

Different Strokes, Soulless Notes: The Influence of AI upon Art

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A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art" - Paul Cezanne

Art has been traditionally seen as an expression of human emotion and experience. The beauty of art lies in the fact that the artist has inserted a part of his/her soul into that creation. Art breaks down the barriers between reality and human imagination and transports the aesthete to the world which once existed solely in the mind of the artist.

Art has been created by artists to serve as a tool to communicate ideas, as a social commentary and as a “medicine” to heal the human soul. It is thus no wonder that in his poem, “Ode”, Arthur O’Shaughnessey compared artists to “Music Makers”, who can “move and shake” the world through their art. Hence, the creation of art has traditionally been seen as a human centric process- made by humans for humans.

However, the advent of Artificial Intelligence challenges this notion. One of the earliest examples of AI, which was seemingly capable of generating art, was Harold Cohen’s 1973 computer algorithm called ‘AARON’, which was able to ‘create’ drawings by following a list of given instructions. The underlying idea was to determine the answer to the question, “What are the minimum conditions under which a set of marks functions as an image?”.

Since the mid-2010s, there has been a rise in AI platforms which are available to all those who can access the internet. Examples include Google’s DeepDream, OpenAI’s DALL-E, and ‘robot artists’ such as Ai-Da and Botto. Ai-Da uses her robotic arm, camera-eyes and in-built programming to create paintings and drawings. Her creators argue that art does not need to be inhibited by human hand alone. These developments raise pertinent questions - Who owns AI generated art- AI itself, the company or the user? With AI entering a field thought to be inseparable from humanity, will artists lose their voice?

There is also an opinion that AI is merely reusing and recycling existing artworks for its content. These views are shared by illustrators such as Harry Woodgate and Anoosha Syed, who have stated that AI cannot “create art on its own”- it simply spins together the works of others.

It is necessary to address these concerns, particularly in an environment where more users have easier access to using AI-generated art. After making its mark in content writing and picture generation, AI has now entered the fields of music and acting. The SAG-AFTRA strike in 2023 was an expression of the wariness with which actors view this development. One of the stated worries was that AI could “exploit performers by using their likenesses without fair compensation”. The strike was successful, and studios were mandated to acquire the consent of the performers before attempting to create any digital replicas. The contract stems from the understanding that an outright ban on the use of AI would not be feasible in the current climate. The way forward would be to create boundaries within which AI can be used without subduing the voice of artists.

While the fact that the parties have reached a mutual agreement is commendable, the strike also reveals a fundamental crisis in one’s view of identity. It is hard to imagine that the performers were compelled to fight simply to ensure that their faces and voices are not separated from them. It highlights the pressing need for better legal regulation. Until now, regulations have been lagging behind technology, which results in both instability and uncertainty. Regulations should be far-sighted, as they should be capable of predicting how potential products may trample over the rights of others. There also needs to be cognizance of the fact that AI itself relies on artists to generate content. Creativity is inseparable from human beings and attempts to exclude artists from the very process of creating art are absurd.

However, relying solely on firms to realize this is not a good strategy. Artists need to realize that the way forward would be to familiarize themselves with these emerging technologies. Artists should

know about emerging technologies even before their employers. Knowledge about both existent and emerging AI platforms, their capabilities and limitations would place artists in a better bargaining position, ensuring that they receive fair compensation and protect them against exploitation. This may also help artists learn how they can leverage these upcoming trends to gain new skills.

One of the ways in which we can accomplish this is by incorporating AI in formal art education. For instance, artists could be trained to use their vision to give prompts which maximize AI's potential "creativity." Courses should also explore how AI generates 'art' and identify the works that inspired it. Some art schools, such as the School of Visual Arts, have already begun offering AI based courses. This approach flips the discourse- instead of pitting AI against artists, it aims to make artists more comfortable with AI. Greater engagement with AI would give artists the power to influence Tech-companies to create AI products that specifically help meet their needs. Therefore, this would help create a symbiotic environment where on one hand, artists utilize AI for their work and on the other, Tech-companies develop AI products which respect the rights of their users (artists). This would mean greater checks on copyright violations and plagiarism, practices which AI has been engaging in until now. Once aware about how AI generates its content, artists can identify existing works that may have inspired the output. This would compel companies to compensate the original artists.

