



AES+F. Psychosis, Pill Rain, 2021. HD video, NFT, 1 min, edition 1/1

# IN SEARCH OF RUSSIAN NFT ART

*With Russian crypto entrepreneurs, such as Buterin and Salnikov, at the forefront of the international blockchain revolution, which Russian contemporary artists are pioneers in this new 'wild west' of the art world?*

TEXT: JO VICKERY

Despite the fact that NFTs have now been offered for sale in the traditional auction houses, the first thing to say about NFT art is that the scene is barely up and running. It is, by all accounts, still in the earliest stages of formation, where it still feels like a club, albeit one that geographically covers most of the globe. In the NFT space, it is hard to distinguish between nationalities, people use handles instead of their names and there are scant references to their real identities. In blogs, they talk a lot about a sense of community and Russian artists and collectors often seem to refer to this using the anglicised word "komiunity", not "obshchestvo". It is a cosmopolitan group, yet something of a commune; there is a lot of discussion around community values, such as social responsibility, it is soft activism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in this environment, the most successful Russian artists in the NFT art world to date are Pussy Riot, having sold just over \$300,000 of art in four drops since the middle of March this year (once an NFT work of art is minted, it can be “dropped” at any time, this refers to the date when it becomes available for purchase). Iranian born art collector Amir Soleymani paid the equivalent of \$184,000 for their first drop, a video called ‘Terrestrial Paradise’ from the series ‘Panic Attack’. In the space of less than a month, they sold two more to Music Production Studio 3F and another work to a collector, who goes by the name of ‘nftgirl’ (and who owns nearly 300 artworks), on Foundation.app, one of the more sophisticated NFT art trading platforms. This is by any standards a fast public sales schedule, for NFTs one drop per week is generally considered the upper limit to be successful. For a medium once praised for its ability to be copied infinite times over, here editions of one and exclusivity are highly prized among collectors.



Pavel Pepperstein and Sonya Stereostyrski. *New World*, 2021. Video

This is a strategy which might bring digital artists, who, until today, have been seen as poor cousins in the traditional art market, new revenue streams and new collectors. Although AES+F have sold to the tune of several hundreds of thousands of dollars at international auction, over the past decade, public sales outside retail galleries have been patchy at best. They made their first of four NFT drops in March, all of which sold. The top price was paid for ‘Circle of Life’, one, of an edition of one, a collaboration with composer Dmitry Kurliandsky (b.1976), which fetched \$26,788 (7.50ETH). Russian NFT art entrepreneur Olga Dvoretzkaya actively promoted them on her social network, noting there that their first drops went to a Swiss collector. Another veteran of digital art is Olga Tobreluts (b. 1970), who created and minted a new work titled ‘Dollar’ from the ‘New Mythology Series’, showing a dollar sign rotating endlessly on a loop alternating between gold and green, where it is covered in coronavirus spikes. It sold for \$2,081.11 (1.00ETH) on Foundation.app in April and more drops are in the works. In the same month, Aristarkh Chernyshev’s ‘PIO v 1.1’, an NFT video minted from a digital work, which is concurrently for sale on S/Edition, sold for \$4.152 (2.00ETH).



However, the NFT art world is not only attracting digital artists who are looking for a sales channel more suited to their medium. The most successful of all Russian artists at traditional auctions, who has recently stepped across the crypto threshold, is Pavel Pepperstein (b.1966). His works have been long traded at auctions in the West and Russia, where they are reliable sellers, primarily in traditional media of paper and canvas. Yet, in collaboration with Sonya Stereostyrski (b.1998), with whom he has formed an artist duo called 'PPSS', they sold a recent work called 'New World' directly on Rarible for \$12,000 (5.00WETH), one of the more successful crypto virgin sales among Russian artists to date. They have now set up a twitter account on social media, one of the preferred media for crypto art collectors, where self-promotion on social media is considered to be key to getting noticed by new collectors. Established names and new artists are all together in the same boat, looking for collectors who are themselves new to art collecting and may never have stepped inside a gallery before. There is much talk in the NFT community about the crypto art world being the great equalizer. With an established artist like Pepperstein there is more to lose in the short term, entering a marketplace with completely new conditions, alongside new names.



