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STATE OF THE ART

Guillaume Coiffier, Sewade Ogun, Leo Valque, Priyansh Trivedi

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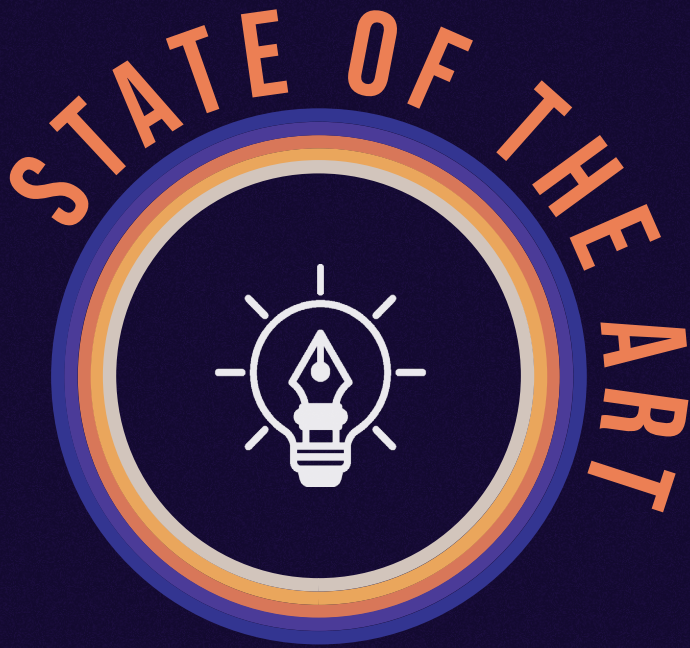


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NE VOUS EN FAITES PAS, ÇA VA MAL SE PASSER

THINK BEFORE LOADING



Guillaume Coiffier
Sewade Ogun
Leo Valque
Priyansh Trivedi

State of the Art

By the ladybug team: Guillaume Coiffier, Sewade Ogun, Leo Valque, and Priyansh Trivedi

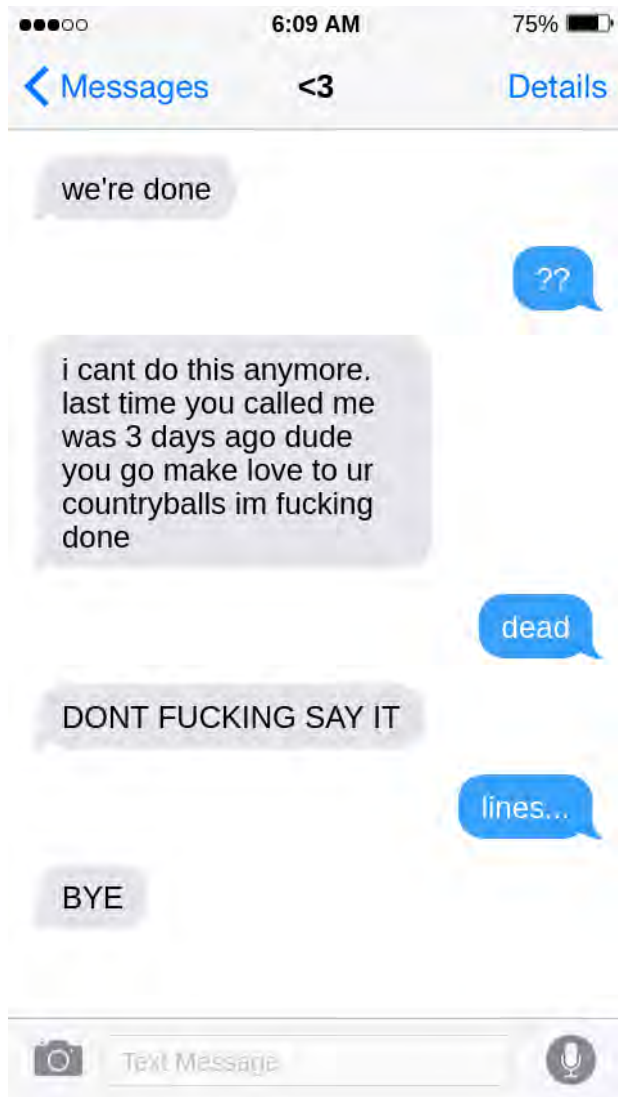
October 17th, 2022

Cold sweat. The smell of stale bedsheets. Hints of the sun blazing in all its glory filtering through the IKEA curtains. It's a Saturday today, right? Maybe. The days blend into each other, nothing to tell them apart. Sigh. "I need coffee." I speak to myself sometimes. The voice, so alien, I barely know it. Anyway. Groggily, I pull myself out of my bed and make my way to the computer. Bright blue lights, my window to the world that matters. Too bright, this morning. I take a deep breath and dive in. Another day, another email. "SpuriousDrumming: Yann, I need a new scene. Last minute. Sorry". I sigh. Again?

