

De Valmy, Laurence. "Greg Smith connects physical art and digital asserts to grab in his show *Absent Word Double*," *The Curious Frenchy*, 19 April 2022.

Greg Smith connects physical art and digital assets to grab in his show *Absent Word Double*

New York based artist Greg Smith currently exhibits *Absent Word Double*, a body of work inspired by the BiP39 language, at [Susan Inglett Gallery](#) in Chelsea, NY, from March 18-April 23, 2022.

If you own a crypto wallet you have received a group of words serving as a back up to recover your assets. These words aren't just any words. They are pulled from a specific list of 2048 words known as the [BIP39 wordlist](#). Some words included are for example abstract, borrow, daughter, initial.

It's of course a great source of inspiration for artists since it creates a new language which can be seen as modern poetry. It is exactly what inspired Greg Smith in this new solo exhibition.



Absent Word Double Installation by Greg Smith (credit: Adam Reich)

The artworks of the show *Absent Word Double* are a series of "banners" created using various materials and with words, all belonging to the BiP39 list. "It's terribly difficult to write something reasonable using the BIP39 word list since so many important words are missing, but at the same time these awkward phrases can link to the Ethereum blockchain in a natural way, creating a sort of digital reality that sits alongside the physical show within the gallery." says the artist.

To go further, the artist did link digital assets to the phrases included in his artworks. One of them being a parcel of land in Wyoming part of the cityDAO project. Some of the assets have been claimed by the viewers and those remaining will be donated.

Greg Smith shares in this interview what led him to this show and what he hopes viewers will take from it.

Can you tell us about your exhibition "*Absent Word Double*" and the inspiration that led to this body of work?

I guess I've been sewing and making banners for quite a while, but I was always uncertain about what to put on them. A banner demands a slogan, it seems to me, but the examples I came up with didn't interest me very much. So I started thinking about constraining a language to force the slogans into directions I couldn't control. This is when I stumbled onto the BIP39 word list. I'd always been amused by some of the seed phrases that Metamask spits out, which occasionally read like absurdist jokes or concrete poetry. Only after some research did I realize that the BIP39 word list could be used to explore all sorts of things, from ruminations on divorce, to attempts to construct a calendar, to (of course) slogans. I was immediately drawn to how this BIP39 "language" both closed things down and opened things up: It's terribly difficult to write something reasonable using the BIP39 word list since so many important words are missing (basic verbs, pronouns, conjunctions, and so much more), but at the same time these awkward phrases can link to the Ethereum blockchain in a natural way, creating a sort of digital reality that sits alongside the physical show within the gallery.

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You declared about crypto: "There's potential, but I'm also deeply skeptical of the possibility of making a clean break". Can you share more about this?

It's wide-open technology, and everyone's trying to figure out what it can do, and it's glorious chaos full of really amazing stuff and garbage and everything in between. I honestly don't know what to make of it, and I think that's what I find so fascinating. There are smart people contributing to writing the underlying code, good ideas people have for DAOs, and novel routes folks have come up with to express themselves. I think all of that is amazing. But at the same time, I wonder if all the familiar patterns of capitalism and wealth accumulation are playing out in crypto, and will continue to do so over the coming years.

In one of your artwork, you included the code to a digital wallet giving ownership of a property in Wyoming. What gave you the idea to create this interactive work?

I really respect the audacity of cityDAO project (Citydao.io). Who doesn't want to try to manage property differently? And shouldn't there be more space for alternative approaches? I love how Ethereum serves as a great way for folks to pool resources to embark on projects that would otherwise be out of reach for people of ordinary means.

Anyway, more than a year back I started accumulating digital assets for this show, and I scooped up a CityDAO Citizen token along the way. But I wasn't participating in the project itself, so I was eager to let someone else have at it. And to my surprise and delight, on March 26 someone grabbed it from an account I set up for the exhibition (the account was accessed through the BIP39 seed phrase "citizen citizen make claim upon this country wild west piece govern citizen", and you can see when someone made the claim at [this link](#)). Now maybe the token will eventually end up with someone who will help move the project forward.

I like having this DAO angle as part of the show. I take great care with the material presence of the objects and banners that I make. But these things don't exist in a vacuum. I have family and friends who make my studio time possible, I show within the gallery system, I have a full-time job that pays for my studio and materials, and I'm very much part of this messed up world we all live in: All of this is dragged into the gallery with everything that I construct for the exhibition. Using the BIP39 word list and token gifts provides a way for me to connect the physical show to these larger less-visible structures in a different, and perhaps more participatory, way.

What do you hope viewers will take away from the exhibition?

I always love to walk away from art shows feeling that the world is not nearly as ossified as I had thought. Probably that's what I hope for viewers of my shows, too.

So there's that optimistic gesture going on, but I think that for me, it starts from a rather bereft place. I think that a lot of this show is about an attempt to replace what is missing with really terrible tools (the BIP39 word list, for one). Relationships in a very general sense and their breakdown are a focus of many parts in the exhibition, and throughout, there are clumsy attempts to find a way forward. Making DAO tokens available is part of that, both in the sense that I'm offering gifts to viewers, and in the sense that the DAO tokens invite viewers to engage with others in a new way. But again, there is a clumsiness here; I'm not always convinced that these DAO-mediated relationships and interactions can deliver what they promise.

What is your dream project?

Ha! The sorry truth is that my dreams are pedestrian: more time, more resources.

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Follow Greg Smith on Instagram [@gregasterisksmith](https://www.instagram.com/gregasterisksmith)

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