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Art in the Time of AI: Style and Artistic Intention in AI-generated Images

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Abstract

Drawing on recent debates about the intersection of art and artificial intelligence (AI), as well as philosophical definitions of art, this article proposes an intentionalist and human-oriented approach to artistic AI-generated images via services such as Midjourney or DALL-E. First, the approach is human-oriented because, at least at the time we are writing this article, the algorithmic intelligence behind image generation has not reached the level of a genuine artificial "mind" that would eventually perform all the functions of a biological mind or human personality in the process of art-making. Therefore, the specific intention to create art and the expression of a certain mental or emotional representation through art, that is, the abilities typically expected of artists, show that human intervention remains indispensable in the creative process, although faced with the specific constraints of a new medium. Second, the approach is intentionalist in that it is a certain concept of human intention in relation to art that gives meaning to the tendencies favored by AI-generated imagery, such as the imitation and revival of past styles or the conceptual nature of this form of art itself, by deliberately using these tendencies in the continuation of previous art practices and styles.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, art, artwork, image, aesthetics, style

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Introduction

This article addresses a specific, yet ongoing and evolving phenomenon at the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and new media art, namely the artistic images generated by converting natural language descriptions (prompts) into images through artificial intelligence networks via services such as Midjourney, DALL-E, Craiyon, Stable Diffusion, NightCafé or Wombo Dream, which have gained significant popularity among artists and amateur users alike since early 2022. We seek to determine the extent to which AI-generated images can count as art with respect to two core concepts that have historically been used to define and describe art as art: the ability to *imitate* reality or previous artistic models, and the ability to *express* a human artist's personality, imagination or inner life. While a certain form of imitation or mimicry designates an aspect of the AI-generated art phenomenon that we call "classical revival" in a sense which will be explained in Section 3, the expression of an artist's inner thinking process (namely the ideas expressed in words as prompts, as well as the artist's decision to favor a certain artistic style by using certain parameters) constitutes the conceptual aspect of AI-generated art that we will address in Section 4. In short, the concept we propose in order to bring these two aspects of AI-generated art together is that of *artistic intention*, which has already proved to be very useful in discussions about the definition of art and the identification of artworks in general. Drawing on Arthur Danto's and Jerrold Levinson's theories, we will show that an artist's intention is precisely what allows us to account for art's essential relation to artworks and styles from the near or distant past by virtue of a certain artworld or history of art. Yet, the idea of an artist's intention relates the work not only to previous forms of art, but also to the mental activity of the author who uses prompts as a means of artistic expression. However, in the case of AI-generated art, the constraints are twofold in relation to the artist's intention. This medium seems to involve a bidirectional process, in the sense that the concept that human authors express as an input in prompts influences the visual outcome of verbal descriptions and vice versa: unlike the arts based on

notations or unchanging instructions, AI-generated art constrains the artists themselves to modify or adjust their verbal descriptions during the process of generating images according to outcomes that may not match their original intention. Hence, even though generative AI technology offers infinite possibilities just like the human imagination itself, this type of medium is not free of constraints, as the human creative intention and the visual possibilities it uncovers seem to influence each other, so that artists' ideas have to adapt to the possibilities of the medium.

The main difficulty of any approach to AI-related phenomena is the fact that the object of research is constantly evolving, so that it seems impossible for any research to provide permanent solutions. However, while AI-generated imagery is a relatively new phenomenon in both art history and the history of technology, some remarkable insights have been offered by scholars and artists who already addressed topics such as authorship, arthood, intentionality, creativity, artistic value, and style in connection with this "new paradigm" of artistic creation (see Steinert 2017, Elgammal 2018, Du Sautoy 2019, Manovich and Arielli 2021, Anscomb 2022, Meyer 2023). In 2018, years before the spread of services such as DALL-E or Midjourney, an AI-generated image titled *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* was sold at auction by Christie's for a surprisingly high price. Although enthusiastically described as independent of the human mind in that the technology that generated it did not execute a predetermined plan, the portrait was the indirect result of the work of a collective of artists who used machine learning technology to train an algorithm on a collection of 15,000 human-made portraits created over a period of five centuries. On that occasion, Ahmed Elgammal (2018) accurately described AI-generated art as conceptual art by referring to an aspect that we will also emphasize: what matters is not so much the outcome (which might not always be aesthetically appealing), but the creative process and the idea behind the work. This view leads to interesting questions about the authorship and artistic agency of humans and machines alike. Claire Anscomb (2021, 2022) has recently provided an answer that constitutes as well one of the key assumptions of

this article: on the one hand, art is characterized by intentionality in a broad sense, so that, as photography *qua* art shows us, an object can be art without necessarily coming from an artist's *hand*; on the other hand, AI agents themselves, at least at their current stage of development, are neither artists, since it is doubtful that they possess intentionality and a deep semantic understanding of their work, nor co-authors, since co-authorship implies the synchronization of intentions that only humans seem capable of (Anscomb 2022, 35). Yet, such agents, Anscomb argues, are not mere passive tools either, but rather a kind of creative partners, for they can actively contribute to a work that has an artistic value by influencing some aesthetically relevant and unanticipated formal properties (although the artistic value is not necessarily synonymous with aesthetic value). Emanuele Arielli goes a step further by suggesting the possibility of developing a posthuman and non-anthropocentric notion of *agency* that would allow us to account for mechanical processes and non-human entities (Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 3, 24-25). However, the broad notion of agency is not necessarily synonymous with intentionality and it is doubtful that the mere agency of non-human entities can turn them into artists.

In contrast, Steffen Steinert (2017) has adopted an intentionalist view that partly coincides with our approach, since he convincingly demonstrates that the ability of the so-called "creative machines" to produce art is traceable to human intentions. Thus, Steinert argues that there is no need to speculatively attribute a mysterious artistic agency to machines in order to say that they make art. It is sufficient to say that they are produced and used according to an intended outcome, namely art-making, and are thus bound to a human intention, although the degree of human involvement is considerably lower when compared to non-autonomous artifacts (Steinert 2017). However, in his 2017 article, Steinert is not referring to widely available services such as DALL-E or Midjourney (which had not yet been launched), but to particular creative machines such as a musical robot that plays alongside human musicians by improvising while listening to their performance or a generative computer program that "draws" and "paints" by

simulating different artistic media, tools, and emotions. What is indeed characteristic of these machines is that their proper function envisaged by their human creators is precisely to embody knowledge about art and to produce a certain kind of *artworks*, regardless of the fact that humans do not directly monitor or interfere with the subsequent creative process. However, the prompt-based image generation services bring some slight differences into this picture. First, Roland Meyer (2023) has recently provided an interesting insight into how prompt-based generation really works: rather than being a system of instructions and interpretation, Meyer argues, prompts involve a process of "navigation and matching" similar to Google search engine, the difference being that what they are looking for is not something existing, but something merely possible, resulting from a combinatorial dream logic. Thus, the prompts would be not so much means of production as "generative search queries", in other words, "a search process that produces what it is looking for" by "narrowing down selections" in a virtual archive of latent possibilities (Meyer 2023, 104-106). Second, although usually labeled as "AI *art* generators", prompt-based services generate *images*, which is not the same as generating works of art, since not all images are art (Anscomb 2022). Just like a camera, AI technology can be used in all these cases to produce any kind of image, artistic or not, especially since the databases that algorithms have been trained on in order to "learn" to generate images comprise all kinds of images, from high art to media, from masterpieces to ordinary photographs. Yet, the difference we are interested in is not the mere difference between an image that resembles a painting by Vermeer and an image that looks like a non-artistic photograph in a family album. The difference lies in the intention with which the technology is used, regardless of the aesthetic features generated (which in any case cannot be fully anticipated by the user): one can use the technology to show that it can generate a Vermeer-esque image, hiding the fact that the image is the result of a machine and thus testing the machine's ability to fool the human observer. But is it not doubtful that using a machine in order to show that it can compete with human artists and eventually become their rival

