

Ecstasy Inquiries

One.

Ecstasy is a particularly interesting substance for many reasons. While it has not enjoyed the relative cultural and legal *Glasnost* of marijuana, ecstasy is generally not viewed quite as harmful and vile as cocaine and is certainly not in the same league as the heavy opiates. Ecstasy is happy pills. Hug drugs. Lover's speed. A "recreational drug" in the word's literal sense.

Don't let the cute street names fool you though, ecstasy is undoubtedly a potent substance. Its roll in fueling the emerging rave and club scene in the 90's can hardly be understated. If it was ecstasy, that vilified this energetic cultural movement, or the other way around is hard to say. In any case, it's important to understand that ecstasy does exactly that; it creates movement(s). And that's really what makes it potent. And dangerous.

There are two essential features of ecstasy that, in conjunction, set the substance apart from most other well-known drugs.

One: Its ability to bring people together in an affirmative and affectionate manner. Unlike diverse drugs such as cocaine, cannabis, opiates, or mushrooms, ecstasy does not *primarily* target the mind of the user, rather it's aimed at the interpersonal level.

Two: Unlike the drugs just mentioned, ecstasy does not derive from a natural source, like coca leaf, hemp plant, opium poppy, and so on. In other words, the principal effect of ecstasy – this empathy enhancement – is literally man-made. Designed, if you will.

Ecstasy or MDMA or methylene-dioxy-meth-amphetamine was first created in a German lab in 1912. But it were really the 70s' that saw the birth of ecstasy as we know it today, when a group of California chemists and psychiatrists started to experiment with the substance within a therapeutical framework. "Positive emotional experiences" were reported, word (and pills) got around, and that was of course the beginning of the end for the substance's legal run.

Positive. Emotional. Experiences. That actually sums the substance up pretty well – at least in its aspirations, if not in certain outcome. That's also the reason why ecstasy is produced in dark Dutch basements and not in the great halls of multinational pharmaceutical companies.

Legal drugs regulate and normalize; illegal drugs heighten and alter. A productive and obliging citizen in a capitalist society doesn't *need* to be happy, just not too depressed to work and consume. And we certainly have pills for that.

But a pill that's literally designed to enhance empathy and interpersonal connections? That brings people together and has a track record of fueling anti-authoritative movements? Yeah, probably not.

Two.

Ecstasy is of course no longer a subcultural phenomenon. As electronic club music inflated and became mainstream, so did MDMA. Again, this seems to be one of those chicken-or-the-egg conundrums. Nevertheless, the actual production and retail of ecstasy is still a form of subcultural pharma. From substantial underground production facilities to DIY ecstasy pharmacies – not unlike the niche micro-breweries that have been surging the last decades.

However, after a steady period of growth, the consumption of MDMA in Europe took a sharp dive in 2020. The reason of course being the Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns. Most ecstasy users deem the substance simply a party drug – a way to connect with friends and strangers alike on a dance floor. No party = no pill, and vice versa. Interestingly, the Netherlands – the European heartland of both ecstasy and rave – has seen some of the largest and most intense protests against the Covid-19 restrictions.

In these times of assertive population management, isolation decrees and Foucauldian self-discipline, we find it particularly interesting to closer examine these potent little pills *that are designed to have the exact opposite effect.*

Three.

Throughout history, radical technological leaps are unfailingly linked to conflicts, and the defining conflict from the end of the Cold war until present day is the purposely vague and never-ending “War on terror”.

Its object is something all the great powers and elites around the globe actually can rally around: control. It has of course led to, or aided the development of, a number of technological advancements in the field of population management, or biopolitics. Surveillance techniques, information retrieval and data base analysis, facial identification, Wi-Fi-positioning, and so on, and so on. Technologies aimed at conservation, not for transformation. Yet, these technologies transformed our society as a whole and they are now part of its very fabric.

