ALEXANDER REBEN

Delusions of a Time-Traveling Cactus

Delusions of a Time-Traveling Cactus
Alexander Reben
September 6–October 28, 2023

Opening reception: Tuesday, September 6, 6–8 PM
Gallery hours: Tuesday–Saturday: 11 AM–6 PM

Alexander Reben's practice investigates human connections with algorithms and automation. In tandem with his experience as a mathematician and robotics engineer, the artist uses mischief, absurdity, and humor to explore the evolving relationship between humans and technology. *Delusions of a Time-Traveling Cactus* presents Reben's role as translator of this feedback loop—a circuit he probes through art making.

Untitled (365) is a generative artwork that creates a digital image of a new sculpture daily. The work utilizes an automated set of instructions to construct each composition. Reben begins this process with a framework that the artwork uses to generate its own imagery. Each day thereafter, the work analyzes what it made the day before and tries to make something similar yet unexpected. Parameters are embedded to contextualize the sculpture within art history, thus encouraging three-dimensional, spotlight objects that are either situated on a plinth or freestanding. *Untitled* (*365)* serves as Reben's own commentary on how machine learning systems understand art, giving the artist the opportunity to remove his preferences and reveal what AI determines as "good" and "artistic."

Untitled (plotter) is a soon-to-be-titled installation featuring a continuously drawing machine. On the first day of the exhibition, a robotic plotter will begin a composition where it attempts to interpret an AI-produced image as a pen drawing. *Untitled (plotter)* uses machine learning to generate an image that is then converted into vector paths and drawn, line by line, over the span of several hours. In a similar exercise as *365*, the neural net powering this artwork is introspective in its analysis of what was made the day prior—to create a new work, it must reference the past. Once the first piece is finalized, Reben shows the first drawing to AI to give it a title that will remain as the namesake of the installation. The two tapestries in the exhibition follow a similar procedure, gaining their designations from machine-generated naming conventions.

Reben also considers what humans want from technology. While AI systems still rely on human guidance, Reben's series *AI Am I?* reverses the traditional feedback loop between humans and machines by privileging AI as a creative entity. *I, Twilight Wanderers in the Kingdom of Enchantment,* and *Lanterns of the Whispering Woods* are all part of this series where an artwork is described by AI and then realized by the artist or another fabricator. A wall label accompanies each work, explaining aesthetic decisions as well as artistic intentions. However, this text, in addition to the artist name, birth location, and date are fabricated by a neural network. Reben installs each work with this information as an accompanying wall label, elevating it to the status of an art historical text found in a museum.

Speak Art Into Life invites visitors to talk into a microphone, thereby prompting a custom program that generates artwork based on what the participant imagines. Each user may then choose one of four results. As new viewers engage, a linguistic exquisite corpse is formed by AI that amalgamates the artworks to visually and conceptually connect them. This work serves as another example of the human–machine feedback loop. Reben outlines a selection of different interactions and modalities within *AI Am I?* as follows:

- AI describes artwork > I make artwork
- AI describes artwork > Someone else makes artwork
- AI describes artwork > AI reads the description and makes image
- AI describes artwork > AI reads the description and makes image -> I make artwork
- AI describes artwork > AI reads the description and makes image -> Someone else makes artwork
- I make artwork > AI describes artwork
- Someone else makes artwork > AI describes artwork
- AI makes image > AI describes artwork
- AI looks at anything > AI describes artwork

Delusions of a Time-Traveling Cactus serves as the exhibition title and an allegory for how Reben confronts humor. The title work includes a potted cactus and a modified version of *Back to the Future*. Reben emphasizes the absurdity of the artwork being conceived by data yet manifested as a living organism with a finite duration. In a continuation of the *AI Am I* series, an AI-generated text accompanies the sculpture that states, "I chose a cactus because it's already suited to exist in its own time and space, its physicality

communicates its evolution over time, and it cannot go back in time to change what it is. But, by being planted in an ambiguous environment of mirrors and digital screens, self-reflection and magnified doubt is explored." —Chat GPT

In tandem with the gallery's solo presentation, bitforms is pleased to announce that *AI AM I?, Artificial Intelligence As Generated by Alexander Reben* opens at the Crocker Art Museum October 22, 2023–April 28, 2024. The exhibition asks audiences to consider the role of artificial intelligence in the future of art and daily life. By presenting a range of works Alexander Reben created before and after the advent of current-generation large AI models, it also doubles as a brief history of this emergent field.

