain technologies) that “places resources into the hands of the users rather than the gatekeepers of the arts,” while in theory, it models a new concept of “organizational bodies as something that are fluid, mutable and adaptable, and that shift the ecology within which art is created,” as Black Swan co-founders Laura Lotti and Calum Bowden have argued.⁽⁵⁾

To summarize: the general (American) public finds museums incredibly trustworthy, considering them to be citadels of authenticity and facts backed by neutral experts, while many in the Web3 community embrace the maxim DYOR (Do Your Own Research) and distrust museums precisely because they are centralized organizations that monopolize trust. It may be tempting to dismiss this attitude as resulting from grievance: of course artists and art workers who have largely been ignored or preyed upon by the establishment would decide that it must have been corrupted (whether by money, ignorance, or bias), and should no longer be trusted. But it is just as likely that this attitude results from traumatic experiences with exploitation and hypocrisy in the “traditional” or “mainstream” art world: as the saying goes, trust must be earned. If anything, the division of opinion over museums reveals that the approach to earning trust depends on the community to which one appealing: Do you hire experts who work with authentic objects and conduct research, or do you enact protocols that allow “wider communities and collectives of creative practitioners” to “benefit from the value created by their practices”?

The irony here is that museums already somewhat resemble blockchains, in the sense that they offer (theoretically) permanent and immutable storage of cultural heritage that is geographically distributed across a network of individual nodes. More to the point, most museums and other legacy cultural organizations were thinking long and hard about the concepts of community and trust long before DAOs gained traction. Whose stories do museums tell, and who gets to tell them? What kinds of value do they create for their artists, audience, staff, and donors? How can they operate according to the principles of sustainability instead of extraction? Perhaps asking (and even addressing) these questions is too little, too late; not everyone is happy to see incremental change when the crises that artists and other cultural workers face are so dire. At the very least, we might admit that they are justified in asking more of museums.

At the same time, in this age of rampant anti-intellectualism masquerading as populism and a renewed Californian Ideology that presents technological silver bullets to solve every social problem, it seems prudent to ask: Who stands to benefit most from the erosion of public trust in our most civic organizations? What concept of democracy is served when someone advocates that a museum operated by an accredited non-profit organization or the government—holding works in trust for the public, subject to legal and financial oversight, and beholden to the ethical guidelines of professional organizations, at risk of censure—should be replaced by a DAO comprised of private citizens who, as the Black Swan member Penny Rafferty acknowledges, may participate in group

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voting without pursuing true “horizontal decentralization”—if they bother to vote at all, given the notoriously thorny problem of incentivization?⁽⁶⁾ This is to say nothing of the fact that the voting mechanisms of DAOs can symbolically or even literally link democratic representation to the holding of (digital) property and suggest a future in which society is atomized into cliques sorted by vibes, leading Hito Steyerl to bluntly assert that “DAOs reflect sunken social horizons.”⁽⁷⁾

In the end, we need to ask more of museums and we need to ask more of DAOs (and of emerging technologies more broadly). For either to earn our trust, they need to continually define their terms and defend their motives. In the meantime, the rhetoric of decentralization helpfully reminds museums that the pursuit of democracy or equity is procedural as well as symbolic: they need to attend to the politics of the protocols or mechanisms that they put into place, and not just the politics of their stated goals.⁽⁸⁾ Conversely, museums and the incredible

trust that they have earned from the public might encourage the Web3 community to consider how trust is not simply the product of technological protocols (no matter how transparent), but also of a “social layer” of legal and professional codes and specialized knowledge bases.⁽⁹⁾ Hopefully, a future arts ecosystem of both “trustless” museums and “trustworthy” DAOs is closer than it appears.

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(1) American Alliance of Museums, “Museums and Trust 2021,” <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/>.

(2) This essay attempts to answer questions I first put forward in my “Curator’s Note” for the Fall 2022 exhibition Peer to Peer: “How might our institutions change if we imagine them not only as centralized repositories, but also as a kind of cultural protocol facilitating the open exchange of ideas between artists and their contemporary peers, historical predecessors, cultural workers, and public audiences? We may then also want to ask the inverse about the future of technology: How might blockchains change if we imagine them not simply as autonomous agents of decentralization that will make existing institutions obsolete, but also as public infrastructures embedded within—and accountable to—the larger social sphere?” See Tina Rivers Ryan, “On the Museum as Cultural Protocol,” FeralFile.com, <https://feralfile.com/exhibitions/peer-to-peer-pjb/note>.

(3) Even if one agrees that legacy organizations might be untrustworthy, one should remain skeptical regarding the supposed transparency of a technology that is plagued by both scams and the Oracle problem (that is, the problem of how one determines that the information entered into the blockchain is accurate in the first place)—which are challenging in no small part because the community values anonymity.

(4) Black Swan, “Simulating Equitable Art Worlds: DAOs through a role-played lens,” KW Institute for Contemporary Art, <https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/black-swan-dao/>. Others took different approaches: artist Simon Denny facilitated a collaboratively organized exhibition of blockchain-related works called Proof of Work for the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin in 2018; Colborn Bell started his own Museum of Crypto Art in 2020; Trent Elmore, Maria Paula Fernandez, and Sam Spike started building JPG, a protocol for crowd-sourced curation, in 2020; and Lady Cactoid partnered with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to curate drops on the museum’s behalf in 2023.

(5) Laura Lotti & Calum Bowden, “Manifesting a Black Swan DAO,” in *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations*

and the Arts, ed. Ruth Catlow and Penny Rafferty. Torque Editions, 2022, 151, 156.

(6) In a short published exchange with Ruth Catlow on the word “innovation,” Penny Rafferty writes: “Take for instance the word decentralization: we have already seen a fork that goes beyond the binary of centralization and its decentralized counterpart, but we hardly ever ask, are you working towards vertical decentralization—allowing voting power whilst still maintaining and embedding authority, guideline policies, controls, checks and social capital—or are you working towards horizontal decentralization, where members are socially and institutionally equal, with dissolvable power structures set in place? Greater understanding of the complexity of the world we operate inside—ecologically, financially, ethically and creatively—is needed” (Ruth Catlow and Penny Rafferty, “Critics Page: Innovation: Beyond Innovation: Decentralization, Imagination, and Care,” *The Brooklyn Rail* [May 2023], <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/05/criticspage/Innovation>).

(7) Hito Steyerl, “Walk the Walk—Beyond Blockchain Orientalism,” in *Radical Friends*, 129.

(8) As Victoria Ivanova and Gary Zhexi Zhang note in their recent book on decentralization and the arts, “A more interoperable cultural sector, in which organizations are able to integrate at the level of process and production as well as project and outcome, is a testing ground for more democratic systemic imaginaries” (Ivanova and Zhang, *Future Art Ecosystems: Vol. 3. Art x Decentralised Technology*. London: Serpentine, 2022, 30).

(9) This is to say nothing of the fact that decentralization in practice often resembles centralization. Again, as Ivanova and Zhang note, “The rhetoric of decentralization is often offered in flat opposition to centralized architecture, occluding the utility of hierarchical structures within technical systems and governance models, as well as the unsustainable emotional labor overheads that some decentralized structures necessitate” (Ivanova and Zhang, *Future Art Ecosystems*, 73).