

AI: Artificial Imagination

Susanna Lindberg

Abstract. *This article reflects on the philosophical presuppositions of artworks made with the help of AI. Such works illustrate the author's more general claim that in order to understand works-of-AI, we should not look at them as works of intelligence (aiming at logos) but at most as works of imagination (playing with mimesis). But can it even be said that AI imagines? To clarify this issue, the article follows the idea of imagination as formulated by Kant and then developed by Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. In this line of thought, it becomes possible to think that imagination is not only a free gift of nature, but always already a technics. For these philosophers, it is a particular technics whose law is mimesis, that is, capacity of producing and sharing semblances, fictions and figures. Is this also what a generative AI does? The article distinguishes more and less imaginative uses of AI in art and suggests, in the end, that even if it cannot be said that a generative AI imagines, still, in best cases, imagination can take place in well-constituted assemblies between humans and AIs.*

Keywords. Artificial intelligence, Imagination, Technology, mimesis, Kant, Derrida.

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Since a long time already in restricted circles, but since a couple of years in the face of the general public, AI has sneaked in everywhere (including into the new Microsoft Word version which I installed without expecting malice, and which is right now trying to impose its «copilot» on me in the most intrusive and exasperating manner. «Unplug yourself», I say; «I'm afraid I cannot do that», it answers). Of this profusion I will only extract the question of art. To start with, I will simply name three kinds of uses of AI in artwork, to which I will only return at the end. It's possible to distinguish several approaches to AI in art. For example, the general public knows works in which AI is asked to imitate a human artist (generate fugues like Bach, poems like Shakespeare, portrait paintings in the classical style).¹ On the other hand, big museums exhibit works in which AI is let loose to produce something a human being cannot do, like the generative gardens of Christa Sommerer and

¹ David Cope made a famous Bach experiment already in 1997. In this experiment, he asked the public to compare Bach-style pieces, one of which was indeed composed by Bach, another one by a contemporary composer, Steve Larson, and the third one by the computer program EMI (Experiments in Musical Intelligence). The public was constantly mistaken in attribution of the pieces. More recently, in 2018, the artist collective *Obvious* wrote the algorithm which generated the famous *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*, a picture miming classical portrait style. The first print was sold for 432,500 US dollars at Christie's, but the later prints of course suffered a huge inflation. The 2024 experiment with the ChatGPT who writes better than Shakespeare (or another famous English-language poet) – according to a panel consisting of 1634 participants – is presented in Porter & Machery (2024).

Laurent Mignonneau² or the immersive works of TeamLab. There are also works in which the artist exhibits the gap between the human and the AI, for instance in the films whose scripts are made by AI and which turn out to be hilariously or ridiculously absurd, like Oscar Sharp's *Sunspring* (2016) and Miao Ying's *Pilgrimage into Walden XII, Chapter Two: Surplus Intelligence* (2021-2022). Especially these works exhibiting the absurdity of the works-of-AI show why we might do well to abstain from using the word «intelligence» when speaking about AI: it clearly has no clue of what it is doing. At the same time, all these works show that the products of generative AI can look a lot like creations of imagination. They invite to ask if the AI generating the work is really *creating* the work: it seems that the AI can at least help *invention*, but can it really *imagine* new things, does it actually have – or *is it* – an *imagination*? Such questions presuppose a careful consideration of the nature of imagination, so that in the end, whether it turns out that AI can imagine or not, at least it invites us to adjust and refine our understanding of imagination. It also invites us to ask, inversely, to what extent our human imagination is also a technique rather than a spontaneous natural force, and to what extent its technicality interferes with our creativity? Of course, the ultimate horizon of any investigation of *artificial imagination*, as artist Gregory Chatonski calls it,³ is to make us better understand the general algorithmic condition under which we live today, and to produce openings for critical reflexivity capable of «engaging with the algorithmic condition without being subsumed by it», as David M. Berry puts it in his important article «Synthetic media and computational capitalism: towards a critical theory of artificial intelligence» (Berry 2025, 1) – but as this question is vast, in this article I limit myself to the more restricted field of art. To approach these questions, in what follows, I will look for the trace of technique in the notion of imagination as defined by Immanuel Kant and then discussed by Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Only at the end, equipped with a more fine-tuned conceptual framework, will I come back to the question of AI in art.

1. Kant, Schelling, Hegel, and imagination as natural gift

What is imagination? The inaugural modern theory of imagination was formulated by Kant and further developed by German Romanticism and German idealism – but Kant is a sufficient starting point here. For Kant, imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) is a capacity of bringing together otherwise incompatible faculties so that, thanks to it, we can avoid the blindness and the emptiness of unilateral thinking of experience («thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind» (Kant 1998, A51/B76). In the *First Critique*, the first chapter of *The Transcendental Doctrine of the Power of Judgement*, that is *On the Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding*, Kant explains how pure transcendental imagination produces a mediating representation, a transcendental schema, that is at the same time pure and intellectual and yet sensible, and thanks to which categories can be applied to appearances (Kant 1998, B176-183/A137-143). Readers of Kant disagree on the precise nature of this mediation: does schematism outline *forms* (because it is the capacity of subsuming sensations under rational forms) or is it above all a *synthetizing activity*

² Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau are known for their applications of evolutionary algorithms in artificial life installations, aim at «giving up control over art» and letting the algorithm generate virtual worlds that seem to grow beyond human imagination. Sommerer's and Mignonneau's work is nicely described in Magrini (2017, 51, 174-5).

