

Blockchains otherwise

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Inte Gloerich

Is resistance to blockchain-based marketisation possible? Activist and artistic engagements with blockchain technology point to (at least) four different, partially overlapping, tactics towards this aim. The first is part of an accelerationist logic: riding the waves of capital until capitalism finally crashes, funding alternative values with whatever profit was accrued while it lasted. As Jaya Klara Brekke puts it: “tap the end of capitalism for those funds you

will need in order to build new worlds” (2022, 104). The artwork Terra0 could be an example of this logic. Connecting a forest to a blockchain, the project gives the forest agency to sell its logs and buy more land to expand itself (Seidler, Hampshire, and Kolling 2016). Economic growth logic inverted for a more bountiful nature.

The second tactic is part of prefigurative politics, which David Graeber describes as “the idea that the organizational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create” (2013, 23). Building alternative blockchain systems that perform a different kind of politics and social organization could be an example of this. DisCO, a distributed cooperative organisation inspired by feminist

economics, thinks about ways of making visible the value of care work in blockchain-inspired governance systems. DisCo does not settle for blockchain ‘as is’, but bends it to fit their values (Troncoso and Utratel 2019).

Then, there are those that explore how blockchain’s logics can be subverted to make space – however minor – for different ways of relating in non-financialised ways. To explore what this might mean, I’ve been inspired by Patricia de Vries’ take on “plot work as an artistic praxis” (2022) that builds on decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter’s description of plots: small, imperfect corners of relative self-determination within the larger context of colonial plantations (1971). De Vries asks how artis-

tic work, implicated as it is in institutional and capitalist logics, can perform plot work to create space for relating outside of those logics. A possible answer to this question comes from artist Sarah Friend, who programmed her Lifeforms NFTs in such a way that they ‘die’ if they are not cared for. The NFT has to be given away for free to someone else, who then takes over the caring responsibilities (2021). Lifeforms represent little plots of care relationships, not only to the NFT, but also to those around you, calling on others to ‘care for’ instead of ‘capitalize on’.

However, these tactics hinge on the assumption that blockchain is here to stay. Perhaps another tactic should also be explored: how to protect fragile life-sustain-

ing elements against capture by blockchain’s market logics? A tentative example could be Ben Grosser’s Tokenize This, that creates “unique digital objects” in the form of a url that is only accessible once, and is deleted straight afterwards (2021). This project doesn’t protect anything against tokenisation necessarily, but it does create slippery objects difficult to grasp through tokens. Perhaps ephemerality in the context of purported immutability can be a fruitful lens for more work in this direction.