

A Poet by Any Other Name...

by Wendy Dennis (written in 1998 – when I was in a different lifetime!)

The winds of oozy woods which wear
the ocean, with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the purple even
I sleep in the arrow
Of the dome of death.

Would you believe that this poem was written by a computer program? How about this one?

Pink confused with white
flowers and flowers reversed
take and spill the shaded flame
darting its back
into the lamp's horn.

Has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Actually, the second poem is a stanza by a human poet. Or, is it? Would you be willing to bet a week's pay on which is which? And, betting aside, how upset would you be if you guessed wrong?

In the past decade or so, more and more people have had the opportunity to consider such a question. For example, Ray Kurzweil's Cybernetic Poet (RKCP), which wrote one of the above stanzas, has fooled a substantial number of people since 1988. And, in 1997, a test was conducted to compare three scores, one by Bach, one by David Cope's computer program EMI (for Experiments in Musical Intelligence) and one by Steve Larson, a music theory teacher at the University of Oregon. The audience believed that EMI's creation was the actual Bach composition. Such "Turing Tests" are no longer used to test the validity of Aaron, the computerized robot that creates original drawings. Built and programmed by Harold Cohen and on permanent display at the Computer Museum in Boston, Aaron has had paintings on exhibition in a number of museums, including The San Francisco Museum of Art.

Now, I think this is all pretty neat, but a lot of people think the whole idea of a computer program creating art is ridiculous, if not unsettling. After all, why bother? What is the point? And, how can it be art, anyway? Which leads us, of course, to the question: What is Art?

There is always the dictionary definition: "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination esp. in the product of aesthetic objects; also: works so produced." (4a, Webster) And, given that consciousness seems to be a determining factor, it is difficult to argue that a computer program circa 1998 is consciously using its skill and imagination to create art. Although, there is a growing number of scientists and thinkers who believe that true computer intelligence and consciousness will become a reality. But, for our purposes, a more relevant question might be, "What criteria should we use to determine whether something has inherent artistic value?"

Does it have to have its origins in conscious creativity? Are the creative expressions of child (when not referred to as scribbles) on equal footing with a painting by Picasso? How about a photograph that didn't capture the intended family shot but ended up producing haunting shadows against a powerfully brooding sunset? And then there is Tristan Tzara's poetry writing method, "How to make a Dadaist Poem," which entails cutting an article into its separate words, shaking them up in a bag and copying them onto paper in the order they emerge. Each of these situations can produce esthetically pleasing, as well as powerfully evocative results. But, does the human response, regardless of why or whether something was consciously created, grant artistic value?

I say yes. Of course, a logical reversal of this would be that, even if something is consciously created, it is not art if no one responds to it. Although, also following this logic, even if only the creator responds to it, then it is art. So, what am I saying here – anything can be considered art? Even those pictures painted on velvet? Well, they don't evoke a big response in me, but a lot of people enjoy them, more than the number of people who appreciate an intricate jazz composition or an abstract painting.

Extreme examples? Yes. But, art comes in many guises, whether or not they are officially recognized. Consider the whole new world of art forms made possible by computer technology. The human element guiding the creative process is obvious, yet "Cyberart" raises a lot of questions as to its true artistic value. Although, the creative value of photography was also viewed with suspicion when people first discovered that a camera could produce more than mere reproductions.

Granted, if a dance, song, picture, or verse so clearly expresses an aspect of human experience that it reverberates across cultures or through the centuries, then it is *great* art. Yet, I cannot deny the validity of any one person's creative expression. Nor can I deny the validity of a person's response to a particular creation or venue. If it strikes a chord in someone, it brings that person closer to their humanness, to their existence, to being one with the moment. And, to me, this sense of connection is the purpose of art. Regardless of the source.

(FYI - The first poem was written by RKCP after reading poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The second is a from *Imaginations 96*, by William Carlos Williams.)

[In the mid-1990s] *Wendy Dennis is a poet and writer living in Jamaica Plain, MA. Her main interest is "finding connections in the chaos," which has inspired her life-long exploration of different perspectives of art, psychology, and spirituality, as well as the relationship between the individual and society.*