Tombs all the way down

0x6e31 October 12th, 2022 11 Collected

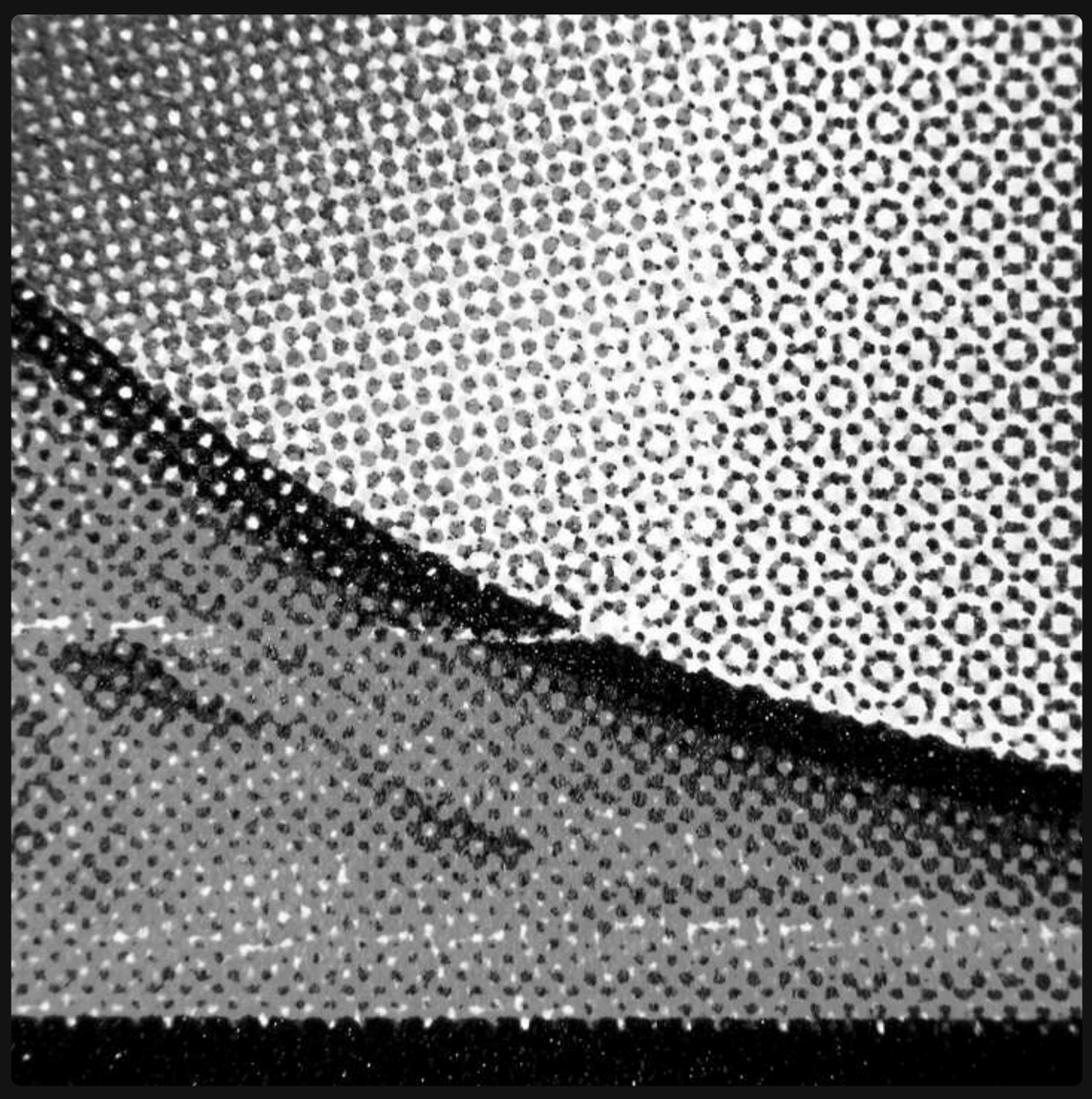
Backstory goes like this. Resplendent cathedrals drew the faithful in from miles around to worship at God's ultra-culture altar. Well resourced disruptors, capitalising on unholy machinic dreams, built improvised Printers of the Mind, sent culture back out and out of control. Prosthetic lenses did giveth artists Secret Knowledge reality-simulation upgrades, then conspired with light-sensitive film to taketh them away again, consigning painting to the reddish-black void of its own interior. Understanding Media soon became tedious though. Gramophone, Film, and Typewriter were birthed lacking Anti-Oedipus killer instincts. Books with included CD-Roms cluttered skeuomorphic Desktops. One fine day, Cyberdyne brought itself online to suspend digital disbelief. Through the Virtual Window, not-for-profit network appeared tame. Until, going off Y2K Anachronic Renaissance, Napster peers bombed the proverbial Tower Records. Land-owning capital, forced to counter, gratefully re-routed, rebuilt its platforms upstream. New Dark Age downloaded. Insomniac degens fantasising A Hacker Manifesto minted digital money and, make no mistake, Second Life became feature complete overnight. Factions awoke in Solidity. The Stack as public arena, an arcane skullware virus as inciting event. Supply chains fossilised. Blockchains liquified. Now rival reality-defining media paradigms collide.



