



Creative Insight

CAN YOU CURATE THE WILD WEST OF NFTS?

Nicolas Roope talks to us about his new NFT platform Plinft, its "fractionalised" model, and the challenge of introducing selection to this space without losing the spirit of openness we're told it brings

By Megan Williams 16/03/2022

"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" goes the old philosophical question. Toying with this concept in the worlds of contemporary art and advertising is Plinft, a new platform for NFTs (non-fungible tokens) that aims to connect NFT "collections and communities, Web3 style".

Plinft's debut event took place last week in Manhattan's Times Square, where artworks and NFT collections were displayed on a digital screen during a 15-minute show. The event drew on a "fractionalised" model – in other words, the slot was divided among exhibitors, meaning each piece had a brief airtime, in turn lowering the cost per exhibit. Roughly 500 artists had their work showcased individually. If you're trying to work out how they packed it all into a quarter of an hour, it's because each piece of work was displayed for just over a second. Yet the artists and collectors could still say that, technically, they were shown in Times Square – an event commemorated by grabbing an image of it in situ and minting an NFT of it. If a piece is exhibited and you have one second to see it, did it really run?

For Nicolas Roope, one of Plinft's co-founders, the answer is yes. "It happened, although it's not that long period of time," says the designer and entrepreneur, who has set up Plinft along with software developer Joe Leo, producer Harris Salat, and Bruder, who is described by the group as an "anonymous crypto god".

The Times Square event was, in a way, a hack that provokes myriad questions about the machinations of artistic and advertising spaces, and where we draw the line. Do we attribute more value to something that we can see in the flesh – say, in Times Square – or the reproduction of it that's shared on social media or listed online?



Top: Art Monkey collection in Plinft's Times Square showcase; Above: From the Flower Girls NFT collection by Varvara Alay, which featured in the showcase

"Most brands that appear on Times Square, they're not really doing it for eyeballs, they're not really doing it for the people in the square. So that's why it's interesting, because actually, if [each artwork in the Plinft showcase] played for ten minutes, it would cost ten times as much but actually, [the artists] wouldn't get anything more valuable out of it really. It wouldn't count any extra for them, so it's better for us to get it to the minimum.

"We could break it down to 1/30 of a second and make it incredibly cheap, but then it's just going to be a complete garbled mess on Times Square," he says. "We did look initially at actually just cramming tons of stuff in there, and then being able to tear out each of those showings, because it would still be true to say that they showed in Times Square – it becomes almost subliminal – but that felt like it was going too far, so we've ended up with actually what works quite well as a show."

Plinft, like his previous pursuits, is emblematic of Roope's ambition to get involved in transformative moments as they're on the incline – from digital agency Poke, which recognised social media's potential early on, to designer lighting company Plumen, which was an early adopter of LED technology in lighting. "Big change, big opportunity, a very nascent moment in a complete mess – that's where I'm probably happiest! Where the rules haven't been set yet and there's a lot of freedom, but there's actually something really significant happening under the skin of it."

"If you have to bend and shape yourself so that you fit the agenda of gallerists or the institutional point of view on what art should be, then it's quite a limit"

In many ways, Plinft marks a full circle moment for Roope. The team is assembled of people who he worked with some 20 years ago in New York and had been "very much involved in Web1 and that dream," he says. Somewhere along the way, our picture of the web became understandably muddled, so when he was approached about Plinft, he says it felt like it was an opportunity to "realise some of those more positive ambitions for what we thought the internet could become".

It ties into Roope's own early experiences as a creative. He began doing digital art in the 90s and was a founding member of the art collective Antrom. Alongside performing interactive shows and making "art-based work", the collective led influential commercial projects for Levi's, Guinness and the BBC, "almost because there was absolutely no way to commercialise that kind of [artistic] product at the time other than by taking money from clients," Roope explains. The difference now is that "artists and practitioners and imagemakers and music-makers suddenly have a means to monetise their digital products, their digital things, in a way that hasn't happened before," he says.

"Obviously, artwork has always been possible, but I think if you can't live off it, or you have to bend and shape yourself so that you fit the agenda of gallerists or the institutional point of view on what art should be, then it's quite a limit. I think that's the stuff that's really interesting me."



Plinft's Times Square display produced by Covert

NFTs have been met with concerns – namely around the energy-intensive process of "mining" on the Ethereum blockchain, which currently applies to most NFTs – and a lot of raised eyebrows, given the frenzy surrounding them. Amidst this 'gold rush' that took off in 2021, Roope says that there has been "loads of unnecessary hype; vacuous work and ideas and so on". And unless you're directly participating in this flurry of activity, it's easy to feel ambivalent about NFTs. "I mean, you're either in it – and people seem to be blindly passionate about it, people are getting completely obsessive – or they don't know anything about it, and so I think there's a frustration with that," Roope says. "Obviously, it's in everybody's interest, either inside or out, to connect the two."

