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by

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ARTS
IN THE AGE
OF AI

Exploring the Artificial Imagination

Grégory Chatonsky, Artist

Initially evoking wonder with its uncanny and sometimes humorous images, AI's role has expanded, reshaping fields once considered uniquely human. In the wake of this evolution, Grégory Chatonsky, a pioneering artist at the intersection of technology and art, challenges us to reconsider originality and creation. His work prompts us to view AI not as a mere mimic but as a collaborator in a new kind of imagination. In this realm of "artificial imagination," art reflects human ingenuity intertwined with the boundless potential of technology.

The media storm around AI has been brewing since the summer of 2015 and the release of Deep Dream, a software developed by a Google engineer that conjures up new images when presented with other ones. This type of automated pareidolia—a function of the visual cortex that prompts us to discern familiar forms in random patterns, such the shape of an animal in a cloud—sparked curiosities from that guilty pleasure we feel when observing a piece of technology that get things innocently wrong. As we have moved from one innovation to the next, everyone has formed their own opinion on this topic, and has had a go at image generation or chatting with a Large Language Model.

Given our readiness to find fault in such software, not to mention the dwindling mineral and energy resources required to keep it running, we might see all this as a mere technological bubble whose

promises will eventually burst. But we might also note that fields once considered to be the remit of human intelligence (computer science, copywriting, translation, artistic endeavors, and law, to name a few) are now becoming perfect playgrounds for AI.

Intriguingly, many references to these questions within the mass media focus on art, artworks, and artists. The reasons for this proliferation may seem unclear, since this technology has already affected a wide range of professions. It touches upon concepts that posit the artwork as the singular expression of an exceptional being known as “the artist,” who instills a material with their subjectivity, no doubt because the figure of the artist is equated to the development of Western economic subjectivity. The first fictional character of an artist, Frenhofer in Balzac’s *Unknown Masterpiece* (1831), is contemporaneous with the industrial revolution and the emergence of that other breed of creator, the entrepreneur.

DOING AWAY WITH THE COPYCAT PARADIGM

When I first forayed into AI as my artistic medium back in 2009, I was perceived as an inveterate geek. Nowadays, everyone’s a specialist, with a firm—often negative but sometimes enthusiastic—opinion on the issue, compounded by a hodgepodge of technical knowledge and memories rooted in science-fiction. It’s as though AI has always been a means of imagining and recounting science-fiction, but also a way of imagining the artificial.

One of the main criticisms brought before AI argues that it practices cultural extractivism by literally sucking up data found on the web, copying images, texts, and sounds. It is alleged that companies in Silicon Valley are genuinely stealing from creators who already find themselves in a precarious position, and profiting from their work with no regard for citing sources or signatures.

Petitions launched by visual artists against this wholesale theft are often led by individuals whose style is, oddly enough, easily replicable by an AI. Many contemporary artists do not have a style that can be transferred onto a software; rather, they follow a logic that lets them circulate a distinct atmosphere between different media. But if people often think so-called “generative” AI copies work—as humans used to do—through cutting, mixing, and collating, it is because they don’t really understand how the technology works.

The copycat paradigm of transforming a single unit into multiple, identical units stems from the production methods of the industrial revolution. Such methods included creating a mold in order





to achieve economies of scale as the number of objects injected into it increased, explaining our consumerist compulsions.

Yet, although AI copies, it certainly doesn't follow that same principle. The Internet has enabled us to accumulate a vast amount of data that exceeds the capacity of the human nervous system. AI feeds on this data, translating it into statistics and defining it as a probability in what's known as a "latent" space. In such a space, there are no more source images; instead there are the probabilities of these images, which enable a dramatic reduction in the volume of data used.

It's still difficult to distance ourselves from the copycat notions we have grown accustomed to, especially in view of the "technological reproducibility" described by Walter Benjamin. There is no image within the latent space of an AI. What it has are potential images—not only past images that helped to train it, but also, and much more disturbingly, future images. For instance, we might play around with presenting a sample photo to the software and asking it to generate an identical one. This new logic of potential media pushes copyright, which is based on originality, into obsolescence

and unexpectedly brings about the death of the author that we were warned about in the previous century.

