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Artwork and Artificial Intelligence: Fighting for the Future of Humanity

Alexandria Barath

When you compress all of Earth’s history into one calendar year, the first humans wouldn’t appear until the evening of December 31st. The first computer wouldn’t be created until just milliseconds before New Year’s Eve, and the birth of every human alive now would fall just after that. While we are just a grain of sand within the timeline of the universe, we have progressed far faster than anything before us—especially in the realm of technology. As technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) starts to play an everyday role in the lives of Americans, what does this mean for the human race? We are creatures that are meant to feel deeply and express emotion through vehicles such as art and creativity. While AI can be programmed to demonstrate feelings and generate similar ideas, these machines are not able to replicate the emotional depths of human life—specifically in regard to creating art. The integration of AI generators into everyday life will crowd out active artists who have dedicated hours to perfecting their handmade crafts, steal trademark styles of artists without their consent, and increase social isolation as those looking to art for meaning will cease to find it.

Before commenting on the implications of artificially made artwork, it’s important to note the significance of human-made art within society. Art is described by Oxford Languages as “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” (Oxford Languages). The important distinction made here is not only within the ‘human creative skill’, but also for the effect of that skill— affecting others through emotional power. If we define art by the implications of its finished work, then true art leaves an impression or feeling with the beholder.

Furthermore, Eden Gallery, which includes various art galleries to display works of international art, describes art as “an important avenue through which to connect with others, especially in times of crisis” (Kobra, 1). While art may not be the first thing

that comes to mind when thinking of topics of importance—let's say compared to math or science—art is essential to understand the human condition. This opinion, where one believes logic and math supersede art, would change during a major life crisis—such as the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or indescribable bouts of loneliness or depression. When a shift like this happens in one's life, they are bound to feel alone, like no one has ever felt this isolated or sorrowful before. This is the time when one turns to art. Whether this is in poetry or paintings, they look to art to find that in fact, they are not alone.

Or, instead of feelings of loneliness, this individual feels a love so profound that their elation has no boundaries in sight. They will look to describe this feeling through another's words, paintings, or sculptures—to find that they are not crazy after all. This is why human-made art is essential to humanity. Individuals yearn to find purpose and understanding through the experiences of others—of humans. When this art is created through artificial intelligence, while it does pass through the hands of humans through their input of words and phrases, the art itself is not human. This depletes the very reason why humans turn to art in times of need.

This lack of humanity is present within the innerworkings of the Artificial Intelligence programs that are generating this art, known as generative AI. These programs use diffusion to produce 'art' through data sets. This process inputs thousands of images into the AI which trains it to lay pixels in specific shapes, colors, and figures to create recognizable images. For example, if you input hundreds of pictures of pop sensation Taylor Swift into an AI's programming, it would be able to generate an image that closely resembles this celebrity. Once enough information is input, the AI can generate images that mix and match ideas, words, and prompts that its given. It is even able to copy the styles of certain artists: "some artists have balked at the new technology's capacity for mimicry" (Clarke, 7). Now that anyone can generate new artwork mimicking the style famous painters, this poses a threat to the need of contemporary artists.

AI's unique ability to generate images will eventually lead to the destruction of man-made art through overcrowding. Not every human can create magnificent art, but just about every human can type a simple prompt into a generator like DALL-E or Artbreeder to create a breathtaking image. After all, "[w]ho can compete with

the speed, cheapness, scale, and, yes, wild creativity of these machines?” (Wired, 5). As Wired suggests, these programs produce quality artwork for a fraction of the cost of its man-made equivalent—and within a fraction of a second. Many contemporary artists struggle to make selling their artwork a prominent source of income, and with the rapid increase of AI-generated art crowding out their work, their future does not look promising. Creators are already discouraged, as “[m]aking a living as an artist is impossible for all but a few high-profile practitioners, and the lack of sufficient financial remuneration for artistic labor is the dark reality at the heart of the contemporary art world” (Sharot, 1). Not to mention the fractional time it takes an art generator to complete an image, merely seconds, compared to the days or weeks it could take an artist to create a similar image, creates an unfair ratio of art production. There could be thousands of AI generated pieces uploaded online for every piece created by the brushstrokes of a painter. These artists are already swimming upstream due to the overcritical selectiveness of the art world, and artificial intelligence makes the current stronger.

As for the future of museums, some believe AI art will never hold the same value as man-made art: “Instead of thinking of AI-generated art as a doomsday development—a cluster bomb thrown by Big Tech into the heart of the art world—you can think of it as something with its own history” (Smee, 10). While it seems there will always be a divide between man-made and computer-generated work, some museums—a San Francisco gallery to be exact—are eager about displaying and promoting AI-generated work within their walls. Many exhibition centers are shifting to focus on AI artwork, which is described by *The Smithsonian Magazine* as “quickly permeating creative spaces,” and some even “mimick[ing] history’s greatest painters” (Enking 3). While today, we yearn to gaze at pieces handcrafted by great painters, such as Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* or Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, future generations might idolize work in these painters’ styles, but without their authentic touch.

However, technology is often detested before deemed useful, meaning this debate over artificial intelligence might be futile come next decade. Many new inventions have brought about conflict with the intersection of art and technology: “Many painters recoiled at the invention of the camera, which they saw as a debasement of human artistry” (Roose, 22). Artificial Intelligence, however, is different. RJ Palmer, a digital artist, stated that this vital

difference lies in the idea that AI is actively against human made artwork. He says that “What makes this AI different is that it’s explicitly trained on current working artists,” and that “its actively anti-artist” (Roose, 24). Since AI can be trained to mimic human behavior, it can generate images in the style of certain artists without their consent, essentially stealing their work. A popular AI art generator, Stable Diffusion, shared the data and information on the code within its database. Shortly after this was shared, a tool was built to help identify whether or not specific artists work was used to help train this generator. If their images were used, it puts their style at risk to be copied by the Stable Diffusion code.

The Concept Art Association (CAA) notes that this new tool is helpful for artists, but only to a certain extent. While artists whose work was discovered to be used by this generator were able to opt out for future images, it isn’t able to untrain the AI to stop generating images in the style of these artists. The CAA describe it as “like someone who already robbed you saying, ‘Do you want to opt out of me robbing you’” (Clarke, 11). Not only is this theft, but creations associated with a specific artist’s label crowd out their original work. Greg Rutkowski, a digital illustrator specializing in the portrayal of fantasy scenes, mentions that he “probably won’t be able to find [his] work out there because [the internet] will be flooded with AI art” according to an interview he did with *MIT Technology Review* (Clarke, 8). This poses a massive issue for the future of creators.

With the increase of technology and expansion of artificial intelligence, online art generators are inevitable. However, there are many problems that arise when imagining a world with exclusively computer-generated art. If continued, this movement will crowd out active artists who have dedicated hours to perfecting their handmade crafts, steal trademark styles of these artists without their consent, and increase social isolation as those looking to art for meaning will cease to find it.

Since we cannot stop technology from expanding, the correct step forward in addressing this conflict lies in the distinction between human-made work and online-generated work. While both might be considered ‘art’, the difference lies in the impression it makes on the observer. As long as we continue to recognize this distinction and cease to compare AI work to artists’ hand-made

work, we can learn to appreciate artwork generators without fearing it is at the expense of artists.

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