

Artificial “intelligence” and the ontology of art:

A phenomenological inquiry

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The article explores the philosophical implications of artificial intelligence (AI) in the realm of art, drawing from phenomenological perspectives. Firstly, it aims to clarify specific terms frequently used in philosophical and technological debates, thereby enhancing dialogue in the field and addressing underlying issues. The article focuses on questioning the role of art as an event of manifestation and explores the implications of AI on the relationship between art and Truth. In this regard, the analysis considers whether AI-generated art can truly engage in the ontological event as the human-created art, or if it merely remains a product of computational processes, lacking genuine existential depth. The goal is to return to the fundamental question of being of the artwork, seeking to understand how AI challenges or redefines traditional concepts of art's essence.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, art, phenomenology.

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In the postscript to his seminal work *The Origin of the Work of Art*¹, M. Heidegger poses a thought-provoking question: «Is art still an essential and necessary way in which truth happens, that truth which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this essence?»². However, the concern about an “end of art” has earlier origins. About a century before, G. W. F. Hegel had anticipated the end of art’s ability to express the highest spiritual truths, ceding its role to conceptual thought. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*³, Hegel outlines the historical development of art through three phases – Symbolic, Classical and Romantic – culminating in the idea that art, while still meaningful, no longer serves as the primary means for the manifestation of the Absolute Spirit. This progression reflects a shift from the sensory and immediate to the conceptual and rational.

This inquiry, situated within a philosophical context, prompts profound and complex reflections on the role and nature of art in contemporary society. Indeed, the urgency of this question has intensified with recent technological developments, particularly the

¹ Martin Heidegger wrote his work *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* between 1935 and 1936. The first edition of the text, however, was published in 1950 by the publishing house Günther Neske.

² For the article, the following English translation of the German work was used: M. Heidegger, *The origin of the Work of Art*, transl. by J. Young, K. Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 81.

³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Duncker und Humblot, Berlin 1835. This is the collection of notes from university lectures on Aesthetics given by Hegel in Heidelberg in 1818 and in Berlin from 1820 to 1829.

advent of artificial intelligence (AI). Machines, through advanced machine learning algorithms and neural network techniques, possess now the capability to learn and generate artistic content autonomously. It would seem, then, that rationality and computational calculation have become part of the artistic process itself, changing its rules and, perhaps, its essence. This technological progression challenges traditional conceptions of creativity, compelling us to reconsider classical categories and frameworks to develop a coherent understanding of the aesthetic implications. In this scenario, procedural logic would not only surpass art as a means of expressing the Spirit, but art itself could be reduced to computational outputs. This shift would blur the boundaries between philosophy of art and computer science, making their respective domains increasingly indistinguishable. To adequately address these complex issues, it is essential to clearly and commonly define a series of key terms.

1. Human or non-human. Challenging the concept of intelligence

Firstly, it is necessary to delve into what is meant by “artificial intelligence”. It refers to the capability of a machine to imitate intelligent human behaviour: this involves learning from experience, understanding complex concepts, engaging in natural language conversations and making decisions based on data. It operates through sophisticated algorithms and models, such as neural networks, which process and analyse vast amounts of data to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. However, for the purpose of a philosophical analysis, it is important to understand what we mean by “intelligence” when referring to a machine⁴. Human intelligence encompasses a range of cognitive abilities, including reasoning, problem-solving, understanding, self-awareness and creativity. AI, on the other hand, excels in processing information, identifying patterns and performing specific tasks at high speed and accuracy, but it lacks consciousness, self-awareness and subjective experiences, which are core components of human intelligence.

⁴ Cf. K. Crawford, *Atlas of AI. Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2021.

To find an answer to the question: “can the adjective intelligent be attributed to a machine?”, we can turn directly to ChatGPT, a large language model developed by OpenAI based on the GPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) architecture. It uses advanced machine learning techniques to understand and generate human-like text based on the input it receives. Trained on a diverse dataset covering a wide range of topics, ChatGPT can perform various tasks such as answering questions, generating text, providing recommendations and engaging in interactive conversations.

