

# Spoken Tokens

## Poetry on the Blockchain

An *industry* is the common appellation for a trade sector or group of related commercial endeavours sharing a common technology (viz. service industry, IT industry); but although *industry*, in the sense of *zeal* or *diligence*, may characterise the work of individual creative artists, the designation of any particular artistic practice, or of various such practices, considered as a sector, as an *industry*, is often tinged with irony or cynicism. For instance, the assignment of Shakespeare, Gentileschi, Mendelssohn, or Annie Ernaux to the “entertainment industry” registers as trivialisation. And yet artists, too, must subsist, and abjure the vulgarities of trade at peril to their well-being; while the idea that the practice of each individual artist somehow constitutes a unique, hermetically sealed phenomenon merely upholds the anti-modernist fantasy of the lone romantic genius, for whom a shared tradition is an Oedipal shackle. Furthermore, being *industrial* (rather than simply *industrious*), in its root sense of *constructing something from within*, is doubtless common to all successful practices, whether metallurgical or lyrical, which strive to create something innovative that can at the same time be recognised and prized by a given society (typically in the form of financial compensation) for its use value.

In what follows I propose a solution to the difficulty of distributing and marketing poetry, a genre whose practical nature as a *craft* has been perhaps more thoroughly obscured than other artistic forms by the romanticising tropes of idiosyncrasy, inwardness, and mysticism routinely associated with poetry in the common imaginary; and yet whose practitioners have famously been as productive as any other artisans, and who are equally subject to economic forces. Furthermore, by suggesting the *transformed* use of a very recent *industrial* technology (the decentralised, distributed ledger system known as the blockchain) for the commercial circulation of a very ancient *industrious* technique (verse-making), I not only demonstrate a concrete instance of an innovative industriality, I also lay productive stress on the prefix *trans*, in its etymological capacity as the sign of *communication*, *displacement*, and *metamorphosis*, and suggest some of the potential supplementary benefits of the proposed journal to a world in *transition*.

### Publishing poetry

Creative writers and aspiring authors depend on literary periodicals and journals, both printed and online, to gain exposure for their material, receive feedback useful for their artistic development, and attract the attention of publishing houses. This is a feature of the modern era, in which generalised increases in population, prosperity, access to education and political freedom over the last two centuries, the decline of wealthy and/or aristocratic patronage, and the rise of free market economies around the world have broadened the potential pool of creative production, and increased competition for available financial resources. These developments have, in turn, transformed the factor crucial for success as a working artist from appealing to the personal taste of a narrow and elite range of individuals, to winning a broad consensus among a geographically widespread public readership with disposable income. At the same time, a relatively centralised mediating authority, particularly in the Anglo-American sphere, remains in place between producers of literature and their potential readership, whose financial support is indeed indispensable for creative artists' survival: that mediating authority is constituted by the publishers in charge of renowned houses, and the editors running the best-known journals.<sup>1</sup> And these publishers and editors, unlike their distant ancestors in the noble houses of Europe, are guided in their selection of creative artists for promotion not merely — if at all — by personal whim and gusto, but more importantly by *market forces*, chief among them the prospective saleability of literary *assets acquired* to as great a number of *consumers* as possible. The professional literary system is thus increasingly self-serving and profit-driven, operating in such a manner as to potentially stifle innovation and experimentation — an ironic, albeit hypertrophied echo of the earlier reliance by individual creators on a classical *tradition*, to which they must cleave in order to render their new works comprehensible, and thus acceptable, to their conservative patrons.<sup>2</sup>

However, increased competition, centralisation of authority, de facto censorship, and the closed loop of creation and acceptance are not the only challenges facing aspiring contemporary poets. Submitters must often pay a fee to have their work considered for inclusion in literary periodicals, a relatively new feature in the poetry landscape that is justified by journals variously as a means to survive, an instrument for the collection of funds for future remuneration of successful submitters, or, in rare cases, as a defence system designed to discourage “inappropriate” submissions.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned, with few exceptions, there

1 For notes on the quasi-monopoly enjoyed by the “Big Five” publishing houses in the US, and the important role played by lesser-known academic presses in that country in the dissemination of less “marketable” genres like poetry, see Margaret Renkl, “University Presses Are Keeping American Literature Alive”, *The New York Times* (14 November 2022).

2 For a foundational discussion of this problematic, see T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, in *The Sacred Wood* (1920).

