Artificial Intelligence

The Rembrandt approach



We Live Context

Inspiring decisions.
Delivering ROI.

Rembrandt uncovered.

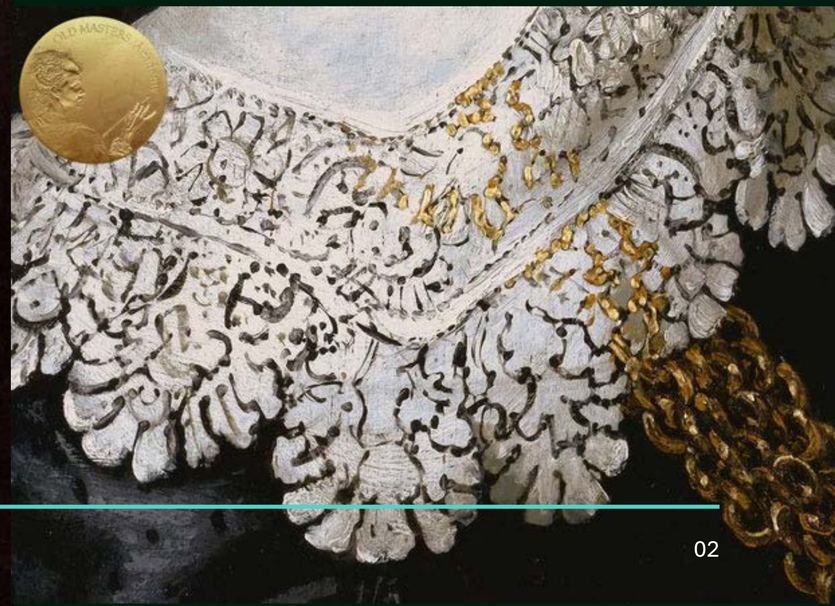
Rembrandt, the most renowned painter of the Dutch Golden Age in the 17th century and one of the greatest artists in the history of Western art, made his name as a portrait artist.

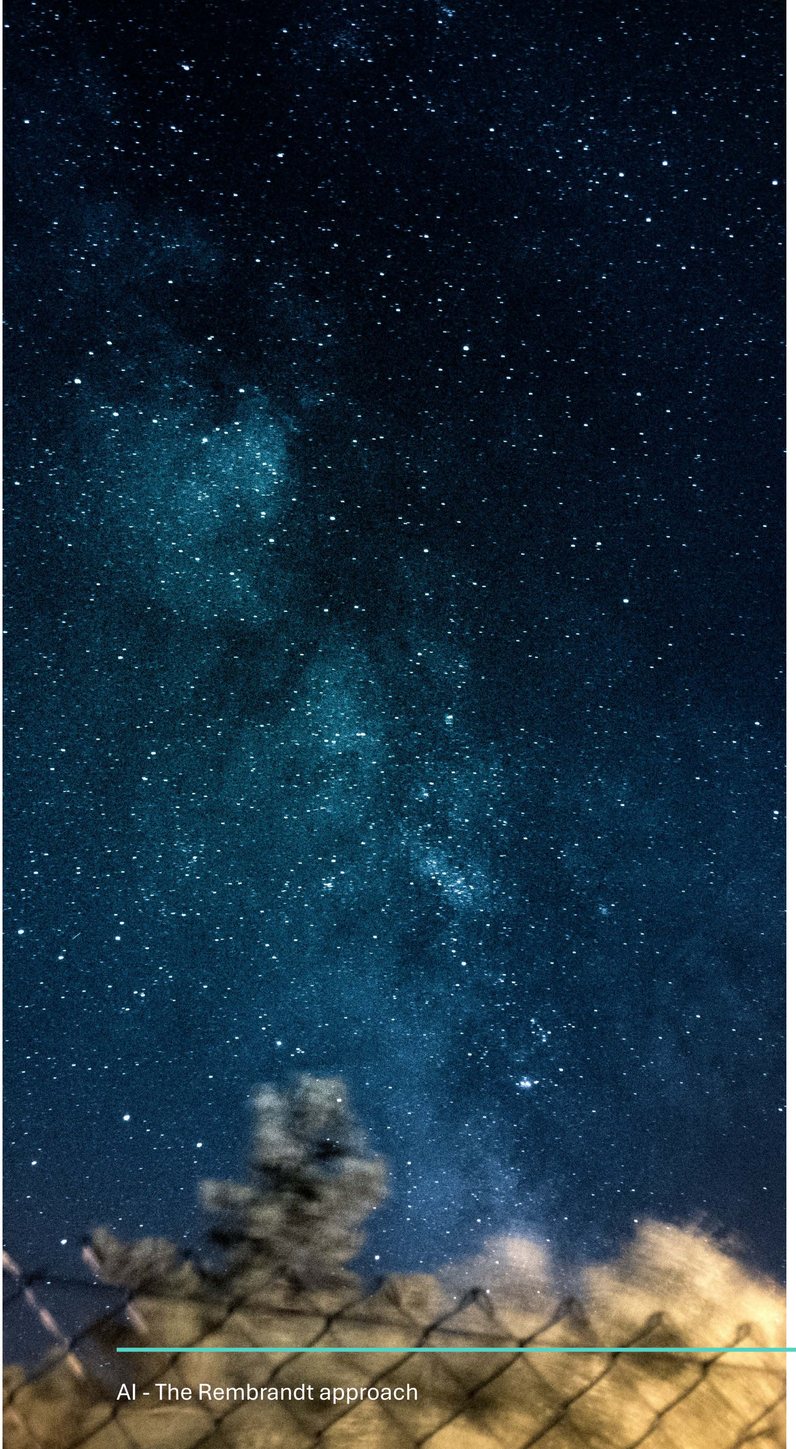
The face in this self-portrait is captivating - intelligent, thoughtful, almost melancholic. Its location in the painting adheres to the law of thirds whereby artists locate the main feature in the left, right, top or bottom third of the image. The impact of the face is all the more striking in the context of the surrounding background. It enhances but does not distract.