constitutes a genuine *artistic* intention? We argue that this kind of technology, regardless of its supposed autonomy, is linked to humans by something more than the original human intention manifested by those designers and engineers who created those systems for the purpose of creating art or images. Since, as Claire Anscomb argues, these systems are not as autonomous as they are believed to be, a human artistic intention must nevertheless be present in each individual creative process, even if the exact aesthetic features of the outcomes remain unpredictable. This is possible precisely because, as we know thanks to artists such as Duchamp or philosophers of art such as Arthur Danto, what makes an object "art" is not necessarily a constellation of certain sensory properties.

1. Non-human, yet still too human?

1.1. From aesthetic objects to works of art

Although there are today other forms of art in which artificial intelligence appears to be equally creative, such as generating music or poetic texts, our analysis is limited to text-to-image models for several reasons. First, the very principle of linking words to images interestingly relates prompt-based image generation to an ancient historical affinity between words and images, between literature and painting: Horace's famous phrase ut pictura poesis, Simonides' claim that painting is silent poetry and poetry is speaking painting, or the practice of ekphrasis as a literary or rhetorical description of a visual artwork are some illustrative examples. This does not mean, of course, that prompt-based AI art is literary art, but rather that it seems to reiterate the historical (and also natural) image-making power of language. However, it is noteworthy that human control is not limited to the verbal descriptions used in prompts, even though these descriptions constitute, in the case of services such as Midjourney or DALL-E, the main way of creating images. At more advanced levels, human creators can feed an algorithm a particular collection of data depending on the pattern they want to obtain, just as they can input their own creations based on which AI technology can produce

variations. Moreover, human control also continues in the "post-production" phase of creation, since users can choose from the potentially infinite variation of images that AI technology generated those images that best match the idea they envisaged, and they can also edit the images using editors such as Photoshop (which has also included in its latest versions AI-based tools such as a prompt-based generative fill function to modify and transform images more easily and rapidly).

Yet, beyond the natural and historical affinity between words and images, there is an even more important argument for focusing on text-to-image models of creation. What we are particularly interested in is precisely the way in which human creativity is involved in and influenced by artificial intelligence technology, and it is indeed human creativity that appears to be particularly prominent in the case of expressing an idea in words that are later converted into an image. If we look at this phenomenon considering the processes of artificial intelligence only, then the lack of artistic intention (or the lack of intention tout court) that characterizes AI networks as machines does not necessarily mean that the object they are able to generate cannot be aesthetic. Indeed, there are aesthetic objects produced without a conscious intention, such as the natural beauty of a landscape (see Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 3, 11). However, there is a difference between an aesthetic object such as a beautiful flower or landscape, which does not require a creative intention, and an artistic object, which does. As Jerrold Levinson puts it, "regarding something as a work of art is subtly different from regarding something as if it were a work of art" (Levinson 2011, 39). Yet the mere intention to bring into being something over which we have no further intentional control does not seem to meet the criteria for creating art: would it be enough to simply ask an artificial intelligence to compose a melancholic song in order to declare oneself an artist or to be able to claim that one has created art? Analogously, a gardener has the intention of planting a flower, but the beauty they will bring to existence will be that of a natural aesthetic object, not an artistic one, since the very aspect of the object is not designed by humans. Then again, one can quickly see that the difference is not absolute, but rather

gradual, since a landscape gardener can create garden art. As a matter of fact, Immanuel Kant listed landscape gardening among Fine Arts as a kind of painting which combines the very natural objects according to an artistic idea and therefore creates art directly with nature's materials (Kant 1987, 192). Thus, a landscape artist can exert partial control over the garden as artistic object by shaping the form of paths, trees and vegetation and thus expressing something of their imagination, even though the natural process of growth remains, of course, independent of their intentional control. This is also the case with art forms that presuppose an even freer relationship with nature. Joseph Beuys's project of planting 7,000 oak trees in Kassel, as well as various works of land art or earth art, already involves the combination of an artistic initiative and the contingency of a more or less predictable future evolution. Nevertheless, the artist's intention lies not only in the initiative of planting the trees, but also in the act of investing this natural creation with a certain meaning concerning art, existence or society that originates precisely from the artist's mind.

This is not to say that, when it comes to AI-generated poetry or music, humans could not have access to certain parameters that influence the final result or that they could not subsequently modify that result according to their preferences. What is essential, however, is that the human control over the work should lead us to the mind behind the creative process. As Emanuele Arielli points out, we can think, on the one hand, of aesthetic objects whose symbolic intention or meaning is absent or insignificant, insofar as our engagement with them is purely hedonic. This is not only the case with the aforementioned natural beauty (although even natural beauty can often be attributed a higher symbolic meaning related, for instance, to the harmony of the world) but also with the design of industrial objects, wallpaper patterns, and so on. But, on the other hand, major works of art have always seemed to embody a certain meaning concerning art, society, existence or the life experience of the artist who created them (Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 3, 20-22). It is in this sense that Van Gogh's life may be, at least in part, constitutive of the appreciation of his paintings,

just as the history of a people is constitutive of the interpretation of its artistic heritage. One might be tempted to think that the difference is due to the various degrees of aesthetic complexity: after all, a Van Gogh painting is far more aesthetically complex than the pattern of wallpaper. However, this is not always the case. Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes are replicas of commercial packaging, yet they bear a meaning by virtue of the artistic status that their ordinary twins from the supermarket lack, despite having the same design. Thus, the idea of human control over AI-generated works means first and foremost the ability to invest the work with a meaning that allows the viewer to discern the mind behind the work in such a way that the work itself becomes expressive of a certain personal, cultural, spiritual or social background.

Still, this is not to say that the element of chance or randomness must always be eliminated. The artists of the Dada movement might have integrated randomness into their art, but this is precisely one of the features that express their vision of art. Although AI-generated works are unexpected without being purely random (since they are the result of training the algorithm on a certain amount of data), it can indeed be said that AI-generated art raises the same question that Marcel Duchamp or the Dadaists had already raised in the twentieth century, namely "What is Art?". However, whereas Duchamp and the Dadaists used ready-mades or random elements to intentionally challenge certain definitions of art, an artificial network that produces a text or an image, at least at the current stage of its evolution, is not consciously making a statement about art, since it lacks personal attitudes such as Duchamp's critique of "retinal art" or Dadaists' strong commitment to principles such as provocation, nihilism, and transgression. Although, as we will show in the following, an AI network may have learned certain patterns from the history of art through the data it was fed with, a human author is still needed in order for an AI machine to create art that challenges the boundaries of art itself. The reason for this is precisely the fact that artistic intention is crucial in identifying something as art, and not as a mere technological miracle which, although entertaining or appealing, can be called art only metaphorically

(in the same way natural beauty can) or only in a narrow, hedonic or purely aesthetic sense of the term, in which the artistic intention is negligible (as in the case of decorative art).