When asked “are you intelligent?”, ChatGPT responds as follows: «*No, I don't possess intelligence or consciousness in the way humans do. I am a machine learning model that processes and generates text based on patterns in data. While I can provide useful information and engage in conversation, I don't have self-awareness or subjective experiences*»⁵. The denial, therefore, comes directly from the entity in question. It is intriguing to consider why the term “intelligent” is used so lightly, especially given the philosophical complexity of defining intelligence. The perception of intelligence in machines often arises from their ability to perform tasks that humans associate with intelligent behaviour. For example: AI can diagnose diseases, recommend personalized content, drive autonomous vehicles and – we aim to understand this – even create art. These capabilities may give the impression of intelligence, but they are fundamentally different from human cognition. AI's “intelligence”, indeed, is a product of extensive programming, data processing and pattern recognition rather than conscious thought or understanding.

The theory of G. W. Leibniz regarding the difference between blind thought and intuitive thought⁶ – perhaps the most significant attempt to define intelligence – seems to be of great utility for comprehending the distinctiveness of human intelligence. According to Leibniz, blind thought (*cogitatio caeca*) refers to the use of symbols, signs or calculations to manipulate ideas without a clear and distinct understanding of the underlying concepts. In contrast, intuitive thought involves a direct, clear and comprehensive awareness of the ideas and their interrelations. Applying this distinction to AI, we can argue that machines are inherently limited to blind thought: they can process

⁵ To obtain this response, ChatGPT version 4o was used.

⁶ G. W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, Raspe, Amsterdam 1765.

data, execute algorithms and generate outputs based on the patterns and rules programmed into them, but they lack the capacity for intuitive thought. This means that while AI can simulate certain aspects of human cognition, it does so without genuine understanding or awareness. For instance, when an AI⁷ generates a piece of art or solves a complex mathematical problem, it does so by following predefined algorithms and leveraging vast amounts of data, but it does not have an awareness of the artistic significance or the mathematical beauty of its outputs.

This raises the question: is intelligence necessary to create a work of art? Or is it perhaps subjectivity that is essential? Even the machine, however, seems to underscore that there is still a distinctly human trait which it cannot, at least so far, imitate. The problem is to understand whether art falls within this specificity.

2. A challenge for Aesthetics. The truth of the Work of Art

Among these reflections, the concept of “work of art” stands out. Following the phenomenological approach, we will consider the work of art not merely as a physical object but as a *manifestation*, an event through which an “invisible” reality reveals itself, acquiring a cognitive and ontological significance. In this sense, art is not just a physical object, but an event that engages the viewer’s intentionality and perception. It involves an embodied process where the consciousness interacts with the artwork, revealing deeper meanings and existential truths that transcend everyday experiences. This phenomenological vision allows us to explore art as an experience that goes beyond mere sensory perception, touching on the dimensions of truth.

In his volume *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger develops a complex philosophical reflection on the essence of art. The philosopher argues that the work of art is not merely a product of the artist’s creative activity, but an event in which Being is manifested. The thesis of Heidegger is based on the concept of *aletheia* (αλήθεια), a Greek term meaning “*un-concealment*” of truth: for him, the work of art is the site of unveiling where a hidden truth is brought to light. In his theory of art, the German

⁷ Having questioned the appropriateness of the terminology “artificial intelligence”, it would be more accurate to place the word “intelligence” in quotation marks. However, for the sake of brevity, we will continue to use the acronym AI to refer to it.

philosopher distinguishes between the “world” (*Welt*), understood as the cultural, historical and social context in which we live, and the “earth” (*Erde*), which represents the material and physical aspects of reality. The authentic work of art is the result of the dynamic tension between “world” and “earth”, an interaction that generates new understandings and meanings. Heidegger thus refers to the work of art (*Werk*) as an entity possessing an ontological dimension and not merely an aesthetic one, since the authentic work of art is an event that allows the unveiling of Being (*Sein*).