...so, how much did Rembrandt paint himself and how much help did he get?

Like many of the Dutch Masters Rembrandt often used his students to do large parts of a painting leaving him free to focus on what mattered most. In simple terms, Rembrandt did the ‘faces and laces’ and left his students to do the ‘coats and curtains’.





The Rembrandt Approach is how we get the most out of artificial intelligence.

No-one knows for certain what the future holds but in the foreseeable future – as foreseen by Artificial Intelligence – this is what we know. Some things AI will do better than humans and some things humans do better than AI, including some of the most important things like imagination, judgement, context. So why not use AI the same way Rembrandt used his students?

You can ask AI the question, “What can AI do better than humans and what can humans do better than AI?”. Give it a go, it will take less than a minute to get the answer and will confirm what you probably already knew. AI can analyse 10 quintillion (ten times a billion, billion, billion) bits of data per second. The human brain can gather data at a rate of one billion bits per second but only sub-consciously. Consciously we can process this at only 40-50 times per second. When it comes to analysing vast datasets, identifying patterns and synthesizing it all accurately, using logic and reasoning, repeatedly and without ever getting bored or tired, AI outperforms humans to a degree almost beyond our comprehension.

However, you can also ask AI what humans do that AI cannot and whilst it will accurately give you the answers - based entirely on what it has harvested from our human contributions to the ‘metaverse’ – they will be beyond the comprehension of AI. Some of those contributions came from philosophers like Descartes, Nietzsche and Sartre. Humans don’t just think (therefore we are), we think with self-consciousness and self- awareness. We are able, we are designed, to take account of context and draw on experience.

We can simply have ideas and then apply logic, rather than just ‘logic’ our way to ideas based only on what already is rather than what could be. We can imagine, serendipitously. We have social consciousness and can make judgements based on emotions, empathy, ethics. We can over-ride these and make poor judgements or we can over-ride logic and reasoning and make bold, unexpected decisions. We can ask logical, reasoned questions (just as Socrates taught us) but we can use our imagination to ask interesting, provocative questions. This last point is really important since, currently, AI is designed to respond to questions and requests, and we retain, for the immediate future, the ability to ask better questions.

