

*A Note on AI and the Ideology of Creativity*

michael betancourt, Savannah College of Art and Design

---

Fear of a “robot revolution” was born with the word ‘robot’ itself<sup>1</sup>; concern that machinery will replace humanity are as old as the industrial revolution.<sup>2</sup> The impacts and potentials of AI on art bring this history into focus precisely because art is an expression of human culture and society, not merely a technical system.<sup>3</sup> However, the problems for artistic action and intent posed by the autonomous operations of machinery are not new—these same issues also emerged with the development of photography in the 1800s<sup>4</sup>—and the contemporary “freedom” in art is a product of how the art world accommodated earlier technical change.<sup>5</sup> Digital technology instrumentalizes this “freedom,”<sup>6</sup> making the questions raised by AI and the generative processes of computers<sup>7</sup> assume a familiar valence, apparent in the discomfiting realization that Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*”<sup>8</sup> is no longer *fiction*. Borges’s proposition that a contemporary author could recreate Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* seems an absurdity—no human author could study Cervantes and arrive at a reproduction of the *same* work, *Don Quixote*, independently—yet that is precisely what machine learning has already accomplished for Rembrandt van Rijn: AI has created a ‘new’ work, *The*

---

<sup>1</sup>Čapek, K. *Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*

<sup>2</sup>Archer, J. *Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England, 1780–1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 42-56.

<sup>3</sup>Golding, J.; Reinhart, M.; Paganelli, M., eds. *Data Loam* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110697841>

<sup>4</sup>Robinson, H. “Paradoxes of Art, Science and Photography (1892)” (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1966) pp. 82-88.

<sup>5</sup>Danto, A. *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton, 1997) p. 45.

<sup>6</sup>Basualdo, C. “A Writing Without Literature (or Painting as a Construction Site)” *Painting Zero Degree* (New York: Independent Curators, 2000) pp. 10-16.

<sup>7</sup>Benanav, A. *Automation and The Future of Work* (New York: Verso, 2020) pp. 15-28.

<sup>8</sup>Borges, J. “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*” *Ficciones*

*Next Rembrandt* (2016). This 3D printed ‘self-portrait’ was painted/generated from a digital analysis of all 346 Rembrandt paintings. It renders Borges’s absurdity an instrumental reality. The painting “by” Bart Korsten, art director at the J. Walter Thompson Amsterdam ad agency,<sup>9</sup> was created for an advertising campaign (not made to be an artwork *per se*, the relevance of this work is self-evident<sup>10</sup>). The significance of *The Next Rembrandt* for a consideration of AI and the ideology of human creativity arises in how this image demonstrates ‘artistic style’ is precisely conventional, challenging beliefs about originality and genius commonly considered essential to aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup> The generation of new work from statistical modeling of empirical features in Rembrandt’s 346 known paintings creates the framework employed by a digital production disconnected from aesthetic questions of labor and material.<sup>12</sup> AI instrumentalizes the “artist’s hand” transforming what had previously been considered immaterial features specific to art, changing art from ‘invention’ into the ‘application of fixed rules’—and thus insignificantly “creative.”<sup>13</sup>

*The Next Rembrandt* directs attention to fundamental questions about intention, control, and agency that are the domain of metaphysics. Challenges to this aesthetic ideology provoke fears that the digital computer will displace familiar aesthetic criteria and artistic processes, deprecating their significance.<sup>14</sup> Neither are these concerns new, having been raised in *New York Times* art critic Stuart Preston’s review of first art gallery exhibition of computer-generated art by Bela Julesz and Michael Noll at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1965. This exhibition of pictures made by programming an *IBM 7094* computer and output as line drawings using a *General Dynamics SC-4020 Microfilm Plotter* is the first show of computer art, predating the Museum of Modern Art’s 1968 exhibition *The Machine* by almost three years. Preston’s review concludes with an appraisal of the future potential of the computer, directly anticipating Korsten’s use of AI:

No matter what the future holds—and scientists predict a time when almost any kind of painting can be computer-generated—the actual touch of the artists will

---

<sup>9</sup>Pickett-Groen, Nicole. “The Next Rembrandt: bringing the Old Master back to life” *Medium*, posted January 24, 2018 <https://medium.com/@DutchDigital/the-next-rembrandt-bringing-the-old-master-back-to-life-35dfb1653597>

<sup>10</sup>Kazakina, K. “AI-Generated Portrait Sells for \$432,500 in an Auction First” *Bloomberg News*, October 25, 2018, 3:22 PM EDT; updated October 25, 2018, 3:41 PM EDT; retrieved October 25, 2018.

<sup>11</sup>Partch, H. *Genesis of a Music* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949).