³ Gregory Chatonsky has developed the concept of *artificial imagination* in multiple thought-provoking works and theoretical texts documented in <https://chatonsky.net/imagination-artificielle/> (last accessed 14.5.2025).

(of bringing coherence to sensation and bringing content to understanding)? For my part, given that for Kant «general logic contains no precepts at all for the power of judgement, and moreover, cannot contain them. [...] The power of judgement is a special talent that cannot be taught but only practiced» (Kant 1998, B171-172/A133),⁴ I prefer the latter interpretation, because it seems to me that in this way one avoids submitting sensation to the sole legislation of understanding and leaves space for the heterogeneous aspects of experience such as contingent natural beings. However, for the needs of this article, which focuses on aesthetics, the right interpretation of the *First Critique* is secondary. Here, it is enough for me to attract attention to one clue left by Kant but picked up only gradually and much later by others, namely, the characterization of the imagination not only as a «talent» (*Talent*) but also as an «art» (*Kunst*), furthermore, an art that is «secret»: «This schematism of our understanding with regard to appearances and their mere form is a *hidden art in the depths of the human soul*, whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty» (Kant 1998, B181/A141, my italics). What is imagination as an «art»? The choice of the word will give way to the thinking of imagination, not only as a free gift of nature (*Talent*), but as a formed and form-giving *skill* of using it well. Far-reaching questions open up here: given that art and technics have the same root (the Greek *techné*), can the art of imagination also be a *technics*? Can imagination be artificial – or technological? At Kant's moment of history, such questions would not have made much sense, they could only slide to and forth on many slippery slopes, but they point at a direction that is ours today.

In Kant's *Third Critique*, imagination serves reflexive judgement which is (uncontroversially) not the determining judgement, which subsumes experience under ideas, but reflective judgement which seeks coherence when no idea is available. The reflective judgement finds this coherence when it finds beauty in art or purposiveness in living nature. The judgement of taste is based on the «free lawfulness of the imagination» which judges on the «subjective correspondence of the imagination to the understanding». It cannot rely on a concept but on the contrary on «lawfulness without law» and «purposiveness without an end» (Kant 2000, § 22 Allgemeine Anmerkung, B69/A 68) – expressions that echo our question of the free gift of nature vs. technics. The purposiveness of which it is capable is not utility in the service of an external objective, but the internal purposiveness of a thing. The concept of internal purposiveness is best explained in the second part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* where Kant explains the teleological judgment. In § 65, he explains the kind of internal purposiveness that judgement can find in living beings, and he singles out that in such purposiveness, parts appear as functions of the whole, the whole as the whole of the parts, and the whole has the character of life (Kant 2000, § 65, B 288/A 285). Coherence and liveliness articulated by purposiveness also characterize the concept of beauty in a work of art. Kant thus conceives of imagination as a power of combining incompatible faculties and bringing structure and unity to the chaos of experience that, as such, consists of disparate contingent elements. Understood in this way, imagination is the best that a finite human mind can do to make sense of reality: an infinite divine spirit's intellectual intuition would know the reason of reality, but the human spirit can only imagine it. Of course, saying so implies giving a key role to imagination and extending its span more than usually by including the famous question of the «as if» (*als ob*) in it. In the *First Critique*, reason is obliged to act «as if» (*als ob*) the ideas of world, immortality of the soul and

⁴ In the field of aesthetics, the first position is represented for example by Robert A. Wicks (2013, 12-37), for whom even Kant's aesthetic judgement is based on recognizing universal forms in artworks. The second position is most famously represented by François Lyotard, who reads the *First Critique* in the light of the *Third Critique*, so that judgement is always a reflective capacity and never a determining one. To clarify Lyotard's position, see Piché (1992, 152-160).

freedom were true, although it knows that there can be no experience of them. To the extent that finite thinking can only do *as if* it knew the ultimate ideas, while at the same time knowing that knowing them is *stricto sensu* impossible, it is reduced to imagining its conditions – but at the same time imagination reaching ideas is nothing less than reason.

Soon after Kant, the German Idealists would claim that when imagining ideas of reason, the finite spirit in fact already rejoins the infinite spirit who knows them. For Schelling, this is because the human spirit is not excluded from intellectual intuition, which is «‘the immediate knowledge of the absolute (and only of the absolute [...])’, the absolute being defined as the point of indifference of absolute identity of being and thinking» (Schelling, *Fernere Darstellungen*, SW IV, 368; quoted and explained in Galland-Szymkowiak 2007, 99). The absolute identity is not a simple vision but the activity of imagination (*Ein-Bildungs-Kraft*) – that is literally the force-of-giving-a-unified-form (*Ineinsbildung*) –, which is for him both the force that constitutes the entire universe and a force reflected in art: according to his *Philosophy of Art*, imagination is «the power whereby something ideal is simultaneously something real, the soul simultaneously the body, the power of individuation that is the real creative power» (Schelling, 1989, 32; *Philosophy of Art*, § 22, SW V, 386).⁵ This is why the absolute can – or perhaps must – manifest itself in art; the artwork is the «sole true and eternal organ and at the same time document of philosophy» (Schelling 1985, I/3, 627; cf. Bowie 2003, 102-139). Here we see imagination not only as a force of the human soul, but as a cosmic force that brings ideas to reality and gives reality to ideas in art. It’s not only a vision but an art, the essence of which for Schelling is a powerful creative form-giving force rather than a formatting technics.