All of this AI itself will confirm to be true. But will it always be true? AI is not certain it will be. Advances in AI could lead to it developing more human thinking and cognition such as consciousness or ‘emotional IQ’. For AI to be able to do this it will need to be given human experience, good and bad, it will need memories and – according to AI – it may still be unable fully to replicate the way we think and our ability to make judgements within context.

‘Faces and Laces’ approach to AI

So, for now, we should use AI the way Rembrandt used his students. Let AI do what we don’t want to do and cannot do anywhere near as well. Rembrandt could of course paint anything as well or better than his students but he wanted to focus his time and talents on the things he could uniquely do well and, one imagines, enjoyed doing. It’s a good analogy but like all analogies it is not perfect. It assumes opportunity cost – having students paint the parts of the picture they could do sufficiently well freed up Rembrandt’s time to use his unique talents on ‘the faces and laces’. AI could conceivably, eventually, do everything with no opportunity cost.

But why would we want to it to? Here is another very simple analogy – right now we have a knife and a fork. One is uniquely good at cutting food but not great for holding it or putting it in the mouth. The other is perfect for holding a piece of food in order to cut it and put in your mouth without risking cutting yourself. We could design a fork to be able to cut or a knife to be able to hold food – people have.



Not a great idea, and more to the point, a solution looking for a problem. Why not use a knife and a fork (some Americans may struggle with this analogy, the image above was indeed an American invention).

Right now, AI can do things we as humans cannot do as fast or as accurately – it can cut through vast amounts of data.

We humans can do things AI cannot do – we can stick a fork in what we judge to be a good idea or a good question, we can dip it in some special sauce to add to the taste.

We’ve got as much as we can out of this metaphor, let us instead get back to Rembrandt and the application of his approach to real world examples.

Medicine

Antibiotics were a stunning breakthrough in medicine responsible for controlling disease and saving billions of lives. We are however becoming increasingly resistant to the ones we have and need to find new sources of antibiotics. Scientists are using AI to evaluate a list of one million previously ignored materials that could be used to produce better antibiotics. Of these 100 have been identified as having potential and 63 are yielding results. Humans, scientists, had the motivation and thought to pose the question, AI did the heavy lifting, humans are now doing the vital validation work on what AI generated.

Business

There are lots of examples of AI being used to analyse business data, identify patterns and trends, spotting financial opportunities or anomalies. But let's look at the less obvious – strategy and ideation. Humans can set the brief – what is the aspiration of the business, what problem needs to be solved, what is the opportunity? AI can then do the first pass. Just input the brief and in seconds AI will spit out a range of possible answers. All of them will be based on what is known or has been tried and found to be successful (as long as someone has written about it and made the data available). Humans can then review the results and spot gaps, join the dots in a creative way, decide to do something that is neither obvious nor logical. Maybe something disruptive?