<sup>12</sup>Gillick, L. “The Good of Work” *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* ed. Julieta Ardanda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011) pp. 70-72.

<sup>13</sup>Kant, I. “Section 1: Pure Reason in its Dogmatic Use” *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996) p. 675.

<sup>14</sup>Ngai, S. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2102) pp. 197, 227-228.

no longer play any part in the making of a work of art. [...] From then on all will be entrusted to the *deus ex machina*. Freed from the tedium of techniques and the mechanics of picture-making, the artist will simply “create.”<sup>15</sup>

Preston is troubled by how the computer displaces human action. His sarcastic conclusion has become commonplace practice for digital animation; machine learning and generative systems are now automating more complex and dynamic aspects of image creation.<sup>16</sup> Digital art from 1965 differs from that of 2016 in degree and complexity of output—the capacity of the mechanism employed and the qualia of its outputs—but the underlying issues of its use in art have remained constant. This review describes *The Next Rembrandt*, as well as the generative work of artists such as Robbie Barrett who employ AI systems to produce original works without human oversight. Historical debates over the photographer and the camera poses the same challenge: a machine automatically, on-demand, makes the art while only indirectly requiring human action. Rejecting autonomous production elevates human handcraft while denigrating machine operation (paralleling William Morris’s Arts and Crafts movement<sup>17</sup> as a ludistic rejection of industrialization<sup>18</sup>). The ideological concern evident in this displacement of human agency from artistic production mirrors the impacts of photography on painting.

Preston’s negative assessment of this computer art does not rely on the limited technical capacities of a pen on a plotter, but the way the machine attenuates/elides the ‘hand of the artist’: rejecting digital renderings as an object for aesthetic consideration preserves established aesthetic ideology. The “the tedium of techniques and the mechanics of picture-making” literally vanish in *The Next Rembrandt*. But this recognition (the painting is 3D printed) is also misleading: it parasitically depends on Rembrandt. The problem for metaphysical concerns with art making emerge from how AI transforms past artistic productivity into a database via the same sampling process common to all digital production. Korsten and his team derived a new art from an existing ‘rhizome’ defined in/by the database of 346 paintings that were made by human hand using the same protocol of fragmentation and quantification used to digitize photography, motion pictures, and musical performances. Their database differs from other “kinds” of data only in terms of *what* is sampled.<sup>19</sup> Database operations remain constant—

---

<sup>15</sup>Preston, Stuart. “Reputations Made and in the Making: Art ex Machina,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, April 18, 1965 p. 366. DOI: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1965/04/18/101539366.html?pageNumber=366> accessed December 16, 2020.

<sup>16</sup>Zylinska, J. *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup>MacCarthy, F. *Anarchy & Beauty: William Morris and His Legacy 1860–1960* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2014) pp. 59-75.

<sup>18</sup>Kaplan, W. “The Lamp of British Precedent: An Introduction to the Arts and Crafts Movement” *“The Art That Is Life”: The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920* (Boston: Bulfinch, 1987) pp. 52-60.

<sup>19</sup>Shaviro, S. *Post Cinematic Affect* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), pp. 132-133.

linking AI to other forms of surveillance and data collection, immanent in how *The Next Rembrandt* was produced by the same facial recognition processing that allows the clever addition of cartoon graphics in apps such as *SnapChat*.

These ramifications of AI for art production are neither utopian nor dystopian. They reflect capitalist demands for increased profits that drive the shift to ever-greater productive efficiency.<sup>20</sup> *The Next Rembrandt* suggests the potential for bespoke on-demand art media rendered for singular viewers,<sup>21</sup> nascent in the customized “feeds” of social media and the ability of music streaming services to produce “original” music that corresponds to the past interests of their listeners. The selection process which controls *what* images are chosen the only factor of aesthetic importance in its final production—a recognition that makes the coupling of this technology with the datasets about consumer preferences generated by companies such as *Google*, *Facebook*, *Netflix*, or *Amazon* into an immanent possibility that once deployed ushers in a novel form of production based on past models but which only comes into being in response to individual demand. Stripped of its 3D data as a painting and considered as a pure image-object, *The Next Rembrandt* differs from what might be expected in an animation frame only in shape (aspect ratio) and quantity—an AI could produce a continuous stream of generative frames for an animation mimicking the work of historical media makers, such as Warner Brothers director Chuck Jones (for example).

---

<sup>20</sup>Schumpeter, J. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008) pp. 31-32.

<sup>21</sup>Betancourt, M. *Force Magnifier: The Cultural Impacts of Artificial Intelligence* (Cabin John: Wildside Press, 2020) pp. 77-78.