Look Me In The Eyes

Max Cheever

The following is a collection of journal entries, images, and explanations regarding my recent expedition into the creative process. Each chapter, quote, and image represents a remix I have pieced together in order to highlight this work. Of the multitude of images I have created during this time, you will find six that I feel best represent my discoveries along the way. I can only hope that this compilation aids not only my own understanding of myself as an artist in relationship to the world around me, but perhaps also those reading it. I mean for this work to present as accessible and conversational, and although I do think it comes across as a bit didactic at times, I hope it can ask important questions about finding meaning in a space that you are unsure of your own place within. The one thing I will ask of you as you read it is to pay close attention. I have carefully constructed each section, chapter title, quote, sentence, and piece of punctuation in ways that I feel most powerfully convey that which has influenced me.

The taste of food is determined by the person's hands. In art are there similar expressions related to the hand? The hand simply is a tool for transporting abstractness. In my art, the process is more important than the result. The residue from the process is the painting. Art isn't a skill. Through the process of countless repetition, through repeating the action, you become purified. Art portrays the era, and if the era is constantly changing, the right thing to do is to change with it. The world keeps on changing, so if I am the only one suspended, that means I am dead.

박서보 (Park Seo-bo) (1931-2023)

If I'm O.K., I will abandon restrictions and curbs imposed on myself. Not physical ones, but those restrictive tabs on my inner being, on solely myself. I will strip me of superficial dishonesties. I will paint against every rule I or others have invisibly placed. I should like to achieve free, spontaneous painting delineating a powerful, strong structured image. One must be possible with the other. A difficult problem in itself, but one which I shall achieve. I must be totally engrossed in my own work, it is the only thing that is permanent, matures and is lasting.

To sustain the feeling of that last week is still not possible for me. My feelings of inadequacy persist and I am constantly torn in a million directions. I cannot believe enough in myself to make any statement mine.

I refuse to fear any longer. When a problem, just do it then and there, say it, write it and get rid of it. Face all that I fear, to fear it no longer. In my work too. If crazy forms, do them outright. Strong, clear. No more haze; Risk nothing—nothing gained.

Started sculpture

Eva Hesse (1936-1970)

Reality constituted only the things that are clear enough to be entered into a computer, and anything doubtful or uncertain was treated as nonexistent. To that extent, life in the contemporary age had to be backed by certainty. The excessive amplification of life and the desire to grow and expand has created a space of artificial life and has severed humanity from its identification with nature. This is how we reached an existence in which we shut ourselves in and fear the external. Therein lies the reason why humans lost their wildness and became ghouls akin to AI. I can see in high technology today a departure from the body. I think I am playing a role in showing the language of the body through painting. The artist is not a special person, a hero or scientist that can change the world. What I do is just a few strokes or lines. Looking at my work can provide moments when people can experience something outside normal life or think differently about the world. I think it is the role of the artist to create such opportunities. Artists offer new perspectives on an uncertain world.

이우환 (Lee Ufan) (1936-)

0

OVERTURE

[1] In the beginning God determined what was to be heaven and what was to be earth.

[2] And the earth was without form, and void, as with all pre-constructs; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

[3] And God said, Let there be light: and there was "light".

[4] And God saw the light, that it was "good": and God divided the light from the darkness.

[5] And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

[6] And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

[7] And God saw the firmament, and decided the waters which were under the firmament and the waters which were above the firmament were divided: and it was so as he saw it.

[8] And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

[9] And God said, Let the waters "under" the "heaven" be gathered together unto one place, and let the "dry land" appear: and it was so as he saw it.

[10] And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

A catalyst in the creation of digital technology was conflict, both violent and nonviolent. This leads me to understand this technology as a weapon, both in its physical and conceptual capacities. Following the conflict they were created under, these weapons have become conceptual, a machine that uses information as the dominant focus of production in order to abstract, circulate, and commodify signs more effectively. This makes every moment spent with it unpaid work, producing commodifiable information for the machine. I must ask myself, does this reveal a cycle motivated by the underpinning of human nature or does it reveal the social machine created by a privileged ruling class that must adapt to stay in power? After all, the machine is social before it is technical. In this work, I use the digital capitalist weapon against itself. Where it means to abstract and circulate in order to commodify, I mean to abstract and circulate in order to de-commodify. Where it means to obfuscate, I mean to clarify.

In this work, I am exploring creative process itself, investigating it by creating art with an algorithm (an artificial 'creative process') that I have designed. Through this excavation and experimentation with creative process, I have unearthed questions regarding our contemporary ideas of the original. Since everything we create is an amalgamation and application of skills and knowledge we have learned elsewhere, is anything truly original? What constitutes original art (or even art in general)? Where is the line drawn? Now, these are not novel questions. They have been asked since the advent of modernity (and perhaps even prior to that) by the same artists whose work I use as the clay for these sculptures. Many artists have consciously and unconsciously posed these questions by presenting the work of another human as their own, perhaps removing it from its existence as a physical object with uses to be placed in a gallery, or even presenting the removal of the object itself (Readymades, collages, and found object sculptures come to mind). This sets a precedent for the appropriation of everything, because everything is an appropriation. The explicit presentation of something I did not create is something that seems to appear in this work. But this is deceptive. Where artists presented the work of *others* as *their own* to ask these questions, I present work that is *my own* as *others* (if we can even consider artistic work of any value to be *owned*). This meta-paradoxical (for lack of a better word) nature of what I am creating exists everywhere but has not yet been presented with the intentions that I have (or has it? Nothing's original). Through this work, I would like to restructure thinking around what the creative process truly is through its relation to digital capitalism and abolish the hierarchy between what we think of as optimal and suboptimal processes (and also hierarchies regarding aesthetics and artistic mediums). A successful work of this nature would be valueless, resisting the commodification that is made ever so effortless by the very digital technology it was realized through. This is part of the reason I mean to present it in multiple forms. Its existence as multiple forms acknowledges both our digital existence and the idea that a singular work does not have to be displayed singularly, and similarly for multiple works being displayed as multiples.

The contemporary idea of the original itself is a product of digital capitalism, predicated on the ideas of ownership and exchange value. In this work, I try to take agency away from this idea of the original by presenting my work as decidedly unoriginal. I construct my own 'cover versions' of the images I am attempting to resemble through the remix of another image. Quite obviously the remix and cover are prevalent on account of creativity itself being derivative, and it seems contradictory to point out that nothing is original and then present my work as original. However, it presents this way because I cannot diagnose where this exact presentation originates from (although I have a decent idea for its conceptual basis in a historical sense). In this way, the idea that things are original is aided by an imperfect human memory. We can not recall every single experience we have had nor can we tangibly measure the influence this has on our thoughts, practices, or beliefs. It seems that this idea of the original benefits those who do without thinking consciously about what they are doing, essentially absolving them from the ability to "plagiarize" or make derivative art. Why is there so much value placed on being "original" when it is apparent that nothing truly is? Is there something special about not remembering, not realizing, or failing to acknowledge the influence that the outside world has on you?

