

Amazon-sponsored artwork that 'learns' debuts at Smithsonian

17 November 2021, by Matthew Barakat



This Oct. 27, 2021, photo shows, from left, artist Suchi Reddy and Swami Sivasubramanian, VP of Amazon Machine Learning at Amazon Web Services, in front of the interactive artwork "me + you" in Washington, D.C. The sculpture uses machine learning to interpret viewers' expressions about the future and incorporate them into the artwork. It is a featured piece of art in the exhibit Futures, which will welcome visitors to the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building for the first time in 20 years when the exhibition opens. Credit: AP Photo/Matthew Barakat

The artificial intelligence at the heart of a new art exhibit, "me + you," does not judge you necessarily, but it does analyze and interpret what you have to say.

Sponsored by Amazon Web Services, the sculpture by artist Suchi Reddy listens to what you have to say about the future and renders your sentiment in a display of colored lights and patterns.

The artwork is a centerpiece of a new exhibit at the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building, which is opening to the public for the first time in 20 years.

The exhibition, called Futures, opens Nov. 20.

Viewers are invited to interact with the sculpture, which listens for the words "My future is ..." at several circular listening posts integrated into the sculpture.

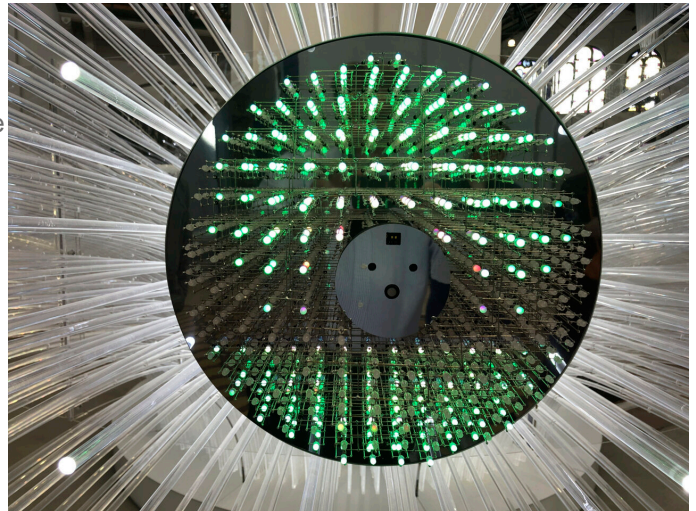
The words and the sentiments behind them are then reinterpreted as a pattern of colored lights. On a very basic level, [positive emotions](#) tend to translate into soothing blends of blue, green and purple. Words that suggest anger might prompt a cascade of colors on the opposite spectrum of the color wheel. If you use a swear word, the lights will turn red.

No matter the sentiment, Reddy said, "I want to show all human emotion as beautiful."

And the interpretations will evolve and become more nuanced over time as the artificial intelligence progresses. Swami Sivasubramanian, vice president of Amazon Machine Learning at Amazon Web Services, said the artwork incorporates sentiment analysis that not only decodes the meaning of words but a speaker's sentiment behind the words.



In this Oct. 27, 2021 photo, is the interactive artwork "me + you," in Washington, D.C. The sculpture uses machine learning to interpret viewers' expressions about the future and incorporate them into the artwork. It is a featured piece of art in the exhibit Futures, which will welcome visitors to the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building for the first time in 20 years when the exhibition opens. It is sponsored by Amazon Web Services and will eventually be kept at Amazon's HQ2 headquarters in Arlington, Va. Credit: AP Photo/Matthew Barakat



Sivasubramanian said Amazon contributed 1,200 hours of programming to serve as the backbone of the artwork's [machine learning](#).

"Machine learning is one of our most transformative technologies," he said. "I'm excited for people to engage with machine learning in an artistic setting."

The artwork utilizes various aspects of machine learning, including basic speech-to-text technology.

A companion website lets people enter their thoughts over the internet and receive a visual interpretation of their [sentiment](#) that is also added to the archive.

In an era of deep skepticism over the data collected by Big Tech, Reddy and her team were careful to avoid data collection of any kind other than people's thoughts about the future. No video is recorded and there is nothing that tracks people's expressions back to them, Reddy said.

This Oct. 27, 2021, photo, shows the interactive artwork "me + you," in Washington, D.C. Viewers speak into the circular panel on their feelings about the future, and the sculpture uses machine learning to interpret viewers' expressions about the future and incorporate them into the artwork. It is a featured piece of art in the exhibit Futures, which will welcome visitors to the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building for the first time in 20 years when the exhibition opens. Credit: (AP Photo/Matthew Barakat

Other highlights in the exhibition include costumes from the Marvel Studios film "Eternals," part of an interactive exhibit that shows how movies help us imagine our future, and objects including an experimental Alexander Graham Bell telephone and the first full-scale Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome built in North America.

"In a world that feels perpetually tumultuous, there is power in envisioning the future we want, not the future we fear," said Rachel Goslins, director of the Arts and Industries Building.

The exhibition is scheduled to remain open through July 6. Eventually, the "me + you" sculpture will be relocated to Amazon's new HQ2 headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.

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