Who are you? Where are you going? What are you up to? These are the kind of “customs inquiries” that are vital if you’re trying to prevent another 9/11, or if you want to personalize advertisement for your Instagram profile. The technologies are available, which means they will be used.

The prime example of this is of course the Covid-19 pandemic. The state temporarily restricting the lives of its citizens, for various reasons, is nothing new. However, requiring citizens to use a digital identification linked to their medical records to enter a shop, restaurant or concert hall *is* new.

Four.

It's important to note that we in no way imply that the Covid-19 virus was developed and spread as part of some sort of perverse Illuminati experiment. But what is obvious, is that the pandemic permitted – or compelled – state institutions to experiment with tools that merge private medical information with public identification. For the benefit and protection of law-abiding citizens, of course. The same line of reasoning that's restated every time surveillance cameras in public spaces are debated.

The last decades have seen immense progress in that very field – we're lightyears beyond the grainy VHS tapes that remain a popular trope in crime TV shows. So where will we be in regard to automated medical identification and documentation in another decade? A chip that recognizes the first signs of cellular anomalies in your blood? With a premium version that doesn't send the information directly to your insurance company?

Time will tell, the point is that the pandemic might just have opened the door in a major way for technologies aimed at the surveillance of our insides, in the same way that the "War on terror" propelled practices geared toward the surveillance of our exteriors.

Five.

Another significant arena that the pandemic opened up for experimentation was the economy. To the layman, at least, it seemed that longstanding rules and regulations of public finance were completely thrown out the window.

It's no wonder that the question of universal basic income became a hotter topic than ever during the pandemic – because apparently lack of finance wasn't the problem. The Adam Smithian notion of the free market being able to solve any kind of significant global challenge died from complications of Covid-19. Not the least notable victim of the virus.

Parallel to the pandemic ripping a hole in the pacifying fabric of liberal capitalism, we also saw the global popularization of crypto currencies, with Bitcoin reaching an all-time high in 2021. The most expensive NFT in the world, Beeple's collage, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, sold at Christie's for \$69 million the same year.

A coincidence? That's a question for future historians. What we do know is that ideas about our economy and of financial systems have become momentarily fuzzy and transient.

Governments simply mining more capital from their digital vaults to keep the economy going and the system stable. Crypto currency spearheads literally mining their own decentralized means of exchange, disorienting the established finance institutions. It seems that the separation of value from actual physical money – indeed of physical objects per se – has never been more profound.

Six.

If the production of ecstasy can be said to be to a sort of DIY pharma, crypto currencies are a kind of DIY finance. Drug culture and crypto history also share some darker links: money laundering, tax evasions, the funding of organized crime, and so on.

However, both ecstasy and crypto currencies have gone through processes of relative normalization and rising appeals to the middle class. And while using crypto currency to buy illegal drugs seems like a genuinely bad idea from a technical standpoint (the blockchain records every transaction), there's no shortage of de facto unregulated markets and accessible digital solutions that make the transactions next to untraceable.

But let's say that you own some crypto currency and don't want to buy drugs or questionable luxury items of the dark web. What can you actually buy?

Until quite recently, this was the main issue crypto advocates were facing. Enter NFT:s.

Seven.

Explaining exactly what an NFT, or Non-Fungible Token, is, how it works and why is beyond the scope of these inquiries. Actually, one could argue that a not insignificant reason for the rise in popularity of NFTs is exactly that it's a complicated concept to wrap one's head around.

For instance, why would top celebrities and large clothing brands buy digital drawings of bored-looking apes for several hundreds of thousands of dollars each? Well, the first answer is that non-fungible items are noninterchangeable – unique. And unique items, if coveted, are of course highly collectable. The second answer is that they never bought those digital apes at all. Not really.