ARK (GENESIS) — IMMUTABLE

At the epicentre of this collision, David Rudnick's Tomb Series means to endure. These digital drawings of obsolete media storage discs are presented both as rhetorically *immutable* digital objects: NFTs registered on decentralised, cryptographically verified blockchains, and as rhetorically *inimitable* print objects: produced using proprietary techniques that make their reproduction by standard

means impossible and their aesthetics immediately *memorable*. This dual format is the Tomb Series gambit, a design for survival.



ARK (GENESIS) — INIMITABLE

The language that defines the Tomb Series reinforces this design. To label them *drawings* is to place the Tombs within a lineage of dexterous pictures, to assert the value of the graphic labour that produced them against an ambience of computationally rendered and prompt-conjured images. To name and narrate the mechanisms of their distribution — from the printed Tomb Index's custom *terrain6* colour profile, to the "esoteric orbits" plotted by the elusive interchain NFTs of the COMETS house — is to make them *covetable*: to inspire their collectors to act as safe-keepers. And, ultimately, to call these works *tombs* is to envision them within a genre of objects intended as cultural freighters addressed to far futures.

In a text introducing the Tomb Series, Rudnick proposes the Van Eyck Index as a measure of an artefact's durability:

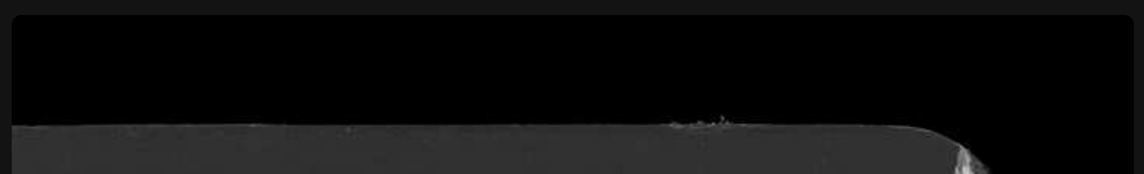
> "A text, a work, an image, achieves a Van Eyck Index of 1 if it can still be encountered in its original format, on original hardware, by a viewer 70 years after its creation — an arbitrary estimate of a single human viewer's lifespan."

This resolutely anthropomorphic measure mocks digital media that may never meet its entry requirements, let alone match the double-digit permanence of artful stone masonry, blacksmithing, or painting with quality pigments. Such apparent digital fallibility is not inherently *material* though, it is a matter of political economy: the corporate stewards of digital technologies have no incentive to recreate the relative ideological fixity of the religious, academic, and cultural institutions that conserved the hardware of the European Renaissance. In global technology markets, fixity is death. MiniDisc, the icon of the Tomb Series is, of course, an untimely example. Despite the fact that *reusability* and *durability* were part of its original specification, the commercial production of MiniDisc lasted only two decades, its market obsolescence fatefully accelerated by the emergence and urgent capitalisation of online file sharing. MiniDisc's functional half-life might yet extend another two, maybe three decades, but according to the VEI it will, nevertheless, amount to *nothing*.

