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By Naomi Rea

How Crypto Investor Ryan Zurrer Went From Unapologetic NFT Speculator to Missionary of Digital Art

We followed the entrepreneur on a whirlwind year of financial disappointments and intellectual victories.



Ryan Zurrer. Photo by Naomi Rea.

It was past midnight in Venice, Italy, and techno music was pumping through the cavernous Arsenale. I met Ryan Zurrer by the bar.

The Swiss entrepreneur and crypto whale was hitting the Venice Biennale party circuit with digital artist Mike Winkelmann (aka Beeple) and the über curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (CCB to those in the know).

I'd done a double take when I'd spotted Bakargiev and Beeple promenading through the Biennale earlier in the day. They were a rather unlikely duo: a museum director who favors the conceptual and a digital artist who was unknown to the art world until his *Everydays* sold for \$69 million at Christie's. It turns out they have a standing meeting that CCB jokingly refers to as their everymonths.

"It's a fair exchange," the curator explained. "I teach him about art and he teaches me about technology."

I suppressed a reflexive wince. I hadn't really thought of Beeple as an artist outside of his financial entanglements with the NFT vortex. But here he was in Venice with one of the most influential movers in the art world.

And what the hell was a tech bro like Ryan Zurrer doing in a place like this? Beyond his purchase of Beeple's hybrid NFT/sculpture Human One for a casual \$29.8 million in 2021, he had few art-world bona fides.

That is, until now. As it turns out, Zurrer had just loaned the work to Bakargiev's museum in Turin. "Come to Turin and judge for yourself!" CCB urged in response to my facial expression.

Over the past year, I have checked in with Zurrer as he continued to evangelize NFTs to the art world, putting not only his reputation but also considerable financial resources on the line. During that same period, the price of Bitcoin dropped from about \$51,000 to \$17,000, while the price of Ethereum dove from about \$4,400 to \$1,250. NFT trading volume is down 97 percent, and a looming recession already seems to be putting cracks in the art market.

Can Zurrer continue his cross-sector diplomacy through the stormy weather ahead? And what exactly does he hope to accomplish, anyway?



Curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, artist Mike Winkelmann (Beeple), and Scott Winkelmann at the Venice Biennale. Photo by Naomi Rea.

Down the Rabbit Hole

I wouldn't readily describe myself as a fangirl. But if CCB—the award-winning curator who oversaw documenta 13—wants you to see something, you see it. Which is how I ended up in Turin wandering through the grounds of a medieval castle with Zurrer one sunny afternoon in April.

"My entire life, from the time that I was a child, has been dedicated to the study of business and entrepreneurship," Zurrer told me as he adjusted his Cartier sunglasses. "It's something that is very deeply rooted in the identity of what it means to be a Zurrer."

Born into generational wealth woven from a 175-year-old silk factory that is still in operation in his hometown of Zug, Switzerland, the 39-year-old was raised on a horse farm in Canada (the dressage kind rather than the pulling-a-plow kind). He comes from a long line of businessmen dating back to the 1700s.

His portfolio of investments has included renewable energies and the for-profit psychedelic medicine industry, and today, he runs a multi-family office for the crypto-nobility. Zurrer really hit on his *raison d'être* in the 2010s when he moved to San Francisco and, as he put it, “went very deep down the Bitcoin and crypto rabbit hole.”

Understanding just how that rabbit hole opened out into the 2022 Venice Biennale requires an understanding of a few tectonic shifts. One: the Great Crypto Crash of 2018, which caused the value of crypto to plummet 90 percent, and many, including Zurrer, to lose the lion's share of their net worth overnight.

“To build up a basis of wealth and then see that evaporate in such an expressive amount is a really dark moment, to be honest with you,” he told me as we settled on a park bench.

The reckoning forced him to get serious about diversifying his assets to ensure his own portfolio would never again be dealt such a devastating blow. And that's how Zurrer found his way to the art industry.

While he had acquired a few collectible objects himself, such as Biggie Smalls's KONY crown and decorative artworks by the likes of Huang Yuxing and Vik Muniz, he wasn't sold on the art market as a great place to invest. As he saw it, the costs associated with insurance, shipping, and storage would likely outweigh whatever gains could be made. Still, diversification is diversification, and art is much more fun than the stock market.