> Heyy so Matt (the editor) trashed the part where we go through stages of the moon. Demographics and whatnot idk. He's trying to get a Kia sponsorship so instead we're going to compare the 12 signs to car colors. I've attached the cars, the palettes and the updated script. Do your thing. PSPS: We're posting on 12KST so I need you to be done by 4pm @today!

I twist and look over my shoulder to the coffee machine. "Damn, I need a shower". I sound even more raspy than before. I need coffee too. I need a break, maybe. Most of all, I need the cash. And SpuriousDrumming needs a new goddamn scene in four hours. I stretch my back and pull out my iPad. Two hours later, I surface back up smelling like yesterday's manure, red eyed probably (I forgot to pull the curtains up, trying to work in the dark for two straight hours). Current state be damned, the scene does look nice.

I transitioned to pseudo geometrical countryballs almost two years ago. Checkerboard patterns as shadows, chevroned eyebrows and glossy gradients. It was rather original, I think. It's funny to boil down my style to these keywords though. Can someone define my motifs this easily? Be a shame if I did. Any child could fiddle around in procreate to tick these checkboxes but I really do put my soul into it. These expressions, I dare not put into words. How do you manage to anthropomorphise cars and star signs anyway. Speaking of, what the fuck am I doing? Three years of art school and crippling debt to draw the libra make lewd gestures at a yellow civic. And they say that art is dead. Well, I suppose it is. We were supposed to usher in the democratization of art with the apples and the microsofts of our time. We end up subliminally hinting to marketing departments we're thirsty for a sponsorship by dripping drivels over droves of damned dummies. Hehe. Anyway, then this happens:.



You know the feeling when you're about to pull that block from the jenga towers that you know will make the entire thing fall but you don't care anymore and pull at it anyway? I didn't even bother calling her this time. I can't do this anymore, either.

I package the scene for the umpteenth time and ... I surprise myself. I've never told SpuriousDrumming off. And I've never ... asked for a week off. I need it though.

October 24th, 2022

I hope none of you are ever in a position where seven days of lying on the bed feels like the solution to all your problems. Modern day escapism do be like that though, so... Anyway, I press the familiar buttons and see this petty beast of mine power on back to life. No new emails. Whoever's heard of that. Wait no there's something just in. Time to draw again, I guess.

> JIM: Nice work on the pyramids bro; [link]

Pyramids? I drew cars and stars signs for the last video. Jim should move out of Colorado. Weed is just too cheap there. Might as well see what video he linked. After the two (or was it three) mandatory ads to buy myself some motivation, or play the new game only IQ > 200 people can play, I find myself on SpuriousDrumming's page. Heckles rising I see the published date: 16 hours ago. What the fuck?

I pull the screen closer, run my hands through my scalp. I've never seen him talk about this topic. I've certainly never made any illustrations on pyramids and the like.

I go through the first minute. It looks similar to his intro. His face is on it, and it is him alright. Did he get another illustrator? I hope not. We've been working together for many months now. I stopped freelancing because of him. Sure he's demanding, and inconsiderate, but I prefer the steady income. But wait, no! It... looks very similar to the stuff I do. The textures match up, the background contoured just so. Perspectives line up, as always. The expressions, they're so lifelike. But I've never drawn this. Nothing close to it! Confused, I press ahead. The words, in his grating melodramatic voice, wash over me. The video is typical SpuriousDrumming content. The art is ... typical Yann content. And yet, I'm watching it for the first time.

I hover on the comment button. 10,000 comments already in 5 hours. This is unusual. His previous videos always have about 1k comments in all. I clicked the button, and read the top comments. Adrian, an avid follower, said "I really <3 your illustrations of the sphinx." Marth agrees with Adrian, "Wow, this story shows the reality of things. The colors make it even more interesting. Keep this up!!!". Jenn223 eloquently writes "First".

