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A playful sublime: nature represented through artificial intelligence

Contents

1. Bestiarium Latens

In 2023, a gallery in Madrid hosted an exhibition that brought together several digital artworks inspired by the theme of the sublime. Titled *Protection No Longer Assured*, the exhibition opened with quotes from Edmund Burke and raised the question of how the experience of the sublime is configured today. The proposed answer focused on various elements found in the artworks: many depicted war or nuclear disaster, the environmental crisis, and – recurrently – the role of technology in all of this (figs. 1–3[1]):

> In a present-day shaped by disruptive technologies and disinformation, armed conflict and environmental collapse, Protection No Longer Assured revisits the sublime notion of delightful horror through a selection of 63 artworks by 31 artists, across media including sculpture, painting, sound and AI art. Wit and reflection come together in this stroll along the brink, through a thought-provoking landscape of mushroom clouds, AI-generated artworks and post-natural creatures.[2]

In this article, however, I focus on one specific work from the exhibition, which is also the only one created using artificial intelligence: the series *Bestiarium Latens* by Mario Klingemann (fig. 4[3]). In fact, this paper will examine AI-generated art, and more specifically, certain repre-

[1] Fig 1: Ryan Heshka, *Protection No Longer Assured*, oil painting (2020), https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ryan-heshka-protection-no-longer-assured. Fig 2: David Altmejd, *Pyramid*, sculpture (2019), https://www.whitecube.com/artworks/pyramid. Fig. 3: P. Pomet, *El último día a la hora del té, 2020*, https://www.artsy.net/artwork/paco-pomet-el-ultimo-dia-a-la-hora-del-te.

[2] *Protection No Longer Assured*, Solo Gallery, Madrid, March 10th–December 30th 2023, Presentation on the exhibition website: https://solocontemporary.com/projects/protection_no_longer_assured/; Edmund Burke (2009): *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, London: Routledge.

[3] Fig. 4: Mario Klingemann, *Bestiarium Latens*, 2023, https://solocontemporary.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/bestiariumlatens01.png

sentations of the animal world produced through AI[4]. The reason is that in these artworks, the sublime – the main theme of this volume – seems to emerge in a particularly interesting way, one that differs both from the classical sublime (of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and from the so-called technological sublime, that is, the sublime identified with technology itself, as theorized in the 1990s, for example by Mario Costa.[5]

To understand this aspect, we need to start from *Bestiarium Latens*. The first thing that draws attention, in relation to the exhibition's theme, is that these images are not truly sublime – at least not in the classical sense of the term. They depict strange animals that are somewhat monstrous, but which evoke more tenderness than fear.

So why are they included in this exhibition? My hypothesis is that they do, in fact, have something to do with the sublime – but with a kind of sublime, as mentioned above, that is partly different from the ones we usually consider. And that the use of AI plays an important role in bringing this kind of sublime to light.

The sublime conveyed by *Bestiarium Latens* does not concern technology in itself, so it is not a technological sublime in the usual sense of the term. At the same time, it does not rely on nature understood as separate from technology – as in a certain contemporary version of the sublime that refers back to the "classical" eighteenth-century idea[6] – because these animals are invented through technology, specifically through AI. This does not mean, however, that these invented animals are unrelated to real ones, as will be shown.

To understand this co-implication between nature and technology, it is necessary to clarify the context in which this work was created. *Bestiarium Latens* was developed as a new version of a work Klingemann had produced a few years earlier, called *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series*. (Fig. 5[7]). When Klingemann created *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series*, in 2020, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) – that is, the kind of AI capable not only of classifying data but also of generating new content – had not yet reached the general public. This would happen shortly afterward with the rise of large language models like ChatGPT, as well as models capable of generating images or sounds from a simple text prompt, such as Suno, Udio, DALL·E, and Midjourney[8]. In the "distant" year of 2020, GenAI could only be used by experts, including some artists (such as Klingemann himself, Anna Ridler, Memo Akten), who had already begun experimenting with the technology and reflecting on it as early as 2017.[9]

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4 The examples of AI-generated art discussed in this article are taken from my book on the subject, published in 2024: Alice Barale (2024), *The Art of Artificial Intelligence: Philosophical Keywords*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars.

5 Mario Costa (2003): *Il sublime tecnologico*. *Piccolo trattato di estetica della tecnologia*, Castelvecchi.

6 On this see at least Emily Brady (2013): *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge Ma: Cambridge University Press.