Meanwhile, Zurrer and other early crypto evangelists were facing another problem: their visions of disrupting the banking system, making corruption impossible, and more equitably distributing wealth were not unfolding at the speed they had imagined. In fact, crypto had become, by and large, a total speculation game. By early 2020, even die-hards like Zurrer were growing disheartened, and he recalled thinking, “maybe it is just this giant online casino.” With no new entrants into the market, the OGs started to wonder whether they had bet on the wrong horse.

“All we thought about all the time was: how do we get the next million people into crypto?” Zurrer said. If only there were a way to solve that problem with something fun like art, while avoiding the costs associated with physical objects.

This brings us to tectonic shift number two: NFTs. “No OG in crypto predicted that what would bring us into the mainstream would be art,” Zurrer said. But that all changed when Beeple sold *Everydays* for \$69 million in March 2021.

Zurrer said there wasn't ever a coordinated effort to capitalize on the moment. How could there be in a decentralized world of pseudo-anonymous actors? But thanks to a combination of factors—from American stimulus money flowing into people's pockets to an isolated populace left to interact largely virtually—there was suddenly buy-in. Speculation on NFTs flourished.

For Zurrer, the appeal was obvious. “If someone were to buy a Ferrari as a display of wealth, maybe 1,000 people would see it, maybe even 2,000,” Zurrer said. “But if you buy, say, a CryptoPunk or another piece of art that you use as your profile display, millions of people see that.”



Beeple, Human One installed at Castello di Rivoli. (Photo by Roberto Serra – Iguana Press/Getty Images)

Leveling Up

Even if you don't really understand how financial markets work, you know that bubbles burst. When we first spoke, Zurrer didn't say bubble—he attributed the ballooning prices of digital art to the transparency enabled by blockchain—but he did anticipate a significant correction was coming.

In order to maintain the status of NFTs after that inevitability—and possibly tap into the billions of dollars circulating in the art market as well—Zurrer knew he needed allies in the traditional art industry.

Which brings us to what a guy like Ryan Zurrer was doing at the Venice Biennale. It also explains why, subsequent to our meeting, I began to see him everywhere: during a conference at Zurich Art Weekend; hanging out outside the Kunsthalle during Art Basel.

In the art world, “we see these advisory and ancillary actors who create great value,” Zurrer said, name-checking Hans Ulrich Obrist, whose vote of confidence can transform a career. “In other industries, you don't have Hans Ulrichs.”

Christov-Bakargiev was under no illusions about her own ability to legitimize NFTs and digital art with one careful selection for an exhibition. “It's about initiating an art historical discussion about the work,” she said. It wasn't artists she'd have to convince: “The idea that digital artists would be excluded from any discourse in contemporary art is just ridiculous,” said painter Julie Mehretu, who was also included in the Castello exhibition.

Still, Zurrer was facing an uphill battle when it came to much of the industry. Curators, advisors, and collectors are often loathe to engage with any project around which they see too much financial speculation—it's why commercial success has been a double-edged sword for market stars like Adrian Ghenie.

Art advisor Lisa Schiff pointed to NFTs as one factor in the breakdown of evening auctions from a curated selection of art-historically significant works to what she called an “Evening-Sale-For-the-Shit-We-Know-We-Can-Profit-on-This-Week.”



Mad Dog Jones, Visor (2021), sold for just under \$202,000 at Sotheby's "Natively Digital" NFT auction in June 2021. Image courtesy Sotheby's.

As we near the end of 2022, NFT trading volume has plummeted some 97 percent since its peak in January. And while the market value, or price floor, of individual NFTs from the Bored Ape collection peaked at close to \$429,000 (152 ETH) in April, by the end of November it had fallen to \$84,789 (66.9 ETH).

Since we first spoke, Zurrer has begun collecting traditional art—recently picking up a Jeppe Hein at Art Basel. But he has been surprised by how skeptical the art world remains about “digital art enabled through NFTs.”

“Lesson learned is that there is a much longer way to go than originally anticipated,” he told me this fall. (He’s somewhat used to the standoffishness of the art-world establishment—his sister is an Old Master art historian who hasn’t yet come around even to contemporary art.)

Against that backdrop, Zurrer’s mission of proselytizing NFTs as serious art has now evolved. He sees a path forward in a taxonomy distinction. To start, he’s moving away from the poisoned label of “NFT.”