1.2. From human intention to artistic intention

Therefore, AI-generated art *qua* art requires human intention in a triple sense. First, a human initiative is needed in order for a work to come into being, since the current AI technology lacks the inherently human *will* to create. Second, a human intervention is needed in order for the human author to shape their work in such a way that it reflects at least partially their imagination. Third, a human interpretation is needed in order for the work to be regarded as art and to eventually embody a meaning of what art is. One must indeed establish the necessary *and* sufficient conditions for something to be considered art in order to determine whether AI-generated images qualify as art. We follow Arthur Danto (1981, v-vi) in pointing out that, ever since Duchamp's ready-mades, it is not the physical participation of the artist in the act of creation that necessarily links the artist to their work, but a certain intention manifested through the work itself. A broader definition of what artist participation is needs to be adopted in order not to exclude AI-generated images from the sphere of art simply because the artist's involvement is too limited: as Claire Anscomb points out, some previous forms of art already show that human control over the works of art is not always limited to the physical action of the artist's body (Anscomb 2021). The mere human intention to simply *produce* something is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to define something as art. On the one hand, as we have shown earlier, there are indeed aesthetic objects that are neither the result nor the expression of any human artistic intention and consequently do not qualify as art (except metaphorically), as in the case of a beautiful natural landscape. On the other hand, there are, of course, objects that are the result of human intentions without necessarily being aesthetic objects, let alone works of art, since it is obvious that not everything that is human-made qualifies as art. Conversely, as ready-mades, prehistoric artifacts that are subsequently artified or even natural objects such as earth

or rocks that artists exhibited in galleries *qua* art show us, there are works of art whose physical existence is not the result of an *artistic* intention to *produce* them, so that the artistic intention lies in something different than the initial physical production of the object (see Levinson 2011, 12).

This confirms the hypothesis that art does not necessarily require the artist to actually manipulate the physical configuration of a work, so it seems to support the claim that AI-generated images can truly qualify as art. Yet, it also shows something different, namely that the intention that defines a process of artistic creation is not to be confused with the intention to bring an object into existence, since the intention of an artist exhibiting a ready-made is not to produce something whose production is by definition artist-independent. Therefore, the artistic intention that differentiates art from non-art must lie in something other than the mere act of bringing something into being by producing it. As we have already suggested before, it is unlikely that one can qualify as a composer by virtue of initiating a process whereby an artificial intelligence technology has created a melody. Nonetheless, the nature of such a creation is still far from obvious. One might say that in this case, AI technology is the artist, and therefore its creation is art. Although we will return to the question of whether AI is capable of creating something under the same conditions as a human does, we can reject this hypothesis by recalling that AI-generated art *qua* art must be the manifestation, albeit an indirect one, of a human artistic intention, although the technological mediation that separates the artist from the final result is considerably more complex than in previous forms of art. Moreover, as we have suggested, an AI-generated object, be it an image, a song or a poem, needs a human intention to create it in order to simply exist, since the technology that produces it lacks the *will* or *initiative* to bring it into being.

Yet, the object needs an additional intention in order to become a work of *art*. We can exemplify this distinction by considering the case of an AI-generated image that mimics the style of Vermeer's paintings. One can use AI technology to produce such an image in order to technologically copy an

artistic style and thus show that a technology which lacks the human intention to create art can nevertheless simulate it by imagining a scene in the way Vermeer would have imagined it. In this case, technologically copying a style is not very different from using a camera to capture a painting. While the original painting is a work of art, copying it through photography is not. Similarly, using an AI technology to benefit from its performance *qua* technology is not the same as making art. In contrast, using it for the purpose of making art essentially means to invest that image with an intention that expresses a certain statement in connection with art itself. Copying Vermeer's style can, in this case, mean parodying it, revitalizing it, enriching it, transforming it, and so forth. The fact that AI technology can copy an artist's style while producing a new, i.e. unique, image indicates the kind of imitation or variation this technology facilitates, namely one that can indeed enrich a collection of images by adding original images. Although AI-generated images do not, of course, automatically count as forgeries, the difference that Levinson notes between referential and inventive forgeries (Levinson 2011, 103) is applicable here. While, as we will exemplify in the following, AI technology can be used to explicitly target an artist's style by extracting a pattern, what it creates in this case is an *inventive* copy, not a referential one, in the sense that, in producing something unique, it does not imitate a particular existing artwork (as a referential forgery would).

2. Beyond aesthetic disappointment

2.1. From technology to art

We must distinguish between the misleading situation in which an AI-generated image passes as a human-authored work that fools the viewer in order to show how accurate and deceiving a technology can be and the situation in which an artist uses technology that copies the style of a past artist in order to express, by this very imitation, an intention related to irony, pastiche, mannerism, revival, hybridization, remix and other practices which, as we will see in the following, constitute certain principles or values of the artworld itself, at least at

certain moments in its history. The example of copying Vermeer's style by an AI agent is not accidental, as it refers to the strategy of a famous forger from the 1930s, Han Van Meegeren, who, in order to prove the quality of his painting technique, painted *The Supper at Emmaus* in Vermeer's style and claimed it to be a hitherto unknown painting by Vermeer himself, thus creating what Levinson calls an "inventive forgery" (Levinson 2011, 103). As Danto noted in commenting on this famous case of forgery, although the painting appears to express Vermeer's artistic intention, it only simulates that intention, since Vermeer could not have invested the painting with any artistic intention simply because he did not paint it (Danto 1981, 51). As for the forgery created by Van Meegeren, we can still follow Danto's remark: "Van Meegeren is after all in a different position altogether from an artist who happened, in 1935 or whenever, to paint in the manner of Vermeer and to make whatever statement such deliberate stylistic anachronisms would enable a painter to make: perhaps a statement about the decadence of the Dutch art of the time" (Danto 1981, 51).

A work can indeed be identified at one point as a genuine work of art, so that it may later be discovered to be a fake or a forgery. Similarly, someone may mistake an AI-generated image as a human-authored work and later find out that the image was artificially generated. In these cases, we seem to experience aesthetic disappointment, which has interesting consequences concerning the relationship between the origin of a work and the pleasure it gives us. The way in which we identify the origin of an aesthetic object as natural, human or artificial directly influences the extent to which the beauty of that object appeals to us (see Steinert 2017 for a similar remark concerning the way in which the evaluation of an AI-generated work might be influenced by the knowledge of its source). It might be instructive to recall the famous example of the nightingale given by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Listening to the song of the nightingale produces aesthetic delight, but if the listener were to discover that they had been deceived by actually listening to a mechanism that accurately mimics the song of nature, then what Kant called

the "intellectual interest" in that beauty and, along with it, the satisfaction of taste that appreciates beauty would immediately cease. This happens despite the fact that, from a strictly sensory point of view, the sensitive qualities of the song produced by the deceiving mechanism would be identical to those of nature: "[O]ur interest vanishes completely as soon as we notice that we have been deceived, that only art was involved; it vanishes so completely that at that point even taste can no longer find anything beautiful, nor sight any charming" (Kant 1987, 169). Without going into the details of Kant's connection between the interest in natural beauty and the human moral vocation, we can argue that the extent to which AI-generated images appeal to us depends not only on their intrinsic sensible quality, but also on how we choose to identify the origin of that image production, recognizing it either as the work of algorithms or as the expression of an original human intention (even if the former can deceptively mimic the appearance of the latter). Yet, what we have to determine is precisely whether this difference is the mere result of the perception which grants an object a relative artistic status as indicated by relativist approaches to art, or is rooted in an essential distinctive property (namely, artistic intention) that, according to an essentialist approach to art, grants works the ontological status of art despite any possible miscategorizations.

