

Recent paintings of Harold Cohen: A Mind's Journey to Itself

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Why is Harold Cohen picking up the paint brush again after leaving the coloring job to AARON, his program, since the mid-eighties? There is a short answer and a long answer to this question. The short answer goes something like this (based on personal communication, 10/2/2011):

Program autonomy had been Cohen's goal for AARON from the very beginning. But in 2009 a newly developed and very general form generator brought it very close to that goal – it could now handle color, forms, composition – and Cohen suffered something of a crisis. The program didn't need him anymore! In the aftermath of that crisis, Cohen had little to show beyond half a dozen small panels, printed in color except for the backgrounds, which had been left gray. That gray became increasingly intolerable to Cohen, and he pulled out paints and brushes simply to correct the source of his discomfort. He found in doing so that he had effected a startling transformation to the nature of the image, requiring a complete rethinking of how his images came into being.

This rethinking about images entails the story about a mind's journey, which can be summed up succinctly by the following lines of the German poet Holderlin:

As you began,

So you will remain.

Spelling out in details how the artist's intellectual journey has come full circle-- how innovation in Cohen's recent paintings harkens back to his early insights into the nature of images-- constitutes the long answer to our question.

Image as "standing-for-ness"

For Cohen a painting has never been just a collection of marks or a decorative, exciting or beautiful object but had to be involved with 'conjuring meaning'. His career, both before and after his adoption of computers, has been driven by a belief that whilst images must have their own structure or internal logic, their 'primitive magic' is that they are able to stand for things that are not literally present, even if these things are not directly recognizable as part of the wider visible world. (Cornish, 2011, p. 4, emphasis added)

In philosophical terms, this primitive magic of the image that Cohen talks about rests squarely upon a basic principle about symbolic representations. In the words of the philosopher Terrence Deacon (2010), information is "dependent on a relationship to something not present" (p. 167, emphasis added). He goes on to say:

. . . the imagined significance of a coincidental event, the meaning of a reading from a scientific instrument, the portent of the pattern of tea leaves, and so on, really is something that is not there. (p. 167, emphasis added)

To fully understand this assertion of Deacon's (2010), we need to consult a great thinker in philosophy, Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Peirce, symbolic representations entail a

relationship among three terms, (a) the sign that represents something; (b) the object of representation; and (c) the *interpretant*—the mind that interprets, or makes inferences by determining the relation between (a) and (b). Note that while (a) is something present, (b) is an absence, which, thanks to (c) the *interpretant*, is inferred to be what (a) is about.

Implicitly capitalizing on absence, Cohen claims that the goal for art is “standing-for-ness” which consists of “an evocation of perhaps unnamable aspect of the world, rather than a direct representation of a specific part of it” (cited in Cornish, 2011, p. 5). Cast into the Peircean framework, an artistic representation, according to Cohen, corresponds to the sign (a), which does not stand in a one to one correspondence kind of relationship to the object of its representation (b), because (b) is an absence—something unnamable, which cannot be directly represented, but can only be evoked, thanks to the inference making capacity of the *interpretant* (c). This has far reaching implications for our understanding of computational creativity: To the extent that absence is central to the notion of image as stand-for-ness, and to the extent that absence can only be inferred, not computed, creativity is a function of the *interpretant* rather than that of computation.

The above formulation of image as stand-for-ness highlights two essential ingredients in symbolic representation-- first, absence; and second, mind functioning as the *interpretant*--which warrant further explanation. Absence is the major element that determines the extent to which an image is a symbolic representation. For instance, portrait painting is relatively less symbolic than abstract painting, because of the former’s potential to become an icon, in which there is a one to one correspondence between presences (the image=the person). The importance of absence in symbolic representations can best be illustrated by Chinese art, especially in its treatment of the void.

From empty space to the void

The void in Chinese painting is not the same as the empty parts in Western painting. The void is a symbolic representation of absence or non-being, whereas in Western (post renaissance) painting, there is no void; the blue paint in the background— or, rarely, the unpainted canvas -- represents sky, which is as physical as the rocks in the foreground. Thus in Western painting, space-- whether painted or left blank, is a continuous presence, something objective and physically measurable.

