

Tanya Leighton

BROOKLYN RAIL

Painting, Protest and the Plural
Potential of Web3

By **Charlotte Kent**



Sharon Hayes, *We Won't Go Back*, 2022. Acrylic paint and newsprint (May 2020–June 2022) on textile, 32 x 53 inches. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles.

The last couple weeks have been dominated by conversations about political life alongside a slew of panels about our future with virtual spaces, most frequently called Web3 or the metaverse. Anxieties about both are appropriately rampant. Amidst this nail-biting, I was reminded how artists across media can shift the dialogue out of despair without launching into resolved utopian thinking. On October 27, *Paint the Protest* opened at Off Paradise and immediately after that I attended “The Porous Pluriverse,” a presentation of in-progress media art at E.A.T. Works. It’s not my nature to be hopeful but I tire of dystopic refrains exacerbated by a politics of crisis; I think it manipulative and unimaginative. Artists present alternatives.

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The artist Tom Chitty has a *New Yorker* cartoon of a car side-view mirror in which you can see someone holding a sign that reads (backwards): The end is nearer than it appears. Its humor dispels the pervasive end-times scenarios. Upon entering *Paint the Protest* I was reminded of Chitty's cartoon by the backwards writing that Sharon Hayes uses in her fabric works. Each phrase is a question that is also the work's title: *When Will this End?* (2021); *What Do We Want* (2021); *We Won't Go Back* (2021). The challenge of reading the text slows and compels more serious consideration of these questions. On solid coloured surfaces the reversed letters are formed from ripped newspaper and magazines further challenging their legibility. Produced in reverse, they provide the sense of both standing behind them, as if held up by others standing in front of us to read, or that they are in our rear view mirror, part of the past. That position ambiguously holding past and future grounds us in a present tense and reinforces that these questions can never be abandoned.

A politics of crisis harnesses anxiety in order to force change. It encourages political momentum that must be acted upon, not thought about. Action must occur, or dire consequences will befall us all. And yet, that kind of future casting contributes to a sense of stress that has two deleterious outcomes. It enables vocal authorities to undermine deliberation by claiming the necessity of one action that they have determined while creating a stagnant outlook that disables the possibility of ongoing transformation. "If some critical moments occur only once in history, there is no seasonal or generational repetition which would allow the opposition to reverse the mistakes of the past." So wrote the sociologist George Wallis in an article titled "Chronopolitics" in 1970, engaging with the rise of American extremism fifty years ago. He emphasizes that "strong relationships exist between 'extremist' forms of political behaviour and 'temporocentrism,' the judging of events from a limited time-perspective." He explains that the apocalyptic emphasis demands things be set right, but right in accordance with a set of dictates that disallow democratic discourse and debate. When future safety depends on controlling a current effect, the sense of urgency marshals immediate action and the period of thought collapses. Wallis observes how this leads to highly

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authoritarian leaps of conviction. The challenge isn't to resolve the crisis but to remain committed to the change we will always want to see next.

Aaron Huey's *Currency of Protest* (2022) adopted an AI using text to image prompts referencing many landmark protests of recent years to create images focused on the Supreme Court, which has become one of the most unfortunate representations of political extremism and commodification in our day. The images of fire, destruction and regenerating nature are then composed into facsimiles of bank notes and printed on seed paper, which audiences can take away with them and plant if they so choose, quite literally seeding the future from the crisis of today. The work expressly speaks to the activist adage: "They tried to bury us; they didn't know we were seeds." The greatest challenge of political conviction is maintaining that losses are only failures when participants abandon continuous action. Of course, it is exhausting and that is why community and solidarity are critical. You need someone to hold the candle when you are too tired to maintain the flame. The works in *Paint the Protest* speak to this not only because they are representative of twenty-eight years of these artists' political efforts but also because many of these artists have been in and out of activist organizations together. That fluidity of interaction is possible through confidence in each other's commitment. Huey's work is an open edition, further undermining a scarcity mentality pervasive to how we value art and conceive of political involvement.

A few *Demonstration Drawings* are also on view, a project launched by Rirkrit Tiravanija in 2007 when he asked Thai artists to create graphite renderings of photographs of civil unrest published in the *International Herald Tribune*. It's a communality that is then problematised in his [*untitled 2021 \(rich bastards beware\)*](#) (2021), an NFT showing a devil-pirate over a 100,000 dollar bill who spears a bleeding heart making the droplets disappear until both skeleton and heart fracture. The work concludes by shifting to a mustard yellow tone as "Rich Bastards Beware Your Future Executioners" appears in block letters; the phrase speaks to the kind of anti-capitalist

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slogan that emerged alongside the punk movement of the 1980s in response to Reagan-Thatcher neoliberalism. Money has always been a form of technology, made explicit by blockchain's cryptocurrency and the speculative nature of some NFT sectors, and this artwork holds in tension the desire and death drives flowing across life, art, politics, and economics. The financialization of art has caused far more protestations recently than the same in our politics, though the latter's enablement by the Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. FEC* remains a travesty I'd rather see fought against than artists' various efforts to be compensated for their work.