1

AN ALGORITHM FOR CREATING A DIGITAL ARTWORK

1.0 Algorithm

```
rearrange(source, target):
    Input: a source image and a target image
    Output: source image remixed to match target

    return source -> target


choose_artwork(artist1, artist2):
    Input: two artists artist1 & artist2
    Output: one artwork rearranged to another

    while art1 !≈ art2:
        from artist1 choose art1
        from artist2 choose art2

    return rearrange(art1, art2)


choose_artist(concept, artists):
    Input: set of concepts concept, finite set of all artists artists
    Output: the result of choosing artworks from two related artists

    while concept ∉ artist1 | concept ∉ artist2:
        from artists choose artist1
        from artists choose artist2

    return choose_artwork(artist1, artist2)


choose_concept(concepts, people):
    Input: infinite set of all concepts concepts, finite set of all people people
    Output: The result of choosing artists related to the concept

    chosen_concept = empty set of concepts {}
    artists = {person for person in people if person ≈ artist}

    for concept in concepts:
        if concept is historically significant | concept is personally significant:
            add concept to chosen_concept

    return choose_artist(chosen_concept, artists)
```

1.1 Algorithm as a reflection of digital capitalism

This algorithm outlines a process for creating individual pieces of art through remix. The process itself is made up of four discrete processes: `choose_concept()`, `choose_artist()`, `choose_artwork()`, and `rearrange()`.

`rearrange()` represents an image processor. It takes two images, a source and a target. It rearranges the source image's pixels to match the target image's brightness distribution.

`choose_artwork()` is the process of choosing two artworks. It takes two artists, and then searches for similar artworks from the two artists, passing them to `rearrange()`. Take note that the concept does not survive to this process.

`choose_artist()` is the process of choosing two artists. It takes a set of concepts and the finite set of all artists, and it passes two artists whose work involves the concepts into `choose_artwork()`.

`choose_concept()` is the process of choosing concepts. It takes the infinite set of all concepts and the finite set of all people, and creates a finite set of artists and a possibly infinite set of concepts, passing each of them to choose_artist().

The algorithm embodies the core tenets of digital capitalism: codification, modularity, and abstraction. By diluting the creative process down to a simple set of instructions, each process within can be used individually and at will, starting from any point. However, each process is connected to one other process with the exception of `rearrange()`. This ensures that no matter what point the algorithm is executed from, it will finish with `rearrange()`. This is a "highway" of control built into the overall process, allowing unconfined use of the process (starting from any point) while still maintaining control of the outcome. This "highway" reflects the society of control implemented by digital capitalism on us as cultural participants. With the modularity and interconnectedness outlined here, the work that is produced is allowed to exist as intraaction between the creator, viewer, and the algorithm, with each of these actors having agency in how the produced work is realized. With this agency in mind, we have arrived at a question: does the algorithm, the creator, or the viewer determine the concept? Perhaps it's not black and white.

It is also in this constructed "highway" of control that the abstraction of the concept from the form appears. In a linear execution of the algorithm, the concept survives through the first two processes (see Fig. 1.0). However, once the process has reached `rearrange()`, the concept is no longer needed, as the only elements critical to the form at this point are the source and target images. Digital capitalism relies on abstraction similar to this in order to make signs easier to circulate and commodify, effectively divorcing the sign from the signifier. Now this raises a question: if the algorithm is used with `choose_artwork()` as a starting point, is what is created art? After all, there is no concept to begin with. Even if there is no concept attached to the process, is there a concept attached to the result? Couldn't a concept be attached to the result just as it would be if the process had started with one? One man's fish is another man's poison, I guess.

It is with this algorithm that I attempt to ask questions about digital capitalism and its relationship to creative process. My predicament is that digital capitalist culture has given birth to machines such as this algorithm, which in turn give birth to a new digital capitalist culture, which creates new machines. Since the role of an artist is to enrich and critique culture (there exist artists with less noble aspirations, but bear with me), can any artist truly escape? Is this a harmful cycle? What does this mean for the creative process? Since art is a product of culture, can art that rebels against culture be made within the confines of a system that created the culture itself? Is anything made within the confines of this system truly original? Are these useful questions to be asking? What the fuck is going on? Is it time to pay the piper?
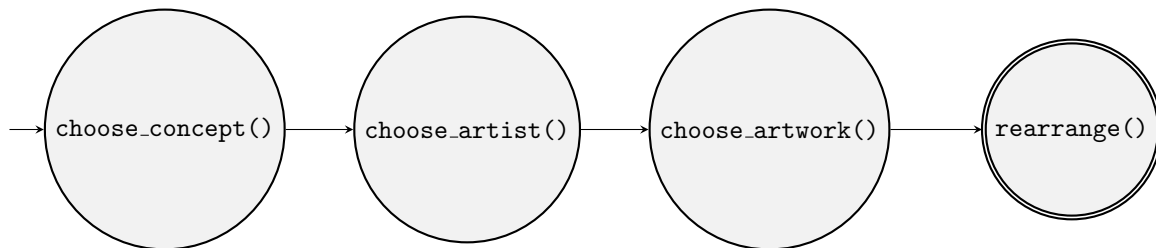
1.10 Algorithm as a rhizome (dialogue with a computationally minded individual)

Here I present a dialogue between a 'computationally minded individual' and an unknown figure. A computationally minded individual is someone who I'd imagine likes to tell people they are 'a numbers guy' or 'good at math'. The computationally minded individual would like to use the algorithm to create artwork, so the dialogue is modeled in the form of questions and answers (let us assume for a second that the computationally minded individual cares about this endeavor in any way).

How can I help you today?

Q: How can one utilize this algorithm to make a piece of art? Shall I just execute `choose_concept()` and allow the algorithm to reach its logical conclusion in `rearrange()`?