By contrast, the void in Chinese painting consists of a discontinuous presence—presence perforated by absence. This perception entails a different approach to space and presence, an approach with a particular sensitivity to absence and non-being. Thus George Rowley (1974), a scholar on Chinese art, points out: “Such a conception [as the void] has had no parallel in the west, because our concern with actuality has made us emphasize the existent rather than the non-existent so that the sky was a space-filled realm and not a vehicle for imparting a sense of the infinite” (p. 71).

Absence goes hand in hand with the *interpretant*. This point is underscored by Rowley (1974), when he claims that “The crucial question is what these empty parts signify?” (p. 71). The *interpretant* is a term used by Charles Peirce (Hoopes, 1991) in reference to the capacity of the mind to make inferences, and to interpret signs. In keeping with the foregoing discussion on the important role absence plays in inference making, a more concise formulation of the *interpretant* would be this: The *interpretant* is the mind applying itself to absence. This line of thinking is common place in Chinese aesthetics. To wit, a late seventeenth century Chinese critic complained about his contemporaries: “Modern painters apply their mind only to brush and

ink, whereas the ancients applied their minds to the absence of brush and ink” (Cited in Rowley, 1974, p. 71, emphasis added).

In sum, it is when the mind applies itself to absence that empty space becomes the void in Chinese paintings. One important consequence of the mind applying itself to absence is that the void has become, in the words of Heidegger (1971), “a presence sheltered in absence” (p. 199).

Rowley (1974) says the same thing when he claims that the void is the symbol of “that non-existent in which existent is” (p. 72). Thus by dint of the inference making capacity of the *interpretant*, the void in Chinese painting is a virtual presence with such a palpable impact that it rivals, and more often than not outweighs, the actual presence of things. For illustration, consider Rowley’s observation (1974) in Chinese paintings of “a dynamic equilibrium of solids and voids” (p. 72), which refers to “the extent of void needed to hold a given solid in equilibrium . . . so that a small solid, a tree group, a single tongue of land, or a middle distance cliff will suggest such a transition from the finite to the infinite that a vast extent of void will be needed to satisfy the solid” (p. 72).

This digression on the Chinese approach to absence gives us a useful angle, when we turn to Cohen’s recent paintings, in which there is a fundamental difference from past conventions in Western painting in the handling of backgrounds and the forms. In light of the foregoing analysis, to understand the new figure-ground relationship in Cohen’s paintings, we do well to start with AARON’s role as the gap maker, one who renders absence visible by creating differences and discontinuities.

Evolution of AARON as a gap maker

Gaps are differences or discontinuities, anything that disrupts the continuity of presence. As such, gaps make absence visible and thereby prompting the *interpretant* to make inferences. Without gaps, the mind would be moving along sluggishly in a sea of homogeneity. The gap between the self and the nonself renders visible to the self an absence of knowledge about the other. The gap between humans and the machine is a bigger chasm--a discontinuity in being.

Cohen has capitalized on the gap making capacities of AARON since the very beginning: Unlike God who created humans in His own image, Cohen created AARON to be different-- a wholly other so to speak. He said in his interview with Scientific American Frontiers in the mid 90's: "I'd be happier if AARON's work in the future were less like human work, not more like human work" (cited in Cornish, 2011, p. 7). As a programmer, Cohen's goal had always been program autonomy (Cohen, 2009). He recounts as milestones the progressively widening gap between the human and the machine: The realization in the mid-eighties that human and machine are polar opposites in their coloring abilities (Cohen, 2010); the realization in 2009 that the newly developed algorithms were "very un-human" (Cohen, 2009, p. 8) in that there is no discernible knowledge base, nor intelligence in the sense of decision making-- all rules are local; no grand plans (Cohen, 2009). With the development of the new algorithms, AARON's autonomy has become "absolute" (Cohen, 2009, p. 7) -- the gap between the programmer and the program is now a chasm that threatens to create a relationship crisis for Cohen. The gap created by AARON at the epistemological level is no less cataclysmic.

