Art and A.I.

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In his novel, *Notre Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo gave the second chapter of his fifth book a rather grim title: "Ceci tuera cela" –"This will kill that". (Fig.1 ND de Paris and the title page of the first edition) The chapter begins with a poignant lament: that the cathedral, and by extension great edifices in general, no longer played the role of recorders of the most important human aspirations in stone, or in stained glass windows. This role was usurped by the book. A few paragraphs into chapter two, Hugo declares that: "Le livre tuera l'édifice" –"The book will kill the edifice". Since these words were written, almost two hundred years ago, visual and verbal cultures have experienced multiple assaults, with Artificial Intelligence being the latest and most far-reaching in its effects. From Georges Artsrouni's 'mechanical brain' in 1932; to Joseph Weizenbaum's 'Elisa', the first chatbot in 1966; to Siri, the voice-activated personal assistant in 2011; to OpenAI releasing their ChatGPT in 2022, A.I. has become an unavoidable presence in society, in particular in the arts.

The more recent intervention of Artificial Intelligence in the arts has deeply affected artistic making, ranging from conceptual levels to the levels of execution. It affected three fundamental activities of art: to make, to do, and to reflect on the making and the doing [in other words, *poesis* (making); *praxis* (doing); and *theoria* (thinking).]

This two-dimensional image, produced by AI, (Fig.2 Artist in studio AI) shows a sculptor molding a female figure out of plaster. The observer may easily err in assuming this to be a photograph of a sculptor in his studio. But neither the artist, nor the sculpture, nor the studio itself, exist. They have all been generated by AI. Such an image seems to be suspended awkwardly between two well-established established artistic practices: the *trompe-l'œil* and the *gesamtkuntswerk*. (Fig.3 Vault, Sant'Ignazio). The *trompe-l'œil*, operates on a forced perspective, one that generates a certain optical illusion as in this example of the vaulted nave of Sant'Ignazio in Rome where the perspective points heavenward, in the direction of the saint's ascension. (Fig.4 Victor Horta, Hôtel Tassel, Bruxelles) The *gesamtkuntswerk*, a term coined by Friedrich Eusebius Trahndorff, designates a total work of art, an all-embracing art form that contains other art forms. (Fig.5 Artist in studio AI) Was it the intention of AI operators, here, to produce a total work of art? And what about the relationship between the work of art, the artist, the observer, and the social context in which they live?

In 2023, a peculiar statue was exhibited at Stockholm's Science and Technology Museum. (Fig.6 *The Impossible Statue*) Entitled *The Impossible Statue*, this work was produced by Sandvik Machining Solutions, an engineering firm that specializes in precision manufacturing using Generative A.I. programs. Nadine Crauwels, the president of that firm, expressed her satisfaction with the product, stating that "By using all our capabilities, we can significantly improve manufacturing efficiency, reduce waste, and ensure the highest quality[1]." (Fig.7 *The Impossible Statue*) The statue was realized, we are told, by combining parts of sculptures authored by five sculptors: Michelangelo Buonarotti, Auguste Rodin, Takamura Kotaro, Augusta

[1] https://news.artnet.com/art-world/impossible-statue-ai-generated-stockholm-museum-2308845

Savage, and Käthe Kollwitz. The statues were: Buonarotti's *David*, Rodin's *Thinker*, Kotaro's *Hand*, Savage's *Harp*, and Kollwitz's *Pietà*. (Fig. 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) The androgynous figure (Fig. 13) rises from the folds of flowing steel drapery; and ignoring gravity a terrestrial globe is suspended, welded onto its right arm in a downward direction. Sandvik Machining Solutions scanned numerous 2D images and converted them into a 3D model; and then the manufacturing was tested in several digital simulations that allowed the company to reduce the amount of steel needed to carry out the sculpture by half.

In their praise for this AI generated sculpture, the journalists noted that it necessitated seventeen sheets of steel and nine million polygons to realize it —these were the polygonal pieces of steel that were assembled to produce the statue. (Fig. 14 Rodin et Claudel, *La main de Dieu*) This compels one to ask if Buonarotti or Rodin counted the number of chisel strokes that they used in a given sculpture? Did they think of their "manufacturing efficiency or reduction of waste in order to ensure the highest quality"? Clearly, counting the number of strokes or of polygonal pieces is an impressive value for a technological mentality. But that is not entirely true, because on the one hand artists will use all the brush or chisel strokes necessary to achieve their desired form; on the other, more accomplished artists, master artists, know how perfected images can also be produced with the use of fewer lines, fewer strokes. In this case, a reduced number of strokes derives from a considerable skill, a skill that has been honed by years of strenuous work, introspection, and a meticulous comparison with the work of other artists. Developing the penetrating gaze of the artist is a life-long pursuit to align the mind, the eye, and the hand. This is punctuated with occasional breakthroughs where master artists of images, master artists of words, use fewer images and fewer words in order to approach the essence of the idea. This is not technical efficiency in the sense given in the technological society,

rather, this is efficient relationship between ideation and execution. (Fig. 15 Gaetano Cellini *L'umanità contro il male*)

