



ALGORITHMIC ART: WHY NOT?

Interview with Laurence Bertrand Dorléac



Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, art historian, is a university professor and president of the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (National Political Science Foundation). She authored *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (Coming to Terms with Still Life), published by Gallimard in 2020, and curated the exhibition *Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte* (Things. A History of Still Life) held at the Louvre in 2022. She answers our questions on the integration of artificial intelligence into artistic practices and the impact of digital technology on the art world.

If artists can be replaced by artificial intelligence (AI), does that mean that their role is purely technical and that they will disappear?

LAURENCE BERTRAND DORLÉAC

If the role of artists was limited to technical virtuosity, they would fall under the category of craftsmen, who reproduce models as well as possible. But by definition, artists seek to give form to the unforeseeable and unprecedented. Regardless of their sociological inclusion (or not) in a named category, they create something new with an element of the old. AI is a gamechanger, not least because it forces a reconsideration of fundamental questions. What is an artist? What is a work of art? What can AI do that an artist cannot? Does AI have imagination? Who decides? Who creates? The artist, the engineer, the robot, the viewer, or all of them together? Is the result a collective work?

Who do you think are the most interesting artists incorporating AI into their practice?

L.B.D. More and more artists are incorporating AI into their work, and more and more they are taking over a scene that was previously reserved for traditional techniques. The *Artists & Robots* exhibition, which took place in 2018 at the Grand Palais in Paris [curated by Jérôme Neutres and Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, editor's note], presented some interesting examples. A first category of artists, following in the footsteps of Paik and Jean Tinguely, engage with the physical dimension of AI as a machine for creation, through the figure of the robot. Note that the word robot comes from *rabota*, a Slavic term meaning work. The term derives from *rab*, which means slave. The person who gave the word robot its current meaning was the Czech writer Karel Čapek, in a play



called *Rossum's Universal Robots*, staged in Prague in 1920. Works by contemporary artists such as Leonel Moura, So Kanno, Takahiro Yamaguchi and Arcangelo Sassolino fall into this category. When the robot figure – not so far removed from the fantastic creatures imagined by ancient Egyptians – disappears, and when technology becomes invisible, what remains is the algorithmic programme that can generate infinite forms. Hence their hypnotic nature. In this light, a second category includes artists such as Ianis Xenakis, Vera Molnar and Manfred Mohr, who offer viewers the experience of works in movement that are sometimes interactive with their own bodies, or even Miguel Chevalier, Ryoji Ikeda, Pascal Dombis, Elias Crespin, Jacopo Baboni Schilingi and Peter Kogler. A third category of creators are involved in deep learning, which rivals humans, seeks to augment them, and even to taunt them. It includes artists such as Sterlac, Catherine Ikam and Louis Fléri, Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni, Doug Aitken, Takashi Murakami, ORLAN and Kōji Fukada. The latter, a filmmaker from the Japanese new wave and an advocate of low-budget films, gave an android the lead role in a film for the first time: *Sayonara* (Farewell, 2015) is a dystopia in which Japan has to be evacuated after several nuclear powerplant explosions. Tania, a young South African, long ill and in a

wheelchair, is locked up in an isolated house in the mountains, with her android Leona watching over her. To distract and console her, the robot recites poems by Rimbaud that Tania has forgotten. Fukada's film poetically shows that AI can preserve the memory of a world lost to humans.

Extra-Natural 2018,
by Miguel Chevalier, generative
and interactive virtual reality
installation, private collection.

What makes a masterpiece and can AI produce one?

L. B. D. The notion of a masterpiece is ancient. In the West, it dates back to the Middle Ages, and was first applied to craftsmanship. It was challenged by the avant-garde in the early twentieth century, starting with Dadaism, which elevated work, production and process. However, the collective imagination continues to embrace the deeply rooted idea that some works are worth more than others, even within the portfolio of a given artist, because of the work's power, aura and recognition, by the professional art world first, and then by the general public. Indeed, a work of art has no value in and of itself, but rather only has value for others – those who, by observing it, participate in its existence and authentication as a masterpiece. The Western category of masterpiece has equivalents in the non-Western world. The term exists in many languages: *Misteroské dilo* (Czech), *Touhfa*



More and more artists are incorporating AI into their work, and they are increasingly advancing on a stage previously reserved for traditional techniques.