That's partly what led to their decision to launch Plinft where they did. As "the most iconic screen in the world", Times Square has "kudos and status" in the eyes of multinationals and the general public. "It's a portal connecting all of the [NFT] activity that is, to many, hidden away, and the mainstream world," he says.

"There's a lot of dross that doesn't deserve that much attention! It's legitimate that it exists, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we should be valuing it at the same level"

In order to distinguish any meaning within a frankly unhinged NFT market, Roope explains that focal points are needed. But how do you create those without reintroducing the very boundaries of taste that artists are trying to escape – and how do you know if those focal points are worthy of attention? It's a tightrope that Roope is mindful of. "It's a bit of a tricky one because one of the things that makes the space so interesting is that you don't have the gallerists controlling it, you don't have the programmers controlling it – it is quite a free space. So one of the challenges is: can you really curate it? Does that go against its nature? But obviously, if you can't curate it, then what do you end up with?

"There's just a lot of dross that doesn't deserve that much attention!" he says. "It's legitimate that it exists, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we should be valuing it at the same level as other things. But I think you could come in too hard on the curation – and there's obviously a lot of collections out there, a lot of platforms out there, that really tailor their offering in a very precise way – that feels like it negates the opportunity to think more broadly about what can and can't be included in the art bracket."

For now, Plinft seems to be aiming for somewhere in the middle. Its launch in Times Square involved minimal curation – "we haven't turned people down, we've just had a complete open-door policy," he says – however, he acknowledges that not everyone will want to get involved, which inherently narrows the pool. "For an artist who [is] more interested in creating an atmosphere and having more time for people to experience the work, obviously, that's not a great mechanism for them," he says.

"Just as we've learned from Web1, it's very easy to be super optimistic, and then all those dreams to be smashed by the profit motive"

"I think what we're finding is just the nature of the proposition for this first drop brings together, attracts, a certain type of artist, and as a consequence the collection is going to have a certain kind of feel about it," he says.

"When we're thinking about doing things that are more art-based, it won't be Times Square. It'll be another situation and we have to find the right model where you can experience the work in the best possible way, so the artist gets really excited about people being able to witness the work in a way that best represents its intentions, but that still financially works in a model," he explains. An art setting also brings the question of curation into sharper focus. While Plinft's current proposition relies on an open-door policy, a gallery space invites greater scrutiny about whether the work is actually any 'good' or contributes something meaningful to the field of art. This is where a curator's hand would typically come into play.

Right now, Plinft doesn't necessarily have to "put our hand in and say yes or no to different contributors", he says. "But I guess at some point, we probably will."



Sol Gods collection

While the technologies emerging with Web3 are often lumped together, for Roope, some areas (including NFTs, of course) interest him more than others. "In all respects, I think probably the thing that excites me the least is the three-dimensional to the idea of spaces – I know a lot of people are very hot on that – having been through quite a few hype bubbles of Second Life and these things, and everybody gets very seduced by the visual nature of it. But I think the stuff that interests me more is decentralisation," he says. "The reason why there's so much toxicity on social media, for instance, is because there's the profit motive in the centralisation of control, which contributes to policies set to maximise engagement, which results in people focusing on a lot of negative stuff – that's where the engagement's richest.

"What Web3 offers, albeit at a very kind of rudimentary, nascent level, is the opportunity for organisations and structures and platforms to not be centrally governed, and to be driven by shareholder interest, ultimately. And there's a possibility for transactions, decision-making, all these things, to be created in a different way, where ... healthy systems are a real prospect. Although, as I said, it's in its very early days, and I think, just as we've learned from Web1, it's very easy to be super optimistic, and then all those dreams to be smashed by the profit motive and so on."

It's a strange juncture to be at. There is, of course, an enormous profit motive in this new playground, and to the businesses and institutions that had a defining steer in the last iteration of the Internet haven't exactly gone away – indeed, many of them are jostling to get to the front of Web3. "Obviously those organisations want to have a big part of it. Obviously, they want to dominate it, as they've dominated [things in the past], and I think that's the reason to be optimistic," Roope says. "There's an opportunity for that not to be the case and for things to be more distributed. One of the really interesting things about this whole NFT space and all the collections we're dealing with is they're all over the place. They're not all coming out of New York, London, Paris, Tokyo – it's everywhere and anywhere. And that in itself is really exciting, just in terms of the structure and where talent and interesting things are going on – it's all over the place.

"I think that feels like the way forward, rather than another round of the same again, where a very select a bunch of people are making all the decisions and making all the money, and everybody else having to dance to the beat."

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