



SOULLESS

There is a great deal of hand-wringing about AI-generated art at the moment. The arguments sound familiar: “soulless”, “just recycling what already exists”, “only humans can be truly creative”. We have heard this sort of thing before. Vinyl supposedly had a soul that CDs didn’t. Analogue photography had a soul

that digital photography didn’t. Apparently, the soul has a longstanding preference for obsolete technology.

REASONING BY ANALOGY

Humans, after all, are rarely as original as they like to think. Most artistic production consists of thousands upon thousands of tiny variations on things we have already seen. Just think of gestural abstraction, freshly rediscovered at yet another gallery opening.

An artist does not wake up one morning and reinvent the laws of aesthetics. For thousands of years, we have moved in small steps from one style to the next. A new style does not suddenly descend from Mount Olympus, delivered by the Muses into some chilly studio in Neukölln. “We are all merely epigones,” Albert Schweitzer wrote in 1899.

Whether AI really is incapable of creating anything genuinely new remains to be seen. Images and videos are already producing some pretty wild and often surreal results – and “surreal”, after all, means precisely that what we are seeing goes beyond the familiar real world. Nor does a chatbot produce text by rummaging through a giant cupboard of ready-made sentences and sticking them together. It statistically models linguistic relationships across a sea of trillions of words. Karl Kraus once remarked that an original whose imitators are better than it is no original at all. In the age of AI, that line has acquired a rather nasty new edge.

FEAR OF LOSING THE GIG

Of course, the anxiety is understandable. Many artists feel threatened. Horse-drawn carriage drivers were not particularly enthusiastic about the motor car or the steam locomotive either. Silent-film actors had serious reservations about the arrival of sound: it would destroy the universal art of visual expression. Kodak did not find the digital camera terribly amusing – and later went bankrupt.

We were also told that analogue photographs had more soul.

The pattern runs right through the history of technology.

Photographers and graphic designers in particular have reason to worry about their livelihoods. Some artists are abandoning photography, digital art and NFTs because it is easier to fend off the immediate suspicion – “Oh, that’s just AI” – when there is still a fat brushstroke on the canvas and the room smells of turpentine.

At least until the 3D printers catch up with that argument too.

Others have started working deliberately badly, making sure that the imperfections of the human hand remain reassuringly visible.

MONET AND THE WATER LILIES

We are remarkably easy to fool once our prejudices are engaged. Give us an ordinary bottle of red wine with the label of a famous château and suddenly we discover notes of leather, tobacco and the south-facing slope. Artist SHLOM recently posted what appeared to be an AI-generated image in the style of Monet. The comments arrived on cue: “You can tell immediately.” “Generic.” “Soulless.” “AI slop.”

Then he told his astonished audience that the picture was, in fact, a genuine Monet water-lily painting.

So much for the infallible human eye.



BUT WHAT ABOUT CREATIVITY?

Will human creativity disappear? Will art become flatter and more generic? Perhaps. But we should be careful not to romanticise the past.

The great workshops of the Renaissance and Baroque – Rubens, Rembrandt, Cranach – operated rather like small factories. Peter Paul Rubens would often produce the design and perhaps add a few corrections at the end. Much of the actual painting was done by assistants: one did the backgrounds, another the fabrics, another the animals.

The finished work was still a “Rubens”.

Martin Kippenberger did not make a single brushstroke on Paris Bar. He commissioned a professional sign painter to execute it. A composer writes the score; the orchestra plays it. A choreographer decides the movements; the dancers dance. Authorship has never necessarily meant doing everything with your own hands.

PROMPTING IS THE NEW MAKING

Perhaps we simply have to get used to the idea that the creative act does not necessarily lie in manual execution. It may lie in the prompt. This is not black and white. Tell an AI, “Make me a beautiful sunset,” and your creative contribution is modest. The result will probably be banal. But banal and bad art is hardly an invention of artificial intelligence. We have always had plenty of it – considerably more than good art.

There are, however, artists who spend hours or days changing, refining and sharpening prompts until they achieve precisely the effect they are after. Philipp Toledano, for example, has explored this territory extensively. In such cases, the prompt is where the intention lies. And perhaps the soul too.

Creativity, authorship and quality may increasingly reside not in the hand that executes the work, but in the mind that knows what it wants.

CRAFT AS A BARRIER TO ENTRY

The more serious problem lies elsewhere. Technical skill is disappearing as a barrier to entry. Until recently, anyone who wanted to paint, photograph, compose or animate at a serious level generally had to learn how to do it. That took years. Now almost anyone can produce images, music and video by the dozen without mastering the underlying craft.



AI Image by Phillip Toledano

DEMOCRATICALLY SPEAKING, THIS IS WONDERFUL. AESTHETICALLY SPEAKING, IT MAY BE A CATASTROPHE.

We are heading towards an enormous flood of content. Streaming platforms are already seeing it with AI-generated music: endless quantities of instantly produced material competing for attention. We should probably expect a great deal of very badly prompted, interchangeable art. Then again, perhaps AI can help us with that too?

PROF. DR. ULRICH SEIBERT

Ulrich Seibert is an art collector, professor of business law, investor and – as he insists on pointing out – a very serious man.



PHILIP TOLEDANO

Phillip Toledano is a London-born, New York-based conceptual artist exploring memory, fiction and photographic truth through AI.



AI Image by Phillip Toledano