“The focus on NFTs as a medium is less important than that keystone component that NFTs have provided to great digital art,” he said.

Instead, he is working to draw a distinction between “gamified collectibles” like the CryptoPunks and what he calls “fine digital art” made by the likes of Refik Anadol, Urs Fischer, and Mad Dog Jones. The latter, he said, hasn’t suffered the same price drop as the former. And as in any recession, he expects to see a flight to quality.



Urs Fischer, CHAOS #21 Bucolic (2021). Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery.

“A lot of smart people in the art world dismiss the category as pictures of monkeys used on social media,” Zurrer said. “But that’s the same thing as somebody saying they don’t like music because they don’t like hip hop.”

Zurrer sees our current moment as a mere “trough of disillusionment” on the way to widespread embrace of digital fine art and blockchain technology.

Recently, I’ve noticed a marked difference in the way Zurrer speaks about art. Back in April, he was a straight-talking venture capitalist who saw untapped potential in the market. By winter, he reminded me more of the typical art-industry insider, who is more likely to pretend their decisions happen independently of the massive financial industrial complex that is the art market.

“Throughout the year, my thesis has evolved from thinking through this less in an opportunistic sense and more in a deeply mission-driven thesis of helping this generation of digital artists take their rightful place in art canon,” he said.

His inspiration came from spending time with influential movers such as Uli Sigg, who played his own role in raising the profiles of Chinese artists, and Pamela Joyner, who made vast strides in gaining recognition for a generation of Black and African diaspora artists. “These conversations and learnings that I took away from them showed me something that is more interesting and compelling than just pure opportunity in the marketplace,” he said.

“I think I came to the realization that my journey is probably not that different from many other collectors and that they do find a sense of mission over time that is genuinely more intellectually compelling than the financial outcome.”

There are signs that the art world, too, is coming around. MoMA sold the \$137.9 million collection of its former president to expand its digital footprint, and the museum’s lobby is currently lit up by a work by Refik Anadol (which stakeholders are hoping to donate to the institution); the Whitney museum has promoted its digital art curator Christiane Paul after nearly 20 years as an adjunct curator; and Bepko’s Human One is continuing its missionary journey to the M+ Museum in Hong Kong.



Refik Anadol, *Unsupervised* (2022). Courtesy MoMA.

Moving Targets

Zurrer sees NFTs as the gateway to a lifelong partnership between the crypto and art worlds that could transform both. “When I went to Art Basel a few years ago, the lesson I had taken away is that a really significant part of the contemporary art market is as a mechanism of illicit money laundering not too different from crypto,” he said. “And so I feel like maybe that they’re just natural partners in that respect.”

But the art world values privacy and information asymmetry where the crypto world values transparency. Zurrer is betting the latter will win out. Having all transactions publicly visible on the blockchain would revolutionize the art business—revealing, for example, how much something sold for, the number of underbidders, and what is available at any moment. The transparency would encourage a higher volume of transactions, which, in turn, would beget higher prices.

There have been some signals that the art world is warming to these ideas. Art Basel and the deep-pocketed Luma Foundation recently launched Arcual, a platform that uses blockchain technology to digitally document provenance, simplify title transfers, and distribute resale royalties. Meanwhile, conservators at the Guggenheim are considering uploading ownership records to the blockchain to streamline research.

Still, there remains a long way to go. In one telling example, only four of Art Basel Miami Beach’s 288 exhibitors were using Arcual. “We’re still on the doorstep of a major paradigm shift,” said Jehan Chu, a former Sotheby’s executive who is now managing partner of blockchain venture capital firm Kinetic. “There’s going to be a digital Renaissance and it definitely has not happened yet.”

For now, Zurrer sees digital art as a vital stepping stone. And while the speculation wave went a long way to growing awareness of the genre, it also harmed the cause among art-world elites. “If you are not crypto native, the volatility of these assets can be very startling,” he said. “And those of us who’ve been in the game for a long time hardened to this reality and also prepare for these types of things.”

Still, he believes that with more crossover physical-digital pieces, like Anadol's museum-scale installation at MoMA, the minds of art-world gatekeepers will open. And after all is said and done, he's still throwing his weight behind Beeple. "I do still believe," he said, "that Human One will be the first NFT to bring us forward."