10-25-2023

AI and the Creative Process: Part Two

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Recommended Citation

ART & ART HISTORY

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Though technological innovation has always influenced considerations of art—think of Duchamp's controversial urinal—the constant throughout is human touch.

An AI image generated using Adobe Firefly with the prompt, "a crowd of early 20th century working class French artists looking at a sculpture of a small toilet in a gallery."
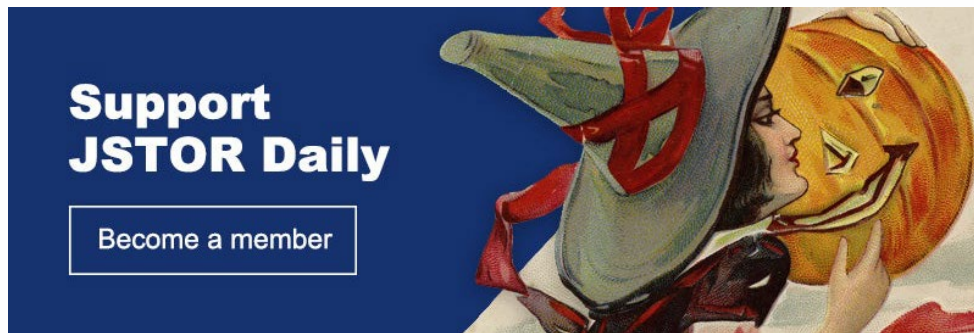
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This is the second article in a three-part series. Read part

one here.

There is perhaps no more hotly contested debate than the very nature, role, and definition of art—you can read about this in Part One of this three-part series.. From philosophy to aesthetics, discussed by scholars as far afield as composer-musician Annelies Monseré **J** to aesthetic-philosopher Stephen Davies **J**, there are ample contributors to the conversation. This becomes clear when looking at how the art world has reacted to new technologies over the past two centuries. In the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, groundbreaking advancements like photomechanical reproduction were introduced, allowing for objective reality to be recorded as never before. Since traditional art forms like painting had been the primary means for creating accurate depictions of events, places, and people, these new technological innovations questioned the fundamental value and objectives of such art. This disruption led to a rethinking of what art could be, giving rise to modern movements known as the avant-garde that broke away from conventional standards. Partha Mitter observes **J** that the

artists that followed in these movements, like their technological counterparts, diverged from tradition, redirecting the trajectory of visual expression in new and surprising ways.

The most significant ideological break came with Dadaism and Marcel Duchamp, who persistently provoked questions about the confines and definitions of art. With the introduction of his readymades into the Western canon, the concept behind rather than the fabrication of a work of art became paramount. In 1917, Duchamp introduced one of his most famous works, known as the "Fountain," which was not a carefully crafted sculpture but instead a standard porcelain urinal. By taking an everyday object, signing it "R. Mutt," and submitting it to an exhibition, Joel Rudinow argues, **J** Duchamp reframed the question of what makes something "art." Rather than focusing on the physical creation, he highlighted the significance of the artist's idea and purpose in determining what constitutes a creative work.

L'Atelier de l'artiste : a daguerreotype from 1837, made by the inventor of this process, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre via Wikimedia Commons

It was a radical move.

Yet, as Steven Goldsmith discusses **J**, the display of commonplace, mass-produced objects such as urinals, bicycle wheels, and snow shovels within the context of coveted exhibition space, as revolutionary as it was, still related to human existence and experience. In fact, Diederik Schönau points out **J** that the traditional understanding of art continues to be associated with human experience, emphasizing the expression, interpretation, and reflection of human emotions, ideas, and cultural contexts.

It is now worth asking whether art is solely limited to human experience. While the presence of a creative element is necessary for the existence of art, the act of

being creative or engaging in creativity does not necessarily result in the creation of a work of "art." If the designation "art" intrinsically carries a connection to the human condition, what happens when the human component is removed from the art-making process? Will the resulting product still qualify as "art?"

