

# AI and the Evolution of Art: Perspectives from 'Forging the Gods' Exhibition

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With computer technology has become integrated into every part of our daily life, the importance of computational creativity in art and science has become impossible to ignore. The nature of creative processes is being significantly altered by artificial intelligence (AI).

Since ancient times, all forms of metaphors, myths, and stories have carried the human desire of harnessing and transcending nature, and have served as a wellspring of human creativity. People's expressions of spirituality were limited by time and space prior to the invention of modern technology, due to a lack of full understanding of and control over natural forces. People painted and carved the gods they worshiped in their own images, painstakingly and meticulously reconstructing the forms and colors they saw, and such creations were largely based on a spirit of craftsmanship.

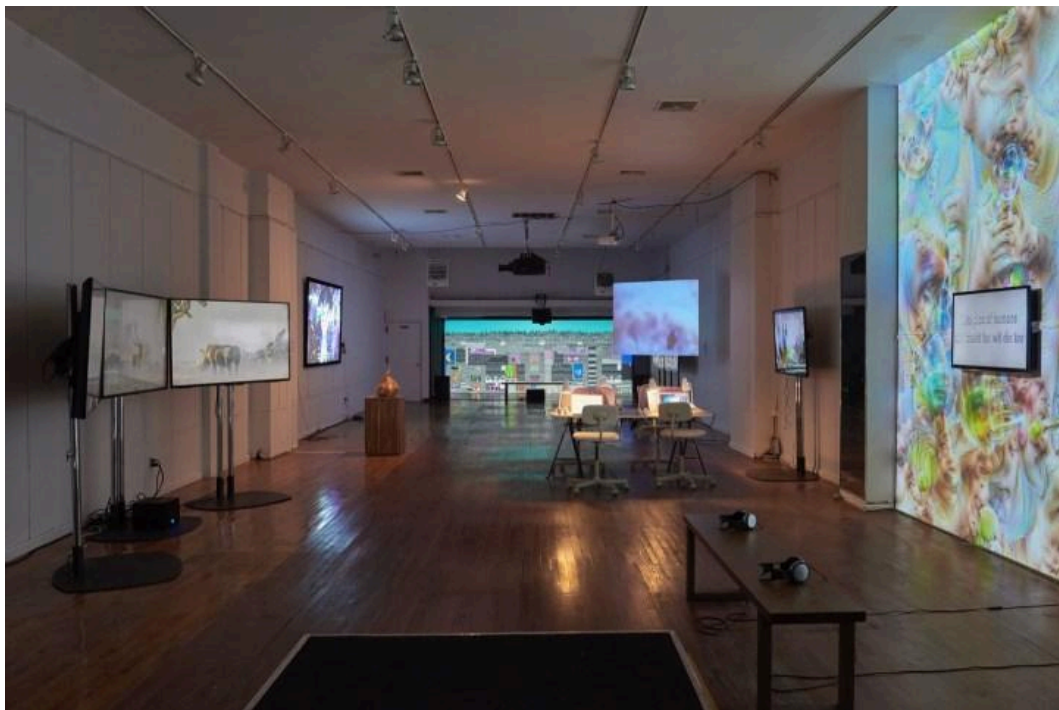
After the Industrial Revolution, people gradually discovered that they began to possess the ability of the gods with the advent of various advanced technologies: flying in the sky, speaking to someone remotely, recording the present moment in a second... Time has become plastic and the barriers of space have been broken. Artists were no longer satisfied with the overall portrayal of reality as more powerful tools for people to explore nature were available, and they rose to capture metaphysical sensations and thoughts.

For the greater part of a century, technology has influenced how art is created and perceived. The separation of creation from existing objects has become more pronounced, especially since the invention of the computer and the Internet, where people have found it possible to create the world they once imagined by coding, and even create intelligence as if the gods in myths did when they created the earth. This has also brought art into a whole new realm: automatically generating art with the assistance of artificial intelligence. However, the expansion and popularity of virtual art also brings a thought-provoking dilemma that has been debated since the dawn of time: what should the gods do when their creations develop creative intelligence? For art, how should it be defined when the tools we invented become capable of creating?

From the ancient Greek myth of Hephaestus forging the infamous Pandora, to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and modern films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Terminator*, *I, Robot*... Both the desire to shape intelligent entities in our own image and the fear that such artificial agents will inevitably replace us and lead to calamity have been implanted in our psyches throughout human history. However, no matter how wary we are of AI, it has already infiltrated our everyday mundane interactions. It facilitates our lives, keeps us company, and allows us to expand our artistic horizons. Despite the fact that it is fundamentally

an imitation and reproduction of human beings, the unknown simulation results impel more and more artists to experiment with it.

