SOMETIMES I WISH THE ARTIST WERE A MACHINE

An essay on artistic egos, friendship and the limits of artificial patience

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Ten minutes before an exhibition installation was due to begin, an artist called me to say he was no longer participating. I was already at the venue. The space was ready. The arrangement had been made. The artist, apparently, was not.

I never received an explanation that made sense of the timing. Perhaps inspiration had finally arrived and instructed him not to leave the house.

That was one of the moments when I caught myself thinking a thought that sounds rather scandalous coming from an art curator: sometimes I wish the artist were a machine.

A machine might fail. It might freeze, lose a file or refuse to connect to the printer. But at least it would not expect me to interpret its technical problem as a profound expression of artistic freedom.

The Unwritten Job Description

In three years, I have organised around forty exhibitions involving thirty-seven artists, mainly in Warsaw and Prague. They have taken place in galleries, cafés, restaurants, independent spaces and even under a bridge. I have learned to expect almost anything, except perhaps a perfectly uneventful installation.

Once, an artist announced that I must order a taxi to transport his works. Otherwise, he would not participate. It was not a request for help. It was a condition.

Apparently the curator is also a personal assistant, transport department and emergency service. I must have missed that chapter at university.

Of course, artists need practical support. Sometimes a venue is difficult to reach; sometimes work is fragile or heavy. Those are ordinary problems we can discuss. An ultimatum, however, is not a transport plan.

The problem is not that artists have needs. It is the peculiar idea that having talent exempts a person from courtesy. A remarkable painting does not make its creator automatically remarkable at keeping appointments.

The Politics of the Best Wall

Then there is the wall. To an unsuspecting visitor, it is simply a wall. To an artist, it can become a question of dignity, status and perhaps the meaning of existence.

Why is my work here? Why is hers opposite the entrance? Why did you hang his painting where people will see it first?

A curator may spend hours thinking about rhythm, scale, colour and the conversation between works. The artist may see only one thing: somebody else got the better wall.

I am happy to discuss installation decisions. Artists should care about how their work is presented. But a disagreement about composition is not necessarily a personal insult.

Sometimes I imagine an exhibition dedicated entirely to wounded artistic egos. The difficulty would be finding a venue large enough. The opening would be spectacular, although I suspect nobody would agree on whose name should appear first.

An Exhibition Is Not a Marriage Proposal

The hurt feelings do not always end when an exhibition closes. I work with different artists because I am curious about different art. For some former collaborators, however, my next project with someone new can feel like an act of betrayal.

As if organising one exhibition together were a marriage proposal.

Apparently, I was expected to devote the rest of my professional life to one person’s creative development. No new discoveries. No unfamiliar paintings. Just eternal loyalty to a single genius.

I value long relationships with artists. Trust can make a difficult project possible, and returning to someone’s work over time can be rewarding. But a previous collaboration is not a contract of exclusivity.

I am a curator, not anyone’s property. My professional curiosity does not expire when we take the paintings off the walls.

A machine, I imagine, would accept that I had chosen to work with another machine next month. It would not spend six months wondering why I preferred the other algorithm.

Or perhaps that feature is coming in the next software update.

Curators Have Their Favourites, Too

It would be convenient to stop here and declare artists the emotional ones and curators the sensible ones. Unfortunately, curators are human beings, too. We have favourites. We make friends. We hold grudges. We remember who helped us and who made an ordinary afternoon unnecessarily miserable.

Consider two artists with equally interesting work. One is someone you know well. You have spent evenings in cafés, talked about politics and art, shared wine, laughed together and helped each other through difficult moments. The other is a stranger—or someone with whom you once had a thoroughly unpleasant conversation.

Whom are you more likely to call first?

I would like to say that artistic merit settles the question. I would also like to say that nobody in the art world has ever secured an opportunity over coffee. Neither claim would be convincing.

Sometimes an exhibition happens because two people enjoy one another's company. Sometimes it never happens because they cannot stand each other. The artist may never hear a formal rejection. There is simply no second invitation.

I recognise this tendency in myself. A good working relationship matters to me, and after a difficult experience I may hesitate before proposing another collaboration. That hesitation can be reasonable. It can also become a shortcut that keeps me from looking at the work fairly.

This is an uncomfortable part of the profession. We talk about artistic quality, but we also operate through affection, habit, convenience and memory. Friendship is not a crime. Neither is deciding not to work with someone who treats you badly. The danger begins when we pretend those personal factors do not exist.

Would a machine be fairer? Not necessarily. Algorithms can inherit preferences and exclusions from the people and data behind them. But they are unlikely to remember an argument about a glass of wine from three years ago. Human beings sometimes do.

The Assistant Who Never Takes Offence

I use artificial intelligence in my working life. It helps with drafts, translations, English-language correspondence and the endless administration surrounding exhibitions. I am not ashamed of this. There is no special moral virtue in spending an evening correcting the same practical email for the fifth time.

What I appreciate is not that AI is creative in my place. It is that I can ask it to reorganise a schedule or simplify a paragraph without worrying that it will stop speaking to me.

Of course, AI has its own irritating habits. It can produce sentences so polished and empty that they seem to have been written for an exhibition that does not exist. Every project becomes “transformative”; every encounter is “meaningful”; every painting “redefines the boundaries of contemporary experience.”

Sometimes a painting is simply good. Sometimes a schedule is simply wrong. And sometimes the curator would just like an answer to the question she actually asked.

I know that a machine does not have feelings. That is precisely why its agreeable tone can be deceptive. It cannot be offended, but it cannot be a friend either. It can help me write a message; it cannot share the risk of standing beside me when an opening begins and nobody has arrived.

What I Would Miss

The fantasy of the perfectly reliable artificial artist is attractive for approximately thirty seconds. Then I remember the things that make me continue working with actual people.

An artist suddenly telling me why a small detail matters. A conversation that changes how we arrange a room. A disagreement that turns out to be useful. An opening that begins awkwardly and ends with people talking long after we expected them to leave.

These are not always pleasant experiences. Sometimes I leave exhausted. Sometimes I leave furious. Occasionally I leave with a new friend.

The trouble with replacing the difficult parts of collaboration is that they are tangled up with the parts I love. Trust is built between people who can disappoint one another. Friendship involves the possibility of offence. An argument can reveal something neither person had understood before.

I do not want machines to replace artists. I want artists to remember that curators are people as well: people with ideas, boundaries, schedules and the occasional unreasonable wish to work with someone else.

And I want curators, myself included, to be honest about how often our choices are shaped by affection and irritation rather than by art alone.

Perhaps the question is not whether a machine can become more human. Perhaps it is whether humans can learn to collaborate without treating every professional decision as a declaration of love or rejection.

Until then, I will continue working with artists. I will continue using AI for the tasks it does well. And if a machine ever learns to install an exhibition without demanding a taxi, I will be delighted to meet it.

I only hope it does not ask for the best wall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elvira Koroleva is a Warsaw-based art historian, independent curator and journalist originally from Belarus. Since 2023, she has organised approximately forty exhibitions involving thirty-seven artists in Poland and the Czech Republic.