3 See Writer’s Relief Staff, “Literary Journals, ‘Reading’ Fees, And You”, *Writer’s Relief* (19 September 2013), <https://writersrelief.com>

is typically no remuneration for publication; a journal may offer a token payment for publication, often in the form of copies of the relevant issue of the periodical (if a print version exists) in lieu of compensation. In addition, response time following submission can be lengthy, often several months or, in the case of the best-known vehicles, infinite. Negative responses—aka rejections—, when they do come, can be unsatisfyingly anaemic: they most frequently take the form of a letter (or rather email) indicating that the piece submitted is “not for us”, despite its unspecified quality, or simply that it “falls short”, without any indication of the criteria applied. (To be fair, some periodicals do encourage potential submitters to consult other work previously published by the journal before submitting, to ensure themselves that their submissions are in line with the editorial board’s taste: but of course, such consultation typically requires purchasing a paid subscription to get past an online paywall). Some journals do offer a supplementary review service, for which, however, an additional “reading fee” is required, often a multiple of the basic submission fee.

Furthermore, the prohibition of simultaneous submission, long a bugbear of the traditional print-journal world, remains generally in effect. In other words, poets submitting their work for consideration by a periodical, whether print or online, have had to assure the journal addressed that the latter enjoys exclusive consideration, viz. right of refusal. While this provision makes sense from the point of view of the publisher—who does not want to commit time and energy to the review of a submission that has in the meantime been accepted elsewhere—for the submitter the ethical obligation to respect the prohibition means that works are effectively tied up in single submission, and can only be (re)submitted serially, introducing a lag time that is only partially compensated by the speed of electronic communication compared to conventional post. What is more, in a feature that is itself a by-product of the digital world of the internet, periodicals increasingly exclude from consideration submissions that have previously appeared, not in other journals, which makes sense (prohibition against duplicate publication), but online, on any of a variety of social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram et al.). Thus, given the increasingly atomised and remote conditions of creative production, this effectively denies creative writers a fruitful and secure arena for feedback and critique, and thus for the crucial development of their craft in advance of submission for publication.

### A solution on the blockchain

Proposed in what follows is a solution to the problems outlined above, particularly as faced by poets wishing to see their work published; advantages are also offered to the editors of such a periodical, and to its readers. The proposed new Web 3.0 journal is to be built on the Solana blockchain and will feature videos of contributing authors reading their own poems, tokenised or “minted” as *non-fungible* tokens, or NFTs—effectively

a string of unique code—and made available for purchase by subscribers. A royalties-sharing feature will allow poets to share their profits from such sales with the journal’s editors and with its readers, akin to the system innovated in the form of Basic Attention Tokens (BAT).<sup>4</sup> In this way, it would remove many of the obstacles to the publication of poetry while at the same time breathing new life, both economic and aesthetic, into a heretofore niche genre by restoring its vitality with a return to the traditional, (virtually) physical performance element of lyrical production, and thus including the audience as an operational figure in the production of literary meaning.

In the “Examples” sections below, I review a selection of examples of literary production already in existence in the form of NFTs on the blockchain. I then go on to present my proposal for the new journal; to detail my inspiration for the idea; to consider challenges to the project’s realisations; and to suggest potential supplementary benefits.

### ...a note on nomenclature

The new journal proposed here is to be known as Common Speech. The phrase is borrowed from *A Perfect Market* (2010),<sup>5</sup> a poem by the late Australian man of letters Clive James, renowned for his verse and criticism and as a media personality. In that text, James decries the trend in contemporary poetry away from the traditional formal craft of verse-making and towards a more arbitrary, less carefully designed and linguistically elegant, indeed more “slapdash” poetic product, implicitly under the pressures of an age in which market forces dictate constant growth and proliferation of all production: hence the irony of its title. Citing in a fragmentary epigraph (“*ou plutôt les chanter*”) the 16th-century poet Pierre de Ronsard, James calls for a return to the musical origins of poetry in line with his Renaissance predecessor’s prescription for poets to sing their verses, and thus to reconnect with the putative customs of our prehistoric ancestors: “...the interchange / Of showpiece and attention that has been / There since the cavemen took pains to arrange / Pictures of deer and bison to be seen / To best advantage in the flickering light.” All this, however, is to be done without falsifying the natural cadences of the human voice: “Recite your lines aloud, Ronsard advised, / Or, even better, sing them. *Common speech* / Held all the rhythmic measures that he prized / In poetry” [emphasis supplied]. James’s imaginary ancient audience is “drawn to us [poets] by love of sound. / In the first instance, it is how we sing / That brings them in.” James’s poet thus prefigures both the creative exchange made possible by the proposed new journal, profitable for all concerned, and the performative nature of its offerings, which feature and celebrate the primeval beauty of the human voice of individual artists reciting their own meticulously composed creations. The phrase