Furthermore, this solution would help answer the question of ownership discussed earlier. The person who has written the prompt to generate the content- the artist is its owner. Sources which have assisted the model to come up with the design are also acknowledged and duly rewarded. This solution would thus ensure that artists do not lose their voice, as it highlights the fact that AI itself utilizes their work. Even the most scenic AI generated 'art' is, in reality, a melody of various individual voices, a culmination of the work of multiple artists over multiple generations, and it is imperative that these voices are not forgotten.

Therefore, it is important to accept the fact that AI is here to stay. Artists should adapt to new technology. Refusing to work with AI is not a prudent position to take, for it would hinder the development of a meaningful relationship between the developers of the model and artists. AI is a reality, and refusing to accept its presence in the domain is akin to refusing reality.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to recognize the contributions of artists that have enabled AI to generate its content. The goal should be to move from competition to cooperation, where both artists and Tech-firms understand the significance of the other. Moreover, Tech-companies should make it clear that their products cannot replace artists. This will be a possibility only when they depend on artists for using their products and value them as a customer base. Hence, the key advantage of this solution is that it enables artists to influence the market, turning them from 'victims' to beneficiaries. Artists could also serve as advisors to firms which are in the process of developing art-based AI products, which would result in better-designed products entering the market that are seeking to make the lives of artists easier by assisting them in their tasks rather than actively trying to replace them.

Lastly, it is prudent to remember that AI is not the first disruption that has changed the way mankind views art. The Industrial Revolution that began in the mid-18th century also transformed the way 'art' was produced. Industrialization and mass production forced craftsmen and artisans to find alternative forms of employment. While the Industrial Revolution changed the socio-economic landscape forever, art continues to survive. With time, artists adapted to the changing environment to come up with even better works. Artists were able to take advantage of large-scale production to gain access to cheaper and more accessible raw materials such as glass and cast iron. In 1841, the American painter John Rand invented the portable paint tube, which helped artists leave their indoor studios behind and paint (capture) the wilderness outside. Therefore, the argument that artists can take advantage of disruptive trends has a historical precedent. Artists have survived global disruptions, pandemics, hostile governments, authoritarianism and economic recessions when few have the time to appreciate their art. Artists have survived all these challenges, and it is my belief that they can survive the AI revolution

too.

The most important reason for the continued existence of artists in this world is that unlike them, AI lacks empathy. It is unable to comprehend this most human of all virtues. Empathy is the crowning virtue of artists. Actors can put themselves in positions where they can identify with the trials and tribulations of their characters, musicians can channel both their joy and happiness to create songs, writers can apply their pen to spread the stories of the downtrodden, and painters can use the brush to create beauty which showcases the work of Mother Nature. Artists can give voice to the voiceless, bring about radical changes to existing establishments, and ask humans to question the status quo. Art tells us what reality is – it highlights both the virtues and the vices of this world. Furthermore, it highlights the various possibilities faced by mankind and teaches us the significance and consequences of our actions. The lessons taught by such art help us change the world for the better.

Therefore, artists dream of a better world not just for themselves but for the entire society. Then, they use their craft to successfully transform dreams into reality. On the other hand, AI is incapable of offering any such guidance. It is run and controlled by powerful Tech firms and can never truly become a champion for the downtrodden, nor does it have an incentive to challenge the wrongdoings of any establishment. In conclusion, unlike AI, artists are from the people and for the people.

Therefore, we as civilians must understand that if we lose our artists in the bubble created by AI, we lose our voices. It is thus our moral obligation to protect the voices of artists from being trampled by AI- not just for their sake, but also for ours.

The truth is that in the world that is increasingly becoming digital, remembering fundamental humanistic values is not a choice, but a necessity. We now, more than ever, need to form deeper bonds with fellow humans. In a world increasingly becoming numb and soulless, art that stirs our senses and soothes the soul is needed desperately. To make the world a better place, what humans need is empathy- and there is no one more apt to popularize this virtue than artists.