THE REPLACEMENT MYTH

The second fantasy surrounding AI is that real-life creators will be replaced by mindless parrots capable only of repeating what they've learned by churning out insipid averages. But if you have never used generative AI, you won't have been treated to the unforeseeable surprises that it occasionally comes up with. This reminds me of the weavers of Lyon, who once revolted against the mechanization of their expertise. You can't help but smile at creators believing that they are not parrots themselves; that they are creating something radically original despite the fact that most exhibitions nowadays give us a nauseating feeling of *déjà-vu*.

The fear of being replaced is a reactionary, finite one whose political dangers we have already acknowledged. It presupposes that the artist has some defined place to be usurped, even though art history is a process that constantly defies its own definition. We all know artists who feel like other artists are copying them. This type of narcissism long predates the advent of AI.

THE BLACK MIRROR OF FINITENESS

The third criticism alleges that AI produces biased representations. Ever since Microsoft's Chabot-turned-supremacist, AI has been accused of one blunder after the other. Yet these accusations fail to consider that biases (whether these are lauded or critiqued) don't exist in a vacuum, that no one can take the position of outside observer, and that AI is indeed made in "our" image. It is a formidable tool for navigating shared cultural spaces since it generates nothing by itself; it is simply a library produced by human beings in the form of potential statistics.

This is probably the most astounding point, as the blind spot of a criticism most often lies with the critic. Whenever a flaw is found in this technology, we can flip and twist that flaw at whim around the human who found it—"no originality," "makes mistakes that a child wouldn't make," "repeats clichés," and so forth. It feels like we're speaking to an animal that needs to be tamed. All this points to an idea that we can no longer stand one another, and that the image AI reflects back on us will enable us to deliver ourselves from it and exorcize it.

AI is assuredly not human, but it does bear an uncanny resemblance to us. And as is often the case with identity, it can be used to conjure up the specter of what it is or to test out our

finiteness as though we weren't ourselves; as though identity were overwhelmed with hi-tech gear that we both create and are trained by in equal measure.

Painters sometimes use a black mirror when painting from life but transformed their image enough to bring it closer to the desired pictorial result. The distorting image—sometimes tragic, sometimes laughable, most often ironic—that AI projects back on us is a new reflexivity of our finiteness.

THE SIMULACRUM OF OUR REPRESENTATION

If many artists feel threatened by AI, this is likely because their precarity has been given the qualities of a martyrdom, a paradigm of the human being who has finally turned creator into an industrial regime, confronted with an unworkable economic situation wherein everyone is “something of an artist.”

More than anything else, the latent space of statistics has brought to light a new realism typified by the industrial automation of resemblance. When we explore AI for hours and days on end, we discover surprising results that we ourselves would have liked to achieve: a counterfactual realism akin to the photorealism passed down from the 19th century, but with a slightly different, dream-like feel. Are machines starting to dream up the traces of humankind, like one dream enmeshed within another?

French philosopher Bernard Stiegler identified three types of memory. The first is primary retention, which occurs simultaneously with perception, such as when I hear a note of music in the present. Secondary retention occurs when several notes are heard and each one, past and present, alters the others to create the memory of a melody. Tertiary retentions are memories stored on material media, such as music etched into a vinyl record that I can play and replay until that material wears out. Today, a quaternary retention is what's appearing with AI, whereby tertiary retentions are made recursive—what we have are images of images, texts about texts, sounds from sounds. We're left not with a memory that retains the clues to reality, but which ends up looping back on itself.

In approaching this fourth memory and this new counterfactual, strange-yet-familiar realism of the possible, we must alter our reflexes around esthetic thinking and the implicit conception of art. This involves flouting the division between original and copy, creator and machine, factual and possible.

At a time when humanity's short-term survival is increasingly doubtful, it feels as though we have endowed memory with a mobility that functions independently of us. It can continue beyond

our own finiteness, forever the same and forever different.
As we approach our extinction and the day when there will be no
more witnesses, perhaps we're dreaming of another memory
as an ultimate, ever-changing witness account of what we once were. //