4 Brave Software, “Basic Attention Token (BAT): Blockchain Based Digital Advertising” (10 February 2021).

5 Clive James, “A Perfect Market”, *Poetry* (February, 2010).

“Common Speech” thus crystallises the notion of the spoken word—the video performances of poetry by the authors themselves—as well as the triple sense of the word “common”: the linguistic, as *vernacular*, in a manner accessible to all, although imbued with the magic of live incantation; the economic, as *shared, exchanged, or held in common*, by means of a public blockchain; and the political, as *popular*, or, indeed, in a transvaluation of the laden term, lower class. This last can then be taken literally to refer to the *lower* realm, that of the body (and its sense organs) as opposed to the exalted *mind* or *spirit*: a reclaiming of the physical, sensual, and productively *vulgar* for the traditionally priestly, exsanguinated practice of poetry.

### Examples of existing literary publication on the blockchain: an NFT novel

In a recent article, Yehudit Mam, a Mexican-born writer based in New York who is also a co-founder of the *dada.art* collective, reviews the current NFT literary scene and comes to the conclusion that: “The age of NFTs by bestselling authors—engineered by large publishing houses—is nearly upon us. The only question is when. Now is therefore the time for independent writers and publishers to experiment with new aesthetic, organisational, and delivery formats before the corporate monopolies transform vital creativity into mainstream mush.”<sup>6</sup> Mam is herself the author of *Quién te manda* (2022), a novel created in the form of an NFT. According to her website, it is “the first novel in Spanish published as an NFT, and in fact the first book designed as an NFT”. *Quién te manda* was initially issued by Ferragosto, a conventional publishing house in Spain; Mam’s decision to create an NFT version was driven, in her own words, principally by economic considerations, “given the automated benefits of the smart contract—no more waiting for the money to arrive via horse-drawn carriage, like handwritten letters in the seventeenth century.”<sup>7</sup> NFTs, she writes, “offer numerous applications for literary purposes: Automatic and immediate distributions between artists, collectors, and platforms; digital immutability; licenses coded into small contracts; and, given the shrunken economics of book publishing, a potentially more lucrative environment for publishers, authors, as well as readers.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these pecuniary issues, however, Mam also notes the formal and aesthetic advantages offered by the use of blockchain technology for literary production, without for all that losing sight of the financial dimension: “NFTs offer the prospect of sublimating literary works into special objects with new layers of value. They also allow creators to experiment

with different delivery models beyond their sheer utility as digital assets. For instance, unlockable content, the flexibility of publishing formats in which single works like poems or essays or short stories can be purchased, and ways for the authors to add value and depth to their relationship with their readers/collectors.”<sup>9</sup> When created as NFTs, in other words, works of literature may recapture some of the “aura” famously ascribed to their physical (analogue) precursors by the 20th-century critic and theorist Walter Benjamin, in his germinal 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. In that text, Benjamin notes the loss of the “authenticity” of a given unique work that is inevitable with the rise of technology and its use in the world of art.<sup>10</sup> Such a restoration of the extra-aesthetic, virtually ritualistic dimension—the magic of (putative) one-of-a-kind presence—would make literary NFT production additionally attractive to artists and collectors alike.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, in a nod to the advances made by technology since the heyday of modernism, Mam cites the contemporary theorist Sasha Stiles, whose publication *Technelegy* (2022) includes cutting-edge experiments with artificial intelligence used to generate poems in collaboration with a human author.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Mam notes, Stiles’s optic is not exclusively future-oriented, but also ingeniously discovers in the ancient medium of lyric production the ancestor of today’s most advanced systems: for Stiles, “Poetry is a technology, a durable, adaptive data storage system for preserving humanity’s most valuable information—poetry as the original blockchain.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the use of an actual blockchain to circulate poetry constitutes not so much a radical innovation as the revival, or indeed recycling, of an ostensibly surpassed, superannuated technology: its *trans-industrial* recapitulation; the survival of an ancient technique in a new, sublated form.

9 [www.yehuditmam.net](http://www.yehuditmam.net), consulted 21 November 2022.

10 Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I, *Werkausgabe Band 2*, herausgegeben von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980). For English see Walter Benjamin “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, (London: Fontana, 1968), 214–18.