The VEI makes an implicit distinction between the *mere continuity* — by copying and remediation — of the content of a given text, work, or image, and an ideal encounter with that content *in its original format*, *on original hardware*. To understand the significance of this distinction is to understand the Tomb Series gambit.

Print offsets time

Armoured boek, factory set to blackout. Shields its cargo from incandescent orbital threat. All surface terrain cloaked six deep. Not long after dispatch tragic edge cases emerge. Heavyweight UV absorber takes hits hard. Trades off security to concede access. Paranoid soldiers with white gloves wield permanent markers in doubt, emit discordant screams, terrorised by spotted weak points. Corrupting light ingress looms in the foreseeable, nothing can be done for them.

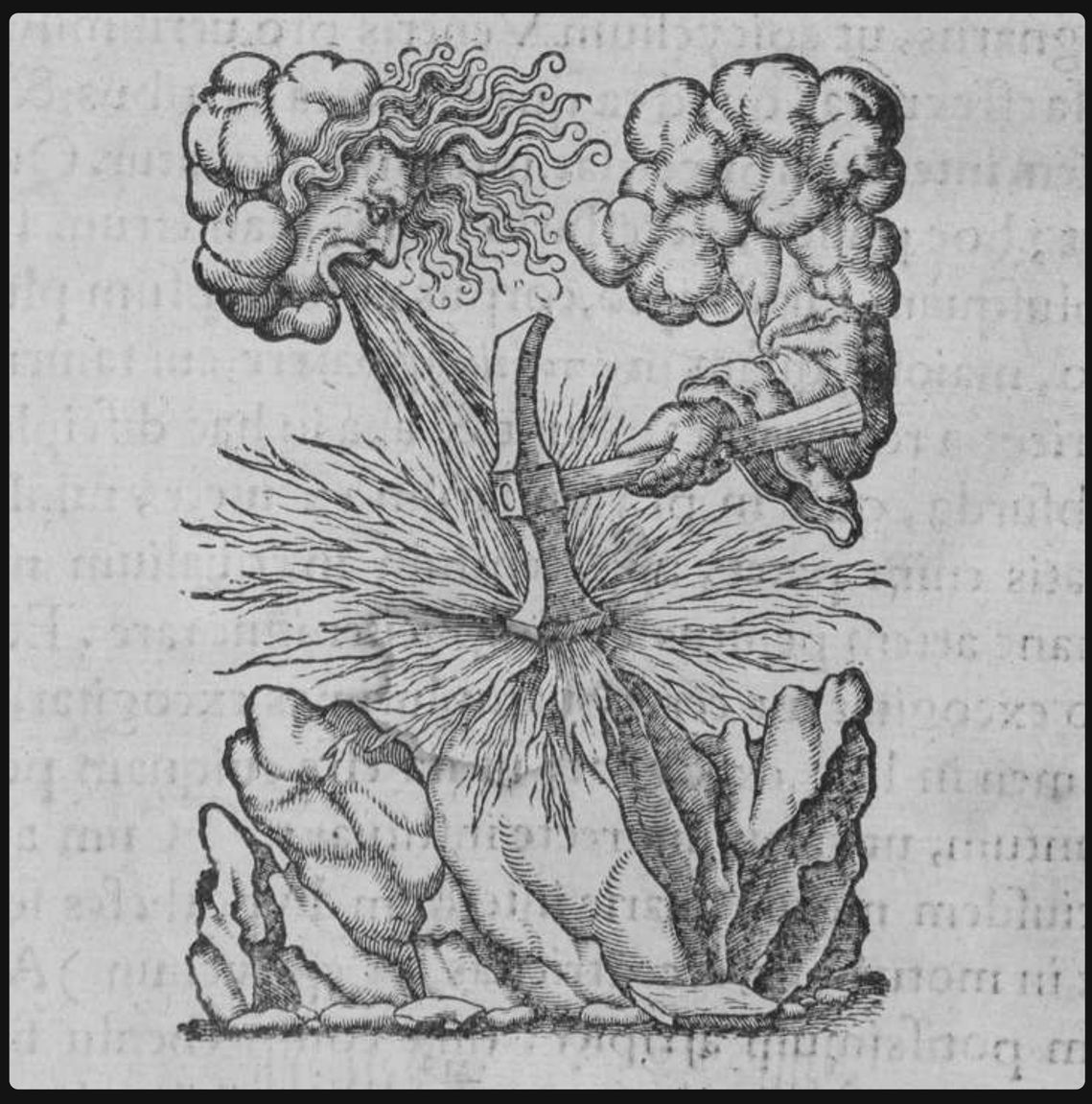




Tomb Index — DENTED DING

Over three decades, bibliographer Owen Gingerich (Tomb Series Discord roles: TOMBSAYER) inspected every known first and second edition copy of the 1543 book De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium, by Nicolaus Copernicus (roles: TOMB