

About the meaning of progress

Re: Humanism was born about a year ago and it couldn't be otherwise. I say this because there are many elements that inevitably led us to this journey. Artificial intelligence, among the most advanced technologies deployed in the global arena, no longer represents a futuristic dimension and therefore far from any possible critical experience. The impact of this technology is now a fact, the human being or rather the user experiences it every day while not completely understanding its extent.

As we know, every element that has marked a stage in the pace of progress has represented a moment of net break, often not painless. Entering production processes means entering people's homes and lives, and like any new road that is traveled, even artificial intelligence requires us to leave categories of concepts behind us and to face the new with the necessary apprehension but also with the hope of overcoming some of the imposed limits.

While on the one hand artificial intelligence has to do with sensitive data, automation of production processes and cultural leveling, on the other it represents a powerful tool that allows us to reach and process information that would otherwise be impossible to assimilate in a few seconds to the single human experience. This certainly has an immediate response in the recent election that led Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States of America, but also represents an important area of research, for example, diagnostics and public health.

In fact, AI has already introduced important transformations into the health system, and will bring more in the coming years, helping more and more doctors to collect, analyze and organize clinical data, carry out early diagnosis, plan treatments and find the best solutions for the patients.

It is clear, therefore, that since a critical path on artificial intelligence has been started, we have wondered about the nature of progress and how it has marked its semantics with the succession of eras.

Inevitably the thought goes to the origins, to the masterly rupestrian paintings that we can still admire today, for example inside the caves of Lascaux, in France: what has moved the first men in the production of signs, both symbolic and practical, divinatory and communication instruments, had in itself a conception of circular progress that took into account every aspect of existence and that really was functional. We all know how the story went on. This symbiosis of art, life and meaning has been lost and civilization has moved towards divergent trajectories, characterized by the cult of acceleration and discordance to the point of losing the reins of one's own well-being.

This multiple views is indeed a complexity, involuntarily anticipating the title and theme of one of the projects presented for Re: Humanism. This complexity, however, cannot be read in a univocal way: technological progress represents for man also the extension of possibilities, sustainable development (or not) of the ability to understand what surrounds him.

This aspect is clear to artists, they have always incorporated the various languages of technology within their own expressive means. It's not a casualty that I speak of languages, because in their researches the *how* automatically becomes also a *why*. Artists like Stelarc, Jana Sterbak, Matthew Barney (but many others could be mentioned) have shown that they

want to keep this dialogue active with progress, questioning themselves dialectically about the extensive possibilities of technologies and how they could challenge established concepts such as identity, space and time.

Precisely in the light of these ideas it is possible to frame the proposals of this first edition of Re: Humanism Art Prize.

The format of the award stems from the need to combine on the one hand Alan Advantage's needs for entry into the artistic and cultural scenario - a company that moves in the area of consulting and technological innovation -, on the other hand from the desire to map the most interesting artistic research on artificial intelligence. This operation was more necessary than ever to identify, beyond the few consolidated voices that have made their way into the field, (let's think for example of Trevor Paglen, Jon Rafman, Ian Cheng or Mario Klingemann, the latter also among the winners of Re: Humanism), a whole series of cultural phenomena that in a transversal way contributed to the debate.

The call started from Italy in September 2018 and was attended by 114 artists on the global scene, some coming from that "niche" that has long experimented new technologies, others with a different history and curriculum but by nature wired to question the expressive possibilities of new means.

The project asked them to reflect on "a proactive vision of the future that awaits us" through artworks involving the use of AI algorithms or reflecting on the topic. The value proposals we received were many, to the point of encouraging us to evaluate further ways of collaboration, even with those who were not among the finalists.

Several themes and reflections are suggested by the ten selected proposals. In this text an attempt has been made to group these thematic groups in order to unravel, at least in part, the complexity of the phenomenon. The ideas to be investigated are still many and go hand in hand with technological advancement, with literary and cinematographic visions, but these conceptual nuclei remain a constant in the experiences of those who have tried to understand the impact of this technology.