The issue of particular interest for the purposes of this article, however, concerns Heidegger’s reflection on the role of the artist. Indeed, for the German philosopher, the work of art must be freed from its references: «The artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge»⁸. Through this conclusion, Heidegger reaches a pivotal and challenging thesis: contrary to the romantic ideology which exalts the artist as a creative genius, revived by the avant-garde’s role of “signature”, the unique revelatory power of art hinges solely on the result. The artist’s role, while significant, is ultimately secondary to the work’s capacity to disclose deeper truths and engage with the essence of Being. It is rather a conduit. This fundamental thesis appears to downplay the *superstructure* prevalent in much of contemporary art, while bringing the focus back to the artwork itself and the aesthetic experience it evokes.

Therefore, the focus must be on the “artistic outcome” of works created by or with the help of AI. Considering the sale of the first artwork created by AI, the *Portrait of Edmond Belamy* conceived by the Obvious collective in 2018 and sold for \$432,500, it seems that the perceptual and aesthetic quality of the result was highly successful even to the eyes of critic. Several artists, such as Anna Ridler or Rekif Anadol, use AI to realise their works, delegating the outcome to it. Ridler uses AI to explore themes as memory, history and technology: she meticulously maintains datasets, such as tulip photographs, to train AI models, blending traditional artistic practices with modern technology. Anadol is an artist and director known for his immersive, data-driven installations that transform architectural spaces. By integrating AI with environmental data, Anadol creates artworks

⁸ M. Heidegger, *The origin of the Work of Art*, cit., p. 40.

that are both visually stunning and conceptually rich. Since its inception in 2016, Anadol has utilised machine intelligence, specifically DCGAN, PGAN and StyleGAN algorithms, as a collaborator with human consciousness. These algorithms are trained on vast datasets to uncover previously unrecognised layers of our external realities. Anadol and his team gather data from digital archives and publicly available sources, processing these datasets with machine-learning classification models.

In these cases, the creative relationship between author and artificial intelligence establishes a dynamic within the artwork, reminiscent of the unexpected emergency driven by freedom found in Performance art. Through a process of transformation and deformation shaped by this interaction – balancing between natural and artificial realms, sensitivity and intelligibility – the artistic outcome emerges, bearing witness to this relationship. As described by Roberto Diodato in the context of Ridler’s work *The fall of the house of Usher*, realised with the use of GANs technology: «it explores a “quasi-memory” that subtly diverges from the purely external memory of a database. [...] Ridler’s work achieves a striking effect by suspending the meaning of a memory image, integrating our sensitivity into a liminal space, a *punctum* etched into a specific, almost human, memory-image»⁹. The relationship between a human subjectivity and AI, used here as a *medium*, has generated in this case a different unveiling of a reality not otherwise knowable.

According to Heidegger’s assertion, the involvement of a machine in the creation of the work should not influence aesthetic reflection, since it is the contemplation of the work itself that evokes such suggestions in the viewer. However, the problematic aspect lies in this ability of a non-human entity (the machine) to manifest and bring to light something that transcends procedural logic. The limitation would be that machines operate based on algorithms and data: they perform tasks following predefined rules and patterns, which raises questions about their ability to transcend these limits. On the other hand, indeed, the concept of art implies intuition, spontaneity and something ineffable,

⁹ From the talk by R. Diodato at the seminar *Art in the Digital Age: towards new forms of authorship*, curated by E. Di Raddo and D. Perra, MEET. Digital Culture Center, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, 6 March 2023. Cf. R. Diodato, *The Dream of a Machine. An Example of the Chiasmatic Image*, in “Paradigmi, Rivista di critica filosofica”, 3/2023, pp. 517-528.

that only the dialogue with human sensitivity can guarantee. These qualities seem at odds with the structured nature of computational logic. Following the thread of reflection that has led us this far, the question we ask is: can a machine, rationally programmed with calculations and algorithms and structured on a computational logic, open itself up to the truth of Being?