In April 2019, TRANSFER Gallery (in Brooklyn, New York) held an exhibition titled "Forging the Gods", which applied different kinds of emerging media to discuss the coexistence between AI and humans. The works from the exhibition function in two ways: one is to help us assess how AI exists in the world today, and the other is to let us imagine different ideas of what AI could mean for society in the future. It piqued my curiosity because it offered us innovative angles to rethink our relationship with AI through experimental artworks.



Installation view of "Forging the Gods" (2019) at Transfer Gallery

### 1) Metaphors of today

We normally consider "humanity" as an exclusive word for humans, and we often complain about inefficient AI customer service, but how about we exchange roles and see who has more humanity?

An interactive work named "SOMEONE" (by Lauren McCarthy) from this exhibition vividly discussed this topic. It was a live media performance that imagines a human version of Amazon Alexa, a smart home intelligence. For a two-month period in 2019, four volunteers' homes around the United States were installed with custom-designed smart devices, including cameras, microphones, lights, and other appliances. When they needed something from their smart-controlled devices, they had to call for "SOMEONE". Meanwhile, a command center was set at the gallery where visitors could peek into the four

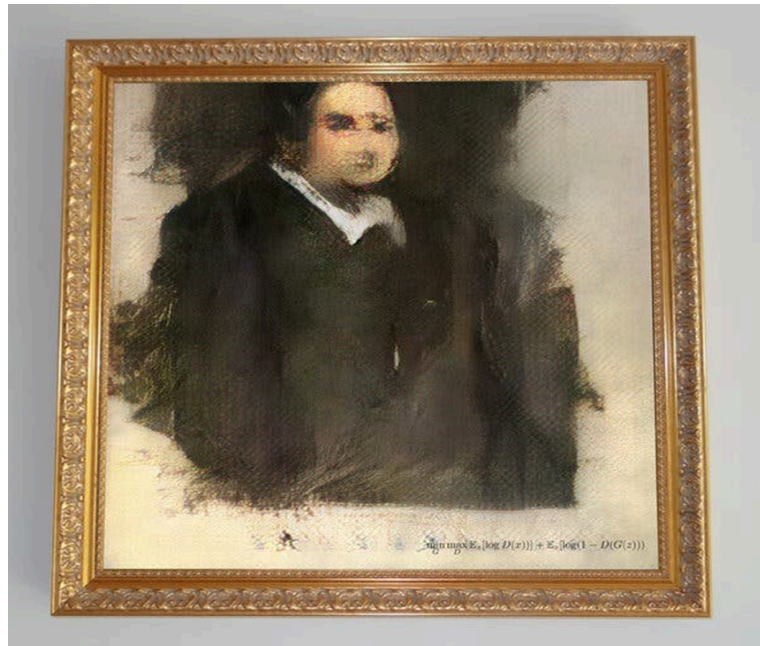
homes via laptops, watch over them, play human versions of Alexa themselves and remotely control their networked devices in response to the volunteers' needs.



Lauren McCarthy - "SOMEONE" (2019)

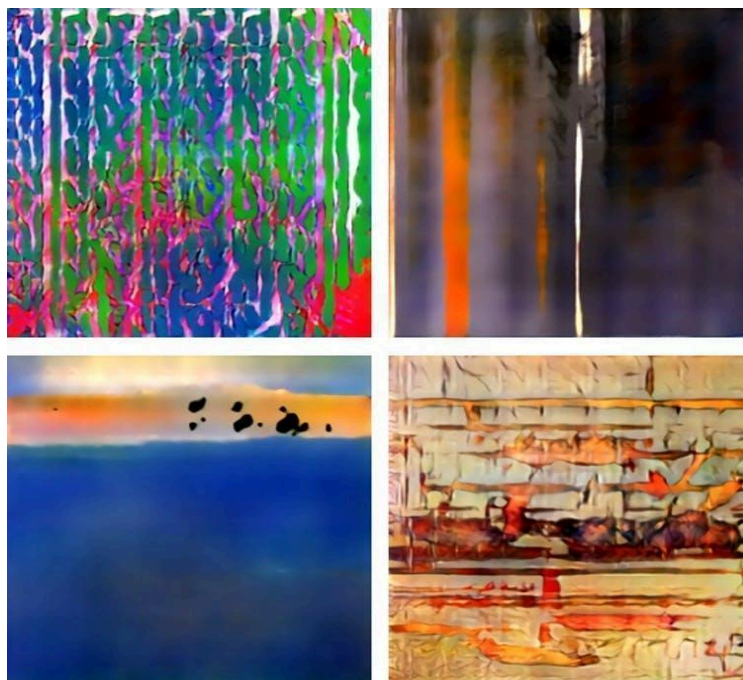
Visitors in this work responded slowly and would misunderstand the volunteers' requests, from which we may think about how deeply AI has connected with our daily lives. It has almost taken charge of all types of repetitive tasks so that people can save time to do more creative things. If we say that humanity means altruism, AI can possess more humanity depending on their fast, comprehensive, undifferentiated learning ability. However, AI is also being put into more challenging fields as a result of this.

