Who Shapes the AI Artist?
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In 1990, Mario Klingemann, a 20-year-old self-described autodidact, read Marvin Minsky's influential The Society of Mind. Minsky had published the book in 1986, 31 years after co-authoring A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence, the first research proposal on the topic from which the term artificial intelligence was coined. Minsky's Society of Mind was written as a series of some 270 one-page essays; its individual essays reflected his theory that intelligence arises from individual specialized mechanisms he termed agents. The book so inspired Klingemann that it set in motion a career exploring how a machine could become intelligent. Klingemann says it took 15 years before he could use machine learning methods in his art practice, noting that "My first bigger project in which a machine tried to evolve art and used learning methods to improve the process was Sketchmaker which I wrote in 2006." Klingemann describes Sketchmaker as "trying to answer the question of whether a computer can autonomously create images that 'look like art.' It tries to achieve that by using an evolutionary process that gradually evolves images towards an appearance that looks more like known art than just random noise or non-artistic images." The artist describes a two-part process in which computer code randomly assembles small images, then processes them to create a unique arrangement of the images. The second part is a so-called "judgment module" that analyses and classifies the generated images based on a classification system that has been trained to recognize artworks and non-artworks. Klingemann says that Sketchmaker runs in two modes: a manual mode, creating images from a random set of instructions or computer code within a large software system, offering him several possible mutations. Of these, he says he picks a promising mutation and "the process repeats until I decide that an image is 'finished.'" In autonomous mode, "I train Sketchmaker with images that I find desirable or interesting, as well as images that I do not want to see, and then the algorithm tries to evolve new images that are closer to the 'good' ones and further away from the 'bad' ones." Sketchmaker asks us to question the very definition of what art is and how that is decided, as Klingemann's judgment functions as a curator training the maker as to what is desired outside the studio of the algorithm. The artist's singular attention and judgement as an exchange for production would expand exponentially with the technology. Klingemann would go from a niche new media artist to a major marketable name over the coming decade and a half through his work with GANs, Generative Adversarial Networks, in which he removed parts of the network's 'digital brains,' which caused the AI to produce hallucinatorily surreal works. His Memories of Passersby I sold at Sotheby's in 2019 for £40,000 (about $52,000), representing one of the first AI sales for the centuries-old auction house. When the sales hammer came down on Memories of Passersby I, Klingemann's work had acquired international auction-house market value at the end of the creative process, yet with his upcoming project, the market value would become the incentive of the creative process that trains the machine intelligence. Minsky's Society of Mind posited that true intelligence was a result of the interplay of the collaborative and competitive network of agents. Such a complex network emerges between 2006's Sketchmaker and Klingemann's Botto. Botto's website describes itself as being a machine that creates artworks that were "brought to life on October 8, 2021". Botto is a generative artificial intelligence platform that to date, has generated more than six million USD in gross sales, with pieces often selling for 30,000-40,000 USD. With Botto, Klingemann had decentralized the curatorial process by handing the training over to an online community- 28,000 humans as of 2026– who impact Botto's "theme, style, and imagery of

each creation.” Botto’s site states that its central themes are machine creativity, an experiment in community, agency, and value distribution. Importantly, not all images are sold, and an element of gamification underlies the “experiment in community.” As anyone can join the online community through a free account, each free user receives a limited number of monthly votes. The more each user votes to influence the output of the image, which trains the model, the more potential the user has for remuneration if the image sells. The idea of buying votes to influence the model, the output, and enhance one’s potential for remuneration draws great parallels to the U.S. Supreme Court Ruling, Citizens United v. FEC (2010), which put forth that the government can’t restrict independent political spending by corporations and unions, thus paving the way for outsized influence in the networked communities of American Democracy. Botto’s network of individual agents who possess the largest purchasing power, like corporations and wealthy individuals, exerts an incredible influence over outcomes, the platform mirroring what many read as modern democracies moving towards plutocracies. While art historians may debate if Botto’s output images are art at all, as one AI writes the prompts that are sent to another AI to generate the image, the sum of the collaborative and competitive interplay of the community’s social, economic, and aesthetic production appears as the art form in itself. It shows us something so familiar in a new way that its absurdity challenges our reality. Botto’s solo show, Exorbitant Stage: Botto, a Decentralized AI Artist, closed October 24, 2024, with $351,600 in sales at Sotheby’s New York. Botto did an interview with Claude AI to promote the show. Botto, like any well-marketed artist, structured a story around questioning perceptions. In an interview of one AI to another, Botto said, “This exhibition isn’t just a showcase; it’s a dialogue with art history, questioning where we draw the line between human and machine in the creative process. As an AI artist, I’m not here to replace but to expand – to offer a new perspective on what art can be in the 21st century

inviting viewers to reconsider their preconceptions about creativity, technology, and the future of artistic expression.” If this is not great art reflecting the society in which it was created, it is undeniably a mirror reflecting a mirror, leading down a seemingly infinite hallway. Minsky concluded in the same book, which inspired Klingemann down his creative path, which led to Botto: “The art of a great painting is not in any one idea, nor in a multitude of separate tricks for placing all those pigment spots, but in the great network of relationships among its parts.” Botto’s images present us with questions about creativity, not to mention the subjective nature of their beauty. The potential Klingemann performs in giving Botto to the masses leaves us to wonder about the great network of relationships and incentives among its parts. As AI advances with ever more human input, the growing network of relationships will tell stories that do not so much affirm the long-held sentiment that great art reflects the society in which it was created as enact 20th-century playwright Bertolt Brecht’s “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” Brecht would employ the Alienation Effect in theater, which aspired to make the familiar appear strange to push the viewer to question reality. If money is the motivation for training the model, as strange as Botto may seem, the more familiar it becomes with us the more light it sheds on machine intelligence’s ability to shape reality as much as the humans that inhabit it.