I begin to wonder. Did the new guy DRAW LIKE ME? Should I be worried that he's swapping me out for another, or that, there's someone else masterfully copying me now? I remember that, during our talk last month, he complained about my turnaround time. He'd like to scale up, he said, even though he likes my style and will like to stick to it. I assured him I will do my best to deliver on time but I'm only human.

I skip to the video's end, trying to find the illustrator's name. We need to talk. He needs to stop using my style at the least. Credits start rolling... And... nothing. No illustrator? That's just not cool, SpuriousDrumming. The new guy, thief or not, still needs some recognition.

Trying to get a handle on things, I type out an email demanding some of these answers. Why did he not inform me? Is our collaboration over? Who is the new guy?

October 25th, 2022

Zwoop. I break from my reverie of watching unending streams of unnecessarily skilled player playing some game and look at the notification.

> SpuriousDrumming: RE: WTF?

Dude, I'm sorry you were awol and i need to scale up. I don't think we'll be working together anymore. I like your work, you're very talented, and deliver consistently, but my man, I dont think I can pay

you. My patron list is decreasing and adsense barely keeps the lights on, sorry. And no, there's no new "guy" haha. I got an AI finetuned on your work. You should check it out, its super cool.

> Yann: Re. RE: WTF?

An AI? Finetuned?

> Matt: Re: FWD: Re: RE: WTF?

Hi, this is Matt here, covering for SpuriousDrumming. Let me try and give you a rough idea of what's up. So, to start off, no we did not hire some human to draw the same as you. But you know that computers can generate images right? I mean generate! Not photoshop. Thanks to some very intelligent folks doing a lot of math. I'm not sure it helps but this is how it works, briefly. There are two aspects: a transformer, and a diffusion model.

We send a bunch of words as commands to a computer. For example, "sphinx on a bright day, drawn in the style of Yann". These words create a pattern of importance that dictates how much each word's "description" and "meaning" flows into each other. Through a big heap, like one hundred billion additions and multiplications, a few seconds of computation time for an average modern computer, we manage to transform these words into a set of numbers, ending up finally as an amorphous blob representing all this sentence is worth, based on a background knowledge gained from going through billions of words, hundreds of times. Next comes the tricky part (no kidding ;)). This blob is meaningless to us humans. People claim to have ways to understand what's going on, but really, they're kidding themselves.

Anyway, I want you to think about entropy now. The fundamental nature of our universe, the matter in which arranged structures of molecules may diffuse into nothing but white noise, through nothing but sheer randomness. This process can't be reversed. But if you simulate it, you can reverse it. And reverse it, we do. But not randomly. The system breaks down billions and billions of images (SPECIALLY, YOURS) to noise through "guided randomness". And then, when needed, we reverse this process. We start out with our amorphous blob, and go through this reverse process, reverse-randomly transforming it to a coherent image. Do this a couple times and you end up with the sphinx you saw in the video. Hope this helps.

Best of luck in your career.
Matt.

Best of luck to your stinky neck you hairy baboon. You can't just dangle some math mumbo jumbo in front of me and make me believe we can replicate me. And yet, the video stands. I believe SpuriousDrumming when he says no human did this. I don't think someone can copy me so perfectly. Not a hint of others' influence here. I.. I am at a loss for words. Effectively, SpuriousDrumming can do what I do.

Well, too bad for him. I'll go work for someone else. I am going back to freelancing. Maybe you can make your computer draw a sphinx on a sunny day, but I'd like to see it try to illustrate the esoteric, to imbue the countryballs with life like I do.

October 27th, 2022

Two days since I jumped back to the dog-eat-dog world of Fiverr. Two days, and I have nothing to show for it. It's uncanny how there are more people here than before. Freelancing stuff like this is always a way to kickstart your career. Ending up here two years after you took off is a sign that things went bad for you. And I guess they did. Not out of my own accord. What do you call it when "a big heap of numbers" fills in for you, again?

I click through the jobs there and something catches my eye. This one is offered to an artist whose profile picture is uncannily similar to my stuff. Click, I jump to their public profile. The stuff is so similar to mine. It's as if they come directly from my notebook. I check it just to be sure I am not hallucinating, but I did none of them despite the striking resemblance. Then, I see it's name : CreAIitive.