(Arabic), *Yetzieat Mofet* (Hebrew), *Kloukh kordzodz* (Armenian), *Dazuo* (Chinese), *Kassku* (Japanese), and so on. Paradoxically, a masterpiece is first and foremost an eccentric and highly unique work that then becomes central and omnipresent. As for whether AI can produce a masterpiece, we haven't yet seen an algorithm create a *Mona Lisa*, but why not? Will AI someday be able to create recognised super uniqueness, which will be legitimised as such? The question remains. The only certainty is that behind the programme that produced this new masterpiece will be a human being. All artists grasp for a masterpiece that eludes them. I had the opportunity to observe Patrick Tresset at the very moment when he was discovering the shapes produced by an intelligent machine that he had programmed on the basis of a still life he had also made: the machine was spitting out mostly random drawings of the still life. His surprise at this co-creation made a deep impression on me. AI at the very least can be surprising. While amazement with art has always existed, this sensation is heightened by the infinite nature of the shapes, colours and combinations that AI enables.

Walter Benjamin lamented the impact of photography on the aura of artwork. What happens to this aura when generative AI leads to a massive proliferation of images and texts?

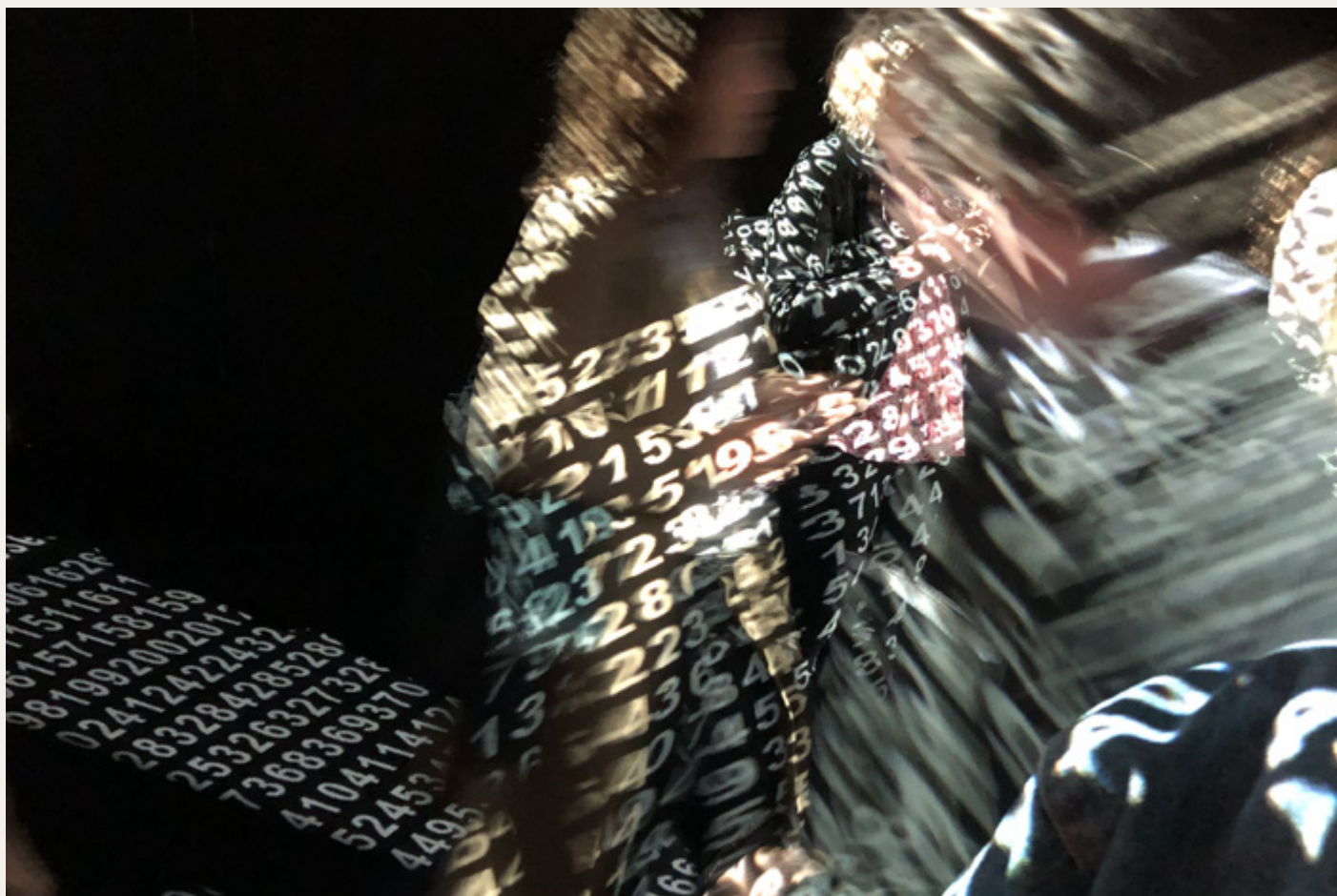
L. B. D. Despite the exponential production of images, we are still waiting for the one that will change everything by standing out from all the others. This is already happening in the world of press images, which are increasingly merging with that of art. Some press photos change the perception of an event or a situation, and end up becoming iconic.

