# For Wh(Art) it's Worth?

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*With the COVID-19 pandemic, the push to adopt digital platforms and technologies in the arts and cultural sector has accelerated. New ways of imagining and producing art and culture have been emerging and they pose thought-provoking questions in many aspects, such as the meaning of the artistic process, the role of artists and craftsmen, and the definition of art. This essay explores some of these new ways of making art and the questions they present.*

> *"The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight."*

And so declared art critic, John Berger, in the opening lines of *Ways of Seeing* (Berger 2008), a seminal work which anchors the reading list for foundation classes in contemporary art theory and iconography studies. While Berger only references visual representations in art, the point he is making seems applicable to the entirety of the arts and culture—meaning-making in art is never definitive. Art evokes feelings of awe, curiosity, fear and love; a plethora of multi-dimensional qualities that forms the aesthetic experience. This experience is never the same for everyone and are more than just fanciful bites of thought; they hold and communicate meaningful values by which we potentially chart and understand our existence.

Meaning, therefore, is the central thread of this written exploration of the future of the arts and culture. It will be the overarching theme that runs through this piece, a consideration of the various possibilities of meaning for the arts, culture, and its institutions, amid the momentous changes that we are currently going through.

# Re: the present and future of the arts

We speak of the COVID-19 pandemic as being Pandora's box, and reasonably so. Among many other things, it unleashed a farrago of uncertainties and disruptions as our everyday lives were forcibly brought to a standstill. We could no longer do things the way we previously did—a universality that affects the art community as well. Galleries were closed, exhibitions were halted, craft production was disrupted, to name a few. We had a series of chained upsets amid the overwhelming sense of gloom that loomed over the future. But much like how hope revealed itself to Pandora, the pandemic too revealed that not all is lost, and that hope can come in many forms. It is these adaptive developments that I wish to draw our attention to, and their implications for meaning-making at large.

Limitations have birthed new imaginations of art and culture—various performance arts such as opera and ballet have shifted to virtual spaces (*Tatler Hong Kong* 2021), while traditional in-person crafts such as filming and acting adapted to the restrictions imposed. The UK soap drama *Eastenders*, for instance, has actors using their real-life partners and family as body doubles so filming can continue without breaking social distancing regulations (*BBC News* 2020). This digitisation phenomenon has opened spaces for cultural activities—museum, heritage, and gallery tours have gone online, and with a few clicks of the mouse, one can easily enter and view places that are closed in real life. But this is not limited to museums and galleries; YouTube's "Virtual Reality" Channel offers full 360-degree views of historical places and heritage sites (YouTube

n.d.), while Google Arts & Culture (Google Arts & Culture n.d.) has over 500 virtual tours of art and cultural destinations that would satisfy the appetites of even the most hardcore tourists.

Craft has found itself including and recognising new forms of expression. From the social commentary public artworks of STIK, one of the many street artists who have been spearheading the production of art in public spaces (Christie's 2020) in a time where closed spaces are out-of-bounds, to the digital art by Mike Winkelmann, also known by his alias, Beeple (Goodwin 2021), which employs Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs)[1] as a medium of value.

I will not belabour the point—new ways of imagining the arts have emerged. This is intertwined with technology, which is beginning to play a complementary or primary role in manifesting art, culture, and craft. It is a phenomenon that has and will continue to unfold now and after this period of uncertainty. Questions regarding a post-pandemic arts and culture scene are straightforwardly important. We want to know what these changes might look like and how we can best prepare for them if need be. I offer not so much answers as questions for us to contemplate. Within the limits of this essay, I seek to address the question about the value of arts and culture and its implication for institutions.

# The questions we ask ourselves

A salient example of new art forms is digital art, which has been gaining recognition over the past few years. Digital art is not a controversial notion per se; it is exactly the kind of innovation that we would naturally expect to arise with the prevalence of technological involvement in traditional craft. However, with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) artists such as AI Creative Adversarial Network (AICAN) (AICAN 2021), who recently held a solo gallery exhibit, and AI-generated art such as the Portrait of Edmond de Belamy, sold by Christie's for US$432,500 (Christie's 2018), critical questions must be raised about the nature of art itself. To what extent does the nature of the creator of an artwork determine whether it is art? When we talk about artists and cultural institutions, we conventionally think of expressions of art or craft that are uniquely produced by human beings. Although there may be other types and forms of such activity, like those done by animals, we largely think of art as a human-centric activity, at least within the confines of this frame of reference and discussion. What is interesting about these new developments is that it pushes us to think about this paradigm—are we prepared to let go of this uniqueness that for the most part has been taken for granted? And in doing or not doing so, in what ways does it change the meaning-making experiences afforded to us via art?