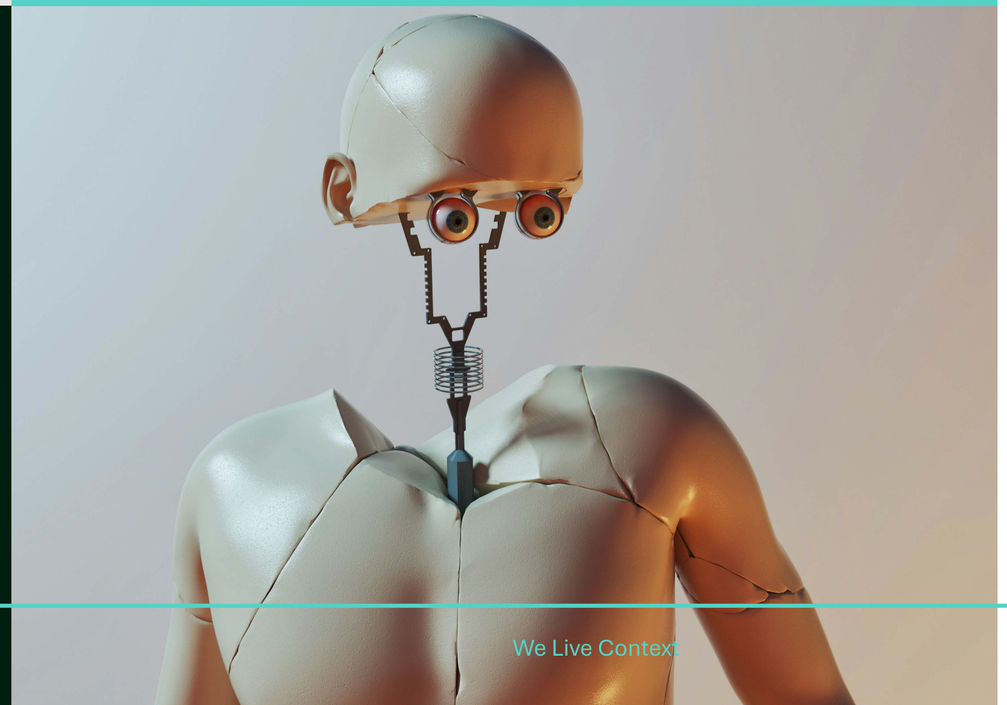
Writers

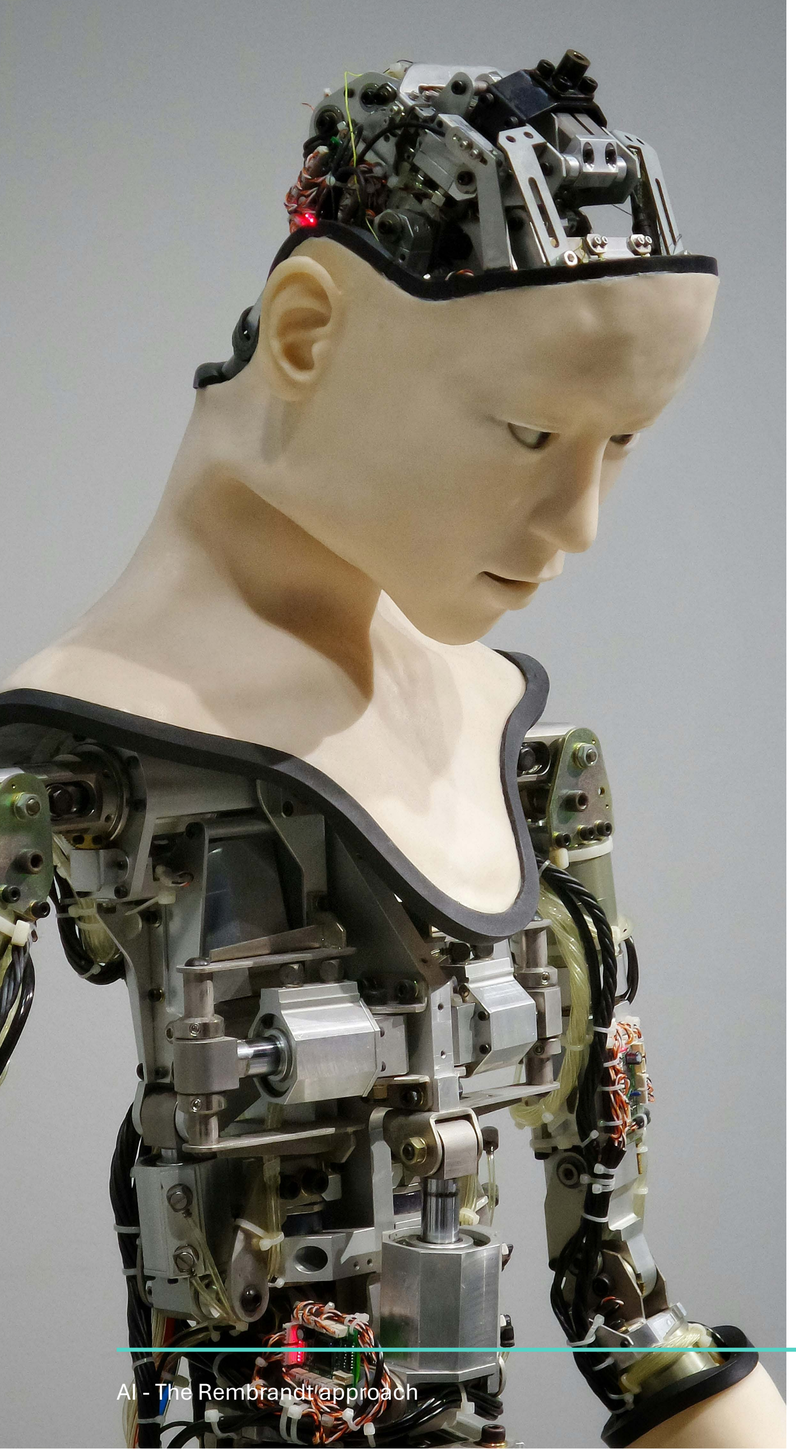
Writers are increasingly using AI – and they have been using Google and Wiki for years – to research, elaborate or tighten their writing, even make it more evocative. AI makes a great proof reader. This is all very useful but it's writers who come up with the best stories.

