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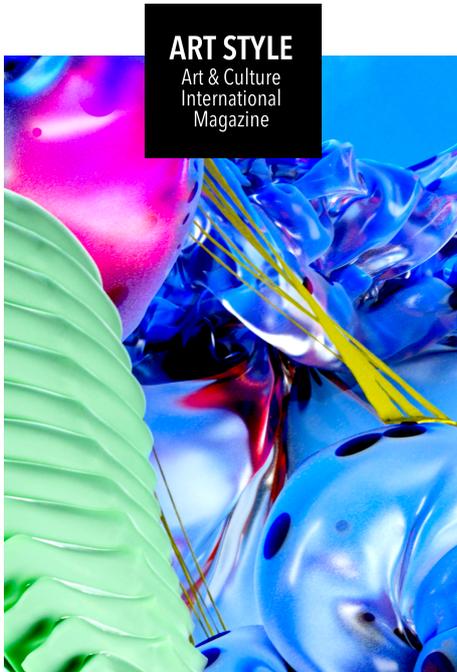
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AI and Future Creativity Politics
Expanded Edition

Language, Power, and Art
as a Site of Resistance

Minimalism, Media Spectacle,
and the Politics of Excess



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Art Style Magazine is an open-access, biannual, and peer-reviewed online magazine. It aims to showcase cultural diversity and operates under the guidance of the editor-in-chief, supported by an international editorial board and scientific committee.

Aims and Scope

Beyond the importance of the medium, form, and context in which art takes its characteristics, *Art Style Magazine's* aims and scope consider the significance of socio-cultural, political, and historical influence. All values of cultures are shown in their varieties of art. The significance of art and aesthetic experiences are analyzed and related to the process of perception and imagination. That process can be understood as an aesthetic experience in art, music, media, design, architecture, and other creative works and events that contribute to one's knowledge and reasoning concerning the arts' effect on the observer and environment. Accordingly, *Art Style Magazine* focuses on the myriad meanings of art and its communication dynamics to address the historical consciousness of modern Western culture in the actual context to promote social inclusion, sustainable development, and decoloniality. Hence, *Art Style Magazine* focuses not only on the art and its description but also on its reciprocal influence on culture. Artistic, cultural, and political interdependence must be understood globally as a significant process for contemporary urban life, evaluating collaborative actors, especially in articulating democratic ideals, image cultures, identities, and world heritage. *Art Style Magazine* believes art is a universal language transcending cultural boundary, taking many forms and expressed through various media in Western and non-Western cultures. The magazine aims to discuss creative developments that address local and global social responsibility challenges through the arts and its reflection on cultural changes and the spirit of the time.

Art Style Magazine features essential analysis fields in social sciences, arts, and humanities, such as art history, art education, aesthetics, communication science, design, and architecture, music, sound studies, as well as image science, which encompasses photography, cinema, new media, and new technologies. The magazine is focused on creative and communicative practices that aspire to meet all aspects of society's idealized aspirations through art.



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Editor-in-Chief and Creative Director

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Editorial

In this edition of *Art Style Magazine*, AI and Future Creativity Politics – Expanded Edition, we enter a moment in which artistic practice and cultural critique can no longer treat artificial intelligence as a peripheral tool or a speculative horizon. AI is now deeply entangled with how images are produced and circulated, how music is composed and heard, how archives are curated, and how publics imagine both their past and their future. The contributions gathered in this issue respond to our call for critical and interdisciplinary engagement with these transformations, examining not only what AI can do but also what it means for authorship, agency, sustainability, justice, and perception.

Our call for papers emphasized several key questions: How is AI reshaping artistic creation and aesthetic theory? In what ways does it reconfigure relations between artist, observer, and environment? How does it function as both tool and collaborator, and with what ethical or political consequences? How might we situate AI within broader debates on social inclusion, sustainability, and decoloniality in the arts? The contributions collected here do not converge on a single answer. Rather, they chart a field of tensions—between human and non-human agency, opacity and transparency, speed and attention, innovation and tradition, spectacle and critique—that collectively illuminate the stakes of AI-driven cultural production today.

The opening essay, Jimmy Alfonso Licon’s “Why Disdain AI Art? Signaling Theory, Metaphysics, and Artificial Intelligence,” explores why AI art often causes unease and suspicion, even when it rivals human work in visual sophistication. Rather than attributing this solely to elitism or technophobia, Licon combines signaling theory with a “thick” metaphysics of art. From a signaling perspective, human art is costly and signals traits such as intelligence and creativity that resist imitation. AI lowers production costs, breaking the link between effort and merit and disrupting this balance. Licon emphasizes that extrinsic features—such as history, authorship, and context—are essential to art’s value. Original works are valued partly due to their histories; however, the opaque data sources of AI and the dispersed nature of authorship undermine these notions and prompt inquiries into responsibility. Signaling and thickness theories thus clarify why extrinsic features matter and how AI art unsettles traditional notions of artistic agency and authorship.