The situation seems to be the opposite of that described by Kant: whereas the disappointment in the case of the nightingale is the result of the confusion between nature that lacks a *real* intention and art that presupposes such an intention, what seems to disappoint in the case of an AI-generated image is that the viewer has assumed the object to express a human intention where such intention would not exist. The situation is similar to the disappointment arising from the discovery that the painting attributed to Vermeer is a forgery due to the deceiving technique of a skillful forger. The intention that has been attributed to Vermeer in relation to what the painting expresses is revealed to be in fact inexistent. Whereas philosophers such as Nelson Goodman or Arthur Danto were primarily concerned with the distinctions to be

made between a work of art and a forgery or between a work of art and an identical ordinary twin, the distinction that seems to concern us today is precisely what a visual version of the Turing test would seek to determine while asking us to distinguish between a machine-produced creation and a human-produced one. The distinction remains relevant as long as the confusion will cause disappointment just like the mechanism that had been mistaken for a nightingale. But does this distinction always involve distinguishing between the two ontologically opposite categories of art and non-art? If so, it seems that an AI-generated object can never be art once its non-human origin is revealed: "It was not Vermeer who created this image, but a machine", one might exclaim. Indeed, discovering that an AI-generated image is not the expression of the inner experience and feelings of a human artist can be disappointing. On the other hand, however, if AI-generated art could genuinely be art, then it has to satisfy the condition of expressing an artistic intention that leads to a human author, no matter how technologically mediated their action on the resulting work may be. Disappointment no longer means that the object that has been considered human-made art is not art at all. Rather, it means ignoring the human artistic merit that makes AI-generated objects art under certain conditions. We argue that the appreciation or disappointment may depend on the ontological status of the object, as the nightingale's example shows us, but not vice versa: we endorse an essentialist view of art in the sense that the ontological status of art does not depend on mere appreciation or disappointment (see Levinson 2006, 17 and Levinson 2011, 10-11, especially his notion of "proprietary right" which basically shows us that we cannot "artify" what we do not own in a way or another), albeit it is defined by an intention to express something that, of course, is not to be confused with the intention to deceive that would define a mere fake. While not relativistic, this way of defining art *qua* art is nevertheless historical insofar as the artistic intention underlying the work only becomes possible in a certain context of the artworld in the sense indicated by Danto: not everything is art at any time precisely because a certain intention that creates art is not possible at every time (Danto

1981, 113). As we will show in the following, the aesthetic tendencies favored by AI technology, including, but not limited to, the imitation of past artistic styles, must become intelligible to the artworld itself in order for the concept of an intention to use them artistically to become possible.

As for Kant's example of the mechanism imitating the song of the nightingale, Kant is, of course, aware that art in general is not always disappointing: art is aesthetically appealing once the viewer perceives its resemblance to nature but is at the same time aware that it is only art (Kant 1987, 173). Yet, the illusion that an art or a technique might produce does not necessarily result in disappointment. According to a famous anecdote told by Pliny the Elder, the ancient painter Zeuxis painted grapes that looked so real that birds were fooled into coming to peck at them, while Parrhasius painted a curtain that looked so real that his rival Zeuxis was fooled into trying to draw it aside. The *trompe-l'oeil* effect does not suggest disappointment at an art that is easily mistakable for reality, but it emphasizes high artistic mastery and excellence of skill. Nevertheless, it does not seem plausible that the main criterion for appreciating art *qua* art throughout history has been the mere ability to fool the eye. Even techniques intended to deceive are not necessarily limited to imitating an appearance, since the example of the forgery created by Van Meegeren indicates that his deception consisted in simulating the *intention* and *style* attributed to Vermeer. However, while creations generated by an AI agent may appear to be technological miracles capable of deceptively mimicking human art, they can also be identified as art to the extent that they succeed in expressing a genuine and original artistic intention of a human author, beyond the mere deceptive imitations of human creations. Drawing on Kant's example, we can conclude that art is truly beautiful art, that is, an art capable of appealing to us aesthetically, when its essence lies in something other than a mere deceitful technique.

This might seem to suggest, however, that, contrary to what we have argued before, the way we perceive an AI-generated image as *either* technology *or* art would be decisive for its ontological status as technology *or* art. The issue can be

summarized as follows: does the fact of discovering that the work is not what we thought it was change the ontological status of the work or just the appreciation that turns into disappointment? As we have already suggested, in order for that appreciation to change the ontological status of the work, the ontological status would have to depend solely on that appreciation. Yet, it seems obvious that the appreciation might stem from a miscategorization of an object that in no way changes the category to which the object actually belongs: the forgery is still a forgery, and the mechanism that imitates the nightingale is only a mechanism, regardless of the category in which one would mistakenly place it and the appreciation that might follow from it. We can indeed assume a certain artistic intention in the case of a forgery wrongly attributed to Vermeer, but this intention, as Danto notes, does not exist *de facto*, since Vermeer is not the author of that forgery. Nevertheless, if an AI agent constitutes one art-making technology among others, then misidentifying the *technology* used by an artist might change the value ascribed to the work, but not its status as art. If the miscategorization that takes art as nature or technology as art results in disappointment, it does not mean that disappointment is always about the confusion between two opposite categories. Suppose an artist were to exhibit a photograph concealing the fact that the image had been edited in Photoshop. Even though the fact that they cheated might diminish the aesthetic appreciation granted to the work, this does not put them in the position of the forger, for it is still possible that they had a genuinely artistic intention to express through the technique they used. After all, art itself, like magic, does not always reveal its techniques precisely in order to maintain an attitude that would otherwise turn into disappointment. This does not, however, negate the distinction we indicated earlier between technology *qua* technology and technology as a way of making art: photography or Photoshop can be used, for example, by tourists, engineers or journalists for various non-artistic purposes. Barring any confusion, the ontological status of art and non-art will indeed generate corresponding reactions. But the ontological status of the work of art as art depends on a certain artistic intention,

which, as contemporary art usually shows us, is not so much to appeal as to *express* something. Someone may misinterpret the outline of a forest they see in the distance at night as a castle because they do not perceive the feature that allows them to differentiate between a forest and a castle, despite the fact that the two objects may have common features, such as their shape at night from a certain distance.

However, the conditions under which an object is a castle seem relatively stable and clear, whereas the conditions under which an object is a work of art might considerably change over time, for, as Danto's ontological approach to the definition of art shows us, they do not depend on the perceptual properties of the objects. According to the famous example given by Danto, a necktie covered in paint is not art if produced by Cezanne, but it is art if produced a few decades later by Picasso, by virtue of a certain historical context of the artworld that enabled Picasso to have the intention of making art out of a tie, even though both Cezanne and Picasso were artists: while Cezanne might have used the tie to simply wipe his brush after painting, Picasso might have grasped the historical possibility of a concept that would allow him to transform the tie into a work of art in the same way he had already transfigured other ordinary objects (Danto 1981, 46-47). We can say that the works of art are *ontologically* distinct from ordinary objects in that they express a certain artistic intention, yet it is clear that the content of that intention, which makes a work art at a particular point in history, can vary: Watteau, for instance, wanted to express something quite different through his paintings than Duchamp did through his ready-mades. By the same token, as Danto points out, Duchamp's ready-mades could not have been art a few centuries earlier, during Watteau's time (Danto 1981, 45). And the same could be said of AI-generated images. By the time generative AI programs and services such as DALL-E and Midjourney became popular, the use of cutting-edge technology to produce art had long been known, since digital art and biotech art, for example, had already made history in recent decades. But this kind of continuity in recent history is not the only reason.