When it comes to academic papers – or something like this – the most tedious part of the job is citing your references and sources. If you don't, it can undermine the credibility of what you are arguing and concluding, you lack academic rigour. Some might disagree. As long as the arguments resonate who cares that there are none of those footnotes and appendices (that we never check anyway).
With AI both points of view are catered for. Take this 'paper'. If you are concerned that it is just making things up to support a point of view – did Rembrandt really paint like that, is that how fast AI thinks compared to humans, are they really using AI to find new antibiotics – just feed the paper into AI and it will almost instantly give you all the sources and references you want. If you were not concerned, you were right to be so, any check of anything in this paper will show that it is all verified by Google, Wiki and AI (because, apart from the ideas, that is where it all came from) .

Legal

Apologies to the lawyers who invested a lot of their time and money to get their law degrees but law is based on looking things up and drawing up legal documents like contracts. AI is having a dramatic impact on the legal profession.
One of the most common uses of AI is to write legal letters for example, to a bad landlord.
Writing a will and is now cheap and quick.
But only a human can apply ethical, empathetic judgements. Only humans can apply context.





Let’s hope ‘the Rembrandt approach’ is the way we use AI.

We need to question - and probably regulate – the way AI is being developed. Why do we want AI to close the gap between how it works and the way we think? Who is the customer here? If it is us, humans, then we want to maintain the differences. Like Rembrandt we want to be able to fulfil our potential, we don’t want to be replaced. If the customer is other machines then we are getting in the way. As humans we are all flawed, we have memories good and bad, we can act on impulse and whim. We are not perfectly efficient, far from it. We seem capable of causing as much harm as good. You would never design a machine – an entity – to be like us so why make AI think like us? Why not just replace us with machines that act purely on logic and reason. Why, because machines have no purpose other than the purpose we give them and whilst they have knowledge, vast amounts of it with the ability to access and apply it faster than the speed of light, they have no imagination.



Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge”. This very famous quote is taken to mean that knowledge may be the foundation but imagination is what allows us to transcend existing boundaries and make new discoveries, as of course Einstein did. Imagination is what allows us to progress.