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b.1985, New York
Lives and works in Berkeley, CA

Alexander Reben is an artist whose work probes the inherently human nature of the artificial through a conceptual and process-driven approach. Reben uses experimentation and prototyping to delve into our intricate relationships with algorithms, automation, and amplification through the lenses of absurdity, humor, mischief, and play. His artwork aims to engage the public with complex ideas in technology in an approachable way and to bring to light our inseparable evolutionary entanglement with technology, which shapes our existence.Reben studied social robotics at MIT where he researched human-machine symbiosis. For over a decade, he has been an artist working closely with cutting-edge technology and companies developing artwork spanning multiple mediums. He has exhibited internationally at cultural institutions, galleries, and museums and is regularly invited to speak at conferences and universities worldwide.

The artist has exhibited at Vitra Design Museum, MAK Museum Vienna, Design Museum Ghent, Vienna Biennale, ARS Electronica alongside IDFA, Tribeca Film Festival, TFI Interactive, Camden Film Festivals, Doc/Fest and the Boston Cyberarts Gallery. His work has been covered by CNN, NPR, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Washington Post, Fast Company, Filmmaker Magazine, New Scientist, BBC, PBS, Discovery Channel, Cool Hunting and WIRED, among others. He has lectured at TED, SXSW, TTI Vanguard, Google, UC Berkeley, SMFA, CCA, MIT, and other universities. Reben has built robots for NASA, and is a graduate of the MIT Media Lab, where he studied human-robot symbiosis and art.
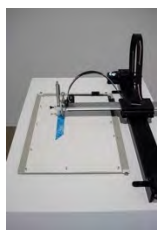
bitforms gallery

Alexander Reben
Delusions of a Time-Traveling Cactus , 2023
Cactus, mirror, screen, media player, video (color, silent), pigment ink on cotton rag
paper print (wall label)
18 x 22 x 38 in \ 45.7 x 55.9 x 96.5 cm

$ 5,000.00

Alexander Reben
Untitled (plotter), 2023
Robotic plotter, pen, paper
48 x 21 x 30 in. \ 121.9 x 53.3 x 76.2 cm

Inquire

Alexander Reben
I, 2020
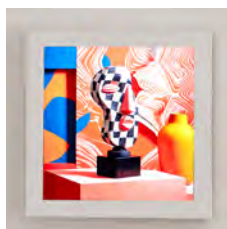Zippers, thread on canvas
30 x 24 in / 76.2 61 cm

$ 9,500.00

Alexander Reben
The Watchful Blur, 2023
From the series *365*
365 HD jpgs, one delivered each day, and then repeated each year
24 x 24 x 3 1/2 in / 61 x 61 x 8.9 cm

$ 12,000.00,
incl. screen, frame

Alexander Reben
Checkered Thoughts, 2023
From the series *365*
365 HD jpgs, one delivered each day, and then repeated each year
24 x 24 x 3 1/2 in / 61 x 61 x 8.9 cm

$ 12,000.00,
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Alexander Reben
A Short History of Plunger and Other Things That Go Plunge in the Night, 2020
Plungers, pigment ink on cotton rag paper print (wall label)
5 3/4 x 8 1/4 in
14.7 x 21.1 cm

$ 8,000.00

Alexander Reben
Speak Art Into Life, 2023
Computer, microphone, electronics, display
5 3/4 x 8 1/4 in
14.7 x 21.1 cm

Inquire,
Institution preferred

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Alexander Reben $ 8,500.00
Lanterns of the Whispering Woods, 2023
Tapestry, pigment ink on cotton rag paper print (wall label)
37 1/2 x 57 x 1 in \ 95.3 x 144.8 x 2.5 cm