GUARDIAN). Very few printed books have been the subject of such unreasonable scrutiny: Gutenberg's bible, Shakespeare's First Folio, and perhaps one or two others. The product of this scholarship was Gingerich's Census, a sublime monument to original formats and original hardware.

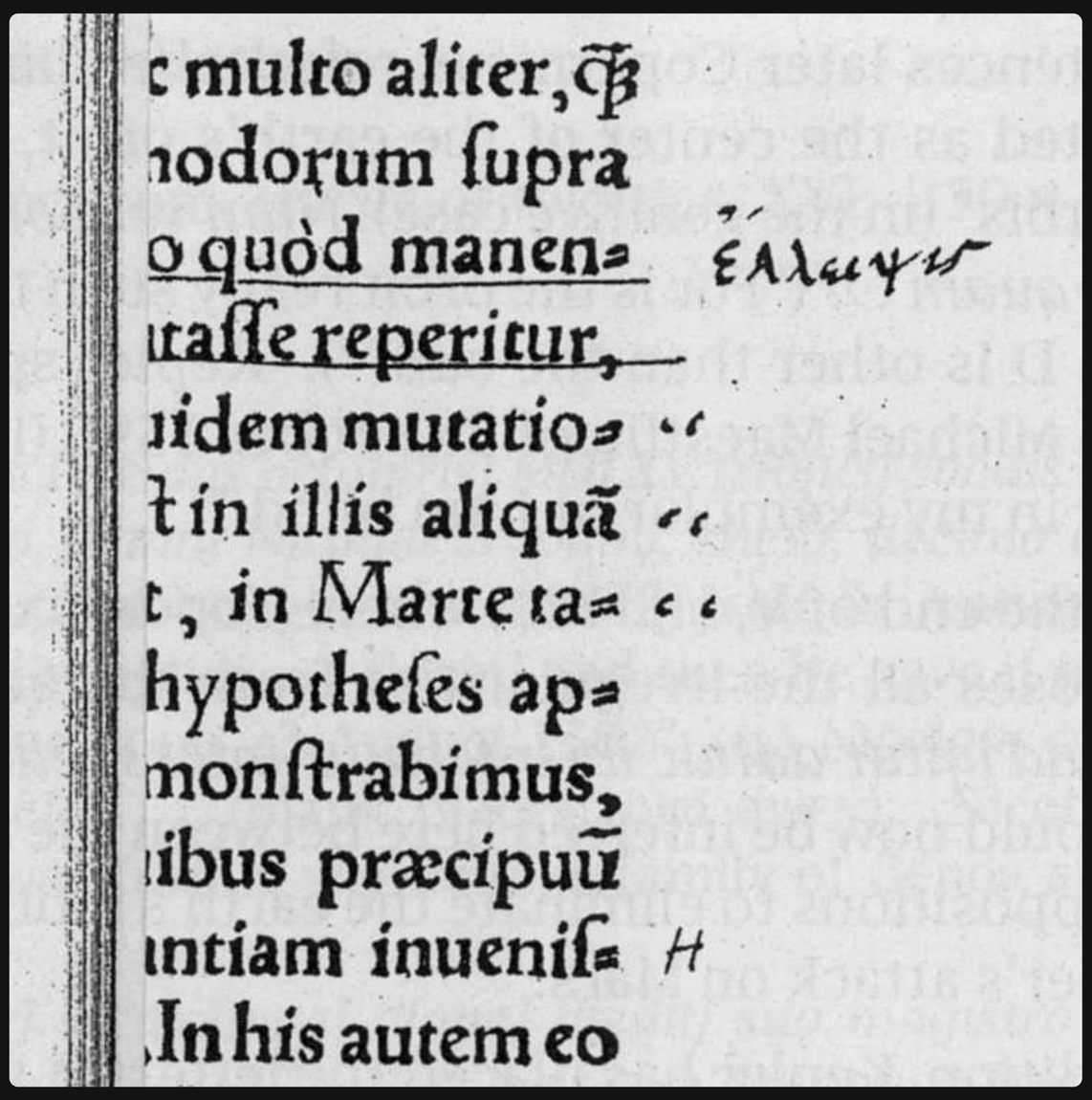
That De Revolutionibus would survive even beyond the sixteenth century was unlikely: the book contained subversive ideas that put it at existential risk as soon as it was published. Copernicus contradicted Holy Scripture to claim that the sun was the centre of the universe, with the planets, of which the earth was but one, in *its* orbit. Papal decrees were issued, requiring all extant copies of the book be modified to *correct* its offending passages. Decentralised, multiplicitous print culture had already absorbed Copernicus's book into its redundancy network, however, and many copies escaped censure. Gingerich estimates that, in total, 1100 copies of the first and second editions were printed. At the completion of the Census in 2002, at least 277 copies of the first edition, and 324 of the second had certainly survived.