In conventional painting there is no gap between meaning and intention, both of which are attributable to the painter. Not so when AARON gets into the act. The painting machine poses difficulty in the attribution of intention, when it produces prints that can have meaning. This gap between meaning and intention is negligible, so long as our attention is distracted by

AARON's complex imagery with its space filling forms. With the new algorithms in 2009 that resulted in simplified imagery, the gap between meaning and intention started to stare at you in your face. Cohen (2010) recounted that:

Interestingly enough, as long as AARON's images were pretty complex there didn't seem to be much of a problem with the untouched-by-hand look of its prints, just as there doesn't seem to be a problem with photographs; the intentionality gets transferred to what the image represents. But in the final months of last year [2009] I had been making a conscious effort to simplify the imagery, with the result that the individual elements were getting larger and, consequently flatter. (p. 14)

From gaps to the void

When Cohen picked up the paint brush again, a profound change took place on multiple levels: the blank space changed from an ideationally neutral background to an absence, which caused some "discomfort" that was attributed to perceived defects in AARON's print, or to an intolerably monotonous gray background. Whatever it was, something was missing.

When the mind applied itself to the perceived absence, another transformation took place: The mind did not fill the gaps, but instead conjured up a presence that flourished in the gaps. A classic example of such "a presence sheltered in absence" (Heidegger, 1971, p.199) is intentionality. As Cohen points out, the gap created by AARON between meaning and intention has much to do with the fact that its images are untouched by hand. He explains that intentionality is usually associated with the manipulation of physical materials in conventional image making. Thus

. . . part of the problem with electronic imagery is precisely its untouched-by-hand look; if it wasn't touched by hand, if it shows no evidence of the manipulation of material, then it becomes that much harder to believe in its intentionality. (Cohen, 2010, p. 14)

Adding a level of materiality to the electronic imagery by AARON seemed to be the right thing to do:

Whether I knew it or not—and I didn't—that seems to have been the reason for painting over the background of one of AARON's little panels. I was opening the door to the assumption of intentionality in the reading of the image. (Cohen, 2010, p.15)

Once the inference making process gets started, the *interpretant* has to go all the way:

I thought all I'd have to do was to add a level of materiality, but that has turned out not to be the case. Some of what I do is aimed at clarifying what AARON “intended.” Most of it is done at the “micro-level” of structure, where a subtle shift in emphasis can make a significant difference to the reading of the image. (e.g., AARON separates overlapping forms with a Mach-band shadow – that is, the enhanced brightness contrast which the visual system uses for edge-detection -- over the behind-form. I deliberately exclude Mach-band-ism, which means some, usually slight, overall modification of the colors). (personal communication, 7/10/2011)

To recapitulate, when the mind applies itself to absence, it transforms the latter into a special type of presence—a presence sheltered in absence, best exemplified by the void in Chinese paintings. Indeed, corresponding roughly to the voids and solids in Chinese paintings, there are two types of presence in Cohen's recent paintings: virtual presence (AARON's intentionality) and actual presence (AARON's images). The following remarks of Cohen

remind me of the dynamic equilibrium between voids and solids in the Chinese paintings, note especially the preponderance of the former (intentionality) over the latter (forms):

I sometimes feel as though AARON is presenting me with a world behind a gauzy screen, and that my job is to remove the screen and show what's really there. . . . The only times I "edit" is when AARON makes images in which some passages are difficult to read and I need to clarify them so that I know how to proceed . . . I don't add my own forms.

Nothing purist here, AARON's handwriting is too difficult to emulate. (cited in Cornish, 2011, p. 9)

The mind's journey to itself

In conclusion, the recent paintings of Cohen tell the story of a mind's journey that has now run full circle, with the culmination of two developments in the long career of Cohen as an artist: AARON as a gap maker reaching its fullest potential in rendering absence visible, and mind as the *interpretant* operating at the height of its referential competence (Deacon, 1997), capable of transforming gaps into void. While the void in Chinese paintings is associated with the infinity or the "mystery of emptiness" (Rowley, 1974, p. 72), the void in Cohen's paintings may best be understood as a mirror. In painting the background without filling the void, the mind is painting itself-- as if in peering into the void that the mind sees its own reflections as the *interpretant*. The most delicate colors of the background in Cohen's paintings evoke a special kind of being, a being in-between presence and absence, or rather something akin to the womb from which presence and absence, representations and inferences have their being. This womb of consciousness is understood to be, in the Buddhist tradition, the mind.

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