Not a press release (but not-not a press release)

Perhaps we can print it out and have it in the gallery, it's a sort of press release poem?

This exhibition presents multiple versions of 'Shreg' , this mutating character without a fixed image, at the core is a kind of poking fun and/or musing at the puzzle of how creativity and cartoon characters are built despite creative visual expression being eroded by advances in Ai, it is entirely possible to short cut all of this and get Ai to do it, so what is now our reason to make?

I feel like we are in George Orwell's 1984 ;

"In principle a Party member had no spare time, and was never alone except in bed. It was assumed that when he was not working, eating, or sleeping he would be taking part in some kind of communal recreation: to do anything that suggested a taste for solitude, even to go for a walk by yourself, was always slightly dangerous."

Making, especially a kind of flawed, nearly pointless making, by oneself is sort of, not illegal as such, but a curious sort of escape from the tech-bro manic world that we are all plugged into and feeding off all the time, we have no spare time, it is occupied by the machine, we are never alone even in bed. We are never bored.

In 1984 we're followed or attached to our technology at all times, rarely a couple of meters from some plugged in device. Our 1984 techno-compulsory nightmare is even worse than the actual 1984, and therefore our art is also constantly attached to our technology, we are never away from it.

We are by ourselves, dangerously wasting time, when we could employ the machines. We are using our brains and our feelings! What an idiot. I mean unless you are posting this online, who will witness this act? We cannot make art today without acknowledging that being an artist is being eroded from both sides; what we consume and what we produce is mediated by machines.

We can refuse this, and make only things in clay offline, but in that sense we exclude ourselves from the attention economy, and the tiny economic 'potential' of being plugged in is somehow better than being unplugged, and definitely not being able to participate. If we don't participate, we rely on proxies to participate on our behalf.

I marvel at my father, he's never been on social media, and had a mobile phone for a month in the early 2000s and then ditched it because he didn't like being contactable at all times; he's never had a PC. He seemingly refuses completely to be part of anything made after 1998. Meaning my mum has to do anything online for him.

The great thing about this press release is that the press won't touch it with a barge pole (is that one word or two?). They need something that gets to the point, not rambling incohesive, human 'Hallucinations'.

The Shreg project also mirrors advances in Ai, which struggles to keep characters the same across multiple scenes. I'm 'backfilling' this idea into the project, of course into the project to make the project seem more relevant, even though this project was started before consumer Ai was a thing, so that's definitely not the vibe when I produced the first exhibition. That wasn't about Ai at all, it was about making a new character, and how you make that bubble up through play really.

Does the artist use the Ai and short-cut their own creativity, or does the artist take the long road, and the audience are forever not sure if its Ai anyway, do they care? What if it's part but not wholly Ai, and which bits and how much? And do you have to spell out that in the press release?

I don't think there is a definitive answer, and different people react differently to Ai. I suppose how do you sort of maintain some sort of independence to the system that doesn't really benefit you in the long term? But without resorting to 'Vinyl is better than MP4s' sort of argument, which might be true in certain circumstances, but usually about some sort of feeling the 'old way' gives you. Increasingly I can see that it won't be possible to opt out of Ai in normal life, my Gmail email account summarises emails, even though I don't want it to, there might be the button to turn it off, but the new 'normal' is for these systems to be on by default.

Saying something isn't Ai is like saying - I made it all by myself! But the systems I use to generate digital images are like advanced computer programmes anyway, Blender 3D and Photoshop are the result of 1000s of people's hard work over years to manipulate images digitally, and all this digital stuff also seemed like cheating at some point in the past, I mean digital photography was given a really hard time for years and years, and then boom, nobody cares about that anymore, in fact we now celebrate crunchy, pixilated images as the authentic past, we've even got filters that make images look more digitally rubbish, or VHS rubbish, or super 8 rubbish.

'Bootleg..' occupies cultural space like a pop star, it leans towards a romantic notion of a character (or artist) being 'authentically' built by human trial and error, interest and fashion. But like Sabrina Carpenter, and Dolly Parton we are authentically, inauthentic "It takes a lot of money to look this cheap". We are wearing huge big blonde wigs here, but we're saying we are innocent too, falling in love for the first time, again.

We are making things 'for real' but we also mask wherever there is a computer to show that we made decisions; I'll downplay the use of the Ai if useful, but I'll also specifically mention Ai if I think that is interesting or useful. I suppose the 'innocence' here comes from showing a character in progress, like the initial drawings for 'Mickey Mouse / Steamboat Willy'. It's kind of rough and early in the process of being made. Kind of 'research' I suppose, but that's way too formal a word for the activity. I'm "Researching" but I'm also intending for it never to resolve into a "Real" Character.

In a way Shreg is the spirit of the artist, untethered from concrete definitions of what makes 'great art'. Painting is perhaps 'less than' a photograph, if you ignore the qualities of painting itself. Non-Ai digital art is increasingly indistinguishable from Ai digital art, if we only think in one dimension, that it is a convincing replication of something that already exists.