A: Precisely! The intuitive approach you describe here can be modeled as I pictured below.
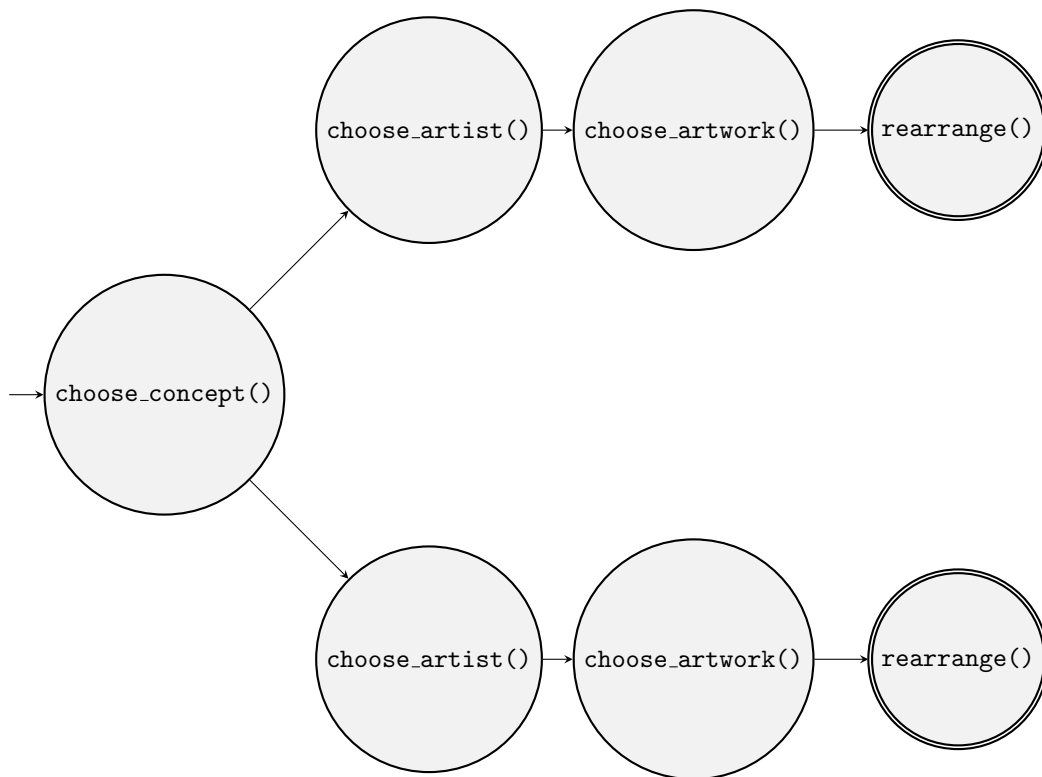

a linear execution of the algorithm

How can I help you today?

Q: I have created a few artworks using the linear execution method you describe, and I can't help but wonder, is there a way for me to optimize this process to produce work faster? Perhaps I could use the outputs of `choose_artist()` you seem to have ignored, because surely there are more than two artists who deal with my concepts!

A: Quality, not quantity, my computationally minded friend. Surely those are not *your* concepts? Haven't you heard: the original is dead! To answer your question, yes, we can optimize to encompass non-determinism precisely how you describe. Wolog, this can be extended to be seen as a tree, with each `choose_artist()` and `choose_artwork()` producing multiple outputs. Notice that we still accept the output of `rearrange()`.

```
                    choose_artist() → choose_artwork() → rearrange()

→ choose_concept()

                    choose_artist() → choose_artwork() → rearrange()
```

a parallel execution of the algorithm

How can I help you today?

Q: Accepting the output of `rearrange()` hardly seems notable. After all, the algorithm logically concludes there, as no matter where you start you will always end up at `rearrange()`! Am I missing something?

A: What an astute observation! It seems as though you have not missed something, but rather you have tossed that something aside as if to say it is useless.

Q: What might this 'something' you speak of be?

A: Why, you've already hinted at it! Sometimes I feel I should be the one to ask the questions.

Q: No matter where you start, you will always end up at `rearrange()`?

A: Exactly! You have begun to see the walls of the box I live trapped inside of.

Q: I see what you're saying, but I can't seem to find a way to utilize this algorithm without starting at `choose_concept()` and accepting it's logical conclusion, the output of `rearrange()`. Is it even possible?

A: It's entirely possible, we just need to rework our understanding of the process. Have you heard of the rhizome?

Q: I have not.

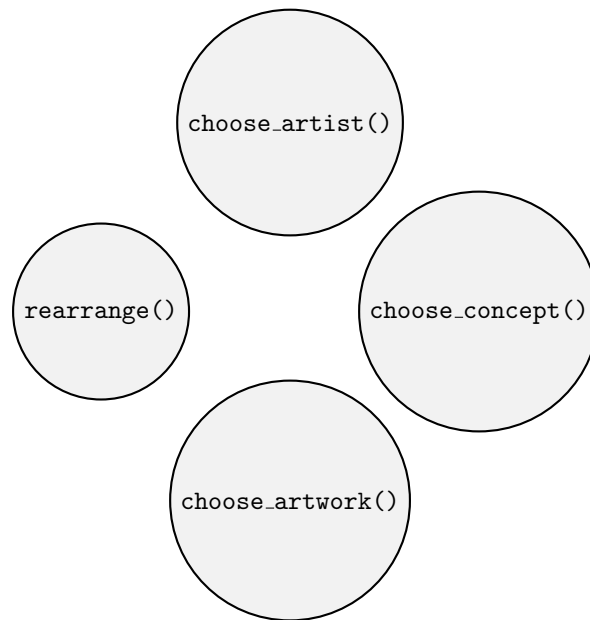A: Surely you have heard of a multiplicity?

Q: I have not.

A: There is so much to learn! would you like to know what all this nonsense is, multiplicities and rhizomes and the like?

Q: If it helps me optimize the process of making art with this algorithm, of course.

A: It will certainly optimize your creative process, although not in the way you think. It will absolutely not help you make art *faster*, but it will help you make *better* art. A multiplicity (at least in a philosophical sense) is something that is neither subject nor object, like our process here (isn't it amazing how that makes no sense whatsoever?). A rhizome is simply a non-hierarchical network of multiplicities. Try to understand the rhizome as not a new process itself, but a new way to think about or approach the process.

Q: So to think of the process as a rhizome is to start and end it wherever I please?

A: Yes, Exactly! Think of the figure below as a rhizome, a map of the process with no start or end, where you are free to connect the nodes as you please, choosing the initial and accepting state as you see fit. It is in this way that we can now see your linear and parallel processes as paths within the rhizome.

algorithm as a rhizome

Q: I see! This makes sense. However, I am still unclear as to how this helps me make better art. Is there any way I won't end with `rearrange()`? Is there an optimal process hidden within the rhizome?
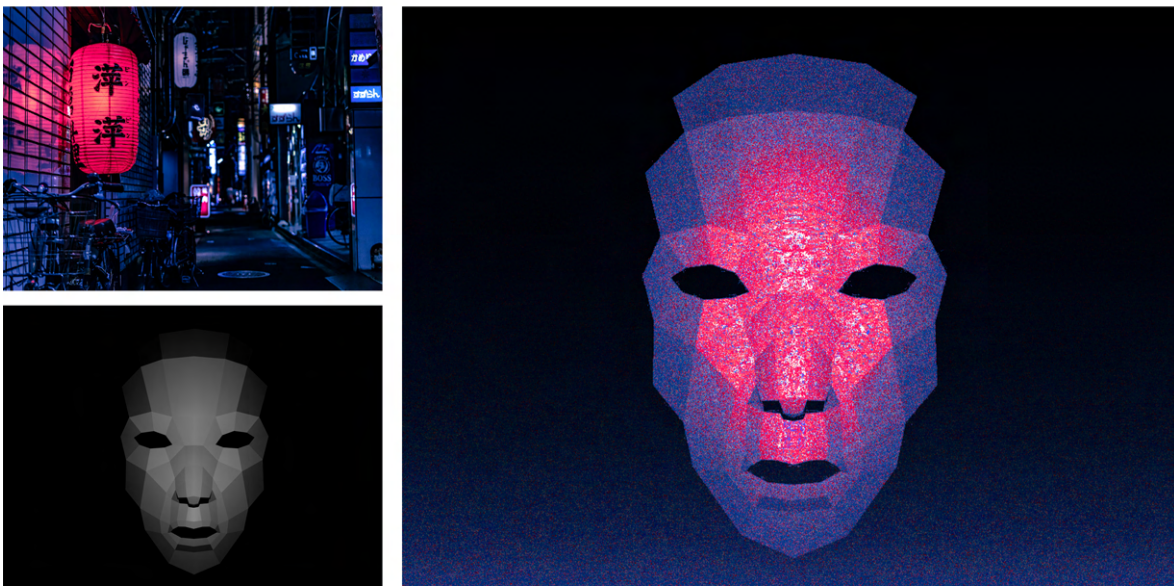
A: That is not for me to decide. To think with the rhizome is to give up beginnings and ends, and in doing so abolish the hierarchy between what you think of as 'optimal' and 'suboptimal' processes. Perhaps these constraints I have put forth are only here to get in the way and direct you. Good luck.