The formal relationships across works from Hank Willis Thomas to Dread Scott or Richard Prince to Jacqueline Humphries or Huey to Tiravanija produce lines of discourse that invite audiences to formulate their own ideas about medium and message, moments and movements, identity and social politics with an experienced finesse by the curator Nancy Spector. Raven Chacon's audio work *Silent Choir (Standing Rock)* (2017–22) is an important reminder of the aural-scapes that permeate how we see; there are film studies and psychological literature on this. The hushed voices of the protesters reverberated instead in the shuffling of feet as they marched against the Dakota Access Pipeline project's impact on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. The sound work's power brought me to a standstill so that when I stepped forward to look at the next work, my body's movement resonated with the potential politics of simply marching on.

The plurality of approaches apparent in *Paint the Protest* made stark the problem with the question "what is the metaverse?" that has been the basis of so many panels recently. How grateful we should be that there is not an answer to that question yet! When there is a definition, we will have lost the opportunity not only to participate in designing and developing this new social realm but the chance to keep it sufficiently fluid that it can continue to shift with the needs of society. Into the

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can continue to shift with the needs of society. Into the conversations aimed at clarifying this technologically-enhanced social realm stepped Kelani Nichole, Regina Harsanyi, and Julia Kaganskiy, the three curators for [E.A.T. Works](#). Launched out of Betaworks, the creative production studio invokes the spirit of the original Experiments in Art and Technology by pairing artists and technologists. The one night salon, “The Porous Pluriverse” presented works-in-progress by artists engaged with world building, making the medium meet the message by allowing an as-yet undetermined virtual space to be speculated through unfinished works.

As Kaganskiy posited in the opening of her essay about the salon, “At a time when worldbuilding emerges as one of the most consequential creative and political acts, how do we envision a world where many worlds can fit?” [Lawrence Lek](#), [Claudia Hart](#), [Huntrezz Janos](#), [LoViD](#), and [Never Before Heard Sounds](#) make evident how art is always about worldbuilding, creating spaces for provocation and rest, commitment and respite. It’s as true for Monet’s waterlilies painted during World War I, among the bombs falling in auditory distance to Giverny, as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), a silent painting that seems to scream. Wallace Stevens wrote in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”: “I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed, and it must not be fixed.” Many artists protest the increasing attempts to universalise what an immersive realm might be. Carla Gannis’s [www.wunderkammer](#) project (2017-ongoing) invites participants not only into the world but to participate in creating spaces of their ideas, a feminist commitment to a plurality of positions, decentering her own perspective to ensure the possibilities do not get fixed. Let’s not impose an imperial vision on a space that is no more new than the Americas were.

The art historian Claire Bishop describes in her book *Installation Art* (2005): “we can only develop as human beings if we actively inquire into and interact

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with our environment. Being thrust into new circumstances means having to reorganize our repertoire of responses accordingly and this in turn enlarges our capacity for experience.” Engaging these spaces presents opportunities to examine what an immersive online sociology might be. I am produced through engagement with a technological environment, perhaps obviously in the case of immersive experiences, but that merely highlights how the same occurs in scanning web pages or swiping through apps. Likewise, the technological is made meaningful by my involvement and so is not asocial after all. In this convergence, therefore, we observe the porousness between the tangible political sphere and the politics emergent in immersive technologies. These environments, as so much scholarship around the design of the internet has expressed, extend our tangible world and in so doing reshape it. The data capture dictated by tech giants and their platforms stemmed from a lack of early awareness and an enthusiasm for their ability to connect us. If that was a trial run for the expansiveness of the spatial web to come then we must explore alternatives to any unilateral aspirations. It’s a myth that the metaverse should be defined.

As Roland Barthes articulated in his famous essay “Myth Today” from *Mythologies*, “myth has an imperative, button-holing character” that depoliticises, dehistoricizes, and naturalises. Its rhetorical nature is to absorb: “it cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making of the world, fixated this world into an object which can be for ever possessed, catalogued its riches, embalmed it, and injected into reality some purifying essence which will stop its transformation, its flight towards other forms of existence.” Confusion about emergent technologies leads many to reject them, an extremist stance that undermines the very participatory politics crucial to ensuring that technologies are not delineated by capitalist stakeholders. Just as the internet is not purely digital but has material consequences for people around the world and psycho-social implications that resonate in our tangible realm, the so-called metaverse is likewise hybrid and can be designed with that in mind.

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Proclamations about Web3 come through the rampant mercantilism shilled by tech giants and media platforms with a vested interest in dominance, but attending exclusively to those loud voices allows their proposals to determine the conversation. Many artists working with the varied technologies from AI to XR protest the mass-manufactured programmatic rhetoric. The artists who risked showing works in progress for “The Porous Pluriverse” undermined the mythologizing about the metaverse; that term originates in *Snow Crash* (1992), a novel by Neal Stephenson, but his vision of this virtual space as existing in opposition to “meat-space” shouldn’t dominate any more than tech oligarchs’ machinations. Recognising the porousness or hybridity of technology is crucial to addressing its political implications.

To protest, etymologically, is to publicly witness. Artists are protesting on every frontier for a more expansive world, here and abroad, tangibly and virtually. They paint the protest in Tilt Brush as much as Gamblin, in blockchain and blockades, in words and pictures wrought from historical references and the latent space of AI. They evade definitions in order to retain the open space that enables a persistent and procreative politics.