To assure the success of ideation and execution, the artistic mind developed artifice. There is no art without artifice. Artifice here is understood in the sense of making, designating all human operations that aim either at complementing works of nature, or standing as a substitute to works of nature, or painting, or playing the piano, or performing mechanical tasks. (Fig. 16 Gaetano Cellini *L'umanità contro il male*) From Aristotle the philosopher, to Ludovico Dolce, the man of letters; from Nicolas Boileau, the poet, to Jean-Philippe Rameau the musician, there was a prevailing position, one that affirmed that art is hidden by artistry itself ("cacher l'art par l'art même"). A great effort in artistic skill consists in hiding the methods and means of artifice. (Fig. 17 Raffaello's *Madonna del prato*) They are thoroughly deployed by the artist while remaining carefully hidden. A highly sought-after skill on the part of master painters consisted in hiding the brush strokes. This position of traditional art was the privileged means to reconcile the artifice with which works of art are produced with the idea of expressing a part of the artistic truth. Artistic skill is hidden by artistry itself. [Recall the statement in the New Testament about Christ's robe having no seams: *John* 19:23–24 " Now the coat was without seam, woven whole from the top down."]

Artistic skill enables, compels the observer to judge whether a work of art amounts to a coherent whole. In fact, one of the first tasks in observing a work of art consists in whether it coheres as a distinct and identifiable whole. (Fig. 18 Karl Friedrich Schinkel *The Origin of Painting*) Subsequently, its composition is examined, that is, the ways in which its general volumes, its proportions, its constitutive elements, and materials are arranged. Inherent in these observations is the understanding that

artistic production depends on two sets of rules: those that apply to the maker and those that apply to the made. The first set of rules, ones that apply to the maker or artist, include artistic conceptualization, the selection of themes for the purpose of the work of art in question, imitation and invention, the knowledge of artistic traditions, license and even caprice, fiction and allegory, skill in execution, and so on. The second set of rules, ones that apply to the made, include the propriety of the tools and the materials used in their service of artistic purpose, as well as the properties of the selected materials. When we judge a work of art to be a coherent whole, we do so because we understood its composition, which is the result of the maker's thought as it is brought to bear, first, on the subject, and second on the intended composition, and third on the articulation of the materials at hand. We give various names to the tasks involved in artistic composition: combination, disposition; diminution and exaggeration; regularity and irregularity; repetition, unity, and variety; accordance and contrast; proportions and dimensions.

(Fig. 19 Karl Friedrich Schinkel *Gotische Kirche auf einem Felsen am Meer*) To put it differently, successful artistic expression depends on the skilled composition of form that displays at once the purpose for which the form was made, as well as the ways with which it was realized. Because the aim of art is to make, to bring something into being, art has a purpose other than itself. In other words, art has various purposes: it animates the intellectual life of the artist; it stimulates the mind of the observer, it inspires pity, provokes humor, elevates moods, and after the French Revolution, art could be transformed into resistance to adverse social conditions, hence the battle cry: "*Aux armes! Aux arts!"* In these examples, the purpose of art is not itself. Note that purpose of the *Impossible Statue* is the *Impossible Statue*. (Fig. 20 *The Impossible Statue*) This artistic expression expresses

itself. It symbolizes itself by severely reducing the possibilities of symbolism. It is identical with itself.

Missing is the realm of the fictive —that important realm that mediates between the artistically real and the artistically ideal. (Fig. 21, 22, 23, 24, 25) Compare the realism of Jacques Louis David's *Napoleon in his study* showing the emperor hard at work overseeing the affairs of France in the early hours of the morning, with the idealism of Antonio Canova's *Bonaparte as Mars* in the courtyard of Palazzo Brera in Milano. Compare the realism of Gilbert Stuart's *G. Washington* with Antonio Canova's *G. Washington* as a Roman patrician general and legislator. Consider the verisimilitude of William Marlowe's *St. Paul's on a Venetian canal*. Here, London's most important cathedral is placed on a characteristically Venetian canal. The painting has verisimilitude, another order of truth, an artistic truth, which is to say fiction.

(Fig. 26 *The Impossible Statue* with the AI artist in studio) Behind the *Impossible Statue* is the removal of artistic skill from the province of the artist. AI removes the very act of making from the artist. Ostensibly then, artists are now almost exclusively conceptualizers who no longer need artistic skill to realize their productions. This is heralded as the liberation of the artist from skill and from the properties of the materials at hand, —"a freedom", to quote Ellul, "from which the artist cannot escape". So there is a peculiar phenomenon arising here: the freedom from skill! What happened here to the concept of artistic will —Alois Riegl's *kuntswollen*?

Conceptualization requires that a mind considered something to be worthy of being made and that this very mind is capable of realizing it, of making it, and of devising

a strategy to realizing that something, with proper skill, apposite means, and adequate materials. Until the object is completed, the idea of making, the purpose for which a thing is made, remains partially realized. The act of making is broken if the subject, the maker, is removed. And this is precisely what AI applications are doing. The maker, the artist, is now several steps removed from the work of art —a great distancing that can eventually become an unbridgeable rupture. These two images point to some unsettling conclusions: by producing the context, the artist, and the art, AI can now occupy the realm of artistic making by staking a claim similar to *gesamstkuntswerk*, to a total work of art. Except that AI is staking a claim on reality itself, and not only artistic reality. Students of Ellul will never forget his warning that the technological order will claim reality, all realities, until nothing else exists. Finally, with Artificial Intelligence, we risk losing the intelligence of artifice itself.

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