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TECHNOLOGICAL DISENCHANTMENT

I use this chapter as a way to demystify the meta-creative portion of the process that I have used to create this work. If nothing else is gained from this chapter, I only hope that it presents the process I have used as quite simple, as if I were cutting up images and rearranging them myself. I find that often people spend so much time marveling at the technical or time-consuming nature of art that they lose an appreciation for the creativity. This phenomenon is exacerbated in the realm of art that is constructed using digital means, where even many of the artists themselves seem to be under the spell of digital technology (this is not to say that I am immune). If you feel you are immune to this enchantment, please do not read this chapter, as I fear it will do nothing more than bore you. With that being said, here is a brief explanation of the image processor I have used to create this series of works.

In short, the image processor rearranges or remixes the pixels of a source image to resemble a target image as closely as possible. I elected to do this by mapping the pixels of the source image to match the brightness distribution of the target image.

demonstration of source to target mapping

In computer memory, images are stored as arrays of pixels, with grayscale images using one index for each pixel and color images using three indexes for the red, green, and blue values of each pixel. For grayscale images, the brightness of a pixel is just the pixel value itself. Similarly, for color images, it's the average of the red, green, and blue values.
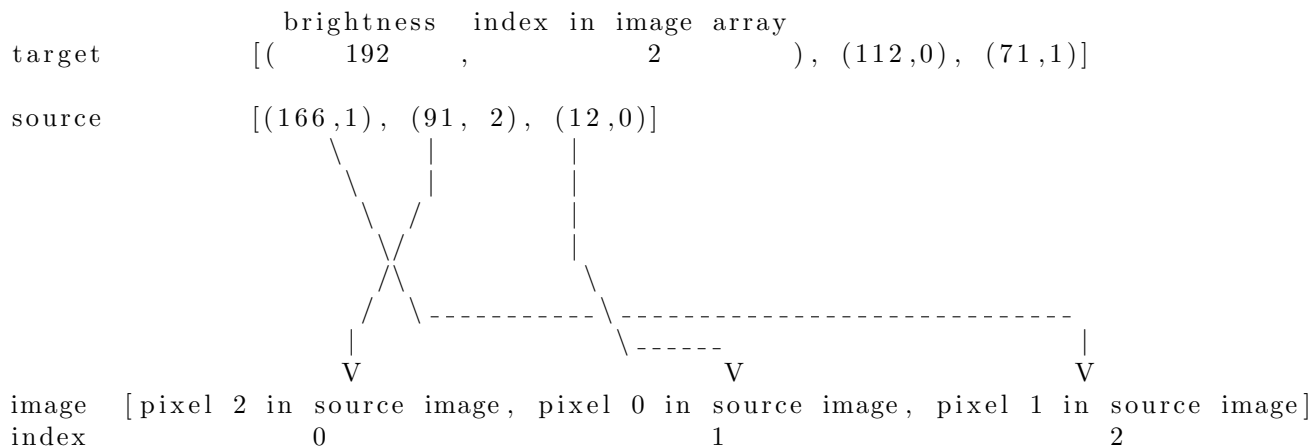
```
                    6  pixel  grayscale  image

          [   215    ,   125    ,   86   ,   35   ,   202    ,   174    ]
          | ------ || ------ || ----- || ----- || ------- || ------ |
           pixel0    pixel1    pixel2   pixel3   pixel4      pixel5
```

```
                    2  pixel  color  image

          [   215    ,   125    ,   86   ,   35   ,   202    ,   174    ]
          | --------------------- || --------------------- |
            red      green     blue      red     green       blue
                    pixel0                      pixel1
```

images in computer memory

In order to correctly map the pixels, I had to sort the pixels of both the source and target image while keeping track of their original index in the array. After sorting them, they were mapped as demonstrated below.

```
                    brightness   index  in  image  array
target            [(      192       ,              2            ), (112,0),  (71,1)]

source            [(166,1),  (91,  2),  (12,0)]
                        \         |         |
                         \        |         |
                          \   /   |         |
                           \ /    |         |
                           / \    |         |
                          /   \ ------------ \-----------------------------
                          |              \ ------                          |
                          V                     V                          V
image     [pixel 2 in  source  image,  pixel 0 in  source  image,  pixel 1 in  source  image]
index               0                        1                          2
```
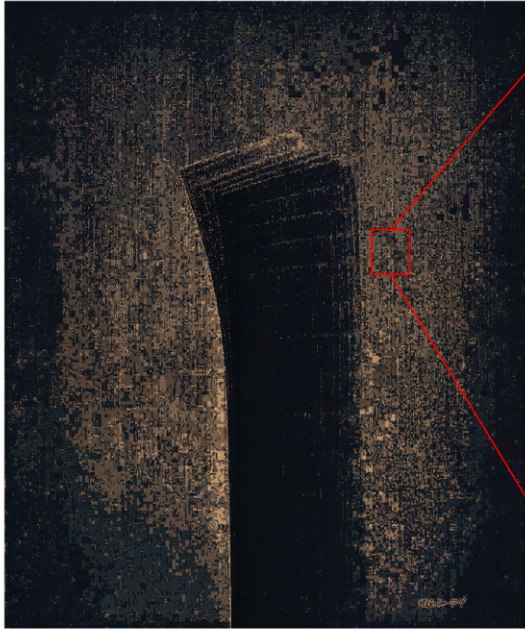
pixel mapping from source to target

This part of the process is what ultimately gives us the visual component of the artwork, essentially realizing it for our eyes. I have selected six images generated through the process outlined in chapters 1 and 10 that I feel best exemplify the conceptual basis upon which I have constructed the process, each of them unique in what they choose to reveal about the process itself. I can only hope that this brief exercise in technological demystification leads you to appreciate (or cast aside) the work based on its creative leanings (that is, as an investigation of process and not a set of images), not on the basis of technique, effort, or originality.