For Hegel, the language of intellectual intuition is too mystical, so he rather thinks, identifying reason and reality, that the absolute reason is nothing *else* than the summum of human reason which exposes itself in the form of dialectics. In this development – on which I will not elaborate here more than this – the imagination, that was for Kant a *secret art* of the human soul, was gradually interpreted as reason, which is the *manifest art* of spirit. No doubt, this conversion shows something that Kant’s imagination was since the beginning: a tendency towards reason. But at the same time, the conversion also misses the very secrecy of imagination, the difficulties it encounters, the impossibilities that it makes possible despite everything. It does what Kant wanted to do and what Schelling and Hegel did: it covers the uncertain abyss of imagination by an intellectual vision or by a dialectical progression (somebody like Novalis would then think that this is precisely how the night of imagination is hidden by the sun of reason). When the nocturnal side of imagination is hidden by the diurnal reason, imagination ceases to be the source of art and becomes the rationalized tool of philosophical reason. At this point I’d like to mention that for me, drawing a strict opposition between art and philosophy, or between imagination and reason, is detrimental to both, and the thinkers of early German romanticism and idealism are so interesting precisely because they could never really maintain this opposition to the end. But still, in the interest of the present investigation, I want to concentrate on imagination insofar as it is not reducible to reason, and insofar as it becomes thematic (albeit not really manifest) most purely in art.

2. Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy and techniques of imagination

This interest in imagination insofar as it cannot be sublated into reason is also motivated by the fact that the Kantian theory of imagination, as well as its German Idealist and even

⁵ See also Galland-Szymkowiak (2013, 187-203).

early Romantic successors, are clearly insufficient if one wants to make sense of contemporary art. Contemporary art (but actually one could show that this was already the case of much of modern art well before German Romantics, and perhaps the case of «art as such», if such a thing exists) is not content with seeking a beautiful form capable of containing the overwhelming chaos of sensibility. It does not aim at satisfying the subject's judgement but at challenging and overwhelming it, and perhaps even ruining it. Jacques Derrida clears out the situation for art in his deconstructions of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement* in *Economimesis* and *The Truth in Painting*. Given that, first, *mimesis* has come forth as the other of *logos* ever since Plato, Derrida shows that Kant's aesthetics, which seems to aim at *logos*, is in reality supported by an implicit and hardly interrogated mimetology. This being said, second, Derrida also shows that the idea of *mimesis* is fruitfully transformed and reinvented by Kant. Unlike Plato, Kant does not think *mimesis* between things and images – as a simple reproduction of a model in a copy – but he thinks *mimesis* of the subject as the imitation of productive force itself, as it comes forth notably when a genius's gift imitates the creative force of nature, or in a different way, like when a student imitates the creativity of their master (Derrida 1981b, 6, 8-12). Notwithstanding this far-reaching reflective turn toward the subject itself, Kant's aesthetics is still limited by its «economimetic» character, in other words, by its reluctance to think the aspects of production that *mimesis* cannot recuperate (in likeness) but that go at a loss (towards difference). One thing that Kant's aesthetics cannot assimilate is disgust (*Ekel*): the aesthetic judgement judges on beauty (that gives pleasure) and even on sublimity (that gives a sort of negative pleasure), but it is at loss before the disgusting that remains, resists, rejects the subject and makes it reject itself (Derrida 1981b, 25; see also 21-25). Another thing that Kant's aesthetics cannot deal with is the impossibility of clearly demarcating between the essential form and the inessential aspects of the work (e.g. matter, but also all kinds of decorative elements and frames, that Derrida sums under the work *parergon*) (On *parergon*, see Heikkilä 2021, 94-102). The object of aesthetic judgement is a work of art; but in *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida shows that Kant's concept of work (*ergon*) is conditioned by what it rejects, namely, by the *parerga* that Kant deems inessential to the judgement of beauty while being simultaneously incapable of distinguishing the essential (beauty) from the inessential (decorative) (Derrida 1987, 80-81). While Derrida's deconstructions of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement* proceed on the thin line between critique and witticism, I think that their real horizon is not only the need to trouble the notion of the work of art but also the observation of the tendency of its undoing in contemporary art, as witnessed in particular by Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot's encounter of the work of literature (*œuvre*) that remains compelling only in the movement of «*désœuvrement*» (which has been translated by *lack* or *absence of work* or *worklessness*, but which should actually convey a verbal sense of *undoing* worklikeness)⁶ is one of the most radical approaches of the work of art of the 20th century. In many ways, such a thinking of the work of art is impossible – it is meant to present impossibility as the core of the work – so perhaps the real chance of the work is its gradual deconstruction rather than its total undoing. Be it as it may, both Derrida and Blanchot step well beyond the limits of the work of art as conceptualized by Kant; the work is no more beautiful, sublime, coherent and unitary; while becoming absolutely what it is, it has lost the absolute-ness of a classical work of art.

