

BOOK REVIEW

*Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain*

*Edited by Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett, Nathan Jones, and Sam Skinner*

Marc Mitchell

*University of Arkansas*

*A blockchain is a digital record of transactions. The name comes from its structure, in which individual records, called blocks, are linked together in a single list, called a chain. Blockchains are used for recording transactions made with cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin, and have many other applications.*

*Each transaction added to a blockchain is validated by multiple computers on the Internet. These systems, which are configured to monitor specific types of blockchain transactions, form a peer-to-peer network. They work together to ensure each transaction is valid before it is added to the blockchain. This decentralized network of computers ensures a single system cannot add invalid blocks to the chain.*

*—TechTerms.com*

To many, the term *blockchain* conjures notions of complex computational coding, digital currencies, and a world far removed from everyday life. While there may be some truth to this view, the technologies surrounding Ethereum-based systems and other blockchain applications have sweeping implications for the contemporary cultural landscape. *Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain*, a deftly crafted collection of twenty-eight essays, explores the impact of a decentralized ledger, or database, and how those invested in creative enterprises could conceivably utilize technology to promote efficiencies, build trust, and design systems that boost entrepreneurial endeavors. The book offers a provocative and compelling read regardless of one's background in the arts or business.

While not a traditional textbook, the collection of thematically organized essays establishes a baseline knowledge for those individuals who seek to explore the transdisciplinary nature of new technologies and understand how these systems can support artistic practices. The editors—Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett, Nathan Jones, and Sam Skinner—have created a platform that allows the book to operate as a work of art, one in which each author has the liberty to experiment with the presentation of their thesis and create a more performative experience for the reader.

Organizing the book into three parts—Documents, Fictions, and Theory—the editors offer a format where readers can opt to enter and exit the book at various points without sacrificing context or insight. However, it should be noted, there was clear consideration of how the book was structured, and it benefits readers (especially those who may not be tech savvy) to move chronologically through the text for the most comprehensive understanding.

The book begins with two essays that form a critical framework as one moves through the remainder of the publication. Nathan Jones and Sam Skinner provide fundamental information via “A Quasi Proto Preface,” which does a wonderful job equipping the reader with concise synopses related to each of the twenty-eight texts. Ruth Catlow extends these efforts in her essay “Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain,” which expands the conversation to include historical information pertaining to the socio-political, financial, environmental, and ethical implications of decentralized technologies.

As readers begin the first section, Documents, an article by the Design Informatics Research Centre outlines FinBook, a QR-code system that allows readers to rank their favorite essays in the book by awarding them FitCoins. This pseudocurrency provides a traceable value that can be evaluated in real-time through open-source software. This novel merger of traditional book and participatory art allows readers to engage in blockchain technology in a manner that is easily unraveled and playful. Primavera De Filippi, Paul Seidler, Paul Kolling, and Max Hampshire all explore the ways in which decentralized technology can play an increasing role in crafting new ways of thinking about ecology in their texts. In Jaya Klara Brekke and Elias Haase’s essay “Breaking Chains and Busting Blocks: Commentary on the Satoshi (Hippocratic) Oath for Blockchain Developers,” questions surrounding ethical and moral dilemmas take center stage for those who are actually developing the technologies. Specific artworks, artists, and exhibitions play a prominent role in the essays by Martín Nadal, César Escudero, and Ami Clarke, as well as the interview between Sam Skinner and Simon Denny. In many ways, these texts do a marvelous job of addressing themes first brought to the mainstream with the ninth Berlin Biennial in 2016. Topics such as the commodification of information, the pitfalls and benefits of digital sharing, and even pop culture’s relationship to institutional critique all make appearances in the essays.

Fictions, the second section of the book, offers a nice respite from the foundational elements established in the first section before transitioning to the dense theoretical essays found in section three. No doubt the editors planned for this breather, and it is perfectly situated.

Cecilia Wee's "Flying Under a Neutral Flag" positions the reader amid complex moral dilemmas that surround a decentralized and anonymous system, even when it's meant for the greater good. The essays by Theodoros Chiotis, Rob Myers, Lina Theodorou, and Juhee Hahm provide waggish takes on digital and screen culture, coding, and the way we create networks. Taken as a whole, the section provides a refreshing and unusual vantage point for considering the societal implications of Ethereum-based systems.

Like most aspects of contemporary culture, blockchain and its offshoots are simultaneously celebrated and vilified by those who are most familiar. This conflict is apparent in the third section of the book, *Theory*. Whereas the previous essays highlighted facts or provided fictional accounts, the essays within *Theory* were teeming with overarching philosophical questions related to the technologies. In Hito Steyerl's barn burner of an essay "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms," she rides the perfect wave of satire to highlight the correlation of events occurring throughout the world and the technologies outlined in the book. Ben Vickers and Rob Myers both discuss the sociopolitical impacts of blockchain technology within governmental structures as well as those communities trying to upend traditional institutions, regulations, and authority. Given the premise of the book—ways in which artists can rethink the blockchain—the essays by Helen Kaplinsky and Mark Waugh are delightfully dense in discussing the implications of smart contracts, how Ethereum-based systems could shift the historical paradigm found in museum structure, and ways in which these systems could handle artist copyright in the future.

While the book may not be suitable for introductory courses related to art or entrepreneurship, it's a valuable resource for those who have interests that extend into the realm of new media and commerce. It's a refreshing publication that straddles both traditional scholarship and an avant-garde approach to discussing philosophical topics related to art and digital culture. The result is an immersive experience where each reader finds their own context for relating to new and abstruse technologies. For readers wanting to teach blockchain technology, two authors from this collection, Ben Vickers and Jaya Klara Brekke, have published *The White Paper*, an annotated guide to Satoshi Nakamoto's 2009 Bitcoin white paper. The book, which also includes James Birdle's history of cryptography, provides a primer for readers who are newer to blockchain but would like to read one of the original texts. Visit <https://ignota.org/products/the-white-paper> for more information. And for ongoing news of blockchain developments in the arts, readers may wish to follow Tim Schneider on Artnet and Jason Bailey of Artnome.

