

Ben Davis

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SHORT ANSWER: *Of course it's art!* There's no limit to what you can classify as "art." The question is only ever whether it's good art. And people seem to be very amused by it.

LONGER ANSWER: *It's not art.* The way it is getting used is essentially like a psychedelic Instagram filter, and the results are actually a bit repetitious, don't you think? There were already very, very striking images produced by algorithmic means, so I'm not sure what the hoopla is.

Even so, I don't doubt that you can invent AI that can figure out how to make something that has a lot if not all the characteristics of what we call "art," even the really brainy stuff. There will be a Turing test where you won't be able to tell what is made by a human and what is made by a computer intelligence, no doubt about it.

But really what "art" as a category means to us is an invention of the Romantic period in Europe. And what it tends to mean very specifically is "proof of human creative genius," which took on extra cult-like status in response to industrialization, as people tried to find ways to feel like they were holding onto their humanity in a fast-technologizing world. So, as humans have invented new tools of image-making and form-making—photography being the classic example—what tends to happen is that what we call "art" mutates to find a new way to convey "human creative genius."

So, it's like, "OK, the photographers do portraits; painting is about exploring color and form and expression now," which is what happened about when photography became mainstream at the end of the 1800s. And then, what also happens is that, some other artists figure out how to use the tool to convey the new standard of what "art" is, and you get something like "art photography." And that tends to be how it goes.

Maybe the smarter and more creative our computers get, the harder it gets for artists to find new strategies to symbolize "human creativity." Maybe the idea of celebrating exceptional "human creativity", in fact, is dated. But I'm pretty sure that's what the cult of "art" and the cult of the "artist" means, even today, so in that sense, Deep Dream just represents a modest new displacement, or challenge that artists holding onto that tradition have to tangle with, that's all.

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