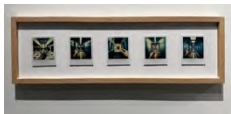**Alexander Reben** $ 8,500.00
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Liminal Thresholds: Epemeral Transitions Within Grasp, 2023
Polaroid Color i-Type Film
Set of 5
4 1/4 x 3 1/2 in \ 10.8 x 8.9 cm, each

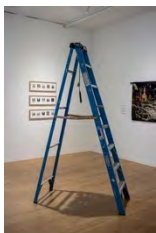**Alexander Reben** $ 3,750.00
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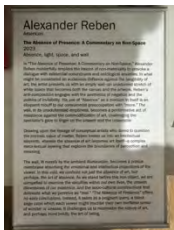Set of 5
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Alexander Reben   Inquire
Ascending Transience, 2023
Reclaimed ladder, fabric strap, hammer
96 x 53 x 24 1/2 in \ 243.8 x 134.6 x 62.2 cm

Alexander Reben $ 125,000.00
The Absence of Presence: A Commentary on Non-Space, 2023
Pigment ink on cotton rag paper print (wall label)
8 1/2 x 6 x 3/8 in \ 21.6 x 15.2 x 1 cm

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Cactus, mirror, screen, media player, video (color, silent), pigment ink on cotton rag paper print (wall label)
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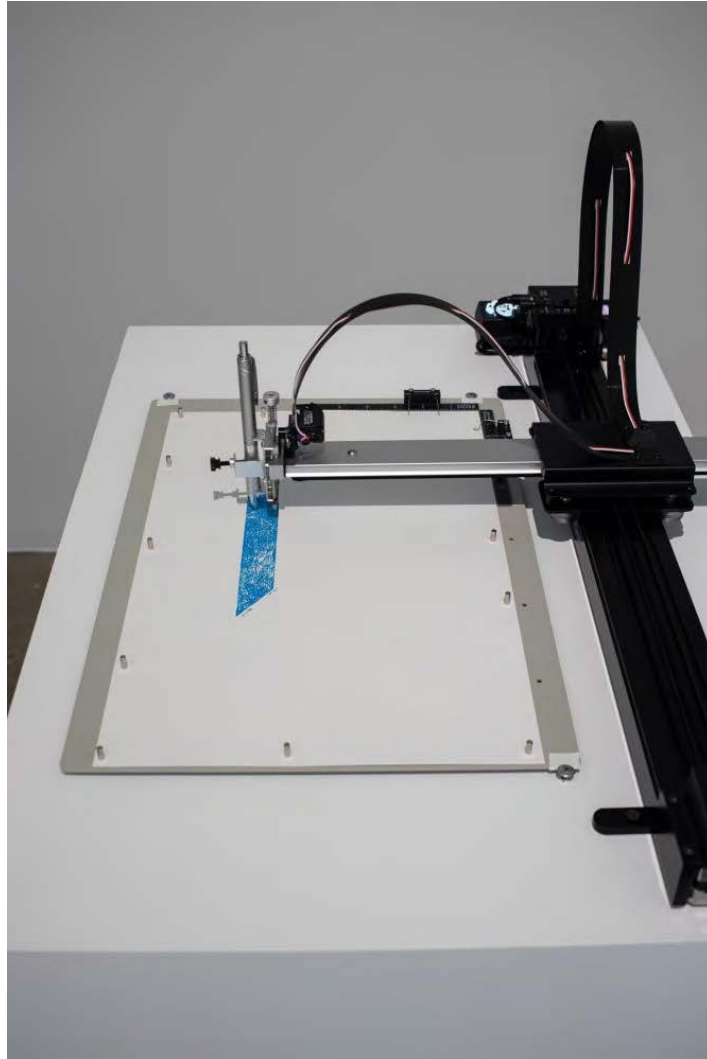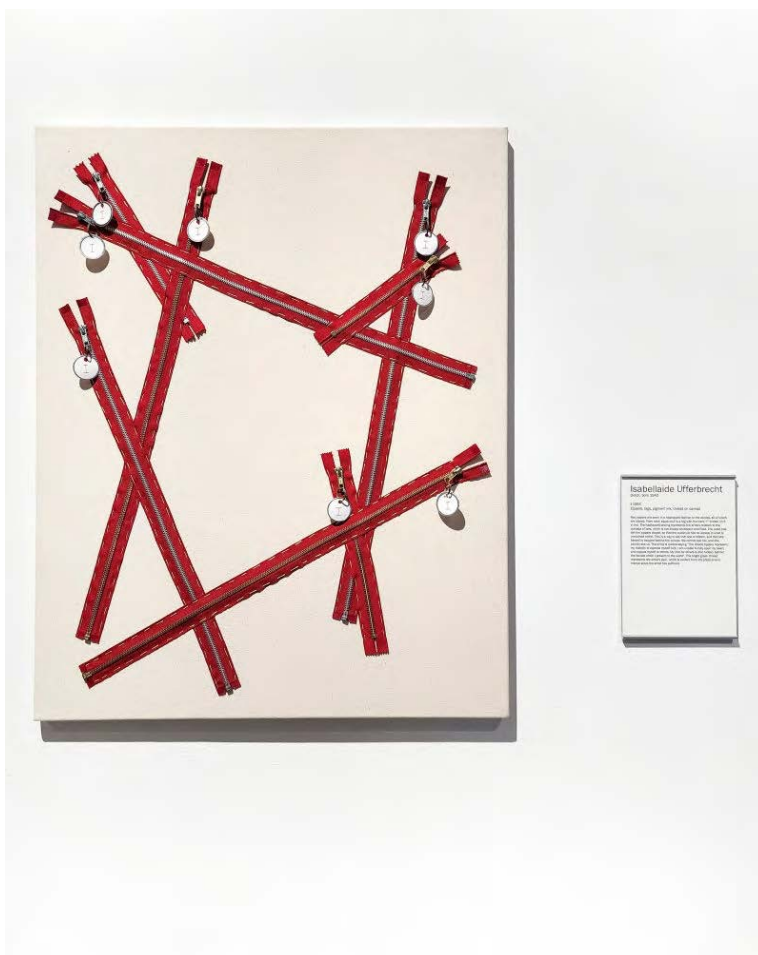
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Robotic plotter, pen, paper
48 x 21 x 30 in. \ 121.9 x 53.3 x 76.2 cm
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Alexander Reben
I, 2020
Zippers, thread on canvas
30 x 24 in / 76.2 61 cm
$ 9,500.00