What has happened to the imagination in this history? Although this deconstruction was seldom made explicitly in the name of imagination, in many ways it invited to pay attention

⁶ «To write is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness, unworking [*desœuvrement*]). Or again: writing is the absence of the work as *it produces itself through* the work, traversing it throughout. Writing as unworking (in the active sense of the word) is the insane game, the indeterminacy that lies between reason and unreason» (Blanchot 1993, 424).

to this «secret art of the human soul»: on the one hand because it is a «secret» capacity of making sense «before» sense is submitted to the rule of reason, and on the other hand because it is an «art». While Schelling and Hegel thought this «art» in the sense of a metaphysics or philosophy of art, Derrida and Blanchot, on the contrary, aim at deconstructing metaphysics *and* metaphysics of art in their thinking of literature and writing. The concept of imagination is particularly difficult because it is first presented as a kind of faculty of the human soul – while at the same time it is the *secret* art of the human soul, so that Schelling could present it as a power that is *in* the soul without being in the least a power *of* the soul, but rather an alien force that is at the disposal of the soul or that disposes of the soul. According to Kant, what imagination does is schematizing. As we saw, imagination sketches out possible ways of giving form to the chaos of experience. It mediates between forms of understanding and the chaos of sensibility (*First Critique*) and discovers the purposiveness in experience (*Third Critique*), and each time, imagination tends towards *logos*. Derrida, on the contrary, attracts attention to a totally different principle that animates imagination: *mimesis* instead of *logos*.⁷ We can understand *mimesis* as a «logic» of producing likeness and *différance*, instead of intuiting ideas or developing a dialectic in which difference always leads to identity. What imagination does is finding and producing likenesses; and because a likeness is not an identity but precisely a likeness between two (or more) which are not exactly identical (but only similar), whenever there is a likeness there is also a *différance*. As we have already seen, the mimetic relation can take place in many ways: schematically, one can distinguish between *mimesis* of objects and *mimesis* of subjects. The *mimesis* of things is a likeness between a thing and its image (copy); the *mimesis* of subjects is an imitative relation between subjects; and before such a relation is born, a subject is mimetic in itself to the extent that it is constituted by self-reflection. The classical form of *mimesis* of objects is Plato's theory of ideas. The classical form of *mimesis* of subjects is Kant's description of the creative genius who imitates the productive force of nature itself, and who is imitated by epigones. In *The Double Session*, Derrida presents the subject's mimetic relation to itself: analyzing Mallarmé's text on the mime Pierrot, he shows how to understand the subject as an integrally mimetic being who doesn't imitate anything but who is still the incarnation of the *mimesis* and simulacrum by which the mime, by his wordless play, «*writes itself*» to presence (Derrida 1981a, 194, 205-206). The mime is nothing in itself, imitates nothing that would provide a clear pole of identification, but is still an infinite mimetic reflection to itself. All these very different mimetic relations are only possible because something like imagination produces *mimesis*: it establishes a relation of likeness over an abyss of difference, or a production of somethingness over an abyss of nothingness. Here the imagination is not a subjective faculty, it is a force of making sense that takes place on the level of sense itself. In these difficult reflections, Derrida sketches out the question of the technicity of imagination, but only to the extent that imagination is interpreted as a force that sketches our systems of traces and makes writing and text possible (of course, this is the epoch of semiotics, so a language is not necessarily linguistic but all kinds of signifying systems – sound, image, etc. – can be analyzed as «languages»). *Writing* is not natural and intuitive, it is an artificial way of organizing experience and articulating sense. Exemplarily literary imagination (as imagined by Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*), but in fact all kinds of *imagination*, are organized like writing, and writing is originary technicity.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has continued Derrida's work on *mimesis* in many ways. Here it is enough to refer to his text *Typography* (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 43-138), in which he

⁷ For a genealogy of the notion of *mimesis* see Lawtoo (2022): for an insightful explication of the emergence of the philosophical problem of *mimesis* in Derrida, Irigaray and Lacoue-Labarthe see Hadikoesoemo (2022): and for an interesting development of the idea of mimetic subject in performing arts where both body and language need to be engaged see Kirkkopelto (2025).

shows what happened when the dimension that we have so far studied in terms of transcendental imagination got interpreted in terms of *historicity* of being. Lacoue-Labarthe shows how after Kant, especially Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Heidegger have gradually elaborated the problem of historical transcendence. Of course, on the one hand, historical transcendence is not different from the transcendence of being: it shows how being has given itself to thinking in different epochs of its history. In German idealism and again in Heidegger, philosophy has thought being, not at all as a thing beyond beings, but as an originary tendency of differentiation and tendency of sameness, which together explain how being can come to finite articulation. In Hegel, such an articulation would be the dialectic that gives being as identical to the reason that articulates it. In Heidegger, being would give itself, not as an *ousia*, nor as a *logos*, but as the originary «tearing» (*Riss*) of such positive terms, and as the ontological difference. The fundamental tearing and withdrawal of being would constantly be hidden by different articulations of being, the most important for us being the *Ge-stell*, that gives being as articulated by the contemporary horizon of the technological era, and the *Word* of thinking and poetry, that give the possibility of preparing the question of the sense of being. Heidegger thus expresses something that was already prepared in Hegel and Nietzsche, that is to say, that transcendence must be thought in terms of technics (*Ge-stell*) and art (*Sprache*). For him, modern ontology is onto-technology.