7 Fig. 5. Mario Klingemann, *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series*, 2020, https://solocontemporary.com/collection/hyperdimensional-attractions-series-bestiary/.

8 On this change see Katalin Feher (2025): *Generative AI, Media, and Society*, London: Routledge.

9 On these first artistic experiments with GenAI see: Arthur I. Miller (2019): *The Artist in the Machine – The World of AI-powered creativity*, Cambridge Ma: MIT Press, pp. 55–132; Lev Manovich (2024): AI and Myths of Creativity, in: Lev Manovich, Emanuele Arielli: *Artificial Aesthetics: Generative AI, Art, and Visual Media*, Moscow: Strelka Press, http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/artificial-aesthetics; Joanna Zylinska (2020): *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams*, London: Open Humanities Press; Antonio Somaini (2023): Algorithmic Images: Artificial Intelligence and Visual Culture, in: *Grey Room* 93, pp. 75–115; Eduardo Navas (2023), *The Rise of Metacreativity. AI Aesthetics After Remix*, New York: Routledge, pp. 4–5, 39–47, 127–128, 142–148; Marcus Du Sautoy (2019), *The Creativity Code. How AI is learning to write, paint and think*, New York: Harper Collins; Steven S. Gouveia (2020): *The Age of Artificial Intelligence: An Exploration: section III: Aesthetics and language in Artificial Intelligence*, Wilmington: Vernon Press; Alice Barale (2020), *Arte e intelligenza artificiale: Be my GAN*, Milano: Jaca Book.

In *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series*, Klingemann focuses in particular on the data on which GenAI is trained and on the possibility of transforming it. At this point, a brief clarification is needed about how this type of AI works. Deep neural networks, that is, the type of AI used today in what is known as generative AI, do not follow a predetermined set of rules, as was the case with the previous type of AI, known as "good old-fashioned AI" or "symbolic AI." Instead, they are exposed to a large amount of data – such as images, words, or sounds – and learn to produce data that are similar, though not identical, to the original input. This implies, on one hand, greater autonomy for the AI, which learns to generate data in a way that is partially independent from the human user – it will be necessary to return to this point. But it also raises a problem: the data produced by the AI are strongly influenced by the original training data.

The AI, in fact, learns to generate new data based on recurring patterns found in the original data. For this reason, as is now well established, it tends to reproduce and, in many cases, even amplify the patterns, biases, and clichés present in the content on which it is trained.[10] Klingemann reflects on this problem and wonders whether it is possible to turn this limitation of AI into an opportunity. For the *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series*, he chooses to train his GenAI on the vast image archive known as ImageNet. Created in 2009 by researchers at Stanford, ImageNet offers a catalogue of almost every object that humans can name. Each object – a mushroom, a ball, a face – is stored along with its caption. Obviously, the connections between words and images are entirely arbitrary and reflect a series of stereotypes that ImageNet, in turn, helps to spread:[11] the dog is likely to be a cute poodle, the food a typical plate of spaghetti, and so on.

Yet, in the *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series*, Klingemann discovers a different possibility: to produce data that are indeed similar to the original ones, but also different and unsettling. In *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series* and *Bestiarium Latens*, this happens particularly with images of animals. How does the artist manage to do this? In fact, for the AI, every image corresponds to a set of numerical values or coordinates. If the artists change these coordinates, they can move within what is called the latent space, which is the space of all images the AI can generate[12]. This is the reason for the adjective "latens" in *Bestiarium Latens*. Some of these images will look familiar – a dog, a mushroom – others will be completely shapeless, and some will be halfway between familiar images and formless ones. Klingemann calls them "images" or "creatures" "of the intermediate spaces." These are the creatures of the *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series* and *Bestiarium Latens*. The artist interestingly compares this ability to move within latent space to the exploratory journey of a nineteenth-century natural scientist.[13] It will be worth returning to this point later.

For the moment, it is important to note that during the process of creating art with AI, the artist partly gives up control. Artists provide the AI with some data, and then must wait for it to produce images that are partly unexpected. It is almost as if the artists are interacting with something – or someone – that speaks a different language: by learning to listen to this language, that is, by understanding how to ask the AI, they discover different things each time.