11 Non-fungible tokens are also often tellingly referred to as “certificates of authenticity”: see *Binance Blog* (“NFT authentication: combating fake NFT and scams” (7 October 2022), [www.binance.com/en/blog/nft](http://www.binance.com/en/blog/nft))

12 Sasha Stiles, *Technelegy* (London: Black Spring Press, 2022).

13 Jonas Kasper Jensen (2022), “Will NFTs bring about the poets of the metaverse?” Interview with Sasha Stiles, *The Tokenizer*, (13 January 2022). The metaphor may at first seem simply like an attention-getting anachronism, but on reflection it makes a certain sense: poetry, especially in an oral tradition, has indeed functioned as a mnemonic for the preservation of crucial knowledge (see the folk “histories” of Homer, or the “wisdom poetry” of Hesiod, as well as such successors as Vergil and Lucretius). Furthermore, certain archaic Greek poets were known to have deployed a form of cryptography, or code, to “sign” their verse, and thus ensure the assignment of its proper authorship: see the example of the “seal” of Theognis as discussed by Douglas E. Gerber, *Greek Elegiac Poetry* (Loeb Classical Library, 1999), 179, and P.E. Easterling and B.M.W. Knox, eds., *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: I Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 138–139. See also the recent controversy over the revelation that Bob Dylan, revered as a modern bard, had used a machine to autograph copies of an allegedly “hand-signed” publication: Michael Sun & Nadia Khomami, “It ain’t me babe: Bob Dylan apologises for using a machine to autograph books”, *The Guardian* (28 November 2022).

6 Yehudit Mam, “NFTs and the Rebirth of the Reader”, *RIGHT CLICK SAVE* (4 May 2022).

7 [www.yehuditmam.net](http://www.yehuditmam.net), consulted 21 November 2022. A smart contract is a program, stored on a blockchain, designed to execute automatically when certain conditions are met.

8 [www.yehuditmam.net](http://www.yehuditmam.net), consulted 21 November 2022.

Mam's NFT-novel was created in a first edition of 100 prints, each costing ETH 0.1.<sup>14</sup> In this sense its production resembles that of a multiple in the world of visual arts, or simply a limited print run, and allows the author to maximise her profits. The presale/launch occurred on 21 September 2022, and the general sale commenced the next day on The Platform, "a forthcoming marketplace and DAO".<sup>15</sup> The conditions of sale include using a smart contract to swap ETH for WETH (= Wrapped Ether, necessary for trading in ERC-20 tokens), which are then bridged to Palm, "A new NFT ecosystem for Culture & Creativity, built efficiently with Ethereum".<sup>16</sup>

### ...an online gallery of NFT poems

Another development in the literary Web 3.0 even more germane to the present project, and a further iteration of the treatment of literary artefacts in a manner borrowed from the world of visual arts, is theVERSEverse, "a poetry NFT gallery where poem = work of art".<sup>17</sup> TheVERSEverse, founded by Ana Maria Caballero, Kalen Iwamoto, and Sasha Stiles, is a platform for the display and purchase (or "collection") of poems made available in the form of NFTs. These NFTs, created for the most part in English by a list of regular contributors, mainly from the Americas, may be stills or sequences of stills, but also often feature a synthesised musical soundtrack and a recorded reading of the text by the poet themselves, or by an associate. In these latter cases the text typically flashes by "onscreen," either in conventional blocks or in a more innovative graphic presentation. These minimally cinematic, audio-visual NFTs tend to resemble music videos in their style and aesthetics, particularly the ground-breaking work of such performance artists as Laurie Anderson or William S. Burroughs,<sup>18</sup> products of the 1980s, the heyday of the medium; nevertheless, in most cases the poet and/or performer of an NFT on theVERSEverse is not visible, in contrast to Burroughs's and Anderson's practice. The result is surprisingly static, and oddly inhuman, with some of the voices taking on a synthetic, computerised quality despite their human source: surely the effect of suggestion, given the "post-human" or "cyborg" character of the graphics and production method deployed.<sup>19</sup>

A further feature, or subsection, of theVERSEverse is more explicitly "post-human" or machine assisted. GenText is a generative text program that allows poets,

visual artists, and Sudowrite, "an AI-powered writing tool," to collaborate on the production of limited edition issues, which are then offered for "collection" on either Ethereum or Tezos, an open-source blockchain that can also serve as a platform for smart contracts.<sup>20</sup> In Issue #4, for instance, the Canadian poet Christian Bök teams up with the American generative artist Sarah Ridgley to produce "Fifty Days At Iliam," a sequence of graphics using the Sudowrite program, paintings by Cy Twombly, and specialised algorithms; the result is inscrutable and typically Twombly-esque, with ostensibly handwritten but actually illegible texts functioning as ornaments, and lists of captions making abstruse allusion to works of classical literature. (Past GenText creations, albeit more conventionally verbal, are no less offputtingly robotic.)

