

# Beyond the Brush:

## Art, Intention and the Means of Making

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For much of the history of Western art, the relationship between artist and artwork appeared relatively straightforward. A painter conceived an image and applied pigment to a surface. A sculptor worked upon stone, wood or clay. The physical skill required to make the work was visible in the object itself, and artistic imagination and manual execution appeared inseparable.

That familiar relationship has become so deeply embedded in our understanding of art that it can continue to influence judgement even when the means of artistic production have changed fundamentally. New forms are then asked, implicitly or explicitly, to establish their legitimacy by demonstrating sufficient resemblance to older ones.

Refractism has encountered precisely this problem. Because its images may possess qualities associated with painting, and because generative computational technology contributes to their execution, discussion readily becomes a comparison with the painter. Where is the brushwork? Who actually made the marks? If software contributed to the visible image, can the resulting work properly be attributed to the person directing it?

Perhaps these are not the most useful questions.

They may arise from defining artistic activity too narrowly through its traditional means of execution rather than asking what painting, sculpture, music, photography and other recognised arts have in common.

### **The common architecture of artistic activity**

Painting provides one way of turning human experience and imagination into a form that another person can encounter. It is plainly not the only one.

The sculptor works through material and space. The writer through language. The composer through organised sound. The performer interprets that sound through an instrument or voice. The photographer selects and organises light, viewpoint and time. Film brings together writing, performance, photography, sound, editing and direction, often involving the work of hundreds of people.

The physical mechanisms are radically different, yet beneath them lies something recognisably similar.

A human being encounters or imagines something. Attention is directed towards it. Experience, memory and emotion contribute to its interpretation. Choices are made about what matters and what does not. A medium is employed through which that interpretation can be externalised. The resulting work is then capable of being encountered by somebody else.

The sequence might be expressed simply:

Experience or imagination → intention → interpretation → means of expression → judgement → communication → human response.

This might be regarded as a common architecture of artistic activity.

If so, paint, stone, language, musical instruments, cameras and computers occupy an important but subordinate position within it. They are different mechanisms through which human intention becomes communicable.

### **The problem with the brush**

The painter provides an unusually persuasive model of authorship because conception and execution can appear to occur in a continuous physical sequence: the artist sees, interprets and makes the marks.

But the visibility of that sequence should not be confused with a definition of art.

Consider the violinist.

The violinist did not normally compose the music, manufacture the instrument or design the concert hall. The notes themselves may have been played by thousands of musicians before.

Yet interpretation makes the performance individual. Tempo, phrasing, emphasis, restraint, dynamics and innumerable moment-to-moment judgements allow two musicians playing the same composition to produce recognisably different experiences.

We do not regard the violin as the author simply because it produces the sound.

Nor does artistic authorship always require physical execution by a single individual.

Sculptors may employ assistants or specialist fabricators. Architects conceive structures constructed by others. Film directors exercise artistic authorship over works whose physical components are produced by large numbers of specialists.

The connection between imagination and execution has therefore been less simple for a very long time than the traditional image of painter and brush suggests.

## **Photography and the machine**

Photography makes the issue particularly clear.

A camera is a machine. It performs much of the physical work required to produce the image. Yet photography has long been capable of recognition as art.

Not every photograph is art. Photographs document accidents, identify individuals, record scientific observations, advertise houses and preserve family occasions. The presence of a camera confers no artistic status upon these images.

Photography becomes capable of artistic expression through what the photographer brings to it: choice of subject, viewpoint, moment, composition, light, exposure, selection and subsequent interpretation. Modern photographic practice may additionally involve extensive digital adjustment of colour, contrast, tonal relationships and other characteristics.

The machine has not disqualified the medium. Instead, artistic judgement has come to be understood as residing in the human decisions governing its use.

This suggests a useful principle:

A medium cannot, by itself, make something art. Neither should the medium, by itself, prevent something from being art.

## **Artistic capacity and mechanical facility**

There is another distinction that technological change makes increasingly difficult to ignore.

Artistic capacity is not necessarily the same thing as mechanical facility.

A person may possess acute visual perception, imagination, emotional responsiveness and aesthetic judgement without possessing the learned physical skills required to render an image convincingly with brush, pencil or chisel.

Historically, this could constitute a formidable barrier. An imagined or experienced visual idea might remain unexpressed because the person imagining it lacked the mechanical skill required by the available medium.

Contemporary computational technologies alter that relationship.

They can provide mechanisms through which a person directs the production of visual possibilities without physically constructing every element of the resulting image. This does not automatically make the person an artist. Nor does it make everything produced through such technology art. What it does is loosen the historical dependency of visual expression upon particular forms of manual dexterity.

That possibility deserves consideration in its own right.

Removing a mechanical barrier does not provide imagination. It does not provide experience, intention, taste, discrimination or judgement. It does not determine what deserves to be retained, what should be rejected, or when a work adequately communicates what its originator intended.

Indeed, once mechanical execution is partly delegated, those human contributions may become more rather than less important in determining authorship.

## **Refractism as a means of communication**

Refractism provides one example of this changed relationship.

