

QUINTESENTIALLY

The Q Art Conversations

Anna Ridler



British multi-disciplinary artist and researcher Anna Ridler is considered to be one of the pioneers of her generation exploring the creative potential of artificial intelligence (AI). Having exhibited in prestigious institutions, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, Barbican Centre and HeK Basel, Anna Ridler's art poetically explores the use and composition of data and datasets as a way of understanding the world, seeking to reveal the intrinsic human element.

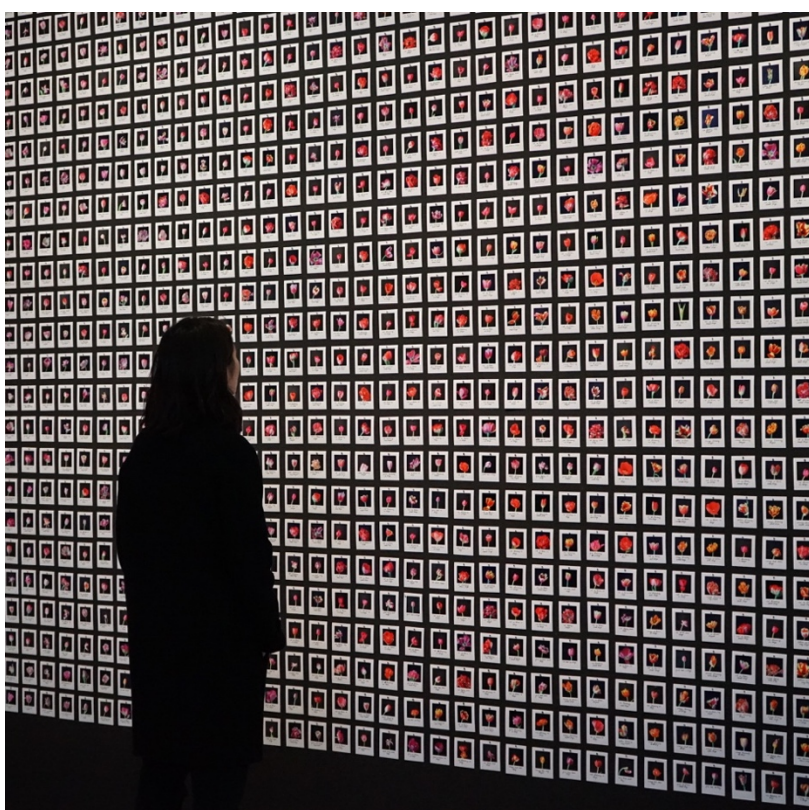
Ridler's practice spans a wide variety of disciplines, including technology, literature, drawing, installation, sound – a product of her unusual path to becoming an artist. Initially studying English Literature at Oxford University, Ridler went on to teach herself about technology and coding, seeing this knowledge as vital to understanding how our increasingly complex world operates. She now works heavily with technology, incorporating it as a tool to encourage dialogues around larger concepts, such as memory, love and decay.

Quintessentially Art had the privilege to talk to the artist and gain priceless insight into how AI is transforming perspectives in the art world, the possibilities for collecting digital artworks and what it means to be an artist in today's ever-changing technological landscape.

How do you think artificial intelligence is changing people's perspective on art and the art world at large?

AR: The idea of an artificial intelligence making art has caused some anxiety within the art market, particularly when you have instances of algorithms that can create art that can pass as "better" than a human made version and can then sell for thousands of dollars. But judging art purely by its appearance, ignores so much of the artist's process. It takes the important factors - how the materials impact the work, how the work is displayed and the viewer's response - out of consideration. This, I think, has caused the "AI art" craze, where artificial intelligence becomes the main focus of the works.

A large part of my practice focuses on larger concepts manifested through the creation of my own datasets, which is extremely laborious. In *Myriad (Tulips)* (2018), I took individual photographs of 10,000 tulips that I had collected from the flower markets in Amsterdam to serve as a bespoke dataset. It is an incredibly time-consuming process, but it also gives me a lot of autonomy and circumvents some of the issues around Intellectual Property, making it is nearly impossible for someone to replicate my work. It is this construction of a database that becomes a creative act and very much part of the piece for me.



What does it mean to make art with AI and how does one collect it?

I often use the example of drawing as a verb and as a noun. On the one hand, there is the act of drawing, which is a very complex process with lots of different components; drawing memory, meaning, even mythologies. Then on the other hand, there is a drawing itself. While AI can create drawings, I don't think it can draw on its own. That is where the human, or artist, steps in.

The current AI bubble makes it important to reference other speculative moments in history. For example, my work *Mosaic Virus* (2019) draws upon this theme and makes connections between the hysteria around tulip mania in seventeenth century Holland and the modern hype and bubbles around cryptocurrencies. In this way technology and art can come together under a unifying concept.

In terms of collecting my work, I sometimes sell part of my handmade datasets, but mostly I offer editioned video works, unique moving image pieces and limited edition prints from models. I have also received commissions from private and corporate collectors to create moving image works, which are securely locked, plugged into a screen and are continually generated from customised models. While there is some confusion around protecting the value and preserving the original, it would actually be impossible to recreate my work partly because my datasets are not open source, meaning they are not available online for people to reuse.

Do you do any research? Are you strategic in your approach or does inspiration come organically?

I do a huge amount of research. Each time I undertake a project, like the work I did around tulips, it becomes almost like writing a book on the subject. Once I have gathered all the information that I can, I construct a dataset. Only after the research is complete do I start working with the technology, building several image-producing models. These images are not just parts of photographs that have been stitched together from the dataset, but rather pictures that have been entirely generated or imagined based on what the AI thinks it should be drawing. To me they are incredibly beautiful – they possess a meandering, dreamlike quality. The results are recognisable as ‘real’, but at the same time have small tells that show they are not. It’s these imperfections, the traces of the process, that I love and want to work with.

The technology industry pushes for realism and advancements in computer vision, trying to minimise these mistakes. As a result, you have things like these hyper realistic deepfake videos of Obama lip syncing (deepfakes are fake videos or audio recordings that look and sound like the real thing). But as a creative person, I actually seek out these mistakes as they draw attention to the flaws and functionality of the technical process. As soon as something becomes too smooth, it stops being noticeable and people stop questioning it.



What role does the artist have in society today?

I think that the artist, particularly when working with technology, plays a hugely important role in questioning and thinking through ideas that are emerging out of it. I see the role of the artist as twofold: first, to explore, play and use materials in new ways—there is a long history of artists taking the latest technology, breaking it and using it in a way no one thought it could be used; and second, to think through and examine the concepts, ethics and ideas that sit behind these very complex systems.

What has changed or developed within your practice?

When I first started my art practice working with AI, there weren't many people interested in this emerging art form. But over the past few years there has been a big shift and growing acceptance within the cultural landscape, opening up a lot of incredible opportunities for me and creating a community of curators, collectors and gallerists advancing this space. Recently, I have been able to exhibit in major institutions such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, The Barbican and The Pompidou Centre which have been breakthrough moments for me.

While I'm really happy to have all of these opportunities, I also find myself thinking about what will come next. What will be the next thing to explore and expose? There has been a core theme through all the work I have done so far - handling and classifying data. Data is incredibly human and traces people's lives. My challenge as an artist is to continue to take something cold and sterile like data and explore and emphasize its humanness in new ways.