But this is not all. In a vast and fundamentally *critical* reading Lacoue-Labarthe shows how, for all these thinkers, each articulation of being is given to a form of subjectivity, and the articulations of subjectivity are themselves historical figurations that reflect the corresponding articulations of being. Transcendence is therefore not opened simply by logic, but it is also articulated to and by historical figurations of humanity – which are products of *mimesis*, not of *logos*. Historical figurations of humanity are not historically existing persons (Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche...) but *types* or *figures of humanity*. In Hegel, different forms of reason are thus given to the figures of consciousness of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; in Nietzsche, to types of humanity such as the Greek, the Christian, the *Übermensch*, etc. in As above (why not ‘technology’?) historical situations (*Dasein*), and so on and so forth. Such types are not positively existing entities, but focal centers of schematization in a given place and time, that imprint their form on everything in the epoch (customs, laws, art, science...) so that they also orient individual’s behavior and thinking. For Lacoue-Labarthe, transcendence is onto-typo-logical when it is thought through such types. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, these transcendental types of subjectivity or “subjects of philosophy” result, not from *logos*, as philosophy would wish, but from *mimesis* – which is a force of fiction. Being is thought in function of such fictive subject-figures, and in this way thinking being is fictioning being: being gives itself in fictions, and because we think being in function of fictions. Fictions of being are not ontological *truths* in a classical sense. Still, they are not for that matter untrue, «only fiction»: they are the transcendental horizon of the subject of philosophy that is each time situated historically. They cannot create fictions of being at will, but they are still bound to recognize that being only comes to it in fiction. They are figurations of the subject to whom being is each time given in a certain manner; but they are also figurations of subjectivity that serve as unconscious models to human beings living in that epoch. They have the force of orienting human behavior not only in their relation to philosophy, but also in their relation to political community, which is much riskier. Here, fiction is not a sign of untruth, it is the consequence of the fact that we cannot really know the ground of being, but we know that we can only imagine it. Imagination makes ontology possible.

But how does this typological-fictional transcendence appear in the imagination? Not directly as onto-typological figures (which constitute the horizon of an epoch), but as *images* (which constitute the phenomenality of an epoch). Jean-Luc Nancy interprets

imagination literally as power of producing images in his extraordinary interpretation of Kant's concept of imagination and of Heidegger's interpretation of the latter, in the essay *Masked Imagination*, included in the volume *The Ground of the Image*. Nancy takes terminology seriously: what imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) produces is images (*Bild*), and the images are produced by *techné* (art or technics), the products of which can be judged in terms of *beauty* (but not in terms of truth):

The Kantian imagination is indeed the first modern figure [...] of a faculty of images that is not representative (at least not in the current sense of the word) but presentative, appresentative, or apperceptive (that is, perceiving for itself, perceiving *ad subjectum*), constitutive or productive of its object – or of itself as an object – and thus, in the end, a purveyor of knowledge. Regardless of whether this knowledge is determinant or reflective in the Kantian sense of these terms, and regardless of whether it is therefore cognition or thought (or, indeed, knowledge or belief – or faith – here too in Kant's sense), it is a knowledge through the image, for the imagination is what presents all things – the object and the subject, the triangle and the ultimate ends, the imaginable and the unimaginable.

Between these two extremes, as we know, there is a technics (or an art), which occupies the decisive place insofar as it is understood as the pure production of a form whose name, "beauty", signifies that it is valid absolutely for itself – or, indeed, as pure production of an excess of all form (called "sublime"), in which the imagination imagines itself as unimaginable or unimagining, and thus again as productive of itself even unto its failure, productive of its limit and of the surpassing of its limit. (Nancy 2005, 81).

An *image* is not a particular work of art, it is the «form» in any kind of work of art, or as Nancy would also say, the *sense* at work. The image is, he continues «the possibility of presentation» which does not come down to the subject, of whom the image would be a projection, nor to the object, of which the image would be a representation, but which is their unity, «not yet either a subject or a representation, but a making-image, a *mise-en-image* or putting-into-image: *Einbildung*. That is what subjectivizes the subject and also what objectivizes the object, and it is there that the subject becomes abyssal» (Nancy 2005, 83). Imagination precedes the subject and the object and makes their relation possible. What is the product of imagination, image? An image is not the *idea*. *Idea* is an intelligible form, but image is the evidence that does not need to be intelligible (a priori), but that still provides coherence (a posteriori). For Nancy, *evidence* is the kind of truth that is characteristic of image. For him, the evidence of image is not an immediate vision, because images reflect the technics of their production, like for example images of film (Nancy & Kiarostami 2001). The image brings together, it gives unity (*Einung*) to the scattered matter of experience and makes it thinkable. The evidence of the image is not in a supposed capacity of rendering the object correctly: it is not an imitation of an empirical or intelligible thing. The evidence of the image is also not in its supposed origin in the subject's productive capacity or productive mimesis. The image is evident in itself, it is the space in which evidence is born as the originary mimesis of the image with itself: it only resembles itself, it is likeness of itself, and this is what it means to be an image. The image is its own likeness – or to put it differently, it is originary *mimesis* – because it results of a technics that puts it in distance of itself. To turn the same image of the image in another language also used by Nancy: image is sense, it makes sense (Nancy 1997). It makes sense in itself because in the image senses touch one another; it makes sense to us because of its power of touching us and of letting the world touch us. Its power of making sense is not in its reference to an underlying ground which would guarantee its reality. It is better to imagine that the images float on the surface of the imagination which is a capacity of producing them, but really out of nothing, out of the abyss of the imagination with no ground, at most a call of abyss. In the

quotation, Nancy underlined that images of imagination are produced by a technique or an art, thus saying explicitly the thought that has been prepared more or less implicitly in all texts that we have discussed in this essay. Images are thus not pure intuitions of things, nor are they only text, but all kinds of images. They are produced by imagination understood as a technique/art, that is technique because it finds a *rule* and an art because it must *find* it.