Almost all of Re:Humanism's proposals are a reflection on the theme of empathy, understood as an opaque border that distinguishes human experience from that of technological artifact. In 1970 the Japanese robotics scholar Masahiro Mori presented in the scientific journal "Energy"¹ the results of a research in which he showed that the feeling of familiarity generated in a sample of people by anthropomorphic robots increased with the resemblance of the latter with the human figure. The side effect of this phenomenon is that at a certain point the extreme realism leads to a sharp decline in positive emotional reactions in favor of unpleasant sensations like disorientation and repulsion, restlessness and disturbance. The research, renamed *Uncanny valley*, pushes reflection on empathy to its limits and is the basis of works such as *devenir-fantôme* by Enrico Boccioletti, *Adversarial feelings* by Lorem and *The Fall* by Giang Nguyen Hoang, winner of the first prize.

In the case of Boccioletti it is a matter of restoring the *Uncanny valley's* own dimension, staging a simulated dialogue between thinking machines, highlighting the empathic nuances and immersing the viewer in a destabilizing environment in which the machine apparently speaks its own language .

Lorem is not a physical person, but a collaborative platform in which artists, designers and musicians question algorithms in order to reflect on the human (and non) components of the creative experience. In *Adversarial feelings* music and images generated by a neural

network study human expressivity, giving rise to distorted and perturbing images that recall precisely that empathic short circuit to which Mori referred.

The Fall by Giang Nguyen Hoang is inspired by a famous Boston Dynamics' video which shows the miraculous results achieved in making the movements of an automaton more fluid. Also in this case the result is disturbing: the more the movements of the robots become fluid, the more we feel a strong difficulty in becoming familiar with this representation. The work takes this reflection further, staging the limits of this identification process through performance. In one of the demonstration videos, the Atlas robot, after having masterfully performed various tasks, stumbles into one of the scene equipment and falls. The fall, indeed, becomes the starting point for reflection on the nature of human learning with respect to the artificial in which even failures play an educational role.

Giang Nguyen's work paves the way for another of the themes proposed by the ten finalists: often the man-machine boundary is investigated starting from those human characteristics to which a negative meaning is normally attributed. The failure for Nguyen, but also the boredom and repetitiveness in *Urge Oggi* by Daniele Spanò, the laziness and slowness of *Demand full laziness, today.* by Guido Segni.

In Spanò's case this repetitiveness is generated by a computer that plays to rock-paper-scissors. The artist demonstrates how this game is based on the human being's ability to interpret the choices of those in front of him, identifying the recurrence of his choices and the ways in which these are applied. We cannot exclude that a machine can go that far, but certainly at the present state of things algorithmic calculation does not provide for the player's empathic nuances, thus transforming the game into a random succession of meaningless gestures.

The work of Guido Segni hides behind his explicit ironic component a careful reflection on the semantic value of experiences such as work, boredom, idleness. Segni (whose name is a pseudonym that emphasizes the artist's programmatic choice) has delegated his production to a GANs (Generative Adversarial Networks) for five years, an algorithm capable of processing the image dataset submitted by the artist and to generate new results, often difficult to interpret. It is curious to discover that composing this data archive are images that reflect the artist in what he himself called "creative leisure sessions", that is images that portray him smiling, lying on a bed doing nothing. It is clear that behind these visual stimuli there is the will to question consolidated categories such as work and identity that are based on it. *If indeed the main risk is that automation can steal jobs from human beings, are we sure that the man of the future will need to work? Again, if this remote hypothesis comes true, what would be the sense of idleness and what would the industriousness be based on?* The artist with his jokes seems to see the answers.

Another recurrent theme among the selected projects concerns the use of algorithms as tools for a survey on the *making of art*, on the requirements underlying human creativity and on the capacity of a machine to replace man in these processes.

