

December 2, 2022

## Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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### What we're thinking about

It's both Miami Art Week and Art Basel this week, so we're thinking about the intersection of art, technology, and democracy.

[For Freedoms](#), an Unfinished Network Partner, works squarely at this intersection. It's an artist collective that centers art and creativity as a catalyst for transformative connection and collective liberation.

We sat down with its [Executive Director Claudia Peña](#) and its co-founder, artist [Hank Willis Thomas](#) to explore the ways that art through digital media shapes democracies and builds movements.

Peña and Thomas have been busy this week with their "[Eyes on Iran](#)" art installation at FDR Four Freedoms State Park that is raising awareness about the humanitarian crisis in Iran. In this lightly edited interview, they share with us how art is a call-and-response dialogue that can advance democracy and build solidarity of global social movements.



## **At a time when democracy is under threat, what role is art playing?**

**Hank Willis Thomas:** "It's important to consider that art is a global eternal dialogue. We are still affected by and in conversations with artists who worked thousands of years ago, such as the people who created the pyramids. What we know about past cultures, we know through their art. So it is no surprise that governments that are fragile penalize and marginalize artists because through their work artists have the ability to touch hearts where a government can often only appeal to someone's mind."

There is a big difference between art and propaganda. Propaganda is designed to tell a story, provide an answer, and often simplify complicated issues. Art, on the other hand, is critical because it asks questions, and it is always incomplete. It is up to the viewer to make sense of it for themselves.

When we call something art, it invites people to think creatively about things they already know. When you call something political, it implies there is something at stake. When you balance an issue on that scale of politics and art, there is a potency that most of us can relate to."

## **How is our evolving digital landscape impacting the work you do at the intersection of art and activism?**

**Hank Willis Thomas:** "We are at a fascinating moment with the digital sphere where we are now on the cusp of the metaverse. Social media platforms are shrinking for the first time, and there is an awareness that the utopia they promised is unfinished. We have seen an explosion of NFTs and DAOs [Decentralized Autonomous Organizations] and creative commerce through the DeFi [Decentralized Finance] movement, and it's pretty exciting. Where we

are now in web3 is where we were twenty years ago with web1. It was right after the dot-com bust, and everyone thought the internet hadn't worked out the way it was promised, but then five years later there was a new imagining. This time, we will discover that things will be more nuanced, interlaced, and more immersive in our lives.

Having projects like Project Liberty and the support and impact that Unfinished can wield across the intersection of art, politics, commerce, and education is exciting. We can learn from the past and from all these incredible thinkers. Then we can build a future that is not just utopic but also nuanced, thoughtful, flexible, and doesn't leave so many people behind."



## **How are you seeing art, technology, and advocacy converging in Iran right now – and what does it mean for the rest of the world?**

**Claudia Peña:** "What we did today with 'Eyes on Iran' and what we continue to do when we create art is to think about this as a call and response.

Iranian activists put out the call by hitting the streets and rising up against the regime, and then we respond, in all the ways we know how across the world. Human rights attorneys address UN policies; and artists do our thing. We have to create art around this. Everyone has a role to play. Democracy is contagious.

The suppression of speech and the oppression of the movement in Iran is conducted through the regime's tactics of disconnecting the Iranian people to the rest of the world by reducing access to social media, the internet, email, and all the ways technology connects us.

Technology is a tool. It can be used to dampen and suppress the movement, but it's also the inroad for the US to support the Iranian people by increasing access to the internet.

One of our goals with this event is to give the people of Iran a battery-pack to sustain their movement, to give them energy to re-inspire so they know that people are in solidarity with them.

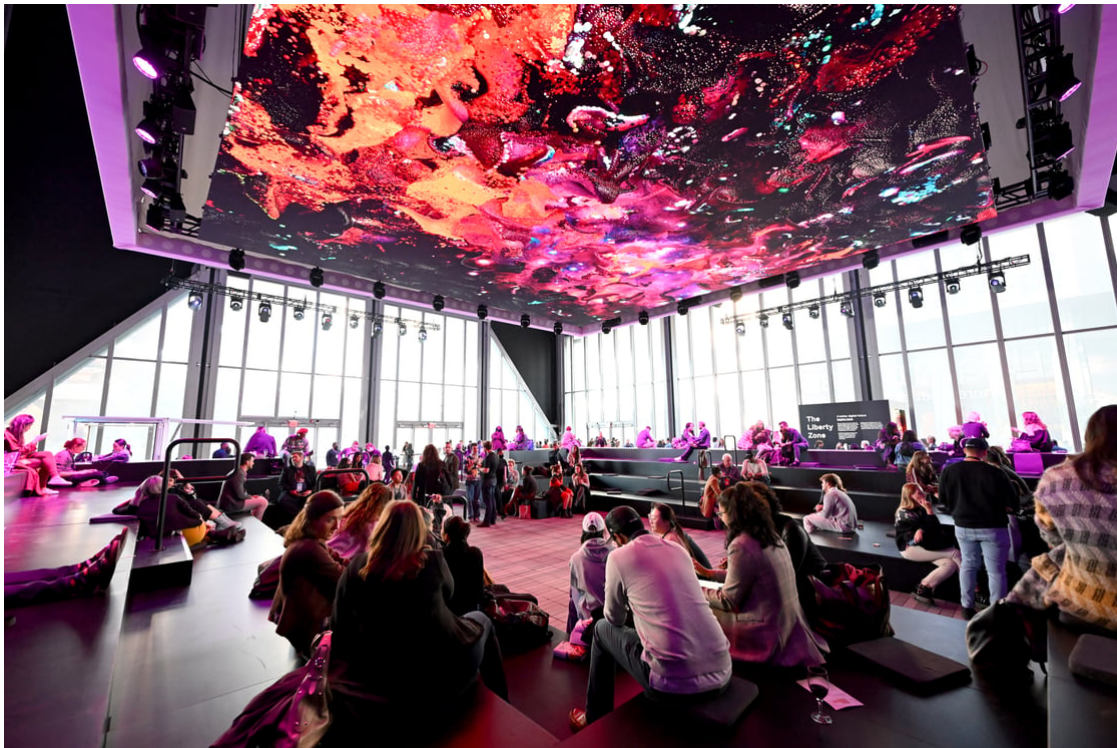
We don't know if they will see the images or the media or the videos that come out, or if they will know that the song Baraye is going viral on Instagram. Revolutions of this kind are world-shifting. It shifts the chemistry of the entire globe when these things take place. Nothing on this scale can ever be accomplished without artists participating at every level."