### ...and a text-only poetry platform

One final example: typed.art is a "text-based art platform where people can mint and collect stories, poems, ASCII, and similar types of text-based art."<sup>21</sup> It uses tokens known as typed, which are stored on the Tezos blockchain; each token's content is stored in turn on the InterPlanetary File System (IPFS). Despite the broadly inclusive mission statement, the contributions consist entirely of conventional text, as well as of characters assembled, old-school concrete-poetry style, into the crude appearance of visual images. There is no editing of submissions and virtually no para-textual material, and the platform's appearance is as rudimentary as possible, recalling the pioneering days of the internet. The texts published on typed.art are for the most part minimalist. Post 8779# by frequent contributor sirenana, for instance, reads in its entirety: "where's the silence? / a heartbeat / <muted> / or in exile?"<sup>22</sup> It was minted in an edition of 1/1 and sells for 1 Tez (xtz), the Tezos native token; royalties are set at 10%, with a 5% fee for the platform.

### An NFT video-poetry journal on the blockchain: structure and inspiration

My proposal for a decentralised journal — rather than a gallery or platform — of NFT videos of poems performed by their authors aims to take advantage of the power and potential of blockchain technology without forsaking the deeply human element of poetic creation: to fashion a *cyborg* periodical. Indeed, in keeping with the prescription for the rejuvenation of poetry offered by Clive James, in his "A Perfect Market," and with Sasha Stiles's bold proposition that poetry is "the original blockchain," Common Speech will revitalise the poetic medium precisely by means of the interactive quality of decentralised trading, while also restoring the ancient human element of live performance. It will do this by consisting of naturalistically filmed readings of poetry by authors, created as NFTs and offered for sale online,

14 An ETH or Ether is a unit of currency on the Ethereum blockchain.

15 [www.theplatform.studio](http://www.theplatform.studio), consulted 27 November 2022. A DAO is a decentralised autonomous organisation, a structure designed to facilitate automated voting and transactions on a blockchain.

16 <https://palm.io>, consulted 27 November 2022.

17 <https://theverseverse.com/mission>, consulted 21 November 2022.

18 See for example Laurie Anderson, *O Superman* (1982).

19 On "cyborgs" and their role in the (ambiguous) resistance to the increasing "technological mediation" of human life in post-industrial society, see Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s", *Socialist Review*, no. 80 (1985), 65–108. The ultimately, if paradoxically, utopian vision of the cyborg drawn there may serve the present project in reconciling the exigencies of information technology with the expectations of a human artform.

20 <https://theverseverse.com/gentext>, consulted 21 November 2022.

21 <https://typed.art/>, consulted 30 November 2022.

22 <https://typed.art/>, consulted 1 December 2022.

with royalties split among contributors, who also serve as editors, and subscribers. It will thus also dismantle some of the economic roadblocks to poetic creation, purveyance, and subsistence, while restoring to the craft of poetry in a post-human age some of its ancient numen, without for all that foregoing the economic advantages of the latest technology.

The inspiration for the use of tokenised videos featuring readings of their poems by the poets themselves, filmed frontally in a neutral environment, comes from an older, Web 1.0 platform. The short-lived YouTube channel *iblamempoetry*, active only from 2007 to 2008 but still viewable today, comprises five ultrashort videos (four of them under a minute in length) featuring amateur performers, filmed in extreme close-up, reciting works by celebrated English-language poets.<sup>23</sup> The poems—by William Blake, A.E. Housman, Philip Larkin, Dorothy Parker, and Christina Rossetti—are presented in straightforward, frontally filmed delivery, with inventive cuts and the interspersions of bits of overlaid text at the beginning and end to add a certain dynamic. The close-ups (of the presenters' typically photogenic faces) establish an immediate, naturalistic human connection between viewer/listener and reciter, while the deployment of camera angle, minimal blocking, and graphic effects serves as a reminder that the texts presented are in fact literary artifice.