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed that the ability to appreciate beauty exists in a mental realm separate from reason. This distinction allows for the admiration of natural beauty—such as sunsets, roses, or oceans—free of human intervention. In other words, Kant suggests that the appreciation of beauty might not be solely a human activity, and that it could extend to a broader, more universal experience, encompassing the inherent beauty of nature itself. Arthur Danto relates that the "disinterested" exhibited in Kantian aesthetics made the modern understanding of art possible as it no longer needed to serve a religious or political agenda to be considered valuable or beautiful. Before this modern understanding, much of art was created with a clear purpose, such as promoting religious beliefs or showcasing political power. The perspective paved the way for artists to create works simply for the sake of artistic expression, allowing art to be more experimental, personal, and diverse in its themes and interpretations. This shift has significantly broadened the scope and freedom of artistic creation and interpretation in the

modern era.

Only now—over two centuries later—is the full impact of the modern definition of art, which underlies this perspective, being realized. Redefining art based on the Kantian understanding alters its very essence. Instead of being something with inherent value only, self-contained, and linked specifically to human experience or economic purpose, this new interpretation allows art to expand beyond its traditional limits. It becomes more inclusive, accepting various creative expressions that might not align with conventional definitions, and recognizing the intrinsic worth of artistic expression apart from its practical or commercial benefits, as Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart argue **J**.

This broadened view of art resonates with contemporary trends in the art world, where artists and institutions are increasingly experimenting with unconventional materials and cross-disciplinary techniques. The performance art and Happenings of the 1960s, as well as the Conceptual Art movement that followed, remind us, Benjamin Buchloh says, that **J** art transcends the canvas and gallery; it includes installations, performances, digital media, and other experimental forms. Recognizing the self-reliant nature of art and its ability to surpass human experience opens the doors for a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of creativity in all its

incarnations.

The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and so-called "AI art generators" implies seemingly reduced human influence in the art-making process; yet the human touch inherently persists. Generative AI models undergo training on existing human-made art, thereby forging a link with human creativity and the cultural context from which it arises. Stable Diffusion by Stability AI, for example, was developed using image and caption pairs from the LAION-5B dataset, a publicly accessible collection derived from Common Crawl data gathered from the web. This vast dataset consists of 5 billion image-text pairs, sorted based on criteria such as language, resolution, the predicted probability of having a watermark, and a calculated "aesthetic" score. This means the AI tool was "trained" on existing imagery on the internet, whether photographs or works of art, created by human hand.
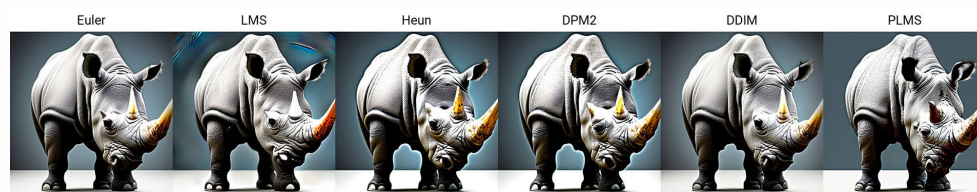
Stable Diffusion – Rhino X Y Plot to show different Sampling Techniques via Wikimedia Commons

From this perspective, AI holds the capability to generate art that fundamentally resonates with human experiences because it is trained on them, Deepak Somaya and Lav Varsheny ⬛ argue. Certainly, AI repackages and displays

information in innovative and potentially more insightful ways and is able to offer novel perspectives and understandings of our experiences. Yet, the human connection remains centrally embedded within every AI generated image; the creative power of AI is contingent on the source material upon which it is trained. The original human creativity that serves as the bedrock for the work generated is an inescapable factor that must be considered. In the world of art and design, converting creative ideas into tangible forms is key, says Karen Lang. When AI is involved, this means artists transforming the results of AI algorithms, the inspirational visualizations these art generators produce, into physical works like paintings or sculptures. This process is similar to using photographs or drawings as inspiration in traditional studio practices. In both cases, the original material—whether digital data for AI or photographs for a human artist—plays a similar role, serving as a starting point for creativity.

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With its potential to generate visually appealing works, AI showcases the capacity to accumulate and build upon the collective wisdom and creativity that humans have contributed across time. This capability suggests that AI-generated work can indeed be considered art, at least to a certain extent. AI will continue to struggle to cope with the matters of empathy and understanding central to the human experience—at least for the foreseeable future.

Disruptive technologies have been a part of art history as long as there has been one. Initially met with resistance, they are over time absorbed and adopted by audiences and artists alike, forcing a reassessment of the boundaries of what is considered art. It is only a matter of time before generative AI likewise becomes normalized in daily life and regarded as just another implement in the expansive toolbox of artistic expression.

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