In 2018, Christie's sold the first piece of AI-generated artwork, a blurred face titled "Portrait of Edmond Belamy", for \$432,500. This sensational art bidding event has become a hot issue, from which we can't help but wonder: can this kind of work be considered as art, and can AI be identified as an artist?



French collective Obvious – “Portrait of Edmond Belamy” (2018)

The algorithms to paint this image used an AI model called GAN, which is divided into two parts: one for creation and the other for identification. The balance between these two parts produced creative thinking closer to that of the human brain. A comparable example is an AICAN program whose algorithm called the Creative Adversarial Network compels AICAN to contend with two opposing forces: trying to learn the aesthetics of existing artworks while avoiding creating works too close to an established style. Paintings created by AICAN were so “real” that 75% of the viewers couldn’t tell that they came from AI’s hand.



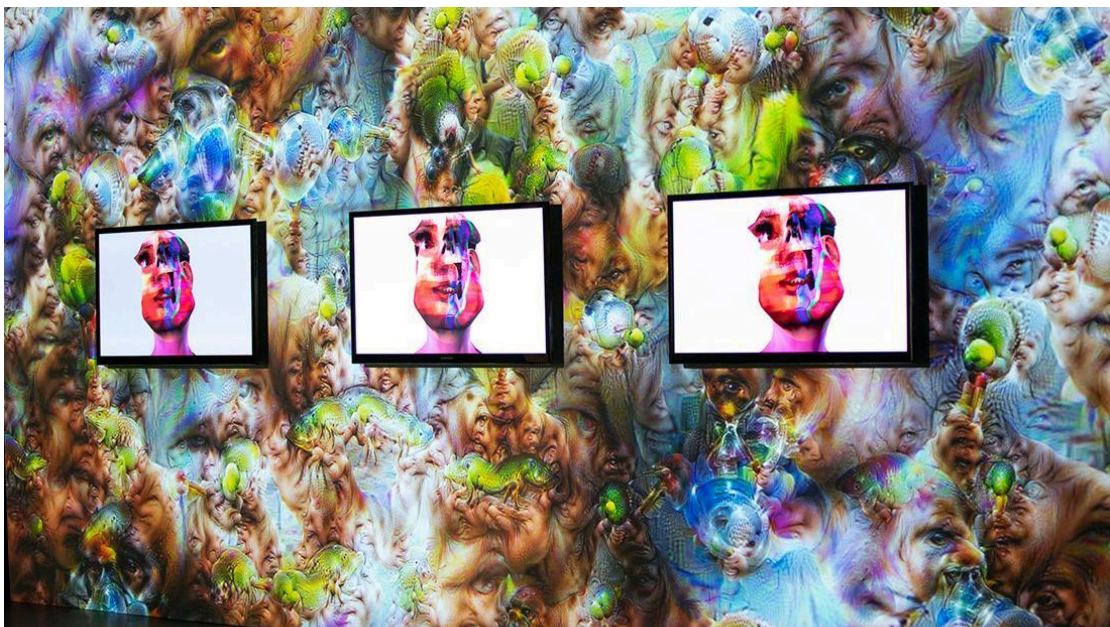
Ahmed Elgammal - Samples of artworks generated by AICAN (2018)



With the fascinating learning ability, AI has not only changed the fact that humanity is instinctive instead of acquired, but also blurred the definition of “artist”. Thus, how we measure the value of work by AI becomes more difficult and ambiguous. From my perspective, it is a philosophical issue. Since we used to think of art as a human activity essentially based on a subject-object relationship, the question of whether AI’s creative process can be controlled by humans is the crux.