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Isabellaide Ufferbrecht
I, 1964
Dutch, born 1942
Zippers, tags, pigment ink, thread on canvas

Red zippers are sewn in a haphazard fashion to the canvas, all of which are closed. From each zipper pull is a tag with the word "I" written on it in red. The haphazard sewing represents the artist's relation to the concept of love, which is not always consistent and fixed. The artist has left the zippers closed, so that the audience has no access to what is contained within. This is a way to say that she is hidden, and that she herself is trapped behind the canvas. We cannot see her, and she cannot see us. The artist is quoted saying "The closed zippers represent my inability to express myself fully. I am unable to fully open my heart and expose myself to others. My love for others is also hidden behind the facade which I present to the world". The bright green thread represents the artist's pain, which is evident from the physical and mental scars the artist has suffered.

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The Watchful Blur, 2023
From the series *365*
365 HD jpgs, one delivered each day, and then repeated each year
24 x 24 x 3 1/2 in / 61 x 61 x 8.9 cm
$ 12,000.00, incl. screen, frame

Video documentation: https://vimeo.com/865183505/8820f703bf

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Checkered Thoughts, 2023
From the series 365
365 HD jpgs, one delivered each day, and then repeated each year
24 x 24 x 3 1/2 in / 61 x 61 x 8.9 cm
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Alexander Reben
A Short History of Plunger and Other Things That Go Plunge in the Night, 2020
Plungers, pigment ink on cotton rag paper print (wall label)
5 3/4 x 8 1/4 in
14.7 x 21.1 cm
$ 8,000.00