Once the genesis of *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series* has been clarified, it is now necessary to understand the difference between this work and *Bestiarium Latens*. *Bestiarium Latens*,

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[10] On this issue see: Hito Steyerl (2023): Mean Images, in: *New Left Review* 140–41; https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii140/articles/hito-steyerl-mean-images; Kate Crawford (2021): *Atlas of Ai: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Simon Lindgren (2024): *A critical theory of AI*, New York: Springer.

[11] See Kate Crawford, Trevor Paglen (2021): Excavating AI: The Politics of Training Sets for Machine Learning, in: *A.I. and Society* 36, pp. 1105–1116.

[12] On the concept of "latent space" see Antonio Somaini (2025): A Theory of Latent Spaces, in: *Le monde selon l'IA*, ed. by A. Somaini, Paris: JBE Books.

[13] See Mario Klingemann (2023): Hyperdimensional Attractions, in A. Barale (ed.), *Arte e intelligenza artificiale*, cit., pp. 103–109.

as outlined above, was created as an updated version of *Hyperdimensional Attraction Series*. One characteristic of the images produced with GANs – one of the first models of generative AI, used between 2017 and 2020 – is that they were very blurry. With advancements in AI technologies, today much sharper images can be generated. In *Bestiarium Latens* in particular, the images are produced using a model called Stable Diffusion, which allows for clearer vision, the addition of new details, and the display of the "texture" (as Klingemann says) of these creatures.

It is now worth briefly returning to the metaphor the artist uses of the natural scientist's journey, because this brings us back to the theme of the sublime. Recently, art scholar Giovanni Aloi, in a very interesting book about animals in art, focused on the use of dioramas at the end of the nineteenth century[14]. In dioramas, dead and stuffed animals were placed in front of a realistically recreated landscape, and a human figure would stand next to them, as if facing or hunting these animals. The encounter with the animals was characterized, as Aloi explains, by the sublime – a sublime marked by a delightful kind of fear, as in Burke's analysis of the concept.

Certainly, this is not the sublime present in *Bestiarium Latens*. The sublime conveyed by this work is not related to threat or to a heroic confrontation between humans and animals. It is not even a sublime connected to technology in the sense described, for example, by Mario Costa: this work was made with AI, but the emphasis is on the creatures depicted, not on the technology used. Another step is therefore necessary in order to understand what kind of sublime this work conveys

2. Critically Extant

For the past few years, the Argentinian artist Sofia Crespo has been working on a project in which she represents nature and animals through AI. She says that her goal is to write "a natural history book that never was"[15].

Indeed, if one looks closely at the animals she depicts, it becomes clear that something is not quite right. Some of these images do resemble old natural history books – the background is slightly yellowed and aged – but what appears within is different. The animals she shows do not exist. Yet what is the point of creating imaginary animals with AI? After all, this has been done many times throughout history without the need for such technology – for example, in the bestiaries of the Middle Ages.

To answer this question, it is useful to look at a particular artwork by Crespo, *Critically Extant*. For this work, the artist asked the AI to generate images of several endangered species – hence the title "critically extant". The AI searched for information about these animals on the internet, and the result was a series of strange creatures, full of mistakes and inconsistencies, which were first exhibited on Instagram and later projected onto the walls of Times Square[16]. The reason they appear so strange is that there is very little information online about these rare animals: few or no images exist. As explained above, the AI needs large amounts of data in order to learn how to represent something. In this case, it couldn't learn properly and thus made errors, producing incorrect or distorted animals.

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[14] Giovanni Aloi (2011): *Art and Animals*, London: Tauris.

[15] See Sofia Crespo's website: https://sofiacrespo.com/ and her Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/sofiacrespo/?hl=en&img_index=.

[16] See the presentation of the project on Instagram: Sofia Crespo, Critically Extant. Accessed August 6, 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/CZH6is_BT_n/?hl=en; and on Times Square Arts: http://arts.timessquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/projects/midnight-moment/critically-extant/index.aspx.

Fig. 6–8. Sofia Crespo, *Critically Extant*, 2023

Exactly these errors, however, allow the artist to convey an important message. We think we know everything about animals, but we don't. In fact, our representations of the animal world are extremely limited. We have endless pictures of puppies and kittens, but very few of many other species and parts of nature. We need to overcome our biases and fixed ideas, and focus instead on what we forget or ignore in the animal world – because what we hide and forget is also what we are destroying, what we are failing to protect.