Common Speech will feature the same combination of "natural" human presence and technical sophistication, with the added attraction of financial remuneration for all parties concerned, and the expansion of readership for the otherwise niche genre of poetry. My proposal is to create a journal hosted on Solana, a decentralised public blockchain permitting the deployment of scalable applications.<sup>24</sup> Common Speech will not have a conventional editorial board but will instead be run by its contributors, poets who submit their work in the form of videos of themselves reading their poetry minted as NFTs and made available for sale by means of smart contracts. They will be encouraged to use the royalties feature on certain NFT-minting sites to generate income that they can then share with the journal, and, in the form of kickbacks, with its subscribers, readers who bid on and purchase the poems it comprises in the form of NFTs. Such royalties-sharing will also be regulated with the use of smart contracts, deployed on the same blockchain, to protect contributors from so-called *art flippers*, notorious among visual artists: speculators who buy up all of the NFTs of a particular artist on offer at an initially low rate and then retail their collection at elevated prices, thus cutting the creator out of the profit process.<sup>25</sup>

The function of editor—i.e., provider of gatekeeping and quality-assurance services—will be assumed

by the contributors themselves, who will vote on the inclusion of new contributions to the blockchain. An initial group of poets will establish the journal by submitting their NFTs and voting on each other. As more poets contribute, they will be added to the virtual board, which will also amplify the funds available for distribution. Their assembly of artefacts will allow for interaction and cross-pollination, intertextuality, and mutual inspiration—phenomena that have long distinguished literature in general, and, in particular, poetry, "the original blockchain," in Sasha Stiles's formulation. These editors may also contribute para-textual material in the form of reviews, essays on poetics, conventional editorials, and the like, and may also respond in real time to the submissions made by other contributors. Such real-time interaction among purveyors of NFTs (self-organised into *communities*) has to date tended to occur on other, more commercial social media platforms; the future development of such services will determine whether they continue to be an acceptable (or even viable) means of communication.

The video-NFT-poems stored as Common Speech will be offered for sale as NFTs launched on the Solana blockchain, which features, in addition to minting, such functions as auctions and royalties. They will be paid for in SOL, the chain's native token. Solana's proven utility for a variety of applications and streaming platforms makes it an appropriate blockchain for a journal featuring art in the form of NFTs. Furthermore, its use of a hybrid consensus mechanism (Proof-of-Stake and Proof-of-History) means that validators are rewarded for verification and processing while also having to stake SOL to improve their chances of selection, which increases their (financial) commitment to the project.<sup>26</sup> The video-NFT-poems can be produced, if desired, in runs, series, or multiples of different versions, to increase their desirability and to multiply potential profits—with the addition, for example, of subtitles bearing the text recited, or even, if possible, conveying translations of the text into other languages, as well as such graphic or audio effects as colours, filters, and sound distortion.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the journal will require a "regular" site on the conventional web to host information and provide links to the blockchain and other relevant locations. This site, with the URL *commonspeech.net* or similar, could be hosted in a conventional manner, requiring basic but minimal maintenance, both IT and financial. It would keep costs down with the use of minimal graphics; see for example *Bestiaire Intime*, a multilingual Swiss site for the publication and distribution of "poetry and statements" by conventional online means that is also part of the catalogue of the Swiss National

23 [www.youtube.com/@iblamempoetry/featured](https://www.youtube.com/@iblamempoetry/featured), consulted 22 November 2022.

24 On Solana see Anatoly Yakovenko, "Solana: A new architecture for a high performance blockchain v0.8.13", (2020), <https://solana.com/solana-whitepaper.pdf>, consulted 17 November 2022.

25 On art flipping see Constanza Ontiveros Valdés, "Art Flipping: What can be done to reduce this practice?", *Art Collection* (20 October 2020).

26 [www.gemini.com/blog/token-spotlight-solana-sol](https://www.gemini.com/blog/token-spotlight-solana-sol), consulted 24 November 2022.

27 An alternative to Solana is the Tezos blockchain, as mentioned above, which supports, among other things, a platform known as *teia.art* for the minting of OBJKTs, or "clean NFTs." This last is lent extra ecological relevance by the recent Ethereum "merge", that blockchain's transition from the enormously energy-consuming Proof-of-Work process to the much more environmentally friendly Proof-of-Stake system.

Library;<sup>28</sup> or see *Ezra: An Online Journal of Translation*.<sup>29</sup> It could feature screenshots of the video-NFTs on offer — or perhaps allow them to be viewed in lower resolution — and would also certainly publish, in conventional fashion, the text-only versions of the poems recorded.