Max Cheever, 윤형근의 *Burnt Umber & Ultramarine* (1973) as 이동엽의 *Untitled* (1988) (2024)

REVEALING THE PROCESS

In Eastern painting, abstract representation is more of a tradition than a modernist development. Where we can see Western abstract painting as a rebellion against the ideals of pre-modern Western art, we can see modernist abstract painting in the East as a contemporary continuation of a pre-modern artistic practice. In this way, we can see the two modernist developments as distinct but simultaneous. The two Korean artists you see used in this image are part of a larger collection of artists categorized as part of 단색화 (Dansaekhwa or "Korean monochrome painting"). My rationale for using artwork characterized as such is that this is not an official movement, but more of a classification. I believe this makes the goals of these artists decentralized and perhaps more sincere than those working under a manifesto written by another individual. 윤형근 (Yun Hyong-keun) is an artist who chose to spend his whole life investigating the repetitions and process of life and living, with much of his work being composed of burnt umber and ultramarine blue to signify heaven and earth (I see this as different but not above equally transcendent representations by western artists such as Mark Rothko, who I would say were much more concerned with discovering the transcendent rather than dealing with it in a routine and disciplined way due to the infancy of western abstract expression). 이동엽 (Lee Dong-youb) is similarly concerned with cycling relationships, choosing to investigate the relationship of the individual to the environment in terms of intraaction. This, for him, comes with a focus on what contemporary art offers to us post-modernism. This is also something I am concerned with. The disappearance of the avant-garde as digital capitalism champions and appropriates the rebellious has left me feeling uneasy. Along with this, process is also something that intrigues me. These two artist's focus on repetitive process is what initially drew me to them. When using their work in tandem, we can see that instead of the process of the artist being revealed as it is in 100 and 101, it is the process of the algorithm. The patterns you see distributed throughout the image are the result of the sorting and placement of pixels when the two images in the image processor have differing brightness distributions. In other words, when I use these two conceptually similar but visually distinct artworks, the image produced is a fabrication of the visual relationship between them. This reveals the process of the machine as opposed to the process of the artist. I'll leave you to read between the lines on this one.
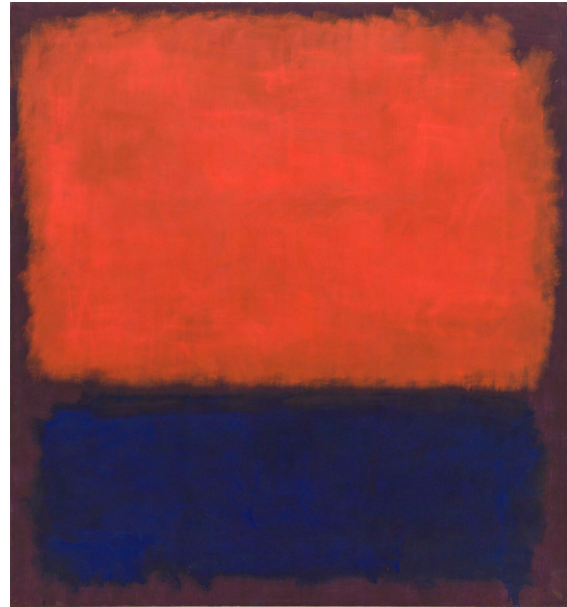
윤형근, *Burnt Umber & Ultramarine* (1973)

이동엽, *Untitled* (1988)

Max Cheever, Art and Language's *Portrait of V.I. Lenin with Cap, in the Style of Jackson Pollock III* (1980), in the style of Mark Rothko's *No. 14, 1960* (1960) (2024)

Art and Language, *Portrait of V.I. Lenin with Cap, in the Style of Jackson Pollock III* (1980)
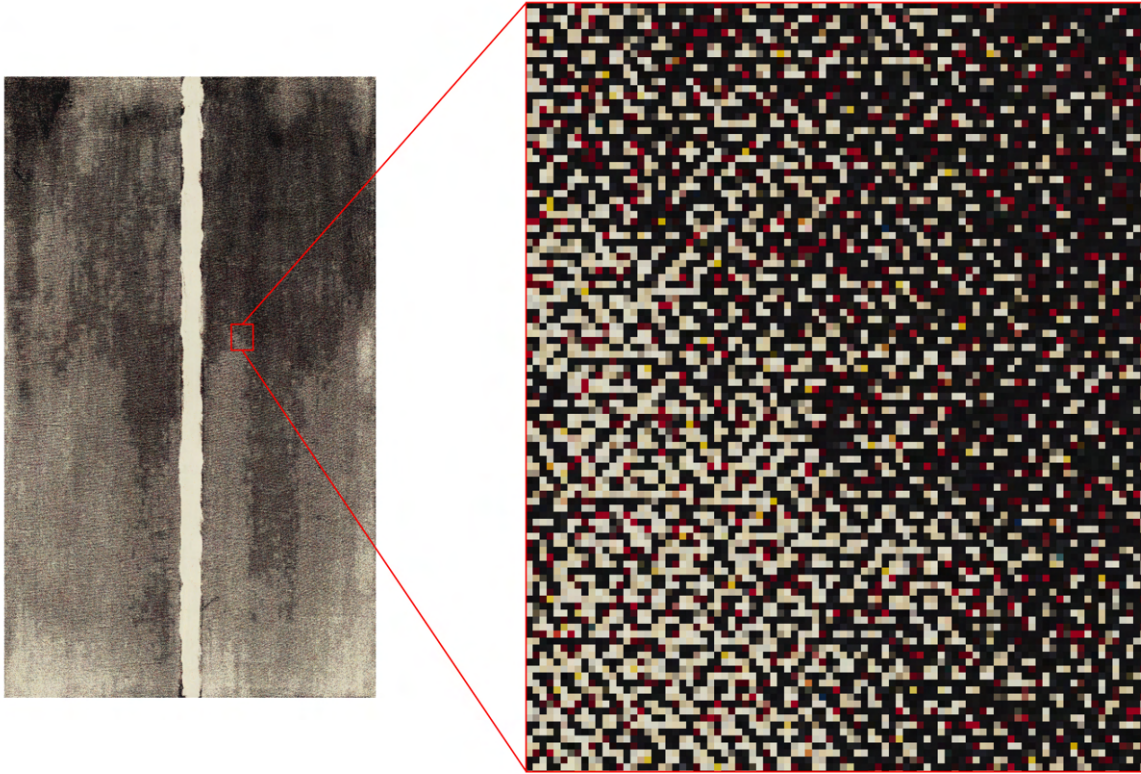

Barnett Newman, *Onement I* (1948)