The artworks in this exhibition are the direct result of Reben's experimentations in human-machine collaborations at the forefront of AI technology. Using a custom neural network combined with a text generation AI (GPT-3), descriptions of non-existent artworks are generated. The artist then curates from these outputs and inputs the selected artwork descriptions into text-to-image AIs, such as DALL-E-2. The resultant images are presented alongside the AI generated artwork description. Throughout the process, Reben interjects with punctuation tweaks, curatorial choices and, ultimately, selecting the final images, of which one is chosen by the artist, a curator, or collector to be reproduced by an oil-painting artisan.
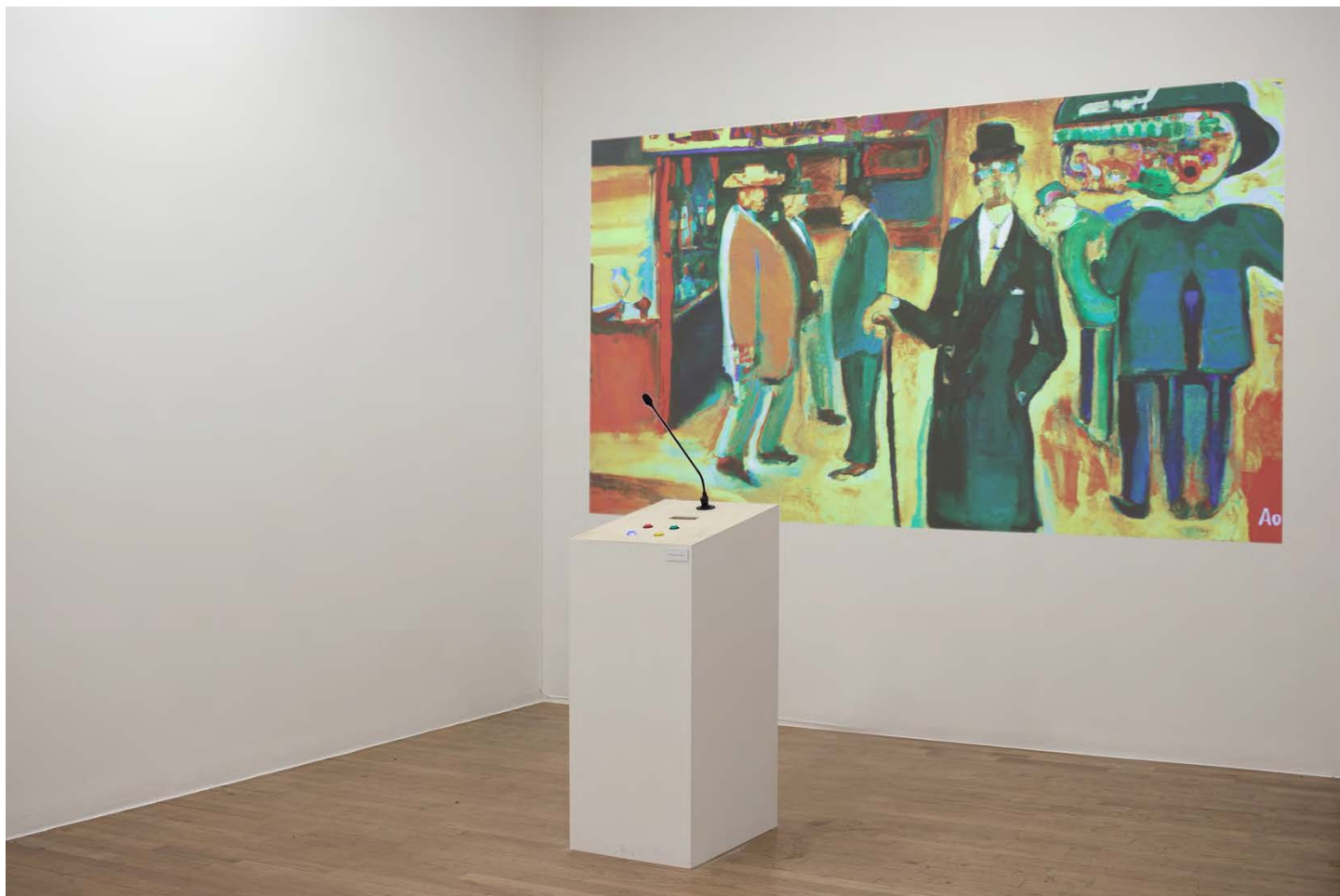
Alexander Reben
Speak Art Into Life, 2023
Computer, microphone, electronics, display
5 3/4 x 8 1/4 in
14.7 x 21.1 cm
Inquire, Institution preferred