AES+F. Circle of Life, 2021. HD video, NFT, 1 min 36 sec, edition 1/1

If we can even talk of making a breakthrough in a field which itself has not yet become mainstream, there are two Russian artists who are making some ripples in NFT art: painter Pokras Lampas (a pseudonym of Arseny Pyzhenkov, b.1991) and digital artist Nikita Replyanski, who goes by the name of 'R66'. Replyanski is one of the first Russian artists ever to mint and drop a work for sale on the blockchain back in 2020, considered to be cryptoart pre-history if only one year ago, in the real world. His work titled 'CA66', described as a "portrait from an AI-designed princess of the future who loves fairy tales from the past", was bought by Greek collector and crypto entrepreneur Ioannis Sourdis, who has over one thousand NFT artworks, which he is planning to display in his digital museum project MONA, an acronym for Museum of NFT Art. He bought Replyanski's portrait for 3.605 ETH, which, at the time, was equivalent to \$1.266.08. Despite the volatility and recent devaluation of cryptocurrency over the past year, today that would be \$7,040.60 and if the same collector had bought all of Replyanski's early works minted last Autumn and dropped periodically over the past year, they would have doubled their original investment. If he continues to produce good work, Replyanski now has the added potential of being written into NFT art history, giving his work further investment appeal. His work, however, is yet to be offered for sale on the traditional art market in the West.

Painter Pokras Lampas, who, over the past decade, has developed a signature style, employing cyrillic script to create elaborate abstract designs, which he calls calligrafuturism, is also making waves in the NFT world. As with Replyanski, his work has never before been sold on the traditional auction market outside Russia, yet his work from the 'Transition' series, 'Nature-Human-Technology-Electricity', was minted, dropped and sold in one day for \$29,232.96 on foundation.app in March, one of the best recorded prices for a work by a Russian artist to date. Street art and the NFT art world have become bedfellows, united perhaps in the sense that they are making art, which has a social message, outside the conventions of the traditional art world. Misha Most (b.1981) is best known today in Russia for his street art, creator of 'Evolution-2', said to be the largest street mural in Europe. In March this year, he minted and sold as an edition of one, a mural he had made in LA during the pandemic called 'In Search Of', which sold for 4.95ETH (equivalent to \$8.937.92) and, as part of the sale, the buyer also received a physical watercolour of the work. NFT art sales are now increasingly involving not only proof of ownership on the blockchain, but also physical works affectionately named 'twins', or in some cases copyright.



Aristarkh Chernyshev. Personal Informational Organism. PIO v 1.1, 2021. Video

This is all only the beginning and, one day, you or I will probably inhabit the NFT world on some level, especially where it intersects with the traditional art world and this is already happening with the main auction houses and big gallerists, such as Pace. Marat Guelman has also recently announced his plans to establish a blockchain gallery called 'Guelman Recommends'. I have no doubt about this: blockchain technology is set to grow and develop into other areas of our lives and so NFT art will surely become more accessible. Until then, somewhere in what seems like a universe far away artists like Pokras Lampas, Replyanski, PPSS, Pussy Riot and AES+F are making history. They are, in the words of Ioannis Sourdis, the real "OGs": original gangsters operating in what people are referring to as the new Wild West. But must it be a Western mainstream, must its vernacular be Anglo-American? Olga Dvoretzkaya is keen for Russian artists to become big players in this market: "There is a chance to start something really unique in Russia, not to wait for Western participants to dictate the trends," she wrote recently in a blog on her social media. The race is, however, on. She is the powerhouse behind a large-scale NFT fair titled 'Disartive', the first ever international fair for digital art and technology in Russia, whose second edition will take place in Nizhny Novgorod this month. If you cannot go in person, the exhibition can be viewed on Rarible platform from your computer screen at home. In addition, as part of the Summer Exhibition at Dom Radio in St. Petersburg, Russian Art Focus is organising a panel discussion on the subject of NFT art, called 'Drops Instead of Exhibitions' around the subject of how the traditional contemporary art market might adapt to NFT technologies. Organised in collaboration with [The Art Exchange](#), it will be broadcast by the Aksenov Family Foundation.

**Public talk 'Drops instead of Exhibitions: From Tension to Acceptance. How the traditional contemporary art market is adapting to NFT technology'**

Dom Radio (Radio House)

St.Petersburg, Russia

June 5, 2021, 4 pm (UTC +3)