

Recently, there is much talk of robots that can paint. There are robots that can accurately copy figurative subject matter and even deform it slightly when making a painting. And robots that can paint an abstract painting with non-objective, indefinite forms are not unusual.

At the present stage, robots can add simple colours to a line drawing. However, with the amazing progress of computer graphics, the day is not far distant when they will be able to make a painting more precisely and beautifully than any painter or designer. In fact, certain types of pictures, produced with high-level printing technology and special machinery, boast a marvellous finished appearance superior to previous painting done purely by hand.

One might expect robots that can play music or write poetry, novels and criticism to be developed even faster than painting robots, since these are clear and precise tasks when compared to painting. The process of adding changes is simple, and there is little need for random elements. With a clear theme and sufficient data, it should be possible to change sounds around or reassemble words to the necessary extent. A robot might be able to produce results that are more interesting and solid than an untalented musician or writer.

If this supposition is true, the future of musicians and writers may be as dark as that of painters. Robots are about to take over jobs that have been thought to belong to the artist. The myth of the artist as a special and divine person is about to be demolished. Producing art will no longer be the exclusive right of the artist.

Works of art are made by human beings but they are also products of some sort of procedure or strategy. If the procedure for making a work of art is built into the robot, it will be possible to make art. The procedure for making art relies on the way of thinking that lies behind the production of other modern products. It is the embodiment of an image, or the concept of production as such. It goes without saying that the work of the artist, particularly the painter, has been seen as effectively embodying the idea that he desires to express with colours and forms.

Whether representational or abstract, paintings have been created by the method of predetermining the thing to be expressed and then reproducing it. A number of conditions must be set, including emotional identification with the subject, in order to determine the theme and straightforwardly give it form. Once these conditions are in place, the artist's hand assembles the programme that is referred to as a painting. Following Deleuze, the artist, the theme and the material

are made into a machine by the operation of desire called art-making. The procedure requires the hand of the artist to prepare the theme and the data and then copy them, thereby presenting a solution. Interpreted in the context of modern technology, this process is the same as the operation of a robot. In other words, the painter himself has been a robot, albeit an imperfect one.

The task of the robot is reproduction or reconstruction with the goal of perfection. That is because reproduction is a technique for revealing an answer that is already prepared ahead of time. If certain data are not given and the programme does not require them, the robot will not do anything. That is, the job of the robot is to reflect the painter's desire to recapture the world. Whether it is an object in front of his eyes or an image made in his head, the painter tried to reproduce it by expressing it in a painting.

This is a kind of narcissism – the desire to take something depicted in the mind and bring it before one's eyes with as little change as possible. It is the true condition of desire and the meaning of reproduction. In this respect, the method of art that best suits modern capitalism may be a mechanical process that is autistic, narcissistic and excessive. Ironically, the fate of narcissism, after cutting off all relations with otherness, is to end up in a 'sea of ego', where there is nothing but self on all sides, eventually losing the desire to see.

Recently, the project of recapturing and constructing the world has been considered very close to fantasy, and it is hard to find any meaning in the operation of bringing such a world right in front of one's eyes. Or it might be said that a solitary, isolated, schizophrenic ego no longer has the ability to structure the image that the artist wants to express. As long as artistic expression is reproductive, it is doubtful that it can continue to stimulate people's desires in the future. Having robots make works of art, even if they are the culmination of self-centred modernist aesthetics, is a very problematic way to open up a new heaven and earth for art.

It is fundamental to the nature of a robot aesthetic completely to reject uncertain individuality and quality. In the name of opposing logocentrism, it makes the world into material for the mechanical operation of desire. As I said before, desire in this case is a mechanism for reproducing the self. The philosophy that sees everything as machine parts, convergence and dispersal of signs, and structural elements, is based on an ultra-substantialism that wants to assemble these things into a unified body of meaning. The philosopher taking this position most likely takes great pleasure in mental games of shifting meaning about by reassembling data. However, when data get into the hands of today's painters, no matter what kind of programme is meant to be used, they will be broken down into something prior to data from that moment on and returned to the state of a unique living thing that is difficult to name.

Long ago Picasso rejected exploration and reproduction in painting. Many avant-garde artists have gone beyond even arbitrary action; what they do is like playing with mud on the canvas. It might be said, if one were not afraid of being misunderstood, that artists do not really know what they are doing. They are creators with nothing to express. If artists encounter something, they ignore it or break it down rather than pursuing it.

The work of the artist slips away more and more from the system of knowledge. The painter has moved far away from the sort of meaning that Pascal ridiculed, but the new Pascals are likely to accuse the whole race of painters of being foolish. In spite of this, painters continue to paint, whether on canvas or some other material, realizing that each moment is a precious part of life. They realize that the world exists in the interval between the brush, the canvas, the paint and the hand, elements which attract or repel each other, rather than in the meaning of painting. Painters do not aim at finishing or completing a painting, because the act of painting itself belongs to a different dimension from the system of knowledge. If they speak too exaggeratedly of the nobility of the act of painting, it is because of the discipline they undertake in order to move away from the self and encounter the world, which is the real work of living.

Lee Ufan, 'Robots and Painters' (1987), trans. Stanley N. Anderson, in *The Art of Encounter*, ed. Jeanne Lee (London: Lisson Gallery, 2004) 103-5.