If Licon interrogates the metaphysical and social stakes of AI art, Risto Holopainen’s “Wasteful Computation: The Case for Simpler Algorithms in Computer Art and Music” brings the debate down to earth—specifically, to energy grids and material infrastructures. Holopainen situates contemporary fascination with generative AI within a longer history of algorithmic and computer art, reminding us that computational creativity did not begin with deep learning. He argues that the scale and opacity of current proprietary models mark a decisive break: they are not only trained on vast appropriations of prior artworks, but also sustained by enormous energy consumption.

A recurring claim in public discourse is that generative AI will “democratize” artistic practice by lowering barriers to entry. In “Why AI Cannot Democratize Artistic Practice: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Botto Project,” Ksenija Savčić subjects this narrative to rigorous philosophical scrutiny. Focusing on the Botto project—a high-profile experiment in collectively steered, AI-mediated art—Savčić unpacks the conceptual assumptions behind promises of radical democratization. She argues that two key assertions are often conflated: first, that AI-generated outputs can be counted as artworks; second, that engaging with such outputs constitutes participation in a continuous, though transformed, artistic practice.

While several contributions focus directly on AI, Aaron Wilder’s “Unstable Language: It’s Time to Speak and to Act” broadens the frame to examine how language, power, and artistic practice intersect in shaping social realities. Drawing on thinkers such as Hayakawa, Lutz, Herman, and Chomsky, Butler, Foucault, and Rancière, Wilder traces how dominant institutions engineer compliance through doublespeak, propaganda, framing, censorship, and disciplinary practices. These techniques normalize obedience and narrow the horizons of what can be thought, said, or imagined.

From here, the issue turns to questions of mediation and visibility. Teresa Weinholtz’s “Minimalism, Media Spectacle, and the Paradox of Excess: Artistic Representations of Carl Andre’s Controversies” addresses the spectacle surrounding minimalist artist Carl Andre. Through a comparative analysis of Elisabetta Benassi’s *It Starts with the Firing* (2017) and Xochitl Gonzalez’s novel *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* (2024), Weinholtz examines how art and literature reframe two scandals linked to Andre—one involving the Tate’s acquisition of *Equivalent VIII*, the other surrounding the death of Ana Mendieta and Andre’s subsequent acquittal.

Although Weinholtz’s essay is not primarily about AI, it resonates with the issue’s broader concerns. The media-driven amplification of certain narratives at the expense of others finds contemporary echoes in algorithmic recommendation systems, virality metrics, and data-driven reputations. The paradox of minimalism and excess mirrors our current moment, in which seemingly frictionless AI tools generate vast spectacles of attention, even as underlying histories of exploitation, appropriation, and gendered violence risk being sidelined. Weinholtz’s contribution thus offers a historical and critical lens for understanding the politics of cultural visibility in both analogue and digital regimes.

Questions of authenticity, technology, and survival come to the fore in Madhvi Prasad’s “Integration of Authenticity and Innovation in Mithila Art for the Survival of Artists.” Focusing on the Mithila (Madhubani) painting tradition from Bihar, India, Prasad traces how this intricate, symbolically rich art form—historically rooted in natural pigments, handmade tools, and freehand execution—faces new pressures under contemporary market demands. As the popularity of Mithila art grows, many practitioners have turned to artificial colors and digital replication to meet demand and reduce labor-intensive aspects of production. Prasad argues that while

innovation and technological integration are inevitable, the uncritical adoption of mass-production techniques threatens the very qualities that make Mithila art distinctive: its material intimacy with the environment, the embodied skill of its practitioners, and its deep community-specific symbolism.

The following articles turn to perception, space, and collaboration. In “Perspective and the Reorientation of Digital Space: A Study of Chinese and Hieronymus Bosch’s Paintings,” Nuo Cheng revisits the concept of perspective as both a pictorial technique and a mode of embodied spatial perception. Cheng argues that the rise of screen-based, digitally mediated environments constitutes an epistemic shift comparable to the transition from medieval to Renaissance paradigms of space perception. In the context of AI, where spatial logics underpin everything from image generation to predictive policing, this reconfiguration of perspective is more than metaphorical. It invites us to see AI not just as a tool of abstraction and control, but as part of a technology ecosystem that could enhance rather than diminish sensory intuition and local agency.

Sun Park and Yan Xiao’s contribution explores how AI alters authorship and agency in art, focusing on “contextual creativity” and “desirable autonomy.” They show that generative AI extends human input, reshaping decision-making among artists, audiences, and machines, with important differences across art forms. Visual art emphasizes curatorial choices and human prompting, while music involves layered stages such as composition and performance, with AI intervening at various points. Comparing these practices, they argue that assessing AI in art must consider context-specific norms and values rather than abstract notions of creativity. To this end, they advocate AI literacy, tiered copyright, and sector-specific governance to recognize human and AI contributions, aiming for forms of desirable autonomy that support diverse artistic ecosystems.