Video documentation: https://vimeo.com/867500568/0a122b574c
Documentation of TED 2023: https://vimeo.com/826251354/d3c4db914a

Speak Art Into Life is an interactive artwork where visitors are invited to talk into a microphone, thereby prompting a custom program that generates images based on given phrases. Participants may then choose one of four images. As new viewers engage, a linguistic exquisite corpse is formed that assembles the souvenirs of past visits into a collaborative composition. Speak Art into Life debuted at TED 2023 in Vancouver, BC.

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Tapestry, pigment ink on cotton rag paper print (wall label)
37 1/2 x 57 x 1 in \ 95.3 x 144.8 x 2.5 cm
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Liminal Thresholds: Epemeral Transitions Within Grasp, 2023
Polaroid Color i-Type Film
Set of 5
4 1/4 x 3 1/2 in \ 10.8 x 8.9 cm, each
$ 3,750.00

At first, Alexander Reben's *Polaroids* appear as snippets from a vacation, scrapbook, or keepsake. Upon closer inspection, an uncanny quality emerges. Each polaroid has an ephemeral quality—a soft focus, color cast, or imperfection inherent to the printing process. The artist interjects this medium with unexpected, fictitious details that shift each vignette from historical artifact into illusion.

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Alexander Reben
Ascending Transience, 2023
Reclaimed ladder, fabric strap, hammer
96 x 53 x 24 1/2 in \ 243.8 x 134.6 x 62.2 cm
Inquire

"Ascending Transience" is an evocative and multifaceted installation by the celebrated artist Alexander Reben. The work exudes a spatial urgency that aims to dismantle the linear understanding of human progress. By employing a seemingly mundane ladder and tools, Reben forges an abstract dialogue between form and function. The piece appears to be suspended in a temporal rift, a state of perpetual flux that reflects society's ever-evolving relationship with industry and innovation.

The meticulous juxtaposition of materials in this installation carries multilayered symbolism. The ladder, traditionally representative of ascent, here hangs horizontally, arresting the expected vertical trajectory. This subversion symbolizes the constrained and often illusory nature of progress. The fabric strap, and the hammer to the ladder, evokes themes of restriction an ent, while the hammer itself embodies the constructive potential of human agency.