2.2. From innovation to history

One can imagine that a modern artist of the nineteenth century might be unfamiliar with the reasons that should make them accept AI-generated images as art, regardless of the fact that they are produced by artists who have already practiced art in previous forms such as painting, digital art, graphics, and so on. Just as Baudelaire contemptuously compared photography to typography in order to accuse artists who began to practice photography of lacking imagination, one can imagine he would similarly accuse artists who use AI technology of lacking originality. And this thought experiment could go further, for an avant-garde artist whose aim is to free creation from the shadow of the past by metaphorically destroying museums, libraries, and academies in the emphatic manner described by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti is unlikely to approve of an art form that relies on algorithms trained precisely on a collection of past works (although we will have to address the reasons why AI-generated art shows that creation *ex nihilo*, that is, free of any influence, is in fact impossible even for modern and avant-garde artists). As we have already suggested, the artistic intention to express something through AI-generated images is subject to certain constraints that are in fact inherent to any particular form of art. In order for that intention to make works of art out of AI-generated images, the tendencies that AI technology favors as a result of those constraints must become intelligible to the artworld itself. It seems plausible that the intention to create AI-generated images would not have constituted a genuine intention to create art at a different time in history, not because the technology would not have been possible, but because its tendencies would not have counted as valuable artistic tendencies.

One might describe this connection in reference not to the institutional atmosphere of the artworld, but to the historical development of art. As Levinson's famous intentional-historical definition of art shows us, the intention of making art always makes us look back in the history of art, since art essentially involves, albeit not always consciously, its predecessors (Levinson 2011, 4). According to Levinson, art-making intentions are historical in the sense that the art of a

particular moment, in order to be art, is intentionally related to something that is art prior to it, even in the case of antagonistic relations projected by revolutionary forms of art (Levinson 2011, 13-17). This is not to say that new art merely seeks an external resemblance to the art of the past, nor that it seeks to afford the same aesthetic or hedonic experiences that previous artworks afforded (since the same features or experiences could also be found in non-art). New artworks, Levinson argues, are intended to be regarded in the way in which previous artworks are *correctly* regarded, that is, excluding categorizations that would, for example, treat works of art as instrumental objects and consequently use Da Vinci's paintings as thermal insulation (Levinson 2011, 8-10). This definition leads to a similar conclusion, since it implies that an object might not be a work of art at a given moment if at that moment it is not intended to be regarded in a way that is already a correct way of regarding an artwork (Levinson 2011, 13).

This concept of "correct regard for an artwork" has interesting implications for AI-generated images, although it is not clear what it actually amounts to, since for Levinson's definition of art, the mere fact that such a regard *exists* is more important than its particular content, which in any case varies considerably throughout history (Levinson 2011, 48-50). It is worth noting that programs and services such as DALL-E, Midjourney or Stable Diffusion are available to all (albeit the access is usually limited to subscriptions) so that images can be generated by art history experts and ignorant users, professional artists and amateurs alike. Let us consider Levinson's distinction between *intrinsic* and *relational* intention of art-making. An amateur user might want to create an aesthetically relevant image, and while they are probably aware of the existence of art history (unlike the naïve creator of prehistoric art, for example), their intention to create a work of art using Midjourney might not be what Levinson calls a *specific* art-conscious intention: the creator might intend a complex of regards that might be accorded to their work without invoking or having in mind particular artworks, traditions, or movements of the past. Their work qualifies as art precisely because the regard they intended while creating

their work happens to coincide with one already accorded to other works, whether kitsch, low art or high art (Levinson 2011, 39-40). In contrast, some artists might use Midjourney with a *relational* intention to make art, that is, focusing deliberately on certain works of art from the past and envisaging the same regards accorded to previous works, whatever those regards may be (Levinson 2011, 40). Thus, an artist creating an imitation after a past work might intend the work for the same regard accorded to past works that were themselves imitations or variations of other works, such as Picasso's variations on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. This is not to say, however, that the work is intended for the same regard as the work it imitates. Picasso's twentieth-century variations might suggest a different regard than Velázquez's seventeenth-century painting.

As we have stressed before, every form of imitation, variation, pastiche or classical revival that might characterize AI-generated images *qua* art must become intelligible to the artworld itself or be accorded the same regard that has already been accorded to other works. This is not to say, however, that AI-generated works would seek an external resemblance to works of the past: even if AI technology can imitate a style, it will still produce unique images. Nor does it mean that artists using AI technology cannot look back to past art precisely in order to *avoid* a particular style or regard accorded to previous works. While experimenting with artistic creation on Midjourney, Lev Manovich pointed out that some of an artist's efforts to create aesthetically pleasing images should be directed towards avoiding a default style that might be regarded as kitschy, stereotypical or melodramatic (Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 5, 14-15). The result of this kind of effort is particularly visible in the case of landscapes generated by Manovich on Midjourney (and subsequently edited in Lightroom) in the style of Peter Bruegel: the artist had to customize and control the process of creation so as to successfully deviate from a default output that, instead of reproducing Bruegel's style, would have produced some kitsch aesthetics more similar to Disney cartoons than sixteenth-century paintings. However, to invoke Bruegel via AI-generated images does not mean to seek to express what Bruegel

expressed through his paintings in his own time. The concept of imitation or variation based on works of the past actually involves two layers. First, it implies a reference to the artist or work whose style is being imitated, but not in the sense that the new work is intended to be regarded in an *identical* manner. That is to say, an artist using AI technology to imitate Bruegel's or Rembrandt's style is in a very different position from an apprentice in Bruegel's or Rembrandt's studio. Manovich's images invoking Bruegel are not merely a way of "making Bruegel", but rather a way of enriching or recombining in novel ways existing styles and visual languages capable of providing aesthetic delight, that is, a kind of regard which is considerably broader than the regard accorded to Bruegel's works. In other words, while the artist's intention in this case is relational, it does not necessarily aim to accord the work the same kind of regard typically accorded to Bruegel's own works. An AI-generated artwork will inevitably be regarded in light of what it means *in the twenty-first century* to make art, that is, in the light of the artistic development up to the present. Second, a work that imitates in one form or another finds a predecessor not only in the works it imitates, but also in works that imitated before it. This is why this tendency favored by AI technology in visual creation is already intelligible to the artworld. To create a work that imitates a previous style, artist or work is to intend the work for that kind of regard that has already grasped the sense of irony, the revival, the eclecticism or the deliberate anachronism when accorded to previous imitative works. To explain this, we will describe this phenomenon using the concept of "classical revival".

