COMBINE24: GENERATING ART

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The role of a civic museum custodian—a figure who sentinels the vaults of these public institutions has oft been misaligned and maligned in public consciousness, and the attendant scope of the mind. A carer, a curator; a janitor, a conservator; a cleric or a clerk—all of these professions embody vestiges of mythic guardians, people whose roles are shrouded in mystery. As an individual who oversees a burgeoning state collection in a part of the world where official records and histories are not readily available to the global public, I have felt it significant to demystify and clarify by creating indexical tools through language. By evolving openly reachable language for the codification and recodification of modern and contemporary art, a prospect materializes to engender culturally situated notations of and on art's intertextual histories.

To this end, the role and agency of emerging technologies have been of central focus. Specifically, what technologies enable audiences, bearing close attention to their attendant political aesthetics. The continuum of now has presented continued industry speculation regarding the significance of Artificial Intelligence (AI). With this, a seeming cultural demand has arisen for an automated, mechanistic cultural form of art to mirror the automated cultural euphoria proliferated by input-led developments in open AI such as ChatGPT.

Amusingly, there are clear semblances between the assumptions regarding recent incantations of AI platforming and the mythologies regarding museum stewardship in pop culture. The realm of Artificial Intelligence has been mythologized since the 1940s and developed in tandem with the history of modern computing and networked culture. Generative data, AI and art are municipal vestiges that invoke the murky terrain of Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny. Inhabiting the slippery path where the sphere of the imagined and that of reality are obliterated—their existence has existed in a lingering state of haunting for decades.

Yet it is at this juncture where our abounding confusion may abate. One argument that we can propose today is that initial conceptions of generative art were circumscribed by their predilection for engaging autonomous "non-human" entities, whether it be the exterior change of matter of Hans Haacke's Condensation Cube initiated in 1965 and worked developed until the year 2008. These non-human vessels could also include the automated aesthetic that abounded as a result of algorithmic formulae, such as the first generation of Harald Cohen's AARON initially developed in the 1980s.

These two foundational artworks exist at a different pivot from certain present-tense obsessions, which if one could be so bold, are arched around are reification of the human presence in the conceptualization of the art object at every stage of the process. Enter Combine24—a novel art competition that is governed by the expressive possibilities of inviting artists and creative practitioners from all over the world, fuelled by an engine of 27,000 digital artifacts drawn from the collections of Finnish National Gallery. Through an online seminar, open community sessions, as well as other forms of attendant outreach the Finnish National Gallery encouraged participants to download a custom .api integration—a method that allows you to sync non-standard digital assets and objects into clients' computing systems, or to invite them to download the entirety of the 27,000 in digital collection assets to be used in any way that they choose—as field of inspiration, appropriation or mechanization.

A shortlisting committee chose a selection of works for an exhibition, with a final Jury selecting the first prize winner and a runner up, with a third prize, expressly reserved for the public to choose. The shortlisted artists, inclusive of artists, designers, and scientists; solo artists and collectives from various parts of the globe, did not purely receive news, whim and impetus to apply through input-driven automation, but also through strategic outreach and word of mouth [sic: community].

Can a community be wholly "automated"? In the age of social stratification, fragmentation, and isolation post-COVID 19, when many are still in search of forms of community that suture and soothe, and which antagonize through the proliferation of knowledge and not abhorrence. Philosophical questions have surrounded the realm of generative AI since the advent of GANs (Generative Adversarial Network), a concept that I came to comprehend through Trevor Paglen's ImageNet Roulette (2019) and the attendant wider project developed in collaboration with Kate Crawford, "Excavating AI", which mapped the means through which AI's learn, are trained, develop biases, against the human, by the human. It resurrected age-old fears regarding Orwellian technological control, semiotic flow and transmission.

If the underpinning of the avant garde at the turn of the 20th century can be routed through circles and squares, specifically, one Black Square (1915), then the square root of all computing can equally dial back to one thing: language, or more specifically, languages and their subsets. Together, one has, a two-way, dialogue, even if the output is automation—an artistic practice that finds popular route in the work of artistic collectives such as the surrealist artists and theatre practitioners through to contemporary painters of abstraction. Parsing through the shortlisted artists in the exhibition for Combine24, one will find many a creative engaging the Finnish National Gallery's collections in new ways.

An examination of body, movement and gesture leads to explorations of poses and posing through time, who will you pose for? A disentangling of metadata may or may not unlink certain collages, only to be re-engaged into newly collaged forms. The landscape, as a site, as entity, as city, as a historical dwelling, is mapped, re-mapped, stitched, un-stitched, and re-configured through various digital tools. Abstract and figurative visual forms both occupy space here. But there is still room for moments of randomness and chaos, explorations into the laws of science and numbers. As you hurtle towards the end of the exhibition, the generative should take on new meaning. One that may indeed be automated, but automated from within multiple seats of consciousness, extending beyond the duality of input and output alone, traversing multiple poles spectral planes.

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