



AI and You

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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1 Tom White, Electric Fan, 2019, Screen print on stretched canvas, 42x42cm, Trial Proof / Purple

Source: <https://www.katevassgalerie.com/print/p/tom-white-1> [accessed 26 March 2024].

Introduction

What is our relationship with AI? In the realm of digital art, we use the rapidly developing technology of our practices and AI; we continue to question and reinterpret the relationship, the authorship and what it means to enter into the relationship between us as practitioners and the technology we use, such as cameras, computers and AI models to produce work.

'Electric Fan' by Tom White (2018) explores how the AI model he uses perceives our world and communicates that perception through a collection of prints; the work of Tom White personifies the AI and has been explained as using an 'Algorithmic Gaze': how machines see, know, and articulate the world.¹

Using writing from a number of influential works, such as John Berger's 'Way of Seeing', Lev Manovich's *Software takes command: Extending the language of new media*, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, and 'Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets' by Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen. I aim to explore what AI and digital technology mean to us as artists, creatives, and technologists.

Body

Our relationship with technology, with every passing advancement and every technological leap, is becoming less of a tool in the traditional sense and more of an assistant, a constant companion. Our relationship with technology is becoming more symbiotic in nature, even more so than it has in the past, such as with early digital media and the World Wide Web; with the integration of digital displays already in every aspect of our lives, the further integration of AI within these devices is easier than it ever has been. With racing developments in AI and the hesitant acceptance of that growth within the public consciousness, we must have a conscious mind and active participation in the growth, development and use of technology and AI in our society.

Tom White's collection of AI collaborative prints is an ongoing collective work that personifies the perception of AI in the context of everyday objects. White has developed a drawing system that converts the visual recognition concepts used within his AI model. The abstract prints that are produced are not just outputs that can be recognisable to some humans as items we interact with every day or even the neural network that produced them but also within any AI system that has been trained with the same objects. These prints are expressions of how these AI systems perceive these items, and with other similarly trained AI also understanding these images, it can be argued that these images work as a language between these AIs. White takes this further in a quote about his work where he equates this communication of abstract language to a culture:

¹ White, [AIArtists.org](https://aiartists.org), White on using artificial intelligence.

“The AI systems we are creating are their own unique culture, and so often their way of representing the world can seem foreign to what we’ve come to expect. But their ability to abstractly represent concepts that we in turn recognize suggests we may have more in common with the machines we are creating that we realize.” ²



Fig. 1 Electric Fan, Tom White

White personifies the tools he uses like other artists before him, but this is not just a personal quirk but an understanding between himself and the medium of AI, the AI he trained. In the opening statement of *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, he talks about the relationship between children and their early visions of the world, how, before any grip of language, a child perceives the world and begins the early stages of pattern recognition, identifying everyday items. ³ Just as White trains and encourages pattern recognition within the AI, just as a parent would educate and encourage a child in the early stages of development. Our perception of what technology and AI models are can be influenced by a number of outside contributors, but like a dog, it is down to us to educate ourselves first and then educate the AI with a critical mind so as not to pass on our flaws.

AI is a mirror to its training images and, in turn, those who train it, which must be a constant consideration. The AI and technology use, as previously noted, entered into a symbolic nature with us as humans and maybe even closer with us as creatives and technologists and in a relationship that is closely knit, it is easy to unknowingly put a piece of yourself into the work and into the technology you use, more so if you are building, developing and training that technology, it is human nature.

In ‘*Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets*’ By Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen. They highlight how the current AI models have been trained on data that have been charged with political, societal, racial and gendered biases and whether intentionally or not, these biases are apparent and baked into the collection of data used to train the AI, the act of collecting and labelling images inherently comes with its own politics. ⁴ White has trained his AI with his own images and those he has collected. On some level, his own preferences, biases and culture will feed into the AI. Even though White has developed his own AI, it can seamlessly communicate with systems such as Google’s and Amazon’s image

² White, dribnet, How it works.

³ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p.5.

⁴ Crawford, Paglen, *Excavating AI*.

recognition systems. From this, we can derive that even though these systems have been developed separately by different people, there is still a common cultural thread running through them, which means these AI share a bias.

Bolter and Grusin, in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, outline the term remediation as “the representation of one medium in another.” They go on to explain that most, if not all, digital media replicates or remixes existing media.⁵ I would consider this statement true for the time it was written (2000), but considering the topic of new technology and AI, this statement is no longer valid. Entering a new age of technology at an alarming rate and in the context of AI, we must shift our thinking from that of remediation. Yes, we can use AI and newly developing technology to replicate almost anything that has come before, but not in the same league that was considered in 2000.

An example of a digital Word document, compared to a pen and paper or typewriter, is not the same as training an AI on Rembrandt and producing a new piece of work, even though the master painter has been dead for 355 years. As artists and technologically savvy members of our global society, we must begin to develop new methodologies and thought processes as the methodologies of the past have less and less of a further arcing reach on our technology and practices of today.

Again, considering how our perception of new media must change in a way to adapt to our growing, developing and technologically advancing world, we can look to the writing of Lev Manovich in 2013 in his response to the term remediation and how that even though some technology can replicate what has come before, it can also be added so much more to the old media it is replicating:

“But if we leave the same photograph inside its native computer environment...it can function in ways which, in my view, make it radically different from its traditional equivalent.”⁶

Manovitch here is discussing the functionality of a digital camera, but taking this thought process further with applications to modern media and AI; we can start to develop the mind frame needed for moving forward in the ever-expanding world of AI and new digital media. Considering White’s work, it can be argued that the AI perception prints echo Kandinsky’s work, which on the surface it does and means that it would fall into the side of remediation and new technology reinterpreting existing media, but within White’s prints, as mentioned earlier, are the equivalent of an AI image recognition language, a digital culture between similarly trained AI, for better or worse. In revisiting our perceptions of AI and helping educate others about the possibilities but also lacking current AI technology and how to address these deeply rooted biases baked within AI trained off of existing media, can we as a collective continue to improve and develop this technology into something that can not be used in any detrimental manners. Currently, AI is being openly welcomed by those who may use it not for the betterment of our global society but

⁵ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p.45.

⁶ Manovich, *Software takes command*, p.62

to exploit and gain an advantage over others. There is growing interest in AI within companies such as Meta and Google in how these learning algorithms can be implemented against those that are none the wiser.

Conclusion

Technology is a part of everyone's life and shows no sign of slowing down or diminishing. And unlike the scare-mongering of some news outlets on the topic of AI “taking our jobs” or the preaching of Luddites, to destroy and hinder is not our way forward as a technological society. As a conscious collective, we must learn to look past the sleek glass screens and sleeker marketing strategies and educate ourselves on the inner workings of the technology we pour our lives into.

Technology, and more accurately AI, is not inherently good or evil; it is a tool that reflects us and how we implement it. It may not live and breathe like a living animal, but it shifts, grows, and learns like the assistants and companions we have made for ourselves in animals. As we learned to work and develop with those animals, we must apply that same logic to technology and AI; only by learning as a society how to work with this growing and developing technology will we grow, develop and know how to handle it.

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