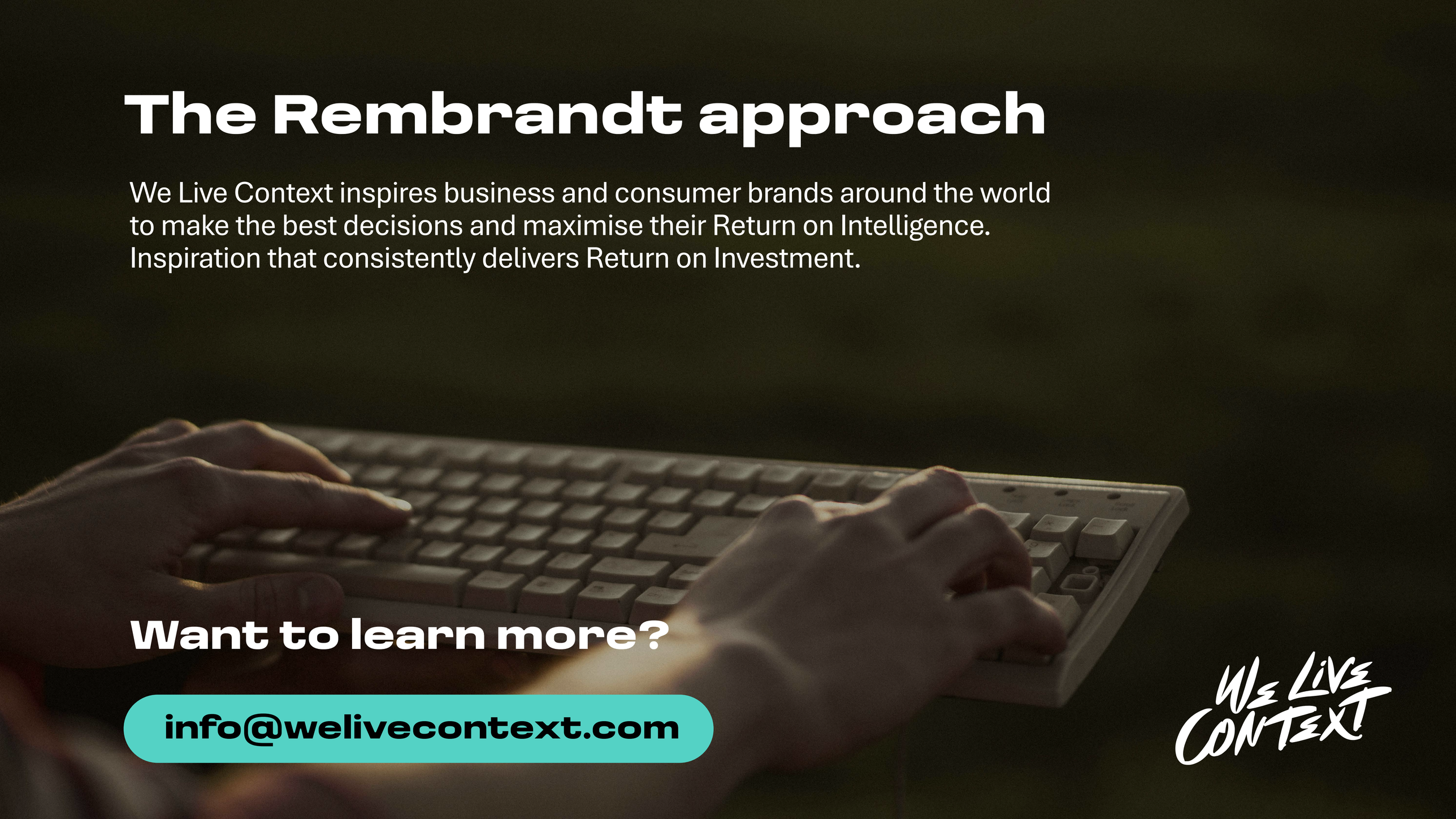
There is another well-known quote about purpose although its author, the 19th Century Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, is perhaps not as well known. “Without purpose life is like a ship without a rudder”. He actually said ‘man’ but the point is clear. Without a rudder a ship just exists, it is going nowhere.

To end on a philosophical note, the existentialists like Nietzsche or Sartre believed that existence had no meaning other than the meaning we bring to it. Without us, life is absurd.

So, let’s hope that our purpose and imagination remain our unique contribution to the progress of life and that we remain the customer for AI…

The Rembrandt approach

We Live Context inspires business and consumer brands around the world to make the best decisions and maximise their Return on Intelligence. Inspiration that consistently delivers Return on Investment.



Want to learn more?

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