I would like to continue from here by saying that imagination is not really a faculty, but the *element* in which we are. «Faculty» sounds too much like a power at our disposal, whereas «element» is the dimension in which we are: it is not at our disposal, but it makes our dispositions possible. Thinking in terms of faculties, Kant does not use the expression «element». But Hegel speaks of our thinking taking place in the «element of reason», Heidegger speaks of us being in the «element of thinking»,⁸ and John Sallis speaks of us being in the «element of imagination» (Sallis 2000). Also Derrida's notion of *khora* can be read as an element. Why «element»? We are «in» the element, but not like we are in the world, in the sense of «within the horizon of a lifeworld». Element is the dimension in which the world and the horizon of the world are available to us. It is not a horizon in the Husserlian sense of framework of intelligibility, it is a sketch of sense *beyond* the horizon of intelligibility, not *epékeina tes ousias*, but the dimension in which any possibility of figuring out being is sketched before it takes the form of a horizon in which thinking can happen. Is not intelligible but it sketches out the conditions of intelligibility. The Presocratics spoke of the elemental by natural metaphors: the element in which we swim, like in water, in which we breathe, like in air, or that carries us, like earth. Plato also spoke of the elements (*stoicheia*) as fundamental ingredients in which reality gives itself to be thought (letters, geometrical shapes, physical elements): these are the intellectual element in which our thought moves. Right after Kant, the elemental comes forth as the dimension in which *thinking* moves. In the history presented in this article, it has become possible to think of the element of thinking as in itself curled up in a vaster element of the imagination, from which images rise with hallucinatory evidence, for thinking to judge. Imagination is the common source of *mythos* and *logos*, and it is the difficult task of thinking to tell these apart.

Imagination is still our element, and our element is nothing else but imagination. Conceiving of imagination as an element amounts to thinking of it less in terms of its contents and more in terms of the *power* it has on us. Often its images are all in sounds and images; they can also be in thoughts and ideas, not in their perfect form, but in their nascent form of evidence that has the power of touching you and inviting you to start building solid rigorous reasoning on them. The elemental imagination is a power without which our sensibility and thought would be weak and empty; sometimes imagination becomes overwhelming, and takes us «in its power», so that we struggle to keep it in check, but this struggle is not necessarily a bad thing, because it is also the origin of creation. Imagination is the entire dimension of potentiality that can be, and that can also not be, as has been shown by Boyan Manchev (Manchev 2009) and in another manner by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2000). Imagination never stays in place, it moves and changes incessantly, as for example Juan Manuel Garrido Wainer (Garrido 2008) has shown. The only law of the imagination is *mimesis* – which is not a rigorous law but a supple, plastic capacity of creating ever new domains of coherence by establishing likenesses and differences, that may well disappear soon after being established. More importantly for us today, being mimetic, imagination is

⁸ Hegel uses frequently expressions such as *element of representation*, *element of determination* etc. The whole *Science of Logic* is situated in «the element of a free, self-contained thought, in pure knowledge; it is thereby mediated, for pure knowledge is the ultimate and absolute truth of consciousness» (Hegel 2010, 46). Heidegger seeks to determine the «element of thinking» in Heidegger (1993, 220).

originarily *technical*. This is because any mimetic relation, being a relation bringing together two *different* modes of being (thing/image, genius/nature, person/another person etc.), has to bridge this gap somehow, and bridging a gap between different things is the originary technical power. This is why I've said elsewhere that *our* element is bio-technical, the endless reaching from a life to another life, or from a life to what is not (its) life, so that this reaching is not a natural contact but a technical mediation (Lindberg 2023, 259-277). Similarly, our imaginary is bio-technical, the imaginary of life continuing itself in technics and of technics that ends up being alive.

Do these long and dense considerations on the notion of imagination finally allow us to answer the question of the possibility of *artificial* imagination? We have seen, firstly, that imagination is a *secret* power, an *elemental power* of images that surround and sometimes overwhelm us, and that are also the primary material of all works of art. Secondly, we have seen that imagination, which first seemed to be a natural gift, turned out to be also an art and a technics: the originary play between *physis* and *techne* (play in which *physis* needs *techne* to do what it can't do alone, but *techne* is still only a continuation of *physis*) takes place first of all in imagination. Thirdly, the technics of imagination is not a skill in a crafts-person's hands, but a transcendental technics and transcendence as technics, thanks to which concrete works can come to being in the first place. Transcendental technics produces images, which are thereby originarily technical well before being products of conscious human activity. Images draw their sense from an onto-typological and onto-technical horizon. The law of this horizon is not *logos* but *mimesis*, which we normally know as the law of art. This is how we end up thinking of *art as a technics of mimesis*. It cannot be reduced to this (art is both free and bound by a technics), but it is necessarily also this.