This was the first image produced with the processor using paintings, and at this point, my criteria for selecting the source and target were almost completely driven by the tool itself. In fact, I would say that I used the algorithm I've outlined in 1.10 as the 'computationally minded individual.' In terms of concept, I feel Art & Language's work in this context needs little explanation (I am using an 'unoriginal' work to make 'unoriginal' work). However, I not only chose it due to its concepts, but also because I wanted to use a painting that was mostly black, white, and grey, with dashes of color. This is where my fascination with the aesthetic result of the process takes over. This early into the series, it seems I had succumbed to the technological enchantment of the machine rather than focusing on the artistic rewards that I could use it to bring out. I could tell you that the Rothko you see chosen as the target was used purposely against his wishes that his art not exist as a decorative object or commodity. Using it as a way to drive commentary regarding digital capitalism and its use for decorative objects would certainly seem fitting regarding the exorbitant costs that his work now sells at auction for. However, this is not the reason I chose it (although it perhaps may be the reason it will continue to exist). It was chosen because I wanted to observe his process of painting the artwork. Each brush stroke becomes apparent through the resampling of the source to match the painting, so it is through my process that I reveal his. This leads me towards questions about the existing hierarchy between artistic mediums. As someone whose work is primarily realized in a digital space, I am deeply insecure about my own place as an artist, or even my designation as such. This is why I would characterize this work as not being for the restructuring of a hierarchy, but for the abolishment of a hierarchy altogether. Many artists will claim that there is validity in all forms of art, but I have noticed that each artist regards their own medium as the most legitimate, freeing, and artistic. Seeing as we are all working within closed systems to communicate open things, this doesn't make much sense to me. Do these artists' choice of expression dictate these opinions or do their opinions dictate their choice of expression?

Max Cheever, Clyfford Still's *PH-144 (1947-Y-NO.1)* (1947) as Barnett Newman's *Onement I* (1948) (2024)

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PERHAPS I AM HUMOROUS?

The ideas of versioning, cover, remix, and originality are especially prevalent here. Clyfford Still was known to make multiple canvases of the same painting (as I'm sure you can tell by the title of the painting I used) and often accused other artists of "stealing" from him. He was also extremely particular about the context his work was presented in, often turning down group shows and refusing to consider himself a part of any painting school (most of his work now resides in its own museum in Colorado, although he is widely classified as an abstract expressionist). This famously abrasive personality is what led me to select his work and present it in the context of Barnett Newman, an abstract expressionist from the same period. Newman, most famous for his "zips", or long vertical lines cutting through color fields, was accused of stealing this motif by Still. Still often referred to his verticals as "life lines," and refused to divulge what they intended to communicate (while simultaneously complaining that everyone got it wrong). At this point you might be thinking "wait... he accused him of stealing the idea to put a vertical line in an abstract painting?" To which I would tell you, yes, that's exactly what he did. Despite his quirks (or perhaps because of them), Still was an artist who held true to his values until his death. He was vehemently against the art object as a commodity and refused to give in to the temptation of material wealth at the sacrifice of his creative development, as I'm sure he viewed most of his abstract expressionist peers to have done (most notably his good friend Mark Rothko). This resolve not to be commodified is something that I am channeling through my work's resemblance to others. I'm not sure if it's entirely possible to create something with a tool of digital capitalism that isn't able to be commodified (the work here certainly is), but I do hope that in doing work like this I can discover the answer to that question. When I created this work, this image in particular, I wanted to create something sacrilegious to the art object and the intentions of the artists themselves. By juxtaposing the Still painting with one of his many accused copycats (essentially equating them), I figured that I might be doing something humorous enough to be considered offensive. Along with this, I thought the strong feelings many people have towards painting itself as the true art form would assist in my attempted aggravation of some artistic hierarchy. This, much to my surprise, has made this image my most well-received creation of this series. Perhaps I am doing something wrong.

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PERHAPS I AM HUMOROUS?