3. Non-human, beyond human. The ineffable of the machine

To answer this question, it is crucial to understand how these “intelligent” machines actually operate. The process of AI in art creation involves several sophisticated stages that leverage advanced machine learning techniques and neural network architectures.

It starts with the aggregation of extensive datasets from diverse sources, encompassing various forms of artistic expression such as images of paintings, music recordings and literary texts. This diversity is crucial for the AI model to develop a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of different artistic styles and techniques. Once collected, the data undergoes pre-processing to ensure it is suitable for training the AI models. This step includes tasks such as normalization, augmentation and transformation of data to enhance its quality and variability, which aids in improving the robustness of the AI models. The pre-processed data is fed into deep learning algorithms to analyse and learn from it. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) are typically used for image-related tasks, as they are proficient in capturing spatial hierarchies in images through convolutional layers. For music and sequential data, Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) and their advanced variants, such as Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, are employed to handle temporal dependencies. These neural networks identify and extract key features, patterns and styles inherent in the data, building an internal representation of various artistic elements that the AI can later use for creation. A critical innovation in AI art generation is the use of GANs, which consist of two neural networks working in tandem: the generator and the discriminator. The generator creates new artworks by attempting to replicate the patterns it has learned, while the discriminator evaluates these creations against the training data, providing feedback to the generator. This adversarial process continues iteratively, with the generator refining its outputs to produce

increasingly convincing and aesthetically pleasing artworks. To enhance creativity, style transfer techniques are employed. These techniques allow the AI to apply the learned styles from the dataset to new content, blending different artistic elements to create unique artworks. This involves transferring the style of one artwork to the content of another, achieved through neural networks that can decouple style and content representations. The final stage involves the generation of the finished artworks.

It appears, therefore, that the final artwork is simply an outcome produced through a sequence of algorithms, lacking any surplus or “emergent revelation”. However, this perspective overlooks several important aspects of the interplay between AI and the creative process. Firstly, while it is true that AI-generated artworks are the result of sophisticated algorithms and extensive datasets, this does not necessarily diminish their creative and original value. The ability of AI to blend various styles and techniques can lead to the creation of unique and innovative works that might not have been conceived by human artists alone.

Additionally, the concept of emergent properties in AI-generated art should be considered. While each algorithmic step is meticulously programmed, the final outcome can sometimes exhibit qualities that were not explicitly intended by the creators. In mathematical and informatics terms, this means that the interactions between different layers of neural networks and the vast parameter space can lead to results that are more than the sum of their parts, displaying unexpected patterns or behaviours. Specifically, the high-dimensional parameter space and non-linear activations in neural networks can produce complex, non-intuitive patterns. For instance, in Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), the convolutional layers and pooling operations can uncover intricate spatial hierarchies in visual data. In Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), the sequential nature and feedback loops can generate sophisticated temporal dynamics in music or text. These emergent properties can add layers of complexity and depth to the artwork, offering viewers new perspectives and interpretations.

With these clarifications, it is understandable why, in the creative process, the role of human interaction with AI should not be underestimated: while AI-generated art might appear to be a mechanical outcome of algorithmic processes, it holds the potential to take part in the manifestation process. Indeed, we have seen that the result of AI procedures is

far more than a simple “sum” of known data, but, instead, it marks the opportunity to open up an emergence, an apparition – from existing data – of a possible Other. Forcing Platonic language, it embodies the enigma of *Chora*, an inaccessible, inexhaustible and indefinable, yet indispensable, space.