Now, it is high time to come back to our original question of *artificial* imagination. Is the technique of mimesis characteristic of imagination also operative in AI? Can we say that the law of generative IA is not *logos* but *mimesis*? Does an AI used to produce works of art engage in mimetic technics? Clearly, an AI does not think in the higher philosophical sense of the term (being conscious, reasoning). But it is surely very good at computing, and a generative AI uses computing based on probability to discover patterns, likenesses, and differences, and then to reproduce and finally produce new patterns. *Mimesis* is the logic of likeness and difference, and this is why it is the principle of producing images – or patterns. *Mimesis* has also always been thought of as the law of reproduction of images, and in the tradition followed above also as the law of production of new images. In all these senses, an AI used as machine learning functions on the basis of *mimesis*. AI does not produce true propositions, but it produces propositions that resemble true propositions: truth-like propositions, imitations of truth, mimēmata of images – products that have from Plato to Baudrillard been analysed as images, *eidola*, produced by the technique of mimesis. In the next paragraph I will show this with some examples from the world of art. It should also be noted that because AI produces works that are thus truthlike but not truthful, these should be approached with what Kant calls reflexive judgement, which evaluates beauty and purposefulness of things that cannot be subsumed to concepts, instead of determining judgements. For reasons of space, I cannot go to the question of judgement here, but I speak of it elsewhere.⁹

⁹ I explain the interest of approaching AI with reflexive judgement in my article «Deconstructing Artificial Intelligence» (Lindberg 2025).

3. Works-of-AI

It is high time to stop this excursion to the philosophical discussion on imagination and ask how all of this can contribute to our original question concerning contemporary art. Many questions of agency surround artworks made with the AI – let's call them «works-of-AI». Does the machine, too, *imagine*? Or if AI is just a technical device, does its technicity mirror a technical tendency in our own imagination? What happens when our imagination is touched by the artificial imagination of the machine? Is our imagination still a free and creative power, now that it is so often overwhelmed by the power of the artificial imagination of the AI?

Is the AI that generates the work-of-AI capable of imagination? In any case, I think that it makes more sense to call it imagination than thinking. It is not thinking in the fundamental philosophical sense of *power of reason* (*logos*) capable of truth. Generative AI has a certain «intelligence» or «nonconscious cognitive capacity» (Hayles 2017), that consists in computing via neural networks, so that it can «create new content, including audio, code, images, text, simulations, and videos» (McKinsey quoted in Kalota 2024, 7). This «content» has the mode of being of what Derrida calls «text»: it is neither true nor untrue but the support of both truth and falseness. It can have a likeness of truth, but it is not in itself true in the demanding sense of the term, because it is generated «blindly» or «unconsciously» without recourse to «higher» functions of thinking such as consciousness, reasoning and judging. On the contrary, it makes some sense to call AI a *power of imagination*, to the extent that both imagination and generative AI are secret schematizing capacities, the products of which are in themselves truthless, although they can be captured in processes of truth (in Derrida's terms, they are *pharmaka*). Imagination is not capable of *logos*, but it is capable of *mimesis* in all the different senses of this term we have seen below, including *mimesis* of *logos*. But what kind of a *mimesis* can a machine do, and does it amount to imagining?

It depends on the kind of machine we are thinking about. Classical mechanic machines are capable of restricted, reproductive *mimesis*: they execute an order that has been programmed in advance, so that their whole operation aims at copying the model. This is the case of computer programs when they are deterministic machines that do what they are programmed to do. They do not «think», but they can imitate products of thinking. It is possible to say that they «imagine» only if one understands «imagination» in the narrow sense as reproductive imagination, which is *mimesis* as the capacity of copying a model. Sometimes AI is used like this simply to reproduce a model, like in the first kind of machine-made works we quoted in the beginning of this article: machines that reproduce Bach-style inventions or Shakespeare-style sonnets.

But contemporary generative AI can also be used in a way that resembles productive imagination. This happens when attention is drawn to the machine's capacity of not simply executing a programmed order but adjusting itself – «programming itself» – in function of a huge stock of possible forms and their combinations, like in the generative gardens of Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau. To the extent that these works seem to grow and evolve, they give a lifelike feeling, so that they seem to catch up with Kant's old idea of thinking art in the mirror of life: what makes the beauty of an artwork is the same thing that makes the sense of nature, that is, a feeling of purposefulness that we project on it, although we know that we cannot really affirm that it is there. Indeed, the works of generative AI seem to «live» along some secret internal purposiveness. In reality, its algorithm is inspired by a more contemporary definition of life than Kant's idea of purposiveness. A more contemporary idea of life sees life as a capacity of relating to exterior situations and adapting itself to what it finds; similarly, generative algorithms are made to relate to exterior situations, reacting to them, and adapting to new situations, and this is how, instead of reproducing a definite program, it «programs» itself, and «invents» new solutions to

situations that it encounters, as explained by Katherine Hayles and Luciana Parisi.¹⁰ Can the inventions of new ways of organizing information made by such an AI be called imagination? Sommerer and Mignonneau, and today the immersive works of TeamLab, follow this intuition and treat AI as another source of imagination, an alien imagination that they wish to *let be* and *set loose*, to see how it produces kinds of contents that the artist could not produce alone.¹¹ They want to be surprised by the machine's inventions – which can certainly be overwhelming. The AI producing these images is certainly a technical device: but can we also say that these works rise from the AI's creative imagination?