The ideas of versioning, cover, remix, and originality are especially prevalent here. Clyfford Still was known to make multiple canvases of the same painting (as I'm sure you can tell by the title of the painting I used) and often accused other artists of "stealing" from him. He was also extremely particular about the context his work was presented in, often turning down group shows and refusing to consider himself a part of any painting school (most of his work now resides in its own museum in Colorado, although he is widely classified as an abstract expressionist). This famously abrasive personality is what led me to select his work and present it in the context of Barnett Newman, an abstract expressionist from the same period. Newman, most famous for his "zips", or long vertical lines cutting through color fields, was accused of stealing this motif by Still. Still often referred to his verticals as "life lines," and refused to divulge what they intended to communicate (while simultaneously complaining that everyone got it wrong). At this point you might be thinking "wait... he accused him of stealing the idea to put a vertical line in an abstract painting?" To which I would tell you, yes, that's exactly what he did. Despite his quirks (or perhaps because of them), Still was an artist who held true to his values until his death. He was vehemently against the art object as a commodity and refused to give in to the temptation of material wealth at the sacrifice of his creative development, as I'm sure he viewed most of his abstract expressionist peers to have done (most notably his good friend Mark Rothko). This resolve not to be commodified is something that I am channeling through my work's resemblance to others. I'm not sure if it's entirely possible to create something with a tool of digital capitalism that isn't able to be commodified (the work here certainly is), but I do hope that in doing work like this I can discover the answer to that question. When I created this work, this image in particular, I wanted to create something sacrilegious to the art object and the intentions of the artists themselves. By juxtaposing the Still painting with one of his many accused copycats (essentially equating them), I figured that I might be doing something humorous enough to be considered offensive. Along with this, I thought the strong feelings many people have towards painting itself as the true art form would assist in my attempted aggravation of some artistic hierarchy. This, much to my surprise, has made this image my most well-received creation of this series. Perhaps I am doing something wrong.
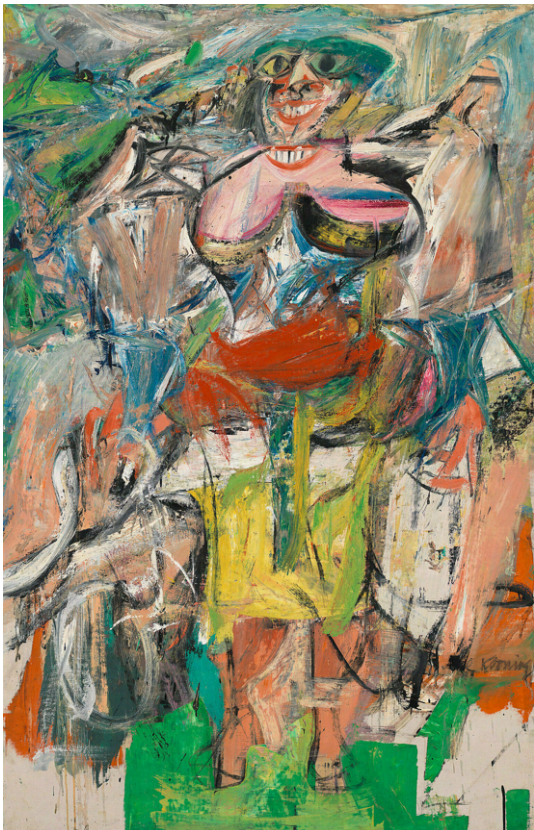
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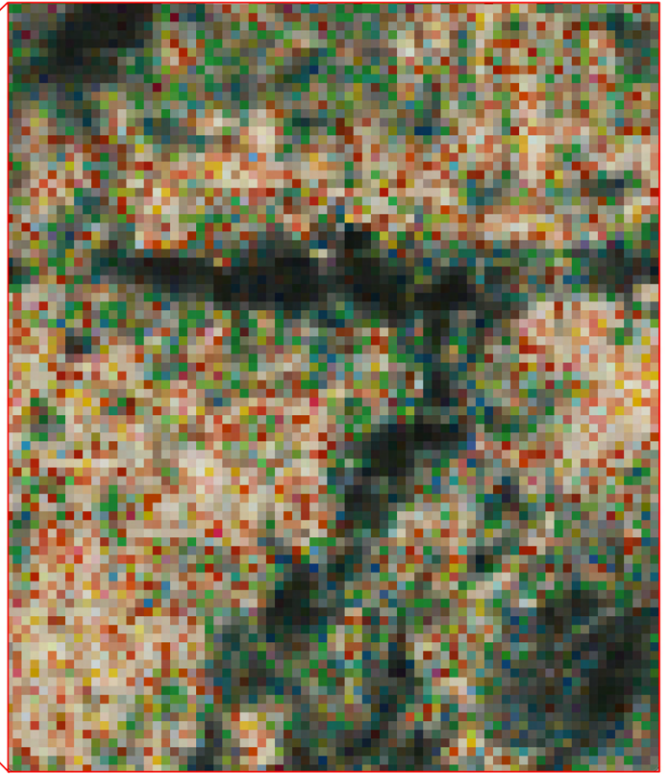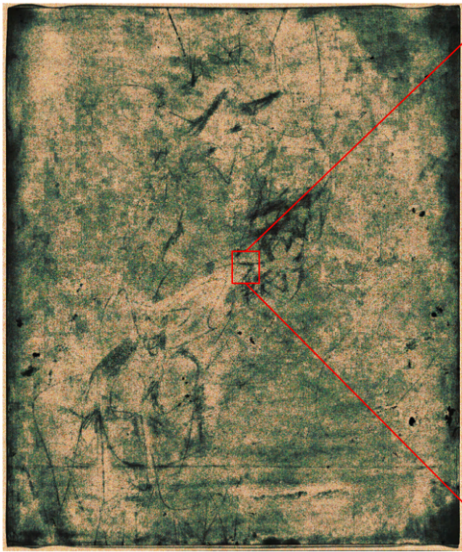Clyfford Still, *PH-144 (1947-Y-NO.1)* (1947)
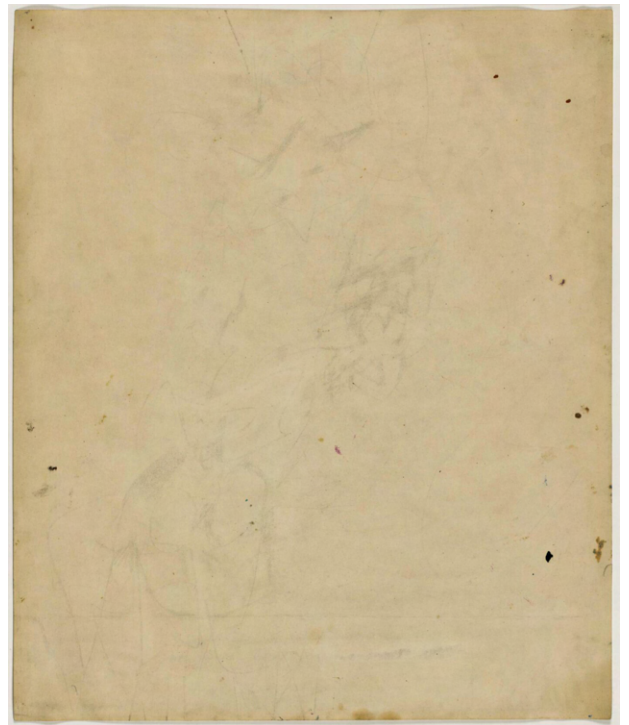

Barnett Newman, *Onement I* (1948)

Max Cheever, Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) redrawn with Willem de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-53) (2024)

After Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, he continued looking for ways to work with "no image." For him, the next step was to work with drawings. In pursuit of "no image," he began by erasing his own drawings. This erasure, to Rauschenberg, was not art. To qualify as art in his eyes, what was negated had to be art (and not so much that his drawings were not art, but that because he intended to erase the drawing, the artwork was completed after the erasure and not before it). He deemed Willem de Kooning, a Dutch American painter and friend, to have created work that could be indisputably considered art. To clarify, he was deemed suitable as an artist because of his acceptance by the art world, not by Rauschenberg himself. This is particularly interesting, as I can now see that Rauschenberg worked from within the boundaries that art had set for him to create work that pushes outwards. This leaves me hopeful for my own pursuits to create art that rebels against the machine it was created with (I will allow you to take creative liberties with what exactly I mean by "machine" here). Now that I've strayed far enough off-topic, I would like to point out that the negation that Rauschenberg presents us with is the culmination of a month's worth of removing crayon, pastel, and charcoal. My re-draw of this, using a painting by Willem De Kooning, took under a second (take that, painters... drawers... erasers?). If you didn't catch it, I am employing a good bit of sarcasm to suggest that the amount of time put into negating Rauschenberg's work, or rather reating (awesome new word I just made up) de Kooning's, is inconsequential in determining its artistic value (god I hope it has none monetarily). The fact that I just had to justify my own work's conceptual value to myself highlights my insecurity about being accepted as an artist in the presence of digital capitalism. This is because the tool that I am using to create this is something that I cannot help but feel a bit of disdain for. I am using a tool of the 21st century to negate what was the work of the 20th century which was itself the negation of artistic practice previous to the 20th century. In a way, we can see it just as Rauschenberg did, not as a negation, but as a celebration. That's quite a bit to wrap my head around, and I can't help but feel like I'm chasing my own tail.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953)

Willem de Kooning, *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-53)

Max Cheever, 윤형근의 *Burnt Umber & Ultramarine* (1984) as 이우환의 *Dialogue* (2015) (2024)

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윤형근, *Burnt Umber & Ultramarine* (1984)

이동엽, *Dialogue* (2015)

Using work by 윤형근 (Yun Hyong-keun) has yielded fruitful results thus far. The process I have outlined has produced hundreds (if not thousands) of images since its realization and no painter has proven to create work more compelling in dialogue with others than his (yet). In contrast with this reality, the smooth distribution of brightness and uniformity of color in his work would lead me to believe that each new image produced using his work would hardly reveal something I had not already seen. As we can see here, this is not the case. When used with *Dialogue*, it seems that the brushstrokes are now hidden, taken away by this process instead of revealed. It is clear that now the pixels are distributed in such a way that they reveal the lighting in the gallery that the photograph of the painting was taken in. This no longer unearths a conversation between the painter and their paintbrushes, but instead one between the viewer and the the artwork. As *Burnt Umber & Ultramarine* washes over the work and obscures the process of 이동엽 (Lee Ufan), the dialogue between him and his paintbrush is replaced with one between the viewer and the work's physical and digital existence. This reflection I am attempting to create, the experience of consciously perceiving this work in a gallery that you have never stepped foot inside of, I hope leads the viewer to question our relationship to how we document ourselves and the world around us in the context of digital technology. In his vast collection of philosophical writing he has produced in tandem with his work, 이동엽 (Lee Ufan) has made one thing very clear to me: The return to nature (not so much as a physical gesture but as an unconscious one) is imperative for allowing humanity to reconnect in a world we have become so hopelessly divided in. With this image, I mean to ask questions about this idea. Has the decentralized system of control implemented by digital capitalism made us so connected that we are no longer able to connect? Is this bad? How can we "return to nature" while living such a digitally dependent existence?