CreAIitive. An AI. I'm sure it's the same fucking thing Matt/SD used to replace me in their videos. It has to be! My nerves on the verge of popping, I scroll through the page. Design after design, some really good stuff, some original ideas too but all in my motifs. They make a computer do what I do for them and are now FOR EVERYONE, FOR MONEY? Where does this end? This is unfair. A theft! An insult!

Suffocated, I switched over to the bright blue bird always open, my finger on the pulse of the world. I'm not entirely sure what I wrote but the last tweet in the thread read something like:

>so you steal my images and learn to copy them as you like? No one asked me. I don't have the program. I have no control over it. And I don't know what to do. FML.

In a few hours my phone started lighting up with replies. Never a good idea, but I need that dopamine hit.

"This is outrageous!!! You have my full support in this. People like you deserve better !" - UpperDupper96

"I didn't even notice the difference between you and the AI. If it can do your job faster and cheaper, why continue bother ?" - KarenFreeStyle

"Yeah, it sucks but its the future." - JoshNonstop

"You call the algorithm mimicking your work a scam. Yet you also took inspiration of other artists to come up with it. So can you truly say that this style belongs to you ?" - Wolks

"Now everyone is Yann! Countryballs for all" - FairBryan77

"But then no one is Yann lol x)" - TimOfUtah

I sigh. Ain't that the truth. The like button plays a nice animation, counter to my current mood.

"Get in touch with a lawyer" - PhobicLion

Hmm.

October 28th, 2022

The phone rings three times before anyone bothers to pick it up. All the time in the world for my heart rate to skyrocket.

"Good morning, Mr Daniel here, copyright lawyer. What can I do for you ?", says the voice on the other side.

I take a deep breath and introduce myself. I try to make the best impression despite the shaking voice and sweaty hands.

"... and I need your help because this content creator, SpuriousDrumming, replaced me by an AI."

A few seconds of silence. I am holding my breath.

– How long have you been working for him ?

– About two years.

– Did you agree on a contract ?

– I was doing illustrations on the themes he was developing in these videos. Each commission was a contract on its own. They get the right to use my drawings for any use provided they cite me as the author of the drawing.

– And were there any occasions on which this agreement was broken ?

– Well, no, but I never gave my agreement for my work to be used to create an AI !

– I suppose nothing of this kind was specified in the contract, so it's not an issue *a priori*.

Moreover, what is produced by this... 'AI', are completely new images, am I correct ?

– Yes, technically.

– Technically, but you are not in possession of exactly the same pictures, are you ?

– That's true, but still ! It is copying my style !

– Sir, I am truly sorry but we cannot copyright a style. How would you even define what a style is, legally speaking ?”

Fair point. He continues without letting me speak:

“In the end, this notion of style has no legal value. As far as I am aware, there is no patent nor trademark nor anything else that protects a 'style'. What is protected are, for instance: a name, a character, a car, a logo, etc. something specific. Anything close to this list will be helpful.

– The shadows and contours have a rather specific shape...

– I am afraid it is not much. We won't be able to argue in court with that.

– But there must be a way to do something !

– As of today, I am afraid there isn't. There is a real legal vacuum around these issues. I can only advise you to avoid your illustrations to be obtained by anyone.

– But that is not how it works.

– I know, and I am truly sorry, but there is nothing I can do for you.”

My shoulders sink, my throat hurts. I try my best to hold back any tear.

“Thank you for your help anyway.” I say before hanging up and throwing the phone onto the bed.

I tried to phone three lawyers in the days following, only to receive the same answers and the same justifications. It feels like I am talking to a wall. A tall, sturdy brick wall that does not want to listen, that does not want to fix the injustice that is happening to me. It is as if the institution had identified the problem, but for now, no legal solution was proposed. I remain alone in this. No job, no money, even the art that once defined me don't belong to me anymore.

So here I am. There is nothing I can do. Only a few people support me over the internet. The vast majority does not care. SpuriousDrumming does not care. Her videos will continue to air, to collect views, likes, fame and money, and people will be happy about it.

No one seems to be able to help me. No one wants, no one can, and no one probably will. I am alone. And I am lost.

November 4th, 2022

Cold sweat. The smell of stale bedsheets. Hints of the sun blazing in all its glory filtering through the IKEA curtains. It's Friday today, right? Maybe. The days blend into each other, nothing to tell them apart. Sigh. "I need a beer." I speak to myself sometimes. The voice, so alien, I barely know it. Anyway.