3. AI-generated art as classical revival

As with the conceptual aspect of AI-generated art that we will address in the next section, the so-called "classical revival" does not exclusively characterize AI-generated images. In the sense which concerns us here, this concept refers to a specific phenomenon in the history of art, which consisted rather in a return to the traditional form of painting by using brush and canvas again, as opposed to a certain modernist experimentalism concerning (but, of course, not limited to)

artistic techniques. Classical revival is a defining feature of a certain "neoclassical" postmodernism in architecture and painting as described most notably by Charles Jencks, who, contrary to some interpretations of postmodernism that he denounced as confusions, separated postmodernism as such from postwar forms of "late modernism" still characterized by radical experimentalism, avant-garde tendencies, innovation, formalism, the rejection of figuration and ornamentation in painting and architecture respectively and so on. By contrast, the neoclassical tendency of postmodernism, which, according to Jencks, initially emerged as a counter-culture in relation to a certain cultural and institutional hegemony of modernism, would consist precisely in the revaluation of those past elements of tradition that modernism often considered outdated (Jencks 1986, 25-38; Raţiu 2012, 287-290). The 1970s and 1980s movements such as the Italian trans-avant-garde and German neo-expressionism, as well as artists such as Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Georg Baselitz, R.B. Kitaj, Gérard Garouste, and Carlo Maria Mariani epitomize this tendency by reviving not only painting as a genre, but also figuration, symbolism, emotion, allegory, portrait, narrative painting or even mythic imagery. The new use of motifs of the classical past inevitably combined with the worldview of the more recent modern past results, in the case of these movements, in an eclecticism described by Jencks as a "double coding" that subordinates postmodernism to both the classical past and the more recent modern past.

Hence, the aesthetic of neoclassical postmodernism is distinctive in that it involves the use of classical motifs against the background of a modern experience of the world, that is, a beauty which is often distorted or parodied as a result of the dissolution of the classical worldview of cosmic harmony, thus deviating from the metaphysical premises of the canonical classicism of the Greeks and the Renaissance (Jencks 1987, 31-32; Raţiu 2012, 293-295). Instead, what is characteristic of AI-generated images seems to be precisely the fact that, given its impressive heterogeneity, it has no distinctive style. Some of the experiments aimed at generating artistic images through AI technology may indeed seem to evoke the style of postmodern

artists such as Carlo Maria Mariani or Komar and Melamid via the ironic use of mythical or allegorical motifs presented to a modern perception that tries to reconcile the past with the present, the biblical angels and the machines, the medieval knights and the astronauts, the Greek goddesses and the modern anxieties, the archetypal figures and the fragmented contemporary universe. A similar postmodern tendency is exemplified by an experiment carried out by Jeff Hayward, who used DALL-E to apply Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist style to the depiction of Marilyn Monroe which is typically associated with Andy Warhol's famous diptych (Hayward 2022): the result seems surprisingly reminiscent of the style of a postmodern painter such as Enzo Cucchi, and is indeed post-modern insofar as it combines abstraction and figuration, in contrast to a certain evolution of modernism which regarded the abstract as opposed to the figurative. Yet, there is no technical or logical impediment preventing AI technology from emulating modern abstract painting as well or from returning to the innocent or optimistic idealization found in canonical classicism, such as the perfect body of the ancient Greek sculpture or the feminine pulchritude and gracefulness of Botticelli's paintings. In fact, as Roland Meyer has pointed out, unlike a classical museum collection, AI models do not treat style as a historical, honorific, hierarchical or strictly individual category, but as a mere visual pattern that can be extracted from any collection of images: consequently, as Meyer argues, the style that AI technology can imitate is an inclusive and non-hierarchical category, as it encompasses the specific aesthetics of historical artistic movements such as classicism, expressionism, surrealism and so on, the brushstrokes of a famous artist such as Van Gogh, but also the stereotypes of commercial genres and the specific look of previous media such as photography and film (Meyer 2023, 107).

Two things are worth noting at this stage. First, the anachronism that imitating certain styles entails does not manifest itself in the mere aesthetic qualities of the image: unlike a painting that deliberately recreates a classical beauty which appears to be distorted by the disharmony of the modern world, the anachronism in AI-generated art need not rely on

evident and deliberate aesthetic contrasts (which sometimes, given the generation process and its unpredictable results, can hardly be anticipated by the artists themselves). In other words, since an AI-generated image may not deviate at all from the aesthetic of canonical classicism in terms of its specific look, what indicates, for instance, the ironic use of such an anachronism is precisely the fact that, as we have stressed before, one must be aware of the historical moment and the conditions under which the work was produced in order to realize that the artist's intention, although appearing to imitate, say, Botticelli, is different from that of Renaissance artists, however similar the images may be. As Danto wrote in the 1980s, "if today an artist exhibits a painting in the style of Watteau, we should hesitate before declaring him out of date", precisely because "this may be a self-conscious archaism, in which case he stands in a very different relationship to the Rococo style than Watteau would have done" (Danto 1981, 45).

Second, not only can AI-generated images be intentionally anachronistic in the sense that they emulate or recombine past artistic styles, but, as Meyer points out, their aesthetics are also inclusive and non-hierarchical in the sense that they borrow any visual pattern, whether from high art or popular culture, masterpieces or ordinary images, regardless of their origin or artistic value. Just as a certain post-modern art integrated, reinterpreted, and recombined the classical and the modern traditions into a paradoxical mixture that reveals what Charles Jencks called the "double-coding" (Jencks 1986, 32-38), the AI-generated art, which is already a post-postmodern or meta-modern phenomenon, relates in an inclusive way to the past, whether classical, modern or postmodern, and to the visual archives in general, whether artistic (such as Van Gogh), commercial (cartoons, TV series or comic books) or technical (photography and film). Therefore, it seems plausible to describe AI-generated images in postmodern terms when it comes to their inclusive relation to the past, focusing in particular on how they are produced: AI networks are trained on gigantic and unstructured collections that encompass an entire history of existing art and cultural artifacts, from classical to modern, from Botticelli and Poussin to Picasso and

Pollock, but also from high art to low art and commercial genres. While AI-generated art may express modern values of progress, innovation and novelty as a cutting-edge *technology*, it nevertheless seems to favor principles such as recycling, remixing, eclecticism, kitsch, mimicry or hybridization when it comes to its most prominent aesthetic features as *art*.

On the one hand, these effects are due to the way in which image production generally takes place, namely by combining or reconfiguring disparate elements of previous experiences, since no image can arise *ex nihilo*. What is noteworthy, however, is that while AI technology seems to be able to generate any image, the source of imitation and "inspiration" is in some ways more limited, although not quantitatively, but qualitatively: as Roland Meyer puts it, services like Midjourney, DALL-E or Stable Diffusion do not offer "images of the world, but images of images" precisely because, unlike previous techniques, the generation process does not use a model of physical reality according to the laws of optics and perspective, but visual patterns extracted from a "flat" and completely immanent (that is, with no natural referent) archive of existing images accompanied by textual information that links them to concepts (Meyer 2023, 108; Mazzone and Elgammal 2019, 7). On the other hand, once consciously adopted by artists using AI technology, this process seems to reflect a certain artistic and aesthetic statement that is postmodern (or post-modern) in a double sense. First, insofar as the stylistic resemblance of the images to works of the past is evident, artists can exploit this resemblance in an ironic manner, in the same way that, for example, Peter Blake's postmodern painting *The Meeting or 'Have a Nice Day, Mr. Hockney!* is an ironic and explicit re-working of Gustave Courbet's *La Rencontre, ou 'Bonjour, monsieur Courbet!'*. Second, this process is post-modern in a more subtle sense, namely in the sense that it overcomes the modern focus on innovation by liberating itself from the illusory pursuit of absolute novelty. The very principle of algorithms shows that the AI-generated art is a new form of "classical" art in the sense that the technology that generates it learns from the art of the past in contrast to certain modern avant-gardes that aimed to