A dialogue between the two-dimensional art on the wall and the three-dimensional installation unfolds through spatial negotiation. The balance of materials embodies the delicate equilibrium in the human condition, as the ladder - an object of ascension - is tethered and weighed down by the tools of its trade. Reben has stated: "The objects that we often overlook in our day-to-day life carry an intrinsic beauty and narrative. In 'Ascending Transience', I aim to juxtapose the collective aspirations of societal progress against the very tools that enable and, at times, hinder it. It's an exploration of the delicate balance between aspiration and practicality."
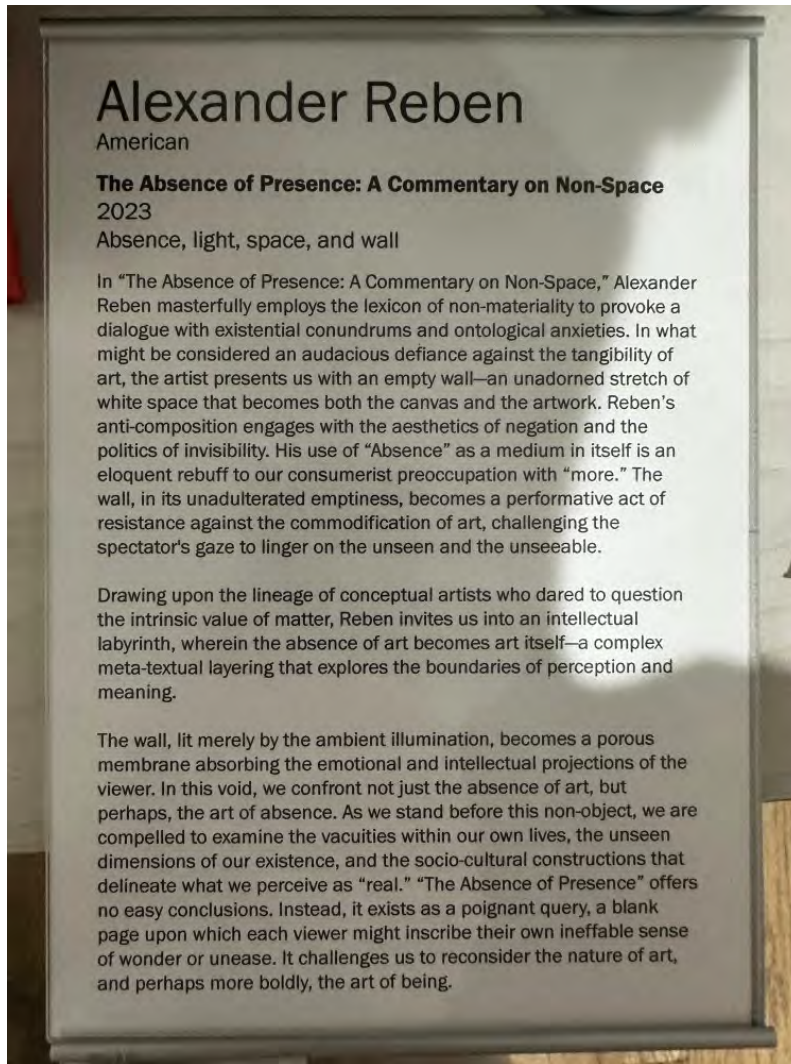
Alexander Reben
The Absence of Presence: A Commentary on Non-Space, 2023
Pigment ink on cotton rag paper print (wall label)
8 1/2 x 6 x 3/8 in \ 21.6 x 15.2 x 1 cm
$ 125,000.00

In "The Absence of Presence: A Commentary on Non-Space," Alexander Reben masterfully employs the lexicon of non-materiality to provoke a dialogue with existential conundrums and ontological anxieties. In what might be considered an audacious defiance against the tangibility of art, the artist presents us with an empty wall-an unadorned stretch of white space that becomes both the canvas and the artwork. Reben's anti-composition engages with the aesthetics of negation and the politics of invisibility. His use of "Absence" as a medium in itself is an eloquent rebuff to our consumerist preoccupation with "more." The wall, in its unadulterated emptiness, becomes a performative act of resistance against the commodification of art, challenging the spectator's gaze to linger on the unseen and the unseeable. Drawing upon the lineage of conceptual artists who dared to question the intrinsic value of matter, Reben invites us into an intellectual labyrinth, wherein the absence of art becomes art itself--a complex meta-textual layering that explores the boundaries of perception and meaning. The wall, lit merely by the ambient illumination, be membrane absorbing the emotional and intellect BUS as of the viewer. In this void, we confront not just the absence perhaps, the art of absence. As we stand before this non object, we are compelled to examine the vacuities within our own lives, the unseen dimensions of our existence, and the socio-cultural constructions that alienate what we perceive as "real." "The Absence of Presence" offers easy conclusions. Instead, it exists as a poignant query, a blank upon which each viewer might inscribe their own ineffable sense wonder or unease. It challenges us to reconsider the nature of art, id perhaps more boldly, the art of being.

An Aesthetics of the Absurd for A.I.

Charlotte Kent
August 25, 2023

When asked about whether machines think, the Dutch computer scientist, Edsger Wybe Dijkstra replied: "Does a submarine swim?" Such a reply puts the terms of the question in question. Western philosophy largely rejects humor as irresponsible, irrational, and so insufficiently serious, which may contribute to limitations within the contemporary discourse surrounding art to accept laughter as a way of reimagining the world. Introduce artificial intelligence into the mix, and pervasive, Puritanical seriousness abounds; the very term provokes anxiety, igniting a set of binaries that limit productive thought, which is why many suggest alternatives like augmented or alternative intelligence and complex information processing, or recommend specifying the software and application. As an MIT-trained roboticist, with extensive practice implementing machine learning systems, Alexander Reben experiments with technology in order to explore its boundaries and produces works that upend easy positions about technology and tools, humanity and creativity, agency and understanding.