A couple of days have passed. I haven't a penny to my name since the last video about cars and star signs. Can't help but laugh at the irony. I started out scribbling Ford GT's in the back of my school notebooks, and I did the same in my last video. I call it my last video because I don't think there's anymore to this story now. That's all she wrote.

Kicked to the curb, with my bottom still red with hurt, I finally ask myself the stuff I've largely put off for the past few months. What am I? What defines me? My art, I should think. And the way in which mine is different from yours. I talk about my motifs sometimes, when the drink gets hold of me. And I equate my identity and my style. "Illustrated by Yann". For two years, I saw this play out at the end of countless videos, seen by countless people and commented upon by countless, again. And each time I grew sure of myself. Like Ned Flanders, the more of the same I made, the more of the same I became. And now, the more of the same I lost.

Nothing makes sense, anymore. This flanderized Yann existed for these people who don't even notice I've been replaced by a computer. "HELP! I'VE BEEN REPLACED BY A COMPUTER", I mimic out loud, chuckling. Poetic justice, I suppose. I have certainly been treated like a computer. For over two years I've been challenged, pushed, and coerced into making this, making that, fixing this, addressing every whim of randos on the web, and eventually exclusively SD's. Like a jester, I've pigeonholed my craft into idiotic symbolism with enough contrast and details in every scene that the braindead sparrows don't flutter away. Jump when they say jump. Fast, ASAP, by today. Use your imagination to create something no one ever has, and do it in three hours, and full color. One day people may tire of this jester, and I would understand that. But that's not happened.

People are in LOVE with the jester. More and more people are flocking to his channel, his viewcount, as well as his frequency of uploads is higher than ever before. Only, they put a puppet in this jester's skin and can now make him dance any which way, for as long as they want. And as of last night, the puppet is no longer being controlled by SpuriousDrumming. He was kind enough to release the model online, for anyone to download and use. His release tweets read like a child running through a lego store, eyes wide open and out of breath. I suppose I can understand that, at some level. Like a blue collar worker staring confused, and yet, impressed, at the shiny robotic arm installed in his place, I can't disagree that this stuff is cool.

But is it art? As Matt said, it's additions and multiplications done billions of times over billions of this and billions of that. But does that stop it from being art? It certainly looks like art whether it's me or the machine producing it. Maybe that is all there is. Maybe creativity does not exist. Or maybe, just maybe, I let go of creativity long ago. I don't remember when I drew something without being prompted. My prompts were longer, and had money dangling at the other end but no harm now in calling it what it is. Content. I create content. I don't see videos. I consume content. I don't listen to podcasts, I fill my ears with content. We all do. Amorphous streams of meaningless arguments and facts put forth for no reason other than propagating themselves to as many people as they can. Can't say I lost my art, then I guess. Only my livelihood.

May 4th, 2023

When I woke up this morning, the sun was already high in a bright blue sky. Winter is definitely behind us, as well as all of this story. It is hard to believe that six months have already passed. This story is behind me. For the better.

In February, I found a job in retail at the local supermarket. Not the most fulfilling, but hey, at least I get to eat and keep my apartment. And most importantly, I am now away from all of this bullshit.

Today, I have a date. It is a girl I met a few weeks ago. I proposed that we take a walk in the park, breathe some fresh air and, you know, get to know each other better. I came early, more than an hour early. Maybe because I wanted to be alone first, get a touch of the atmosphere before sharing it with somebody. I brought my notebook with me, probably for nothing. I haven't drawn anything since.

I walk a bit around the blossoming trees, then I sit on a bench, admiring the landscape. This particular scene on my left, with the pond full of ducks and an elderly man feeding them from

under an oak tree catches my attention. For some reason, it inspires me. I take my notebook out of my backpack, as well as a pencil, and I start scribbling. At first, with no real intention, just for the pleasure of feeling the lead sliding onto the paper. Shapes appear, a runner here, a flower there. I am having fun.

“Hey”, I hear over my shoulder. As I look up, I recognize Anna standing right next to me. I completely lost the sense of time. Almost forgot she was supposed to join me.

“Sorry, I am a bit late, I hope you didn’t wait too long”, she apologizes.

“Nah, it’s fine. I was just...”

– Drawing ?

– Yeah. I guess.”

She takes a quick look at the open page on my notebooks, examining the scribbles of trees, flowers and people passing by. It makes me feel surprisingly vulnerable, almost naked.

“ It’s beautiful, I like it”, she says with a smile.

“Thanks.”