bitforms gallery

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.