An NFT, in this context, is a certificate for the authenticity of digital art. The token verifies who created the certificate, who the current owner of the certificate is, and what its latest selling price was. Note the emphasis on 'certificate' and not on 'art'. You do *not* buy the actual artwork, just its unique receipt. The concept is not unlike those websites that for a small sum offer the registration and naming of a star, often advertised as a fun or romantic novelty gift. Upon registration you receive a star certificate pointing to which actual star in the sky that's now "yours".

Obviously, you don't own the star, but you *do* own the certificate.

That's essentially an extremely rudimentary version of an NFT.

So again, this begs the question why anyone would spend considerable sums on NFTs. There are several possible answers.

One: NFTs present a viable solution for digital creators and artists who have long struggled with the problem of actually getting paid for their work. A digital image can be copied – it's fungible – but an NFT cannot. A sort of Patreon with an added element of receiving something collectable.

Two: In the same vein, NFTs can also be used to raise money for different causes. There were several such initiatives connected to the Ukraine crisis, for instance. Pussy Riot teaming up with crypto organizations selling NFTs linked to images of the Ukrainian flag is perhaps the most notable. "Crypto is borderless, permitless and it's so much easier and faster than fiat [government-issued currency]", as Pussy Riot founder Nadya Tolokonnikova wrote on Twitter.

Three: NFTs are exclusively bought and sold with crypto currency. As previously stated, that's how NFTs came to existence in the first place, as an answer to the question: "but what can you *actually buy* with this DIY currency?"

So, if you believe in the future of crypto, you best believe in the future of NFTs.

And therefore, you might just invest.

Four: You don't know what the fuck you're doing.

Eight.

That fourth and last point might seem unnecessary crude, but it's a fundamental point to these inquiries. Again, we live in an era in which the frameworks of finance and bio-politics are momentarily vague and intermixed.

No-one, it seems, knows what the fuck they're doing: not the established financial institutes trying to come to terms with the rise of DIY currencies. And certainly not authorities trying to tackle a global pandemic and, in the process, inadvertently revealing that they too are basically mining digital capital on the fly.

It's that famous glitch in the Matrix where you briefly see the 1:s and the 0:s, and they don't quite match up.

These are cracks in which sunlight can shine through. Much needed sunlight, we might add, in a period where the mechanisms of populous control are historically potent. If art can be said to have any radical purpose, it might just be to poke around in these breaks and fractures.

Nine.

So. If DIY currency, why not DIY pharma? We're not suggesting that you brew your own batches of colloidal silver to fight SARS-virus, mainly because it doesn't work.

But there is something to be said for exploring certain *really* effective remedies and simulants; how they are – and have to be – crafted outside the barriers of 'big pharma'; how they are – and have to be – consumed outside the sphere of societal supervision.

Drugs that are not primarily combated due to their potentially harmful effects on the individual, but due to the threat of disruption they represent to society itself: Potent 'anarchy alchemies' that momentarily alter reality, and by doing so, give the consumer glimpses of alternative ways of existing and co-existing. Psilocybin is one of them, MDMA is another.

There is also something to be said for exploring this DIY pharma through the lens of digital art and its pairing with DIY currencies. Especially, we would argue, in the halls of reputable art museums and renowned galleries. These establishments, in conjunction with art dealers and a few influential collectors, constitute the "central banks" of the art world. For an outsider (and for many artists), the valuation of art can more often than not appear arbitrary, but these institutions have historically made sure that it's anything but. NFTs have the potential to seriously disrupt this hegemony, just like crypto currencies are now disrupting 'big finance'.

Finally, there's also something enticing in bringing ecstasy – in some form – into those sacred halls. Will it be legal? Owning the drug is illegal in most countries and producing the drug even more so. But how about buying and owning an NFT linked to an actual and very much potent 'happy pill'? Again, the buyer won't have the actual drug, yet they will definitely own a very much legitimate certificate that a specific ecstasy tablet exists. And receipts can surely be exchanged for actual products, can they not?

Who knows.

This is an experiment with DIY pharma.

We're just poking around in the cracks.