Here is appropriate a position statement. Faced with the succession of articles that loudly announce the introduction of works generated by algorithms within the art market, it is necessary to look beyond market trends and the surprise resulting from the observation that yes, an algorithm is capable to produce a result of its own, perhaps intercepting the style of Van Gogh or Picasso, but does not have a personal motivation to do so. Those who are more familiar with the contents of art know well that, beyond the final result, what really makes us participate in a work are its premises. Behind these operations it is difficult not to feel the human search for a horizon shared with the machine.

This is how works such as *Grammar #1* by Antonio "Creo" Daniele, *My Artificial Muse* by the trio Barqué-Duran, Klingemann, Marzenit and *A Brief History of Western Cultural Production* by Adam Basanta are born. All these projects involve direct intervention by the algorithms in the creation of an aesthetic report.

In Antonio "Creo" Daniele the SketchRNN algorithm is the tool through which investigate the nature of the sign, the primary source of communication, at the base of every artistic language. Through the transition from a "Human-grammar" to an "Artificial-grammar" the artist is able to identify clusters at the base of the graphic and expressive components.

Barqué-Duran, Klingemann and Marzenit start from the concept of "muse", so dear to the historical and artistic tradition to question the algorithm in search of common patterns. What comes out is an alienating result, artificial intelligence in this case generates results of its own and far from the human linguistic conception. Here the effort is to create a dialogue between the two languages through one of the tools most akin to artistic creativity: painting. The inspiration emerges through a performative process which also includes the sounds of Marzenit. Everything is wisely orchestrated to answer the question: *can a muse be artificial?*

A Brief History of Western Cultural by Basanta, as the title itself suggests, exploits the potential of AI to trace a path of meaning that takes into account the different instances of Western culture. This path is the result of the work of a machine learning on a dataset of open source images coming from the main world museums. What emerges is a potentially plausible product, the result of the various pieces of the cultural path that the machine was able to develop. More than stopping at the reliability of the result, Basanta shows us how culture today travels through networks thanks to the archives coming directly to its user and intervening directly in its identity construction.

Above digital identity also reflects the work of Michele Tiberio, this time however we speak of personal identity or rather of its projection through social networks and platforms where it is based on a complex of induced aspects: behind the will to show itself in a certain way there is a whole undergrowth of conversations and actions that give us back the complexity of an identity discourse. The artist collects all these personal manifestations in a publication and goes even further, questioning an algorithm in search of character patterns, the same ones that Diletta Tonatto, researcher and sociologist, olfactory designer and creator of the *Maison Tonatto* - who collaborates with Tiberio in the realization of *Me, My Scent* - uses for the realization of a fragrance that translates the digital identity of Tiberius into olfactory notes. In this work it is very interesting to understand the passage from virtual and intangible reality to the perceptive physical one.

To close the thematic path through the proposals of Re: Humanism ten winners there is *Complexity*, a performative work by Enrica Beccalli in collaboration with Roula Gholmieh which, as anticipated by the title itself, investigates the complexity but also the perfect balance of the mechanisms of cooperation that guide the movements of birds flocks. Looking at these, we cannot fail to notice its organic nature and fluidity and yet we are unable to identify a single driving element. As in a multi-voice concert, the end result is more than the sum of its parts. The couple submits this movement to an algorithm that can then generate its own path. The outcome is returned, through a series of physical inputs transmitted directly to the performer by interacting with his auricle, stimulating the areas dedicated to balance. This solicitation leads the dancer to introduce the movements generated by the AI within his improvisation. *Complexity* becomes a witness of a possible dialogue between man and machine through artistic experience.

All the projects proposed by Re: Humanism represent an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on the nature of technological advancement, their main value lies in the critical ability to

identify the assumptions underlying each phase of progress. The vision that comes out of it, far from showing itself to be emphatic and alarmist, puts at center the problematic through dialogue, collaboration and multidisciplinary. More and more the artist needs to confront himself with the fields of scientific research and science needs a lateral look that brings the world towards a sensitive dimension. Our wish is to carry on this research, incorporating more and more realities, people and experiences within our path.