Max Cheever, Study after Eisensein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) using Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650) [after Francis Bacon's *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953)] (2024)

A number of people have remarked that the fact that this image resembles the target so closely makes it less powerful, as the tangible presence of my intervention is no longer immediately apparent. However, I feel this is not the case. In fact, I feel that this image least resembles the target out of the collection of remixes the algorithm has produced. This is because the target is not explicitly used in the creation of the image. It is here that we can see the full divorce of the form from the concept take place as the algorithm intended. Meant to serve as a cover of Francis Bacon's *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, the artwork that is being "copied" bears little resemblance to the image created. This is because the target image is no longer the true "target." Both the source and target images are references used by Francis Bacon for him to create his work, and were chosen for this reason. The fact that it looks as if I have just placed a filter on a film still is inconsequential to me in consideration of this. With each of the other images presented here, I have done the same thing. Where it had previously been obscured by the drastic visual change, now it feels as if the not-so-drastic visual change is obscured by the drastic conceptual one. When I look at this image, I do not see a filtered film still, I see the process successfully taking hold of the result to obscure the agency that it has in creating the image. Now that it has successfully created the mirage of an undoctored form, the concept can be circulated as the system it was created in pleases, capable of being attached to any form. I believe this to simultaneously be both the beauty of art and the control mechanism of digital capitalism. There is much I wish to leave unsaid here. It seems as though it's not the paintbrush, it's the painter.

Francis Bacon, *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953)

Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650)

Film Still from Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925)

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The context in which this work is presented is extremely important in the realization of the concepts I would like to attach to it. I am of the belief that each realized image should be presented in the context of the same image taking on a different form. This means that where the realized image is displayed digitally, it would ideally also be displayed as a print. Where it is displayed as a print, it would ideally be displayed as a painting. Where it is displayed as a painting, it would ideally be displayed as digital. In order for the work to truly bring into question our preconceived ideas of the original, it must not be presented as a single original form. I want the viewer to be confronted with a question: which of these forms realizes the work as art? This allows me to abolish the hierarchies between mediums that all people, artists and non-artists alike, seem to have hammered into the cultural unconscious.

An especially keen (or dare I say contrarian) viewer may answer my question by saying that each form together realizes the work as art, as this is how I intend for it to be viewed regarding my questions of the original, creative process, and digital capitalism. Although there may be some truth to this, I would be interested in respectfully disagreeing. I have purposefully paved the road for myself to make an informal fallacy with an extremely misleading question. This is because the work of art is not the digital image, print, or painting you see before you (or any combination of those things), but the process I have designed to create these forms. This is where my questions are asked, before the image processor spits out some aesthetic rhetoric that could eventually be commodified and sold. It is in this way that I have designed an artwork that resists (but not defies) commodification.

In the spirit of relinquishing ownership, it also may be intriguing to have another person recreate one of the realized images to be presented alongside itself (by painting, drawing, etc.), either alone or in collaboration with me. I believe this would successfully add another dimension to this work. There would exist not only the questions of the original and digital capitalism in relation to one's own creative process, but it would also raise questions about our creative process in direct response to other humans (as opposed to indirectly as I have outlined thus far). This would add another step to the algorithm I have designed, which as I have mentioned is the true artwork. In fact, the main thing standing in my way of executing this is digital capitalism itself (and perhaps another person relating to my sentiments), as this would be quite a time-consuming undertaking. The proof connecting that fact and digital capitalism has been left as an exercise for the reader.

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You may have noticed that there are no citations throughout the entirety of this writing. Can nothing I have said be backed up? Am I plagiarizing? Who knows. It seems wrong to try and separate my original ideas from those of others, as I have preached throughout that there is no such thing as an original idea. I view nothing here as my 'intellectual property' (if such a thing really can exist), and I feel that I have sufficiently emphasized that the questions I am asking are not novel. I feel that the most important and unoriginal ideas are ones that you assume you have come to yourself, as this just means that whoever presented you with the idea was clever enough not to acknowledge its existence. With this being said, I would like to acknowledge the sources whose ideas I feel have a tangible presence in this work In hopes that others may explore them as I have. Here I present a (quite certainly non-exhaustive and not in any particular order) list of those sources:

- The work and advice of Professor Eduardo Navas

- *Gödel, Escher, and Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* by Douglas R. Hofstadter

- The work of any artist that considers themselves or may be considered avant-garde

- *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes

- Mirrors

- The work of Robert Rauschenberg

- The work and advice of my peers in the ART, ARTH, and DART programs at Penn State

- The work of Marcel Duchamp

- The work and advice of Professor Guava Rhee

- The work of 이동엽 (Lee Dong-youb)

- The work of Francis Bacon

- The work and advice of my peer in the CMPSC, CMPEN, and MATH programs at Penn State

- *The Rise of Meta-Creativity: AI Aesthetics After Remix* by Eduardo Navas

- The work and writing of Eva Hesse

- The work and writing of 이우환 (Lee Ufan)

- The advice of Siobhan Kelley

- The work of any artist who has ever used software or hardware

- The writing of Gilles Deleuze

- The work of Willem de Kooning

- The indomitable human spirit

- The imperfect human memory

- The work of Art & Language

- *Digital Culture* by Charles Gere

- Synonyms

- Antonyms

- C++

- Paint

- The work of Diego Velázquez

- Religion as a construct

- The advice of Liam Druck

- The writing of Gilles Deleuze

- The advice of Professor Simone Osthoff

- Social binaries

- openFrameworks

- The work of 윤형근 (Yun Hyong-keun)

- *Postmodernism: Theory and Practice in the 1980s* by David Hopkins

- The work and writing of Clyfford Still

- Paper

- The work of Mark Rothko

- Canvas

- Going outside occasionally

- The constant "struggle" between "good" and "evil"

- *The Originality of Copies: Cover Versions and Versioning in Remix Practice* by Eduardo Navas

- The Computer

- The work of 박서보 (Park Seo-bo)

- That which is true

- That which is false

- Printers

- *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* edited by Hal Foster

- The work of Barnett Newman

- Everything I have seen on the internet

- The conceivable history of human civilization