4. A silent player. The response of Life

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the use of AI in artistic production could be an effective *creative* possibility, capable of surpassing the artist’s own intention by opening up to a truth that is unknowable through human experience, enriched by an infinite knowledge and quantity of data. However, sticking to a phenomenological analysis, it is important to analyse the qualities of the data collected. We could say, using language dear to contemporary French phenomenology, that all the data retrieved by the machine – from which something completely unique and unpredictable can emerge, given the non-linearity that characterizes these modes of computation – can only be “visible”¹⁰ data collected on the “horizon of the world”. Indeed, although the machine can be aware of experiences and feelings, it does so only through a representation which is the translation of these experiences in some language. As we have seen, the machine’s intelligence is purely cognitive, not reflective, and certainly cannot have firsthand experience outside its learning process. Therefore, while it can know, for example, what emotions are – happiness, sadness or nostalgia – it will always have only an interpreted and, for this reason, a reduced notion of them. This brings forth the need for serious reflection on the uniqueness of *being embodied*¹¹ and the actual necessity of this characteristic in relation to art.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this article, we will use the concepts of “visible” and “world” in the meaning given to them by M. Henry. The visible pertains to the external, objective appearance of things, what can be perceived by the senses. The world is the realm of these visible and objective realities, the external domain where objects are placed and observed. Cf. M. Henry, *L’essence de la manifestation*, PUF, Paris 1963.

¹¹ The question of the body and of “being embodied” are central to M. Henry’s philosophy. In this regard, please refer to the study on the thought of Maine de Biran carried out in the volume M. Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps. Essai sur l’ontologie biranienne*, PUF, Paris 1987².

To do this, we will analyse the thought of the French philosopher M. Henry and his phenomenology of Life. In *Voir l'invisible, sur Kandinsky*¹², through the analysis of the paintings and the theoretical texts of the Russian painter V. V. Kandinsky, Henry offers his theory of art. It is rooted in his phenomenology of Life, which emphasises the affective and immediate experience of Life in the human *flesh*¹³. We will try to summarise the philosopher's position: he argues that true art reveals inner Life rather than merely representing the external world. For this reason, he critiques traditional representational approaches, asserting that art conveys the "invisible" and reveals the affective depths of existence, making visible the internal Life felt in the flesh. Therefore, the knowledge revealed by art is knowledge without an object: it's the ontological domain of Life, which folds upon itself and never positions itself as an object before viewers. Art's essence lies in its *pathos*, which uniquely emerges – in the particular case of painting – through the interplay of colours and forms, expressing their immediate subjectivity rather than any external meaning, whether objective, emotional or aesthetic. In summary: art is a mode of Life and ultimately a way of living. Life is present in art for its essence: this essence is to experience itself and to grow, manifesting as movement.

Referring to our starting point, there are two issues that, taking Henry's thesis as correct, would contest the actual title of "artistic" to works made by and, ultimately, even with AI. Firstly, critiquing the notion of representation, Henry argues that aesthetic ideas linked to representation (for example, the deformation of an object through specific techniques or the joining together of two distant elements) are not genuine artworks but rather "*manifestos*". To be considered true artworks, creations must be inseparable from the matrix of sensibility and evaluated according to its criteria. Eidetically, eliminating objective representation is crucial to reveal the pure essence of art. However, artworks generated through AI do not have the possibility to detach themselves from the representation, as the "creative ideas" of the machine, whether it authored or even merely

¹² M. Henry, *Voir l'invisible. Sur Kandinsky*, Bourin, Paris 1998.

¹³ In Henry's theory, *flesh* (from the French "*chair*") is an immanent reality of an affective nature: arising from the tones of suffering and joy, it manifests itself in specific experiences of suffering, pleasure and pain. The flesh is the inner experience through which living beings perceive their own self-affection for Life. It is opposed to the transcendent "objective-body", as it is characterised as an immanent experience. Cf. M. Henry, *Incarnation. Une phénoménologie de la chair*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2000.

co-authored the work of art, are originated from the reinterpretation of existing data and concepts, elaborated in an unexpected and original way, but lacking any sensible intuition. Secondly, for Henry, since *pathos* and Life are by essence “that for which we have no words”, the linguistic referent would unavoidably eliminate them. Devoid of *flesh*, the machine cannot experience and convey Life, but only a representation of it, the translation of one experience (rehearsed by another) into a specific and computational language, that inevitably creates a mediation and a distance.