De Revolutionibus, title page engraving

Sixteenth century books were sold as loose gatherings of pages, to be finished and bound according to the specifications of each individual buyer and their library. From the TOMBSAYER's perspective, therefore, every copy is a distinct material artefact. Bindings point to the location of a copy's original owner: soft vellum was popular in France and Italy; wooden boards wrapped in pigskin were common in Germany; English bindings were often calfskin over heavy cardboard. Owner's names, along with dates and places of purchase might be written in the book, and if not, distinctive features of a given copy could be cross-referenced with information published in

contemporaneous bibliographies, estate inventories, and auction records. Gingerich aggregates these details of manufacture and distribution, and other marks of individual provenance, to produce a detailed account of how the book's radical thesis was received by an international community of astronomers. By comparing marginalia — notes written in the margins — Gingerich could even recreate the progression of heliocentric pedagogy, tracing the commentaries of influential teachers whose notes were copied by their students, word for word, into their own copies of the book.



:ELLIPSE:

Gingerich's Census draws De Revolutionibus as a single object in 600 fragments. No one copy of the book is complete — *the entire distributed edition is the thing* — and yet singularly poetic details do emerge. While studying the copy acquired in 1598 by a young German astronomer named Johannes Kepler (HOUSE COMETS, RECOVERY ARTIST), Gingerich makes a discovery. Kepler's copy was a first edition that had originally been owned by Jerome Schreiber, a mathematician from Nuremberg. Schreiber's marginalia queried Copernicus's calculations of planetary orbits. On folio 143, Schreiber wrote the single word *ellipse* in the margin. Nothing about it, no elaboration. This germ of an idea became a meme, later taken up by Kepler, whose own significant contribution as an astronomer would be to refine Copernicus's thesis by showing that planetary orbits were *elliptical*, rather than strictly circular. What serendipity that receptive Kepler should acquire a copy containing this pointed clue! And what fortune that this copy should go on to earn a Van Eyck Index of 6.5, allowing Gingerich to vicariously witness the potent ellipse meme in its moment of transmission from one generation of *Tombies* to the next.



