

● PROTAGONIST *art*

VOL. 02 · PAPER 03 · INDUSTRY STUDY

THE NFT MARKET STRUCTURE OF 2026.

Post-collapse, post-reset. The category has bifurcated into three structural segments. \$4.8B in 2025 secondary volume, +22% from the 2023 trough.

INDUSTRY

\$4.8B 2025

ABSTRACT · INDUSTRY STUDY · PROTAGONIST RESEARCH

Global NFT secondary-market volume stabilized at \$4.8B in 2025, down 84% from the 2021 peak but up 22% from the 2023 trough. The category has bifurcated into three structurally different segments: institutional digital (28% of volume), generative art (24%), and the long tail (48%). The institutional segment has the most concentrated holder base, the most stable floors, and the highest five-year hold rates. The long tail continues to absorb the speculative buyer; the institutional segment increasingly serves the institutional collector.

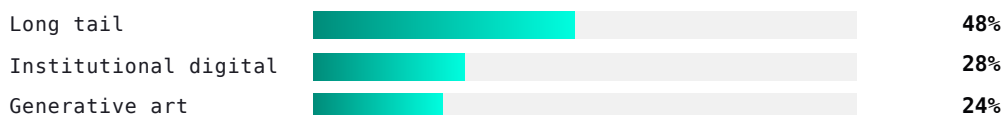
§ I · WHERE WE ARE

THE MARKET AFTER THE DUST.

Three years after the 2022–2023 contraction, NFT secondary-market volume has stabilized. The category did not die — it restructured. The new map is sharply different from the 2021 peak: the speculative buyer is largely gone, the institutional buyer has returned, and the volume sits in the segments that survived the test.

FIGURE 1 · 2025 NFT SECONDARY VOLUME BY SEGMENT

THE CATEGORY HAS BIFURCATED INTO THREE STRUCTURAL SEGMENTS



SOURCE: PROTAGONIST AGGREGATION · OPENSEA · BLUR · MAGIC EDEN · ART BLOCKS · OBJKT.

§ II · INSTITUTIONAL DIGITAL

THE 28%.

Institutional digital — the segment of work that has been acquired by museums, foundations, and serious individual collectors — accounted for 28% of 2025 secondary volume. The names are the ones the field would name: Pak, Refik Anadol, Beeple's later work, Tyler Hobbs, the post-2023 Fewocious series. **Holder concentration in**

this segment is the highest in the category — the top 100 wallets hold 47% of aggregate value. This is institutional behavior, not speculative.

§ III · GENERATIVE ART

THE ART BLOCKS LINEAGE.

Generative art — Art Blocks Curated, fxhash, the long-tail Tezos generative scene — captured 24% of 2025 secondary. This segment has the highest hold rates in the category (38%, per Paper 02), the most credentialed buyer base (heavy overlap with traditional art collecting), and the most coherent thesis: **generative process as the medium**. The segment is small enough to feel intimate; large enough to support full-time artist practices.

§ IV · THE LONG TAIL

THE 48%.

The long tail — everything that is not institutional or generative — accounts for 48% of volume. This segment is where most speculative activity has concentrated; it is also where most failures occur. The segment includes PFP projects, gaming NFTs, ticketing, utility tokens, the long graveyard of 2021–22 launches. The volume is real; the average outcome is not good.

"The category did not die in 2022. It restructured into the form it should have always had. The buyer for digital art and the buyer for speculative collectibles are different people now."

— PROTAGONIST VOL. 02 · PAPER 03

§ V · IMPLICATIONS

FOR GALLERIES + COLLECTORS.

PROTAGONIST HOUSE POSITION · MARKET STRUCTURE

OPERATE IN THE INSTITUTIONAL + GENERATIVE SEGMENTS. *Avoid the long tail.*

The Protagonist catalog operates entirely within institutional digital and generative segments. **The long tail is not where the field's serious collectors are spending time**, and the structural disadvantages (holder dispersion, weak floors, low hold rates) compound against any work that lives there.

REFERENCES

1. Protagonist Research (2026). *Vol. 02 market structure dataset*. CC BY 4.0.
2. OpenSea, Blur, Magic Eden, Art Blocks, Objkt 2025 platform reports.