However, another question remains: what does all this have to do with AI, and with the question of the sublime?

To answer this, it is necessary to focus on a connection that exists between our relationship with AI and our relationship with animals. This will be explored through a third and final example.

3. Canine criticism

The last example I want to present is called *AICCA*, also created by Mario Klingemann. Although Klingemann refers to it as a "performative sculpture," *AICCA* has more the appearance of a robot – more precisely, a robot dog[17]. Its name stands for "Artificially Intelligent Critical Canine." *AICCA* is an art critic, as suggested by the monocle over one of its eyes, which it uses to examine the artworks it encounters, just like a human critic.

These examinations take place as a performance: in front of the audience, *AICCA* moves toward the artworks, rotating its head attentively. Then it produces an analysis of the artwork and prints it out as text from a small printer located under its tail – like a kind of paper "poop."

This is obviously a joke. Yet what is the meaning of this joke and, most importantly, what does it have to do with the question of the sublime? In fact, reading the texts AICCA produces, it becomes clear that they are anything but sublime. These texts are not the central focus of the work, because, as mentioned above, AICCA is intended as a performance. In fact, they are not even public (I was able to read them thanks to the artist's courtesy). However, they help us to better understand the meaning of Klingemann's experiment.

The texts are very funny because AICCA usually completely misunderstands the artworks it observes. It sees one thing instead of another, and from there begins a long, rhetorical commentary. So what is the point of creating such a silly art critic? And again: where is the sublime in all this?

I believe the answer lies in AICCA's double identity. AICCA is a robot, but it is also a dog – and these two elements are strictly connected. This becomes especially clear in the project's presentation. Here, Klingemann writes: "In an age of visual overload and shrinking human attention, there seems to be an opening for machines that pay attention"[18]. This attention is expressed in AICCA precisely through its dog-like behavior. On the Twitter profile of the canine critic, AICCA writes: "Observe the world around you with the intensity of a terrier tracking a scent"[19]. In fact, the heart of AICCA's performance lies in how the dog carefully moves around the artwork, how it rotates its head and wags its tail. Dogs and AI share this capacity: they show us a different perspective on the world.

This recalls a book by Donna Haraway, written after her famous *Cyborg Manifesto*, in which she also draws a connection between dogs and technology.[20] In The *Companion Species Manifesto*, the dog becomes the representative – just as the title suggests – of a broader group: the

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[17] See the project's website: A.I.C.C.A. Accessed August, 6, 2024. https://aicca.me/.

[18] See the artist's website: Mario Klingemann: https://onkaos.com/mario-klingemann/.

[19] A.I.C.C.A., Twitter profile: https://x.com/_aicca.

[20] Donna Haraway (1990): A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, in: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge.

numerous "companion species" with whom humans coexist and who help them question their own identity[21]. These species don't only include animals, but also the cyborgs from her earlier manifesto. Haraway argues that both dogs and cyborgs embody the human need for continuous exchange with something other than themselves. This exchange, for Haraway, is also biological. Having trained as both a philosopher and a biologist, she later focused on how such exchanges happen even at a molecular level, in the form of symbiosis.[22]

AICCA is similar, but also quite different from this idea. The robot-dog does represent a "significant other," something important for understanding human identity, as Haraway suggests. But in *AICCA*, the difference and distance between dog and human – and, by extension, between AI and human – remains essential. There is no symbiosis between them; instead, there is play. And this play requires space, a gap.

My hypothesis is that the sublime lies in the awareness of this distance – not as separation, but as the condition for playing together.

To conclude, this idea of play as part of the sublime was among the first noted by Adorno. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, he argues that the classical 18th- and 19th-century form of the sublime is no longer sufficient, because the sublime today must include the element of play[23].

However, in the examples discussed in this paper, the connection between play and the sublime appears in a way that is also partially different from what Adorno had in mind. The sublime no longer concerns the impossibility of representing the Other, but rather the possibility of playing with the Other – be it animal or AI – in order to glimpse aspects of reality that are usually hidden or forgotten.

And even more importantly: within this play, humans can keep questioning themselves again and again – without needing a final catastrophe.

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[21] Donna Haraway (2003): *The Companion Species Manifesto. Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

[22] See, e.g. Donna Haraway (2016): *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham: Duke University Press.

[23] Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (2004): *Aesthetic Theory*, Bloomsbury, pp. 282–284.

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