The Gaze of the Machine

I first discovered the work of Taro Karibe during a portfolio review in Tokyo close to ten years ago, just as he was embarking upon a new career as a photographer. From the outset, he seemed unconcerned with capturing what is generally considered to be a "good" photograph—whatever its subject may be—than with exploring, probing, interfering with, and questioning the photographic process, identifying its fragilities and dysfunctions and placing those at the core of his practice. This lack of deference to the conventions of photography has naturally steered him into the turbulent waters surrounding the encounter between photography and artificial intelligence (AI).

Unlike other "traditional" artistic disciplines like painting, drawing, or sculpture, photography's dual identity both as an art form and a technology have made it particularly prone to existential crises brought on by each new technological innovation to nudge, disrupt, or even entirely upend the medium. This has been true since its earliest days, from the mass development of the handheld camera to the advent of colour film, but the accelerating pace of change brought on by the move to digital technologies in recent years has left the world of photography reeling.

This has come about through a number of shocks, the first of which was a wholesale change in the "means of production" of images towards digital cameras and other image-making devices. This first wave was then followed by major changes in the way we store, distribute, use, and consume images, particularly in conjunction with the proliferation of smartphones and social networks. In 2021, the art world then saw a sudden boom in non-fungible tokens or NFTs tied to cryptocurrency markets, and along with it the literal manifestation of Guy Debord's premonitory claim from *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) of the appearance of "capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image."

While each of these major technological revolutions has inevitably led to much hand-wringing and dramatic claims of the end or death of the medium, none has been as intense as the latest wave associated with images created by artificial intelligence. While ChatGPT has stolen most of the headlines, generative image programmes such as DALL-E and Midjourney have also caused a furore in image-focused circles through their fast-evolving ability to create photorealistic images that can fool most viewers.

The primary concern with this technological development is understandably that this could make the role of the photographer obsolescent in many instances, from commercial to editorial photography of all kinds. But beyond these entirely legitimate fears—in the context of an already fragile industry—it is arguably in the impact on the connection between the real and the photograph that there is most at stake.

From as far back as Fox Talbot's 1844 book *The Pencil of Nature*, more than any other visual technique, photography has been seen as having a unique ability to provide an unadulterated reflection of reality, to "capture" things as they truly are. However, the successive technological

revolutions that have affected the medium over recent decades have weakened this bond. With AI image generators now able to create photorealistic images without having to draw on reality in any way, that connection is now hanging by a thread. As these technologies have improved, it has now become almost impossible to identify a well-made AI "photograph" from a photograph, and whatever weaknesses still remain—the depiction of hands is understood to still be problematic—the consensus is that it is only a matter of time (months, not years) before these are overcome.

The vast majority of those who have begun to use this technology to create photorealistic images have focused on producing the most sophisticated images possible, often directly emulating masters of the medium, whether in terms of the use of light, composition or colour. But in Taro Karibe's project *Aim an Arrow at Rock in the Ocean*, the images he uses as the starting point or raw material from which to produce his works are not so much about the subjects they might contain, but rather a kind of visual obstruction he generates though deliberate technical dysfunction. As such, their photographic qualities are muted or hidden, and the Adobe Sensei AI software he used to process them, presumably confused by their abstract nature, felt obliged to transform into more recognisable accepted genres of landscapes or even portraits.

Karibe's project could have stopped there, presenting this image-based AI's attempts to try and make sense of his photographs of screen-based malfunctions—an exercise reminiscent of the Spanish artist Joan Fontcuberta's *Landscapes Without Memory*, a subversion of military imaging software from 2006. Instead, Karibe added a further layer to his project by introducing a secondary AI to describe and interpret the results of the resulting images into language, in essence reversing the process of generative text prompts that most image-based experimentation now involves. This second AI seems to be at a similar loss, often stretching to make the images conform to what it expects to find in a landscape or a portrait, no matter how abstract the image appears to our eyes. In a sense, *Aim an Arrow at Rock in the Ocean* is a backwards version of the children's game of Chinese whispers in which the initial statement is unintelligible and each (in this case artificial) participant makes an attempt to inject some meaning into it.

In every step of its process, *Aim an Arrow at the Rock in the Ocean* pushes at the edges of technology, and its weaknesses or blindspots, not only to reveal its weaknesses but rather as a process of experimentation, of using these technologies in ways other than those for which they were intended.

Looking at the results, I couldn't help but imagine what might happen if we were to set technologies such as these free from the baggage of existing imagery. It is perhaps a nonsense to imagine that images could be created by machines for consumption by other machines—why would they need anything other than the glorious simplicity of ones and zeros?—but in placing two different forms of AI technology into dialogue, Taro Karibe begs the question of what function we humans serve anymore in this process.

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Marc Feustel is an independent writer, editor and curator based in Paris. A specialist in Japanese photography, he is the author of *Japan: A Self-Portrait. Photographs 1945–1964* (Flammarion, 2004) and has curated several exhibitions in the field, including *The Metamorphosis of Japan after the War* (Japan Foundation), *Tokyo Stories* (Kulturhuset, Stockholm), *Eikoh Hosoe: Theatre of Memory* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney), and *Okinawa: une exception japonaise* (Le Plac'Art Photo, Paris). He is also active as a writer and editor for contemporary art and photography publications including for *Flashpoint!* (10x10 Photobooks, forthcoming), *I'm So Happy You Are Here: Japanese Women Photographers from the 1950s to Now* (Aperture/Textuel, 2024), Hong Kong Whispers (Hannibal Books, 2024), and *ca.ra.ma.ru* by Takano Ryūdai (Libraryman, 2022). A regular speaker, guest curator and jury member at photography festivals and events, since 2019 he has been one of the hosts of the Artist Talks at the Paris Photo art fair. He now writes regularly about photography and photobooks for publications around the world.

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