simply erase the traces of past influences. In this respect, as Manovich and Arielli remind us, AI technology seems indeed to resemble those traditional art forms that relied not so much on free and spontaneous invention as on craft and learning from masters, although the way a machine learns by extracting, for example, a visual pattern is, of course, considerably different from the way in which an artist used to learn their art in a studio or Academy (Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 3, 18-19). Yet, this is not to say that modern art was free of any influences simply because it rejected the academic art of that time: as Manovich has pointed out, modern artists have also been inspired, for example, by African art, Japanese prints or scientific discoveries of their time, so that their art inevitably reflects elements of a cultural history as any other art does (Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 5, 5-6). The influences of the past, however interpreted by the artists themselves, persist and are not limited to the postmodern revival of the classical in the 1970s and 1980s. After all, even if artists' intentions and strategies varied, it is no coincidence that Picasso made variations on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, that Manet's *Olympia* was oddly reminiscent of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* or that Francis Bacon's *Figure with Meat* reinterprets and recombines motifs borrowed from a portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velázquez and a *Slaughtered ox* painted by Rembrandt.

Then again, as Emanuele Arielli concedes, although AI technology that generates art shows us that human creation itself might often be less spontaneous and more "imitative" than we thought, this does not mean that a machine and a human create under identical conditions (Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 3, 20-21). This is why we have chosen to reserve the term artist for humans only and to emphasize that the intention that transforms any AI-generated aesthetic object into art is an intention only humans seem capable of. This is particularly evident in the case of the simplest aesthetic objects created by artists, which nevertheless qualify as art precisely because a human creative process, which includes affective experiences, conscious intentions or personal beliefs that a machine ultimately lacks, is inseparable from the appreciation of the work of art. Picasso may have had very strong personal

and artistic motivations when he painted the variations on *Las Meninas*, that is, motivations that a machine could not have. And this applies not only to the expression of emotions, but also to the statements about art itself. A machine can generate an image that, strictly as a final product, might be as aesthetically pleasing as a Kandinsky, but it will not do so out of a belief about painting as Kandinsky did when writing about the spiritual in art.

4. AI-generated art as conceptual art

As we have stressed before, classical revival is not only characteristic of AI-generated images. It is also true, and perhaps even more obvious, that it does not characterize *all* such images either. Imitating, reviving, recombining, and parodying past artistic styles are not, of course, the only goals of artists who use services like DALL-E or Midjourney. Hence, the words used to describe AI-generated images should not be limited to imitation, pastiche, parody, neoclassicism, eclecticism, hybridization or mannerism. The broader notion of conceptual art would probably be more appropriate to describe the range of artistic intentions generally associated with text-to-image models of artificial intelligence. As the famous DALL-E image of the "astronaut riding a horse in photorealistic style" shows us, the essential part of the process seems to lie in the idea expressed in the prompts that leads us to the human mind behind, which seems in this respect more important than the potentially infinite variation of successful or failed images the technology can generate from that prompt. This is not to say, however, that the artist has a certain *image* in mind so that they bring it to life by technological means. If, as Roland Meyer argues, prompts are not so much a way of producing an intended outcome as a search query that is not constrained to match any previous image, not even a mental one (Meyer 2023, 105), then generating images using DALL-E or Midjourney is creation inasmuch as it is an exploration. Some spectacular, dream-like images generated in Midjourney such as Jason M. Allen's *Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial* or Mohammad Qasim Iqbal's *Silk and Stone Baroque Facades* are illustrative in this respect: they not only emulate the baroque or surrealist style (as a

certain style is inevitably detectable), but explore the possibility of combining and interweaving, for example, the visual properties of stone with those of silk, the aesthetic features of an opera stage with those of an SF background and so on.

Those works can be correctly described as conceptual and can even be conferred a cognitive value insofar as they reveal possibilities that the author could not have anticipated, but sought to discover. However, saying that a work of art is "conceptual" seems to have become a way of defending the artistic value of a work which, as in the case of Maurizio Cattelan's banana or Salvatore Garau's invisible sculpture, might be accused of not sufficiently revealing artistic mastery or excellence of skill. Insofar as one can trace the genesis of conceptual art in Duchamp's ready-mades, for example, this shows that art is no longer a matter of form or sensory content destined to please the eye (that is, the famous "retinal art" denounced by Duchamp), but a matter of concept. Yet, this by no means indicates that painting or similar arts based on color, drawing and shapes are merely a matter of demonstrating the physical dexterity of painting or drawing. Otherwise, an abstract expressionist painting would be considered far less valuable than a rococo painting or even than the kitschy photo-realistic drawings sold by an amateur painter to tourists. Visual art always has a meaning, either about art itself or about society and the moral, religious, and other values it embodies. For instance, even an abstract painting can be interpreted according to Clement Greenberg's formalism by considering the way in which it succeeds in revealing painting's historical progress towards its own essence, namely the exploration of the literal flatness of the canvas as its distinctive medium and so on. However, the semantic complexity of a work can differ considerably. In a visual version of the Turing test whose purpose would be to distinguish between a work of art generated by a human artist and one generated by artificial intelligence, people are much more likely to be deceived by a non-figurative painting that copies, say, the style of Mark Rothko than by a classical painting that emulate Bruegel's style: this is not to say, of course, that AI technology would necessarily create images of poor artistic quality, precisely

because it is not *a priori* clear what constitutes that artistic value in the first place: for Bruegel's artworld, the value of a painting might lie in its meaning or narrative content, whereas for the Impressionists the value would lie primarily in the effects of the play of light and color (see Anscomb 2022, 29-34).

The exploratory nature of image generation via AI technology becomes clearer, since the match and mismatch between prompts and outcomes indicate precisely the limits of the possibilities of certain combinations of styles and elements. Can we generate, for instance, images of today's New York in the style of Peter Bruegel? As Lev Manovich has pointed out while experimenting with Midjourney, style and its imitation are not only a matter of form but also of content (Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 5, 20-25). This concerns not only the possibility of artificial intelligence to generate a truly novel or original style (which is also an object of contention that we need to address), but also the logical possibility of any image-maker, whether human or artificial, to transfer an existing artistic style onto a different content (since a series of experiments in the field of AI art have already been done to this end): does Bruegel's style lie in some distinctive colors and shapes which can be transferred to a content such as modern skyscrapers, or does it lie rather in the subject of his paintings such as Flemish peasants and rural landscapes? This is not to say that successful separations of style from particular content could not be achieved: Jeff Hayward used DALL-E to extract Henri Matisse's style and apply it to Mona Lisa's portrait (Hayward 2022), just as Leon Gatys and his collaborators recreated an urban landscape of Tübingen in the style of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (Gatys et al. 2015).

