Meaningful absurdities

Madeleine Rood

Artist Alfred Marseille views artificial intelligence (AI) as an intriguing new tool for his creative work. Earlier this year, he began experimenting with AI for the first time. He intends to continue exploring AI as long as it remains stimulating and continues to surprise him.

Alfred Marseille, who studied philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, entered the world of visual arts from a philosophical point of view. He is a versatile artist, creating installations, photographs, films, electronic music, and more. "In all my work, the theme is perception and observation," he explains. "But it's also about what you don't perceive. With the Tropism Art & Science Collective, we create work that unfolds as if in your peripheral vision. When you try to focus on it, it vanishes. The underlying idea has always been that reality is much more than what initially meets the eye. We enjoy leading people astray."

His venture into AI this year seemed like a natural progression for him. "AI draws from all the images ever published on the internet, generating new images based on existing material. In

the films I create with poet Jan Baeke, we often use 'found footage,' assembling films from old clips to tell a new story. In my photography, I often create elaborate collages, such as in my series on forest landscapes, where images are constructed from different perspectives and details of a specific location. Together, these perspectives provide an inventory of what transpired at that place and time."

After the city of Amsterdam called for artists to create works for its 750th-anniversary celebration, he decided to give it a try.

“From a philosophical perspective, I had already been interested in AI, as its output is something that’s not created by humans. Until now, fiction, by which I mean everything from poetry to the concepts of money, private property and nation states, has always been a product of the imagination of living human beings. With AI, everything changes. A new kind of fiction, generated by autonomous machines, that no longer has a link with living reality is starting to have a huge impact on our cultural life and the society at large.

What interested me in the Amsterdam 750 call was the obvious tension between celebrating a rich past in the face of climate disaster that might destroy all this heritage within the next 100 years. So wanted to create an image of how the city might look 50 or 100 years from now.”

He created a large number of images showing Amsterdam submerged underwater or as a plundered city, but the results fell short. "It felt too much like science fiction or fantasy, and

not quite captivating enough." Subsequently, he began experimenting with abstract, philosophical prompts.

Incongruities

"I aimed to introduce incongruities. For instance, I entered the prompt: ‘The philosopher Hannah Arendt contemplates the mystery of birth and death.’ The outcome surprised me: a black-and-white photo of two women who bore a striking resemblance to each other, standing near a dome covered by cloth. 'I found this very intriguing and introduced variations. Subsequently, I entered the same sentence with my own name. This produced a series of entirely different images: two similar looking men, possibly brothers, in each image displaying some peculiar object. These results didn’t make sense, but at the same time were meaningful in many ways.

That's when I felt this perspective was promising. The results were rich in associations and full of surprises, and I could achieve things with this approach that would be quite challenging otherwise.”

It took him a while to find results he deemed of high quality. He noticed many problems with the software. " All the usual racial, cultural and gender biases apply. You really have to make an effort to overcome all these sterotypes. And there are technical issues like hands that often don't quite match. I also got pictures of, for example, five people who looked remarkably similar, even though I hadn't asked for that. It was very disorienting and sometimes also very rewarding to exploit these glitches.

You can already see that the software has improved and is learning from existing images. The question is whether this makes it more interesting. I actually expect AI to become duller and more predictable. It will probably become increasingly difficult to create unsettling images."

Natural Progression

Most of what AI produces is not that interesting: "It makes you wonder what to do with it. You really need to scrutinize and select. Often, it becomes clichéd or too absurd, whereas I want it to touch upon reality. Good art exists at the intersection of fiction and reality. I want to create images that make you wonder what you're looking at."

He achieved this by inputting fragments from poems or texts with complex contradictions, like joy and sorrow, in a prompt. “This resulted in images that you can't quite identify, but that you also can't easily dismiss. Of course, large parts of our visual culture are contained in the training data of AI. So, you can recognize all kinds of things in it, the entire history of art and cultural history comes along. The idea of working with these contradictory prompts is to use this richness in a meaningful way, just as I would do with a collage or with found footage.”

Even though the images emerge from a computer, Alfred Marseille considers them his own work. “For me, AI is a tool I use in a creative process to make something that is meaningfully incongruous and captivating.” ❧

Alfred Marseille studied philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He works as a graphic designer and media artist, creating sound art, films, video installations, light installations, and photography. He is a member of the Tropism Art & Science Collective and collaborates with poet Jan Baeke under the name Public Thought.

See also:

alfredmarseille.nl
tropism.eu
publicthought.net
zerp.nl