### Example of a video-NFT-poem

An initial experiment is underway with the creation of such a contribution. I have chosen for minting a film clip made of my reading a sonnet from a collection of my poems published in 2017.<sup>30</sup> The poem, entitled “For form’s sake: and Clive James,” is a tribute to the late poet’s call for a more elegant poetic idiom. The mp4 is to be created as an NFT in the manner described above, and to be launched on Solana; problems to be dealt with include the resolution (or size) of the mp4, and the corresponding cost of minting, as well as the issue of where to store it. Subtitles and other graphics also need to be added, and various translations of the text (into French and German initially) must be prepared, in order to produce various versions of the NFT for inclusion in a potential series. Such post-processing offers the supplementary advantage of lending the relatively old-school technology of the mp4 medium a more updated look-and-feel; the intrinsic attraction of vintage or even obsolete technology, however, is not to be underestimated — compare for instance the return of vinyl, the (re-)fetishisation of the Polaroid camera, or the transformation of decommissioned phone booths into miniature art galleries.<sup>31</sup>

The overarching aim of the Common Speech project is to create a collection of such spoken word videos, not centrally curated but assembled on one site as a group poetry reading that grows organically and reflects on itself even as it provides support, both artistic and economic, to its contributors (and sponsors).

### Challenges to realisation

The technical requirements placed on contributors, and the financial resources demanded of them in the fashioning of their video-NFT-poem submissions, are perhaps the two greatest challenges to the success of the project proposed. The recent turbulence on crypto exchanges, however, means that the price of gas fees (the surcharge for transmission of a cryptocurrency) is likely to be subject to considerable fluctuation, making an investment in SOL perhaps more attractive than it might have been only a short time ago — naturally, however, this also depresses potential earnings, when

crypto is converted back into fiat. Such turbulence, therefore, also means that the price could rise in the foreseeable future, making purchases of SOL increasingly more expensive. On the other hand, if crypto in general plunges, the relative attractiveness of royalties paid in SOL will decrease correspondingly.

The unwieldiness of NFTs based on mp4s of poetry recitations is also a potential problem: their size will likely make it difficult, if not impossible, to store them directly on the blockchain, which means that the video-NFT-poems in question will simply be represented by URLs pointing to their location off-chain on the IPFS. This would, however, merely add a supplementary layer to the process, and would in fact increase security, given IPFS’s use of cryptography, which ensures the persistence of valuable links.<sup>32</sup>

Securing subscribers (viz. collectors of video-NFT-poems) in sufficient numbers to sustain the enterprise is a further significant challenge. While some of these might well come from within the community of contributors, i.e. poets buying each other’s products as a gesture of mutual support, such a process could eventually lead to a self-defeating form of cannibalism, or at best an incestuously self-replicating style. Word-of-mouth promotion, although often the most effective, could not be counted upon to deliver the required boost, so a more old-school advertising system, either by way of other, more traditional online poetry journals, or of literary blog and amalgamator sites (such as 3 Quarks Daily: Science Arts Philosophy Politics Literature<sup>33</sup>), would be necessary. Promotion of NFT publications could also, paradoxically, be pursued at conventional print events, such as the Volumes Art Publishing Days in Zurich, where small and innovative Swiss and international presses display their wares.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, although perhaps least likely, there is the risk of a hostile 51% takeover of the journal, or its sabotaging by malicious actors: a danger to which all blockchains are exposed, and which may in fact serve as an indicator of their value and attractiveness. There is also the risk of the journal’s reproducing the flaws of the conventional system of gatekeepers and mediated selection (AKA self-replicating quality assurance) despite its democratic armature. This too is a generalised problem, recognised and exhaustively analysed by the Canadian video essayist Dan Olson, for whom NFTs are an inextricable element in the crypto financial system, which is in turn at best a bubble, and at worst a pyramid scheme.<sup>35</sup>

28 [www.bestiaire-intime.org](http://www.bestiaire-intime.org), consulted 24 November 2022. The site, initiated in 2016 by Virgil Scurv and Pierre Lumineau, also offers services featuring “alternative texts for artists, creatives, institutions and corporations ... titles, introductions, exhibition texts, press releases and statements. Available in English, French and German,” theirs is a “process ... focused on open communication, research and poetic perspectives.” Common Speech could perhaps eventually consider branching out into a similar range of corollary ventures.

29 <http://www.ezratranslation.com>, consulted 24 November 2022.

30 Rafaël Newman, *Live Long Enough* (London: Paekakariki Press, 2017), 12.

31 “Cheltenham’s red phone boxes to be turned into art galleries”, *BBC NEWS*, Gloucestershire (18 January 2014).

32 MyCrypto, “IPFS and NFTs: The Relationship”, blog entry dated 20 May 2021, <https://blog.mycrypto.com/ipfs-and-nft-the-relationship>, consulted 24 November 2022.

