When A.I. makes it, is it still Art?

Piero Scaruffi (2018)
And old discussion...

- The Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition (London, 1968)
- Jack Burnham: "It is only a step from here to suppose that in time an aesthetics of artificial intelligence will evolve… a series of art forms that manifest true intelligence, but perhaps more meaningfully, with a capacity for reciprocal relationships with human beings" ("Beyond Modern Sculpture“, 1968)
What is authorship?
When a machine does something, who/what do we credit as the author? Who is the creator?

• The lay public finds arbitrary the decision of a museum to exhibit some contemporary art
• The lay public loves some “inceptionist” paintings produced by “deep” neural networks
What is authorship? When a machine does something, who/what do we credit as the author? Who is the creator?

- Skeptics: the author of machine art is not the machine but the engineer who programmed the machine.
- Counter-argument: who is the creator of Leopardi’s “Canto Notturno di un Pastore Errante dell'Asia”? Leopardi or the Moon? Was Leopardi just the “tool” used by the Moon to write a poem?
- Double-standard: Leopardi is the creator the poem that was triggered by the rays coming from the Moon but the machine is the real creator of the file that was generated by a software written by an engineer.
What is authorship?

• The 20th century avant-garde (happening, interactive art, action painting, performance art, etc) sabotaged the concepts of authorship, originality, identity, purpose etc
• Machine art is, in a sense a consequence of this process of demystification of art
What is art?
How do we decide what is art?
and then does machine art qualify as art?

• Examples of art:
  - Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” (1917)
  - Kazimir Malevich’s “White on White” (1918)
  - Man Ray’s “The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse” (1920)
  - Joseph Albers’ “The City” (1928)
  - Jackson Pollock’s “Blue Poles” (1952)
  - Yves Klein’s “Anthropometries of the Blue Period” (1960)
  - Piero Manzoni: “Artist's Shit” (1961)
  - Shigeko Kubota’s “Vagina Painting” (1965)
  - Marina Abramovic’ “Imponderabilia” (1977)
What is art?
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- Who decided that these are works of art?
- The people in power decide is art: the Pope, the kings, the museum directors, the art gallery directors… the art critics/historians
- Can anything be art? Is there any human-made artifact that cannot possibly qualify as art?
- Is art uniquely human?
- Skeptic: natural beauty vs constructed beauty
- But is any constructed beauty not natural?
What is the meaning/purpose of this thing called art?

- Art interprets human history, the history of human civilization
- To understand why something is reputed beautiful by someone you have to understand a whole system, its history, its values, its processes
- Art is always a dialog between the artist and society, even when the artist doesn’t want to have any dialog
What is the meaning/purpose of this thing called art?

• An artwork is merely the decoration for the slide presentation on the importance of that artwork
• What you read today about the artwork “is” what the artist did
• Art is about stories, not objects
• Art’s function is precisely to tell a story, the story of the human race through the ages
• Art is an interpreter, eviscerating subtle truths of human society
What is the meaning/purpose of this thing called art?

- Theodor Adorno: “Distance is the primary condition for getting close to the content of a work” (“Aesthetic Theory”, 1973)
- Paraphrasing Umberto Eco: the meaning of an artwork is the sum of all possible interpretations by all readers (“Open Artwork”, 1962)
What is the meaning/purpose of this thing called art?

• Creating art is not difficult: making sense of it is difficult
• Art can be everywhere (made by other humans, by nature or by machines), but only humans appreciate it
• Sure, machines can produce artworks.
• But can they critique it?
• Can a machine critique the work of art of another machine? Or the work of art of a human artist?
• Can it write a history of art through the centuries?
What is machine art?

• The product of machine art is no longer the product of hard labor but instead an instantaneous generation by means of software
• Machine art removes the process of bodily creation
• Machine art enables in the arts the industrial paradigm of rapid prototyping
• Not much changes for the experience of the observer, but a lot changes in the experience of the creator
What is machine art?

• It took a while for photographers and filmmakers to realize that the new tool enabled a new form of art

• The fact that machine art can produce a lot of artworks very quickly will lead to a new form of human art
What is an artwork?

• The 20th century introduced alternative notions of visual art, different genres, not just painting and sculpture: kinetic art, performance art, conceptual art, and even readymades.
• The whole art-making machine could be viewed as a work of art.
• The software code of the neural network, the algorithm, could be the work of art.
• A machine artwork could be viewed as conceptual art or performance art or a happening.
What is an artwork?

- The same printout can be viewed as a readymade, a painting, part of a kinetic sculpture, the component of a performance, the element of a conceptual piece, …
What is an artwork?

- What is the photograph by Julian Wasser of the 76-year-old Marcel Duchamp playing chess with a 20-year-old naked woman, Eve Babitz (Pasadena in 1963)?
- Is the photograph a work of visual art by Wasser?
- Is it a work of conceptual art by Duchamp?
- Or is it a work of body art by Eve Babitz?
- Or is it a theatrical work by curator Walter Hopps?
- Or is it just two weirdos killing time on a hot day?