Before deciding whether the AI imagines, we must see how it becomes a mirror in which we must ask what human imagination is like. Is this machine, capable of generating new versions of a given stock of schemes, *like* our imagination, and if yes, what kind of likeness is at stake? Works such as Sharp's *Sunspring* and Miao Ying's *Pilgrimage into Walden XII* put this question at work. Trained on a great dataset of sci-fi film scripts, the AI is asked to produce its own script, that is then shot by the filmmaker. Watching the result we are struck by its absurdity, swaying between hilarious and idiotic. Perhaps the film mirrors the absurdity of the collective film world of us humans, but it also reveals the utter idiocy of the machine who clearly has no clue that its work does not make sense. In our Kantian context, we could say that it doesn't «know» its own stupidity, because it does not have anything like reflective judgement, which was for Kant the distinctive feature of human aesthetic judgement. This is how the work acts as a mirror that shows something of us by showing something that the work lacks, here, the reflective judgement of taste. It takes a human to evaluate the «content» produced by the AI. But at the same time, it also acts as a mirror revealing something that our imagination also is, that is, a capacity of schematizing on the basis of a stock of cultural memories, and of producing ever new schemes growing out of the old ones. Our imagination is educated and trained, also in *technics of imagining*. The work-of-AI mirrors the technicity of our own imagination at the same time as it reveals the impossibility of reducing imagination only to its technicity. Imagination is also, always, the possibility of cutting loose from its own mechanisms, stepping back from usual paths of imagining, liberating oneself from them. Double spiral of technics and free living force. This is how the work-of-AI makes us think of the *bio-technical* character of our imagination, too, which constantly extends itself beyond its natural capacities by inventing new technics, and constantly outgrows its technicity by liberating itself from their constraint.

This is how the mirroring relation between human beings and their intelligent machines always works: the machine is built to imitate some aspect of human intelligence (calculation, memory, pattern-recognition, «inventive» pattern-generation...), and as soon as it functions properly, the human finds the mirror image distorted, tries to understand why, and what really differentiates human from machine; and as soon as this difference is established, a new machine will be invented in its image. The mirroring between human and machine is not going to stop in some definitive definition of one against the other, but it is a constant reflection between human and machine taking ever new forms. Today, inventing

¹⁰ Luciana Parisi and Katherine Hayles show that AI-generated text is more than just support of iteration of a consigned code, so that it can practically be said to «invent». See Hayles (2017; 2023), Parisi (2015, 235-37; 2019, 89-121).

¹¹ Catherine Malabou speaks about our relation to AI in terms of a certain «letting be» or «letting go». On the one hand, we can let go of our desire of controlling AI, so as to see what it can reveal to us – this attitude is demonstrated by the generative gardens which deploy endless digital gardens before our flabbergasted eyes. Instead of controlling the AI, we give up control and see what it can do when set free. But we can also «let go» in the sense of abandoning our control of our own situation, if we simply agree to being controlled by AI, or more precisely by the industries that fabricate AIs in their own interest, as is now happening everywhere, including my own computer. See Malabou (2019, 151-164).

new machines is mostly done by engineers following a commercial command, but it can also be done by artists following a properly artistic inspiration (and eventually working in collaboration with more adventurous engineers).

Watching such works, in which the real question is not the product of an AI but our relation to the entire process of production, we soon realize that the work is not simply the object exposed in a museum, but the larger network of its production and observation. The work is not made by the AI alone, but by the human artist who has judged some of the material endlessly generated by this tool as worthy of exposition: the artist's work comes close to *curating* available material. While the generated material comes from the machine, the gesture of setting the machine to work and then of exposing it as «art» comes from the human being. The work itself is the assembly of the artist, the machine, and also the public which accepts to expose oneself to the work and ask oneself whether this is art and whether this is good art. The artwork illustrates above all the *collaborative* relation between human beings and AI-run machines; and more it exposes the question of the nature of this collaboration the more interesting it is. The question of the AI-run artistic machine is not whether it produces good imitations of man-made artworks, but whether it can become a good instrument of our own creativity, and to the extent that it can, what kind of practice, habituation, and productive skills this requires. With a generative artistic program, the challenge is the same as with all generative AIs that surround us today: how to not be overwhelmed, how to take time, how to take a step back to evaluate its work by using our reflective judgement, how to remain free at the same time as entering collaboration with the machine. As N. Katherine Hayles has shown, our question is not exactly asking how the human mind is extended over its technical tools, but how human and technical agents both contribute to producing situations and works of thinking. In her article *Technosymbiosis*, Hayles traces an already long history of the idea of human/machine co-operation by referring to J. C. R. Licklider's idea of man-computer symbiosis (1960), Donna Haraway's idea of making kin (also with machines) (1985, 2016), and finally her own idea of technosymbiosis (Hayles 2023, 10). For Hayles, all agents of such symbiotic situations have cognitive agency, and decision-making and meaning-making take place in the assemblages, not in their individual members. Hayles imagines that thinking our assemblages with technical systems in terms of technosymbiosis can eventually make these assemblages more biophilic and environmentally sensitive. Catherine Malabou is less optimistic and thinks, on the contrary, that we should pay much more attention to the political conditions of our present «cybernetic universe», because at the moment it mainly demonstrates an exacerbation of hard ultra-liberalist values rather than a discovery of new soft environmentally-friendly values.¹²

What I think, to end, is that we should indeed evaluate the emancipatory and creative dimensions – and the loss thereof – of our collaboration with inventive machines. We should not be tricked to believing that AI is indeed another mind: it is a tool, not of skillful hand but of imaginative mind, and we must weave new bio-technical relations to it. Like any tool, it can help and it can hurt. As it is about to overwhelm the entire society, including art, it is imperative for us to protect our freedom of going with it, against it, elsewhere than it.

¹² «The issue is, therefore, the democratic construction of collective intelligence. [...] the construction of a global community, with shared responsibility, is the only alternative to the domination of the new emperors who are transferring their own hegemonic impulses to robots, neuronal networks, and synaptic computers. We must all understand that in the new cybernetic world order intelligent systems are the instruments of these impulses, not their instigators» (Malabou 2019, 153-154).

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