33 <https://3quarksdaily.com>

34 [www.volumeszurich.ch](http://www.volumeszurich.ch)

35 Dan Olson, “Line Goes Up — The Problem With NFTs”, *YouTube* (2022).

### Potential benefits of the project: towards a trans-industrial remaking of an ancient form

The value of an item on a marketplace is in most cases a product of scarcity as well as of demand, so the value of the proposed video-NFT-poems will be guaranteed in part thanks to the rarity of the individual human *presence*, or signature (or indeed, in the Theognidean sense, *seal*: see note 13 above), of their respective authors, as inscribed in their distinctive facial features, and the faithful reproduction of the unique grain of their voice, as well as, of course, in their actual verse. This could have the knock-on effect of increasing the attractiveness of poetry generally, and thus in turn of enlarging the pool of potential collectors.

Synergies are also possible with the small presses mentioned in the previous section, which could use their association with Common Speech as a way to advertise their own conventional productions, and/or to take advantage of the technology deployed by the journal to pursue NFT-book projects like Yehudit Mam's. Switzerland, and Zurich in particular, is an especially fertile location for such ventures, given its density of both book-producing and graphic-design expertise, and the relative generosity of its granting agencies.<sup>36</sup>

A further potential supplementary benefit of an online journal featuring video-NFT-poems is an increase in interest in live poetry readings, which remain a niche vehicle despite the popularity of so-called slam poetry and spoken word, both in the United States, where they have their roots in the Beat movement,<sup>37</sup> and in Switzerland, where they constitute a natural outgrowth of the dialect poetry movement originating in Bern.<sup>38</sup>

Common Speech thus responds to a number of problems: the hurdles (financial and professional) facing poets seeking exposure; the narrow or niche readership for poetry, whether in print or online; the (unfairly negative) reputation accrued to text-based poetic production as outdated or old-fashioned when judged against the rise of the spoken word or slam poetry movements; and the centralised mediation of publication by a small number of powerful gatekeepers. It aims to supply a solution to these problems with the use of a decentralised, consensus-based editorial and submission system, and with the deployment of smart contracts to enable (or indeed enforce) the sharing of royalties, and thus profits, among all parties involved.

36 See for example the promotion of open-access publication by the Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung (SNF), or Swiss National Science Foundation.

37 See the exciting work of Danez Smith, for example, "waiting for you to die so i can be myself".

38 See the publication list of <https://menschenversand.ch>, based in Lucerne but publishing work by artists from all over Switzerland. See also the pioneering voice-beatboxing of Jurczok 1001, <https://masterplanet.ch>. On his work see also Rafaël Newman and Caroline Wiedmer, "Melinda Nadj Abonji and Jurczok 1001: Performance, Politics, and Poetry", in Lyn Marven, Andrew Plowman and Kate Roy, eds., *The Short Story in German in the Twenty-First Century*, Studies in German Literature Linguistics and Culture, vol. 216, Camden House, Rochester (2020), 231–251.

The realisation and success of the proposal will depend on a variety of factors, including centrally the support of more technically versed colleagues, from the world of literature as well as from the IT and economic realms. The development of crypto, and of the Layer 1 blockchains that subtend it, alongside smart contracts and other decentralised applications or DApps,<sup>39</sup> will also be of crucial significance to the success of any venture intrinsically dependent on this new and complex technology.<sup>40</sup> In the end, however, it will require the continued production of poetry by creative writers, under conditions made, it is to be hoped, more conducive to such production by the solution offered here.

Finally, from a trans-industrial perspective — with the stress on the prefix *trans* and its signification of the processes of *communication*, *displacement*, and *metamorphosis* — I suggest that the proposed journal can also provide solutions to a series of problems, including perhaps the dire existential crisis faced by our present age. In practical terms and for my purposes here, the prefix *trans* signals the following potential benefits of this particular new *industrial*: 1) its assistance in the *communication* or dissemination of previously marginalised or muted status (poems) by returning them, circuitously, to their primeval status as live performance, and by assigning them value within an archaic system in the process of renovation; 2) its exemplification of the decentralised transmission of this *value*, and thus to the *displacement* of a hierarchically organised system of social capital; and 3) its contribution to the currently much-touted *transition* to a more environmentally friendly use of energy, thanks to advances made in blockchain technology, and thus to bringing about a *metamorphosis* of our (environmental, social, aesthetic, financial) ecosystem.<sup>41</sup> 🔍

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His essays can be found on *3 Quarks Daily* in English, in the *Republik* in German and on *Aux arts etc.* in French. His poems have appeared in the chapbook *Live Long Enough*, on *Bestiaire Intime* and on two CDs, and he performs regularly with the Swiss ensemble *Besuch der Lieder*.

39 Distributed, open source software applications run on a peer-to-peer blockchain network.

40 For a measured assessment see Kenneth Rogoff, "Will Crypto Survive?" *Project Syndicate* (25 November 2022).

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