Ai Will Smith eating spaghetti badly is wayyy more interesting than Ai Will Smith eating spaghetti well, and yet the technology advances. I'm saying let's make more Will Smith eating spaghetti badly, let's upset the applecart, perfection is the enemy!

I was telling someone about my work from 2021, a digital catwalk that took me about 9 months to make, I was very proud of it. They kept saying isn't Ai great?! and I had to say it wasn't Ai, it was made before that. It was like, because it was digital it was assumed to be Ai. And then you realise that you've had a 5 min conversation about Ai even though there was no Ai in the work and Ai can't do that level of detail or weirdness, or specific type of errors, even now.

Where does it leave you as an artist that sometimes uses digital stuff but is both interested in new technology but also repulsed by it? Ai is interesting, exciting, terrifying and boring. It's all of those things, and it develops in new directions each week.

My initial thought was that Ai could write the story of Shreg really easily, I'm rushed I've got multiple projects on, I could do with the extra time that an Ai story might save me. But I'm then avoiding the thing that makes my work mine, with a really good prompt you're going to have something that covers over your blind spots, pushes the work into the grey. And to survive the Ai you've got to be so unique that it's easy to tell your work from everything else. Genuinely what is the visual thing that Ai definitely cannot do, now or in the future? Or put in another way what can artist's do that others cannot, it's like easy to answer in the broadest sense, but I'm at a loss for specifics, whatever sort of artist cliche I can think of could be outsourced or potentially done much better elsewhere; image generators? starters of conversations? reflect society?

I got into art because it was the celebration of weird ideas and images; and that art is particularly good at doing that when allowed.

We can be certain that AI will develop because there is so much cash thrown at it, it's only going to get better at mimicking, echoing, parroting, colluding, erasing, rewriting. I've read a lot around Ai and the only job that seems safe is hairdressers and plumbers, for now; and we know from the past that dissolving jobs is only going to make a smaller proportion of the population wealthier, rather than 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' where we all work 2 days a week. With all the advances in technology we work more in 2026 than we did in 1976, did email make life easier or busier? One income was enough for a family at some point in the past, and now two doesn't cover the bases very well.

I read this week that delivery riders are being paid to shut doors on autonomous vehicles, as they can't close their own doors, if left open. So that is the future, being paid by robots in increasingly poorly paid "self employed", app led work. Whilst a few billionaires on a (literal) island decide the direction of culture and commerce.

Initially I was just worried about Ai taking a few poor illustrators' jobs, but it seems to be deleting whole industries especially low paid computer work. I suppose the thing I've noticed is social media also is changing expectations of art, like we expect the quick online payoff to also work in a physical space. There is a space for art to be unresolved, and even intentionally shoddy, but you also need an audience that wants something to be unsaid, some lingering questions about intent, and won't be offended if they are confused, or bemused.

I mean talking about Ai so much makes you think that the whole show is made by Ai which it's not at all! It's just a huge elephant in the room, so it's got to be addressed whether we like it or not. I've used Ai to make some of the initial concept sketches, and to help out on some technical problems, but aside from that, it's not Ai at all, and this part of the press release isn't Ai either, beacuse its really clunky, and has a fw typos in it, because I'm writing quickly and trying not to edit too much. But, I'm also saying celebrate that! That's going to be the Art of the Futyre the human mistake, and the cover up. The human coverup machine. Paid by Ai to make realistic loking human mistakes.

I suppose artists and artworks should defend the right to be confusing, I think that will be the last barrier that Ai cannot climb. Being a problem, a riddle. Change seats each time they think they've got you pinned. Make stuff up. Make it out of mud and tears. Ai can't cry, yet.

I suppose that's the core of what I'm saying, that how do we value human creativity now? I feel like it's swirling again around Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and other art school texts, rather than photography being able to make 'unlimited' artworks, we are now talking about very very fancy autocomplete, generating billions of images. I've seen some works that are all Ai video and are definitely something new like art; but that seems to be like the 0.01%.

Most of it seems to be very derivative (literally i suppose given it's data set) but also dates really quickly. We're likely to get many more artworks that are 'assisted' by ai than, than 'here's an image made from a prompt' ai, without any edits type artwork.

But I feel like saying how wonderful every human is is sort of like the Vinyl / mp4 conversation; they do different things, and they serve different purposes. The fake Louis Vuitton bag owner is very different from the real Louis Vuitton bag owner. Most people are not great writers so handing over writing to Ai isn't a problem; but are we then through lack of use guaranteed to make those writers worse, and cut off the chance that that technically bad writing could actually be a completely new way of writing?

The central problem is that most creative industries rely on 'taste' in some way. And that if people are not bothered, e.g they make an Ai logo rather than going to a designer, then that industry disappears.

I'm not sure where it leaves art, we are told that Art is somehow = to being human and they cannot be separated, and we do this thing without any economical reward at some level. I suppose when your work can be so convincingly copied you are reliant on someone else also believing that art=human and they have taste and they are willing to pay for it. That my version here is more valuable than a version that looks very similar to it.

Do you want me to make a pdf of that?

Bruce Asbestos, 2026

Written to accompany the Exeter Phoenix Gallery exhibition *Bootleg Shreg 2*, 25 April – 20 June 2026