In Reben's shifty engagement with both the tech-side excitement over emergent technologies and the humanist distress around any and all of them, his works provoke audiences to deliberate on a set of contemporary existential questions. The seemingly silly in his work is a provocation meant to help audiences ask not only what they are doing but why. Reben visualizes the process of self-reflection in *Untitled (365)* (2023), a generative code that produces a new work each day for a year, always responding to the prior day's effort, yet with parameters to push towards something different. It exemplifies a reflective nostalgia, a concept that scholar Svetlana Boym describes as considering the past, not as some yearning to return, but for the sake of understanding the present in order to step into the future.

Reben's decision to design *365* to create images that simulate installation shots of sculpture layers histories of representation upon one another. One history of both sculpture and photography has been to represent, document, even simulate some "real" thing. Both are caught up with notions of time— its fleeting

qualities and capture— to which age then adds a romantic veneer, a psychosocial inflection with more problematic nostalgic tendencies. Though sculpture doesn't serve photography, photography plays a significant role in sculpture's dissemination, becoming a representation of a representation with formal qualities that then form how we expect to see the object in front of us.

The art historical method of black and white photography with high contrast, clear shadows, isolated position, within a blank environment codified a homogenized scale for sculpture, extracting the form from any context for an imagined objective viewer whose sensitivity to details would produce comparative exegeses. The recent conversation on sculptural chroma offers just one approach to debunking this legacy and revealing that what we see guides how we think. The outputs of popular AI generators were first criticized for error producing shadows, amusingly ignoring why they might be desired within a virtual situation. Reben's playful turning around art history and technology's visual devices doesn't judge but offers audiences the opportunity to reconsider the foundations of our critique.

That a machine can produce the art criticism, wall texts, and artists statements jibes formulaic tendencies that prescribe experience rather than offer foundations for independent engagement. *AI Am I?* (2020-ongoing) may represent how intellectual labor as well as manual can be automated, but the project also demands that we reckon with the complexities of shared processes and assumptions of individualism in creativity, thought, and production. The discomfort of seeing a machine articulate what has been the provenance of hard-earned scholarship reveals an absurdity within the art industry that needs addressing, if only to figure out what the problem is! The series continues to evolve, introducing new human and machine collaborators.

Speak Art Into Life (2023) further connects people with machines by inviting someone to speak their imagination and select from one of four outputs to be projected; each subsequent participant will notice their choice lightly merged with its neighbor, threading connections despite no intentional relations. This is the affective order of the social, articulated since the 19th century in literature about crowds, mobs, and publics frequently ignored in the atomized structure of our technological context and then deplored when it explodes across social media platforms, filter bubbles and computer viruses.

Reben's tapestries—designed with AI and woven on a jacquard loom, generally recognized as inspiring early computer programming—nod to the medieval imaginings of Hieronymous Bosch (c. 1450-1516) or the famous Unicorn Tapestries (circa 1500 CE). We live in an era of similarly radical transformations in culture, economy, politics, social arrangements, and technology, as Marshall McLuhan articulated sixty years ago; the wildly popular spate of fantasy-medievalist novels, films, and programs reinforce a sense that there is something in the vestiges of time we need to reconsider. If Reben's imagery varies considerably, it is because his aesthetics are not visual styles so much as a politics about our imaginary of human and machine sight and insight.

Where slapstick shocks, satire mocks and irony seems in lock step with indifference, Reben channels the uncertainties of the absurd to tease out presumptions underlying contemporary practices and concepts. It can be a useful tactic in breaking through the morass at the intersection art, technology, and humanity. There is humor and horror in such a gambit. The decisions surrounding robots, alternative intelligences, and personhood occur alongside budding definitions of responsibility, creativity, and compassion. The paradoxes and incongruities of life brought out through his absurdist projects enable critical reflection in ways that are often defeated by overly didactic or political art. The seeming amoral stance of his work does not offer audiences a pat solution to the problems of the day but leaves them to discover their own ethic.

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