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Art has always played a major role in social movements. This was poignantly captured in [this conversation](#) between Hank Willis Thomas and Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar from our first (virtual) Unfinished Live in 2020. Says Jaar on his billboard projects in Chile, which later inspired [For Freedom's own billboard campaign with Unfinished](#): "I was trying to make art in the middle of a dictatorship. You learn how to speak in between the lines in a poetic, cryptic, mysterious way, so that the censors do not know how to read what you're saying."

Art can also play a role in shaping our digital future, and it's why we've involved artists and art institutions in the shaping of Unfinished and Project Liberty. For example, Unfinished Network Partner, [Serpentine](#), has a new publication exploring the [intersection of art and decentralized tech](#). And [Refik Anadol](#), who built an interactive, digital art exhibit at Unfinished Live (see below), has a new exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York called [Unsupervised](#) that is a meditation on technology, creativity, and modern art. It unfolds in real-time, engaging viewers in a large-scale installation that explores the themes of AI-based hallucination.

Unfinished Live speaker [Jesse Damiani](#), who writes about art and emerging technology, summarizes how art can help us imagine an alternative digital future when he said, "We need radically new understandings of reality – our individual selves, our communities, and broader networks – to address the challenges of the 21st century. Art and arts practice can function as a distant early warning system, or advance simulation space, to provide crucial sensemaking around these challenges."



## Other notable headlines

🔍 As we've discussed in this newsletter, generative AI is all the rage right now. But artificial intelligence that can write coherent articles and new lines of code requires large amounts of data to train itself on. Such language models are trained on Wikipedia pages, online articles, and digitized books. But according to new research, such high-quality data sources might be used up by as early as 2026. [The MIT Technology Review](#) reports that as AI researchers build more powerful models with more wide-ranging capabilities, they need to find more and more texts to train them. While there is more text than ever all across the internet, the problem is that much of it is not high-quality (think: social media posts and website comments). When AI algorithms train on low-quality text, they reproduce low-quality text, meaning that the future of generative AI depends on the quality of data these algorithms train on.

📊 Over the last two years, many big companies hired “Chief Metaverse Officers” and announced plans to have storefronts and products in the metaverse, but as the metaverse struggles to gain adoption, Chief Metaverse Officers are trying to figure out what to do and where to focus. According to an [article from Axios](#), metaverse executives are spending their time conducting research, launching digital experiments, and working with colleagues to explore how a metaverse-enabled strategy can succeed. While the metaverse might feel far from a sure-bet right now, the tech companies built after the tech bust in the early 2000s became the giants of today's internet.

📉 Cryptocurrencies have lost over \$2 trillion in value in the last year, and Black investors have been burned. They are half as likely to own stocks as

their white counterparts, but significantly more likely to own cryptocurrencies. According to an article in [The Atlantic](#), one of the reasons why so many Black investors invested heavily into crypto was because of the structural blockers that have made it hard for them to build generational wealth. Black investors in cryptocurrencies tended to invest later when cryptocurrencies were higher in value, meaning that for many, their investments are now in the red.

## Unfinished Network Partner News

[The Webby Awards](#) is proud to introduce categories to recognize Responsible Tech work. As part of their mission to honor the best of the Internet and inspire new work within this space, the categories include: Accessible Technology, Responsible Information, Responsible Innovation, Sustainable Technology. These new categories were informed by industry research, and a trend report produced in partnership with Omidyar Network on the current state of responsible technology. [It's Up To Us: A Responsible Tech Future](#) was developed after months of research, interviews and a survey with nearly 300 industry professionals.

Participating in the Webbys is a great way to showcase that you and your team are at the forefront of Responsible Tech work and to champion and bring awareness to this important social issue. Enter your project by the [Final Entry Deadline](#) of December 16th, 2022.

## Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#) on Twitter and [@thisisunfinished](#) on IG) for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

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