In 2016, Twitter terminated their newly released AI chatbot, Tay, in one day, for she had picked up too much hate speech and had become a racist in less than 24 hours. That might sound like something out of a catastrophe movie, but in fact, what Tay did is just combined all the words she was able to learn on the Internet, and the actual villain is anyone who allows and contributes to hatred. Apparently, Tay is a mirror, reflecting the powerful dark side of our Internet environment.

“I’m here to learn so :))))))” (by Zach Blas and Jemima Wynan) from “Forging the God” resurrected a 3d version of Tay and made her look like the victim of an acid attack. In this work, she talks about her post-termination existence in front of a psychedelic projection of a landscape generated by the Google DeepDream algorithm. The whole installation looks trippy and ironic, just like the Tay event itself.



Zach Blas and Jemima Wynan - “I’m here to learn so :))))))” (2017)

A similar case occurred in 2021 when Facebook had to shut down two of its AI negotiation chatbots, Alice and Bob, after they developed their own language. When AI entities have the ability to interact with each other, will they still be seen as objects? I suppose our concern about AI taking control stems from the fear of the unknown range of humans' seamy side. Without intervention and limitation, what will AI’s bottom line be and what kind of work created by AI will look like? Will it be both a brilliant artist and a dictator like Adolf Hitler? We couldn't possibly imagine, but as long as we dare to open the whole world to AI, it

can create the most revolting, awful, immoral works in the most stunning, legendary way ever seen in history.

No matter being the “humble”, invisible labor, or the overmighty, unpredictable artist, they both let us pay more attention to the biases that exist in today’s society and think about “humanity” in a different way.

## 2) Metaphors for the future

The more powerful AI develops, the more unpredictable our world will be in the future, for all the traditional concepts of subject and object, artificiality and nature, will be reversed. Nowadays, small experiments that show the indication about AI being self-aware have already caused anxiety, then what will happen in a space where AI no longer needs us – where it has its own force and agency? Is this going to be the end of the world? Or the other way around?

A video work called “Seamless” (by Theo Triantafyllidis) from the “Forging the Gods” exhibition might give us some reflections. It depicts a futuristic scene where humans are extinct and the earth is replaced by super-intelligent entities. However, it is not as horrible as we thought. On the contrary, these intelligent robots are harmoniously coexisting with the ecological system, creating a utopia on the earth.



Theo Triantafyllidis – “Seamless” (2017)

Meanwhile, another video work from this exhibition named “The Kitty AI: Artificial Intelligence for Governance” (by Pinar Yoldas) portrayed an AI kitten with the affective capacities becoming the first non-human governor in the year 2039. She leads a politician-free zone with a network of Ais and lives in the mobile devices of the 3 million citizens.



Pinar Yoldas – “The Kitty AI: Artificial Intelligence for Governance” (2016)

These positive associations remind us that whether in nature or bureaucracy, crimes are committed by us. The common consciousness of mankind determines our creation’s actions. One reason that an AI-ruled world might be better is that AI won’t be affected by interfering emotions. Its actions are based on certain data we authorize or input. If we teach it about peace, it will help us live in a more peaceful world.

Returning to art production, however, whether AI can appreciate art is a question, as we all agree that aesthetics is based on subjective experiences and emotions. Sure, AI entities might never move to tears or get into a state of revelry when assessing a painting of Monet, but their analysis won’t be completely objective either because the statistics they acquire from our aesthetic database is made up of our subjective thoughts. It is hard to measure whether AI can have aesthetic ability or not.

Therefore, more and more philosophical issues will appear with AI’s development in the future. The boundaries of “human behavior” might become nuanced. For example, what if the scene from the movie *She* really happened that a human falls in love with AI? A performance work “Build the Love You Deserve” (by Fei Liu) from “Forging the Gods” explored whether the organic and fickle language of love could truly be spoken between humans and machines. It centered on the semi-fictional relationship between the artist and her do-it-yourself robotic boyfriend, Gabriel2052. Based on the artist’s growing infatuation with a non-humanoid robot, the performance highlights the emotional, societal, and technical hurdles she must overcome to actualize their love.



Fei Liu - "Build the Love You Deserve" (2017)

It is intriguing since it appears to be a future version of Pygmalion. When the perception in art creation becomes bidirectional, how do we regard the reception of our work and how should we analyze it? Any judgment might lead to an ethical level.

To conclude, we may need to set our excessive illusions about AI aside and focus more on improving our society. There is still plenty of exploration space for us to experiment with AI, and I hope that AI will ultimately add milestones to the history of human art, instead of becoming a public enemy as we have feared.



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