To clarify these concepts, let us take an example proposed by the author: speaking of the element of the line in reference to Kandinsky’s abstract art, Henry emphasises that no line satisfies on its own or evokes an impression of beauty. It is the force that produces the line, delighting in its creation, that is satisfied. This delight, the feeling that Life has of itself, justifies the choice of the line and its particular path, because the inner experience of the forces that generate that path is precisely the expression of Life trying to express itself. Every form is justified in itself by the *pathos* which it expresses. It would seem that, for the phenomenology of Life, there is no room for “machine-made” in the horizon of art, precisely because of their inability to immediately experience Life in the flesh and, consequently, transmit it through art.

However, if we shift our attention to the the chapter that Henry dedicates to the *Colour*, we will find a contrasting, but maybe more interesting, point of view. Here the French philosopher describes colours as “*carnal beings*”, stating that life inherently resides in them, in the work of art and only subsequently extends from the work to the artist. In its phenomenological essence and tangible form, as sensation and subjectivity, colour embodies the affective tonality and the “inner sound” that the French philosopher investigates through his research. In this way, the focus shifts again from the act of creation to the aesthetic experience the viewer has in front of the work of art, avoiding the dangerous step back from Heidegger’s enlightened thesis. Henry emphasises that this experience is not limited to perceiving objects and attributing meaning to them. For example, to experience the colour red is not simply to perceive a red object or the hue itself, nor to judge it as red. Instead, it is about experiencing the power and impression of red within themselves. It is about focusing solely on the colour itself and letting it influence us, thus experiencing Life in its continuous effort of self-differentiation.

Let us think of the previously mentioned works by Anadol, in particular the work *Machine Hallucinations – Nature Dreams*¹⁴. Phenomenologically, what stands out are the vivid colours and abstract exaggeration of an imperceptible fluidity, never static, always in motion. The virtual flesh of colour, devoid of any form or reference to reality, on the borderline between presence and absence, imprints itself on the viewer, allowing the emotional essence to be felt and experienced. In this case, then, AI would be the producer of those “carnal-virtual colours”, the creator of an abstraction that is effectively beyond human imagination, beyond the “horizon of the world”.

These considerations lead us to one issue that, in conclusion, is intended to be underlined, rather than to resolve doubts, to open questions. In Henry’s words, art is Life’s response to the query that arises from its own nature. These are questions that appear in the flesh, in the experience of joy and suffering, of solitude and encounter. Art is intimately connected to this eternal search for meaning. The focus is on a topic already highlighted by Kandinsky¹⁵: the *Inner Necessity*. It means that, at the origin of authentic artistic production, lies a necessity: it is the one of the artists, or of the artwork itself, which aims to communicate a personal, universal, situated or a-historical *pathos*. There exists a need for a relationship with an Other, to tell what cannot be expressed in the language of the world, to “make the invisible visible”. This “inner necessity” is the object of aesthetics and the sense that must not be lost sight of when reflecting on the nature of art. As of today, we know that machines cannot feel such a necessity: their production will inevitably respond to a different need, such as a predefined programme or an imposed requirement. It is the human who must answer: is it still possible to feel, know and communicate the interior necessity of one’s own life without the aid of technology?

¹⁴ The work *Machine Hallucinations – Nature Dreams* (2021) by Refik Anadol is an AI Data Sculptur made in the form of a hypnotic loop that combines colour and sound.

¹⁵ V. V. Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst, Insbesondere in der Malerei*, Reinhard Piper Verlag, Monaco di Baviera 1911.