It begins not with an instruction to generate an arbitrary image, but with an encounter with reality. A photograph records that encounter and subsequently serves as the Anchor. The artist then seeks to move beyond the optical record towards accumulated experience,

memory, present response and emotional significance while preserving the recognisable identity of the originating place.

The current Refractist methodology therefore places considerable emphasis upon observation, the Anchor, preservation of identity, direction, selection, rejection and judgement. Artificial intelligence contributes possibilities rather than conclusions. The distinction is already central to the Refractist method.

What computational technology contributes is a mechanism of visual execution.

This is especially significant where the person directing the work possesses visual ideas and judgement but lacks the conventional mechanical skills of the trained painter. The technology can give those ideas visible form. The artist must still decide what is being sought, recognise when the result has departed from that intention, reject attractive but inappropriate alternatives, redirect the process and ultimately accept responsibility for the image presented to others.

The distinction is not between skill and absence of skill. It is between different kinds of skill.

Manual dexterity may become less important. Observation, direction, discrimination and judgement do not.

### **The danger of making painting the tribunal**

This suggests that Refractism may have made an unnecessary concession in some of the arguments surrounding its development.

Because its images sometimes resemble paintings, it has been tempting to ask whether the process is sufficiently similar to painting for the resulting works to qualify as art. In doing so, painting inadvertently becomes the standard before which Refractism must establish its credentials.

There is no obvious reason why it should occupy that position.

Photography does not have to demonstrate that it is sufficiently like painting. Music plainly cannot. Sculpture occupies three-dimensional space. Literature may contain no visual image at all. Yet all participate in the broader human activity through which imagination and experience are transformed into communicable form.

Refractism should therefore not need to demonstrate that its practitioner possesses the skills of a painter. The relevant questions concern what the practitioner contributes and what the resulting work communicates.

### **Art does not require universal approval**

Nor can artistic status reasonably depend upon universal—or even majority—aesthetic approval.

Works recognised within the history of art have always divided audiences. Some people encounter profound meaning where others experience indifference, incomprehension or dislike. Contemporary and conceptual art make this particularly conspicuous, but the principle is much older.

This matters because two questions are easily confused:

Can something legitimately be considered artistic activity?

and

Is this particular example good art?

The first concerns the nature of the activity. The second involves judgement of its outcome.

Recognising photography as an artistic medium does not require us to regard every photograph as art. Accepting musical performance as an artistic activity does not make every performance good. Similarly, recognising Refractism as a potentially artistic practice would say nothing about the merit of an individual Refractist image.

That judgement properly remains with those who encounter the work—an important principle already stated in the present Working Paper.

### **Technology and resistance**

New technologies inevitably disturb existing practices. They may challenge established ideas of skill, originality, scarcity and authorship. They may also have economic consequences for artists, galleries, collectors and markets built around particular forms of production and ownership.

It would be simplistic, however, to attribute resistance to computational art solely to protection of established interests. Questions concerning training data, appropriation, originality, artistic labour and authorship are legitimate and require serious consideration.

But those concerns should be distinguished from a different proposition: that an image cannot constitute artistic expression merely because computational technology contributed to its execution.

History provides little support for defining artistic legitimacy by the absence of technology. Technologies change. The human questions surrounding their use persist.

### **From manufacture to communication**

Perhaps, therefore, the arrival of generative technology provides an opportunity to reconsider an older assumption.

Instead of asking principally how was this object made?, we might ask:

What human experience, imagination or intention gave rise to it?

What decisions transformed that intention into this particular form rather than another?

Who exercised judgement over those decisions and accepts responsibility for the result?

And what, if anything, does another human being encounter through the finished work?

These questions do not provide an objective test for art. Perhaps no such test is possible. They do, however, place painting, sculpture, photography, music, literature and computationally assisted practices upon something approaching a common conceptual ground.

They also preserve the role of the audience. Intention cannot compel response. An artist may seek to communicate and fail. A technically accomplished work may leave its audience unmoved. Another work produced by unconventional means may provoke recognition, memory, discomfort, pleasure or reflection.

The means of making cannot settle that question in advance.

## **Refractism beyond the argument about AI**

Seen from this perspective, Refractism need not seek admission to art by demonstrating sufficient resemblance to painting.

Its proposition is narrower and, perhaps, more interesting.

A real place is encountered. Photography establishes what was there. Human experience does not stop at that photographic instant: memory accumulates, familiarity alters perception, and subsequent encounters change what the place means. Refractism uses contemporary computational technology to explore whether those dimensions of experience can be given visual form without surrendering the identity of the originating reality.

Whether the resulting images are good, bad, moving, trivial—or art at all—cannot be decided by the technology that helped produce them.

Those judgements belong elsewhere.

But if artistic activity is understood as a human attempt to transform experience or imagination into a form through which another person may encounter it, then perhaps the important question for Refractism is no longer whether it resembles established art sufficiently closely.

It is whether there was something worth communicating, whether the artist succeeded in communicating it, and whether another human being finds something worth encountering in the result.

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