By now, astute readers may think "well let's just include AI artists as sentient beings together with us—let's give them personhood and include them as humans". Tempting that may be, it does not sound satisfying given that our current notions of the relationship between art and ourselves are being challenged as they are. For instance, how would this inclusive attitude pan out in the immediate and long run for stakeholders? Traditional artists and the nature of craft would be affected by this inclusion. Too much spotlight and hype have been focused on human artists who can and have collaborated with technology and AIs, but what about artists and craft that are not readily translatable or compatible with these developments?

As technology develops, more types of AI-based art will emerge in the market such as AI-generated, or AI-assisted art. A possible issue that may arise is the dilemma of inclusion and exclusion when dealing with such forms of art. If we exclude them, it will seem to be an unfair penalisation of innovative forms. But including them as art may result in problems of competition with human artists who cannot catch up with the production power of algorithm-generated art, or who are engaged in traditional crafts that do not translate well digitally or with technology. Even the previous leverage of the "original creative human mind" is increasingly challenged, as AI too, demonstrates the ability to produce original compositions. Take for instance Art AI (Art AI n.d.), an AI art gallery which through Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs)[2] is able to produce original creative works. On what grounds of value then would human artists claim, when the twin domains of quality and originality, which grounds aesthetic value, are challenged by AIs?

By extension, what does this mean for institutions, especially those who are involved in the arts and culture? Would there be a need to have support systems or policies to cope with a paradigm shift that potentially sees the obsolescence of traditional modes of craft and artists who depend on them for their livelihoods? The status of AI art would raise questions for such institutions, and as we have seen, it is not just a simple matter of whether such works can be accepted or not. Institutions that promote, preserve, and protect the arts and culture, are predicated on the premise that this is a uniquely human activity, that it is a celebration of human creativity at its finest. The question of whether we accept AI-generated art then becomes a concern since by accepting it, the idea of human creative excellence becomes compromised. If that is the case, the hard question that this points to

for institutions is—what do they stand for? Is a re-evaluation of their core ideologies, identities, or missions to be considered?

# What next?

My sense is most arts and cultural institutions would want to preserve the human element of these activities. There is a romanticism, a hope that is captured in this idea that in and of itself gives us meaning. As Lee Daehyung points out, "The new calling of art will be to ask the crucial question of what will preserve a humanity differentiates human beings from robots—how do we resist being reduced to 0s and 1s" (Daehyung 2020). Daily advancements in technology and information have in many ways been accelerated in the current pandemic. The questions raised throughout this essay not only aim to highlight the changes brought about by technological advancements in the arts and cultural scene. To a larger extent, they are to highlight the sort of structures and support systems which must exist for our arts and culture to thrive, in a changing world where arts and cultural institutions play a more important role than ever. A step forward we should be considering when entering this flurry of movements and advancements is arguably one that is inward-looking and introspective—what sort of meaning and values do we want for ourselves? A robust philosophy of meaning when it comes to the arts and culture will be the compass that directs us through these new developments and uncertainties. □

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Notes:

1. NFTs are tokens of digital art that are placed on digital ledgers called "blockchains". NFTs are unique and are purchased because of this uniqueness, which guarantees sole ownership to the work even though it can be copied multiple times. An easy way of understanding this is to think of owning an original file; people can copy it as many times as they want, but the unique status of it being the original and its ownership is still yours.

2. Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) are a class of AI generator algorithms that utilise two separate neural networks called the "Critic" and the "Generator" respectively. The Critic is given a database of human art styles while the Generator produces art from scratch. The Generator keeps producing while the Critic determines whether generated works are similar to existing human styles or pieces. Over time, the Generator improves to the point where generated art is approved by the Critic as "original art".