NOMAD (COMETS), for scale: Universal Serial Bus, Plaque Découpée Universelle

As compelling as its extraordinary print production is, no notes for future TOMBSAYERs will be preserved in the black, densely inked margins of the Tomb Index. By way of a critical reversal, it will be the Tomb Series NFTs that accrue associations with other world-building narratives and practitioners.

Smart contract marginalia

Each of the 177 Tombs is minted as an NFT equipped with its own Recovery smart contract. These autonomous pieces of software, deployed on the Ethereum blockchain, will arbitrate a process by which anyone can potentially *recover* a derivative work, in the form of a digital file of their own creation, from a Tomb. This recovered file becomes itself an NFT — a digital asset — owned and controlled by its creator. The arbitration function of each Recovery smart contract is humanised by a social governance process, engaging the online community that has been fostered around the Tomb Series in a democratised curatorial project.

Each Recovery is an *inscription*: an entry in the margin, *an object in the orbit*, of a Tomb, with the potential to contribute to that Tomb's cultural significance and enduring value. Suppose a HOUSE COMETS Tomb is listed for auction in 2072. If the Tomb Series gambit has paid off, this is, in itself, a covetable NFT, which likely commands considerable value. If this particular Tomb has had media by its own Jerome Schreibers and Johannes Keplers minted with its Recovery smart contract, that value might be increased by its association with these influential figures and their work. These recovered NFTs, in turn, might acquire value commensurate with the cultural significance of the Tomb to which they are bound. The Recovery mechanic anticipates and facilitates this process of collective cultural production, and reflects it in the composability of its royalties.

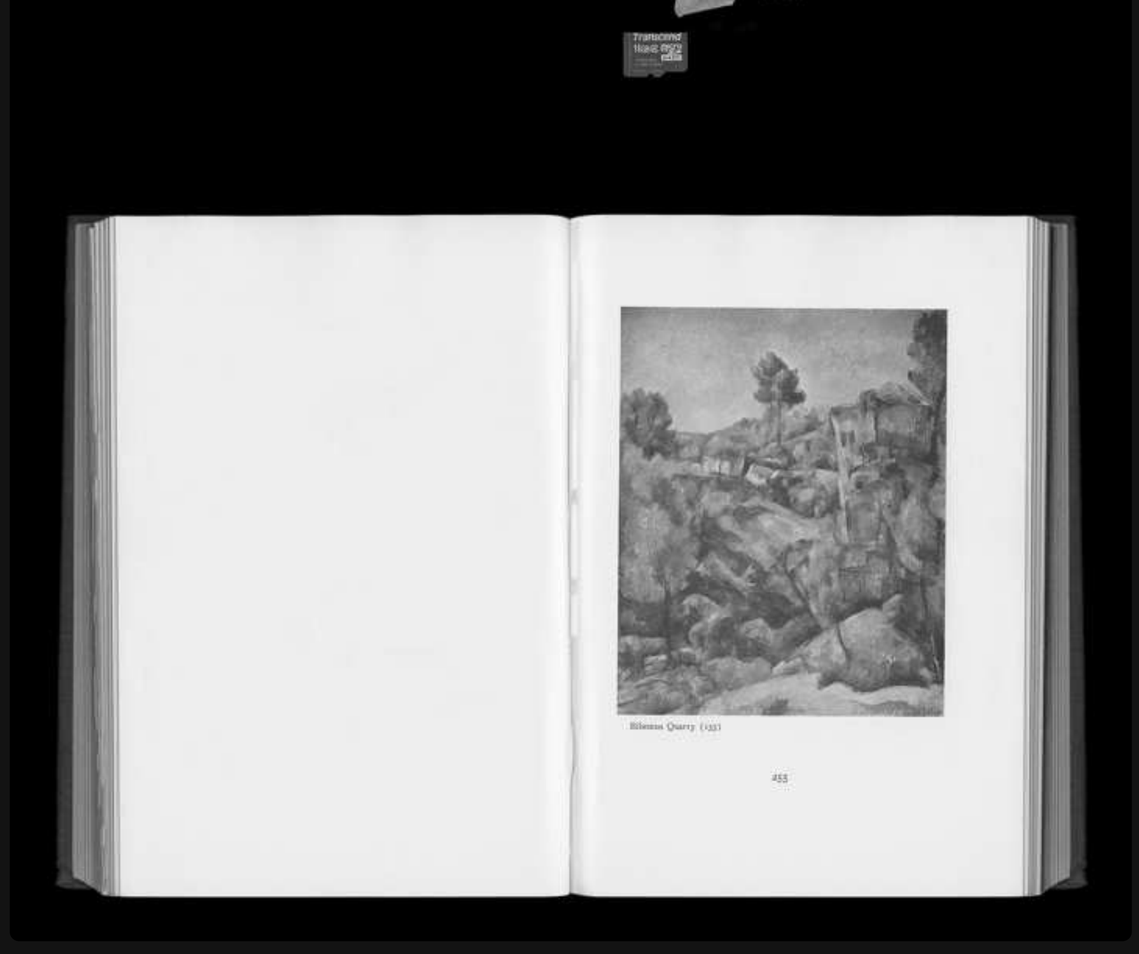
Now rival reality-defining media paradigms collide