Admittedly, AI more acutely raises the question of the veracity of a press photo, but that question has always existed. On the battlefields of the American Civil War (1861–1865), for example, Timothy O'Sullivan would move the dead to 'make them look more real' before taking pictures of them in a bid to frame, or even stage, his subject. True/false is the theme of the fourteenth Festival of the History of Art in Fontainebleau, taking place in June 2025, and AI will obviously be a major issue.

Since AI draws on existing data and models, could we say that its arrival in the art world points to the end of creativity and innovation?

L. B. D. No, for all the aforementioned reasons, and quite the opposite in fact. When photography emerged, some painters considered committing suicide. Yet photography allowed for variations in painting through emulation or permeation. AI boosts artists who stop being afraid of it. The possibilities expand. Even for artists who turn their backs on it, AI can spur inventive resistance. Periods of uncertainty are conducive to the invention of creative materials and techniques. Artists are anthropologically used to playing with the resources at hand.

If we assume that art is a reflection of society at a given moment, does AI change the situation? Does it enable escape from context? Or, conversely, does it reflect contemporary obsessions and biases?



L. B. D. Among artists currently producing works that incorporate AI techniques, those trained in the fine arts are the standouts. Much of the other work is literally of no interest because it just rehashes what already exists. In other words, nothing is more academic than AI when it is programmed by a conformist mind. In this respect, yes, we are going to be awash in works of the zeitgeist, but no more or less than before. As always, landmark works have yet to emerge. The treasure hunt is on.

NFTs (non-fungible tokens), which promote a form of digital art certified by an encryption algorithm, made headlines in recent years before seeing their price plummet in September 2023. What do these phenomena reveal about the art world and its market?

L. B. D. The market is reinventing itself as techniques, and even practices and tastes, evolve. The NFT is a digital object that is tracked, preserved and authenticated via blockchain thanks to an identifier that makes it unique and non-fungible.

It is interesting to note that NFTs thus bear testament to the permanence of the old world, in which property is attached to a single person. The speed of access to sharing platforms is another appealing aspect of new artistic practices. Anyone can become an artist – incidentally, this was the slogan of youth in the 1960s. Not to say that all productions are equally interesting, shareable and enduring. NFTs may be a future for digital art, but they are only one of many. The market valued them as attractive at first, and dubious next. This is nothing new: the contemporary art market is subject to fads and uncontrolled excesses. But it also has more established players who adopt development tactics, or even strategies, and compete with each other while maintaining solidarity and compliance with certain rules. In short, the art market is no exception. It shares the well-known characteristics of other markets.

Laurence Bertrand Dorléac
at the *Artistes & Robots* exhibition
she designed with Jérôme Neutres,
Grand Palais, Paris, 2018.