This again seems to suggest that the main function of AI-based image generation is to simply copy and transfer existing styles. An experiment conducted by Ahmed Elgammal and his collaborators showed that this is not always the case. Elgammal has developed a Creative Adversarial Network (CAN), which, like other similar systems, learns about art and artistic styles from a huge collection of images from the past, but, unlike other systems, is at the same time able to deviate from established artistic styles (Elgammal et al. 2017). The

network succeeds in increasing the "stylistic ambiguity" (and eventually the originality) of the images it generates as the system incorporates a discriminator that penalizes the outcomes which fit into a pre-existing style, thus enabling the generator to produce stylistically novel works (Elgammal et al. 2017, Anscomb 2022, 21). Thereby, the network developed by Elgammal seeks to maintain a balance between two features that make a work aesthetically pleasing: on the one hand, the network does not deviate excessively from what art generally is, in order to give the viewer a sense of familiarity and avoid a disturbingly unfamiliar outcome; on the other hand, it increases the ambiguity of the style so that the work does not seem to repeat an already seen pattern (Mazzone and Elgammal 2019, 2-5).

Having seen that human creation is itself subject to influences from the past, one might be tempted to conclude that the machine can distance itself from these influences even better than a human can. This does not mean, however, that the network itself qualifies as artist simply because it seems capable of originality (after all, as we have shown before, there are human artists who consciously and deliberately paint in the style of other artists). The necessary condition for being an artist is not to avoid a repetitive aesthetic, but to express a certain artistic intention (which may even involve the repetition of an established artistic style). Claire Anscomb is right to stress that the network developed by Elgammal, while capable of stylistic innovation, is only following the reasons of its creators, so that it cannot fully qualify as a creative agent, let alone an artist (Anscomb 2022, 25-26). What is at stake here is not the imitation of a style or the deviation from established styles, but the fact that, in both cases, the machine has a univocal and mechanical relation to the art of the past. In contrast, artists usually tend to have passionate, personal, and ambiguous attitudes towards the art that preceded them. Avant-garde movements may come to mind, but the same is true of art in workshops and academies, in that the process of learning from the art of the masters was subjectively and consciously internalized as an essential condition of making art in the conscious of artists who had a certain subjective belief in art's role (in the sense that they looked at the masters with

admiration, envy, ambition to surpass them, desire for recognition, or any other sentiments a machine lacks). Another way of putting this is that technology cannot explain in subjective terms the motivation behind deviating from a particular style, nor the meaning of its outcomes: Manet or any art critic could explain in a complex way the intention behind an aesthetic feature such as the seeming *non finito* in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, just as Kandinsky could offer a personal, subjective or spiritual motivation for the fact that the shapes are unrecognizable in his abstract paintings, whereas AI technology could only "say" that it followed the preferences of its creators. However, when it comes to AI agents as rivals or substitutes for human artists, this substitution is likely to take place precisely in those cases where the author's intention or self-expression is negligible (see Manovich and Arielli 2021, chap. 3, 25): for instance, works such as industrial design, that would fall between the mere aesthetic objects without artistic intention and the major works of art. Yet, as minimal art often shows us, even when the expression of human subjectivity is obscured by an industrial or minimalist appearance, this can still be the result of a non-negligible intention and an essential statement about art itself.

5. Conclusions

Our approach to AI-generated images was intentionalist in order to ground the artistic status of these images on a concept already used in defining artworks. This analysis faces of course the difficulties intrinsic to an intentionalist approach. If artistic intention is constitutive of the work *qua* art, one may ask: should an image generated by AI be interpreted exclusively in terms of that intention? How is that intention visible in the first place? Indeed, since it is expressed in words (even if, as we have seen, the human control that materializes that intention is not limited to prompts), intention is constitutive of the understanding of a message. For instance, "Red Square" can mean either a place in Moscow or a geometric figure whose color is red depending on what the person who uttered those words intended to say. However, we must note two things. First, artistic intention is limited neither to the production nor

to the designation of an object. An artist who creates the image of an astronaut riding a horse in DALL-E does not communicate only by denoting that particular constellation of objects, but also by revealing an ineffable dimension of their personality, such as imagination, irony, dream, wit, fantasy, emotions, feelings, and so on. While AI technology is the cause of the particular aesthetic features of the various images that fall under a concept, it is the human author who should be credited with the concept itself that generated the images. In this respect, AI-generated art falls into the broader category of those art forms in which the artist is not directly executing the work themselves: in addition to music and architecture, one might think of Sol LeWitt's guidelines for making wall drawings that are the creation of the artist's mind without coming directly from the artist's hand. Even if the degree of compliance with the instructions might be higher than in the case of prompts used in "communicating" with AI technology, the instructions are open-ended so that the results might vary according to the draftsperson's interpretations. Nevertheless, as Meyer has pointed out, the process of generating images from prompts is slightly different from a classical instruction-and-interpretation process, resembling more a "navigation-and-matching" process than a visual production triggered by words (Meyer 2023, 103): the art of using AI technology in order to generate images from language descriptions of a concept may require hours of "prompt engineering" precisely because, unlike instructions that presuppose a unidirectional influence in the creative process, prompts themselves can be modified in order to obtain a better match, so that the visual outputs determine the optimization of future text inputs that result in variations and alterations of the original concept (Meyer 2023, 103-104).

Second, the concept expressed in the prompts may nonetheless remain concealed, since artists using AI technology to create images do not always reveal the words they used as prompts. Thus, the interpretation of the work may be at least partially influenced by the elements that AI technology generates in terms of aesthetic features of the image, even though it is still the human who has a rich semantic insight into those features. That is to say, the interpretation of a work of art might not

always be limited to the artist's intention, since it may reveal a meaning that the author themselves did not have in mind: as Nelson Goodman once wrote, the Freudian interpretations of *Hamlet* revealed a meaning of Shakespeare's play that Shakespeare himself had not thought of, although it is debatable whether Shakespeare would have agreed with or understand the psychoanalytic interpretations (Goodman and Elgin 1988, 63). Thus, AI technology can make the public and the authors themselves see in images something other than what the authors originally intended. According to a famous anecdote, Kandinsky was inspired to create abstract paintings after noticing in his studio that one of his canvases was accidentally hanging upside down. AI technology can be regarded as the exploration of various latent possibilities within predefined limits, which always make possible an element of surprise (see Anscomb 2022). From this point of view, the lack of precise human control over certain properties of the image is not an argument for separating AI-generated art from art in general, but, on the contrary, for demonstrating that this partially unpredictable process is one that suits the very nature of art itself: as R. G. Collingwood and Levinson have pointed out, even in traditional art forms, an artist is not constrained by a fixed goal in the same way as a craftsman who has to produce a utilitarian object such as a coat, a shoe or a pot: while the craftsman, in order to produce a useful object, has to stick to the plan when it comes to non-negotiable features such as shape, size, color and so on, art is a freer and open-ended process in that it is not compelled to envisage so many features, or at least can accept deviations from many of them (Levinson 2006, 36). If this is the case, then even the process of optimizing the prompts demonstrates that the process of adjusting expectations and effects, as Meyer puts is, is not a way of applying a fixed set of instructions, but of exploring through trial and error a world of latent possibilities (see Meyer 2023, 103). Of course, the surprises AI technology offers, at least at its current phase of development, do not always satisfactorily match the author's intention or expectations, and this is why, as we have already shown, the artist's control usually extends to creating variations based on the same prompt, modifying the

prompt, setting certain parameters or subsequently editing the images in Photoshop. Yet, while it is true that successful AI-generated images are the happy reconciliation between an artist's expectations and some unpredictable results, these images, as long as they are art and not mere technological miracles, are more than just a happy surprise, since they bear either directly or indirectly the hallmark of a human's style and ideas, as well as the heritage of an entire history of culture.

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