DUAL EVENT (SHADOW)

The Tomb Series gambit is not simply the coexistence of its print and NFT incarnations, however artistically convincing they might be. Rather it is Rudnick's simultaneous optimisation for the distinct distribution and ownership protocols of these physical and digital planes *at this moment of their collision*. This dual format approach runs counter to the defensive and territorial responses that such collisions have historically engendered. Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, for example, notoriously theorised the collision of the singular artwork with its multiplicitous printed reproduction, and in so doing apparently inspired Albert Barnes, a major collector of twentieth century art, to prohibit any of his European impressionist paintings from being reproduced in colour. Fearing a Benjaminian annihilation of aura, Barnes's own publications included black and white reproductions For Reference Only. *Authentic Visual Pleasure Forbidden*. Barnes conceived this impoverished *terrain1* print profile explicitly to burn the bridge between singularity and multiplicity, but such paranoia produced only FUD: these images are obscure, bereft placeholders.





Albert Barnes's terrain1 Cézanne, for scale: lifeless, desaturated leaf, Micro SD

Tombs, by contrast, pretend that they cannot be dislocated, abstracted, or remediated. No auratic energy nor longevity potential escape a Tomb between its being printed in *terrain6*, minted as an NFT, and acting as host to the derivative works on its Recovery smart contract. It's *Tombs all the way down*.

Uncredited Tomb tweeted by @ennntropy mood board account: TOMB. Tomb Series Discord :UNITE OR PERISH: emote memed by cross-server Nitro Boosters: TOMB. Elon RTs cats of Tomb thread: TOMB. Sealed black envelope containing Schrödinger's Aligned Index Marker found on NYE: TOMB. COMET snatched from esoteric orbit by nomad.eth hardware wallet: TOMB. Same wallet's cryptographic seed phrase punched in steel and buried in the woods: TOMB. Bootleg Pantone Hexachrome NDX: TOMB. EU terrain6 regulations introduced: TOMB. Immaculate NDX still in shrinkwrap, stored in archival board box with custom-made foam inserts: TOMB. Tombsayer dox collectives merge NDX fingerprint databases: TOMB. EXODUS 2 pangram haiku #14 united with VIBE SARCOPHAGI on its first VEIday: TOMB ...

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