To sum up, the contributions in this edition of *Art Style Magazine* depict AI’s entanglement with art and culture, highlighting that technological innovation is intertwined with issues of power, visibility, ecology, and justice. AI-generated images and sounds emerge from energy-consuming infrastructures, unacknowledged artistic labor, and discursive regimes that shape futures as inevitable or marginal. Contributors emphasize the importance of understanding these complexities, with some exploring the philosophical, institutional, ecological, and political dimensions of AI in art and design. The work encourages viewing AI as a contested space with multiple futures, urging active participation in shaping them through reflection, experimentation, reform, and collective effort. *AI and Future Creativity Politics* invites ongoing dialogue to foster socially just, ecologically mindful, and inclusive creative futures.

Christiane Wagner

Editor-in-Chief and Creative Director



Why Disdain AI Art? Signaling Theory, Metaphysics, and Artificial Intelligence

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

Abstract

This paper examines why AI-generated art often provokes resistance, suspicion, or outright disdain despite its increasing technical sophistication. It argues that this reaction cannot be adequately explained by appeal to perceptual or intrinsic features alone. Instead, the paper integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks—signaling theory and a thick metaphysics of art—to explain what is at stake in contemporary responses to artificial creativity. From an evolutionary perspective, artistic production and appreciation function in part as costly signals of underlying human traits such as intelligence, creativity, coordination, and endurance. These signals are socially valuable precisely because they are costly to produce based on artistic qualities that are hard to fake. AI systems disrupt this signaling equilibrium by dramatically reducing the cost of producing artifacts with impressive intrinsic properties, thereby severing the traditional link between artistic output and the abilities of a human agent. At the same time, the paper draws on thickness theory to argue that artworks are partly constituted by extrinsic properties such as causal history, authorship, intention, and cultural context. On this view, originals matter not merely because of audience psychology or social signaling, but because these extrinsic features are metaphysically relevant to what artworks are. AI-generated works complicate this framework by obscuring authorship and introducing causal histories that lack unified agency or intentional structure. The paper argues that these two accounts—often treated as rivals—are best understood as mutually reinforcing. Signaling theory explains why audiences care so deeply about extrinsic features, while thickness theory explains why those features matter independently of signaling. Together, they illuminate why AI art challenges entrenched norms of artistic value and authorship, and why human artistic agency remains distinctive even as artificial systems increasingly participate in creative domains.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence now produces images, music, and text quickly and with a level of ease that would have been inconceivable a decade ago. These systems mimic styles, extend traditions, and passably imitate works that once required years of human practice. And while AI replications are far from perfect, they are already very good—and, crucially, easy to scale. The suddenness of this transformation has forced the art world to confront a familiar puzzle in an unfamiliar form. If artistic value were grounded exclusively in the intrinsic properties of works—qualities like color, shape, or timbre—then the advent of AI would merely broaden the supply of aesthetically pleasing objects. Artificially produced works would stand in continuity with human ones, distinguished only by differences that should not matter. Yet the cultural reception of AI-generated art has been marked by ambivalence, suspicion, and, at times, outright rejection. Even when AI-generated pieces closely, if not perfectly, resemble human works, audiences often refuse to treat them in the same way once they discover that the source of the art is AI (Millet et al. 2023).

This resistance reveals a deeper tension. Human beings claim to care about art primarily for the beauty or insight it provides—its intrinsic properties—but they consistently behave as though something more is at stake. In *The Elephant in the Brain* (2018), Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson highlight this discrepancy by distinguishing between the stated and the actual motives underlying artistic practices, as revealed by the gap between what people claim to value about art and how they in fact behave (for example, what they are willing to spend money on). They argue that much artistic behavior—especially the attention lavished on extrinsic features such as authorship, effort, and originality—is better explained by the evolutionary logic of signaling theory, independently developed in both economics and evolutionary biology, than by a pure pursuit of aesthetic appreciation for its own sake.

On this account of art and art appreciation, art functions in part as a fitness display to potential mates and, more broadly, to cooperation partners, allowing individuals who produce or appreciate art to signal intelligence, creativity, endurance, and taste. It is unsurprising, then, that observers care intensely about how difficult a work was to produce or about the identity of its maker, since these are far better indicators of such traits than the intrinsic properties of the artwork itself, such as beauty, shape, or color. These features reveal information about the underlying qualities of the agent responsible, and conveying that information is one of the central social functions of art.

However, a distinct—and in some ways complementary—theory reaches a different conclusion on the basis of similar evidence. On this view, the value of an artwork arises not merely from its perceptual features or its signaling value—though there is likely some truth to both frameworks—but also from a constellation of extrinsic properties that help constitute what the artwork is (Licon 2021). This account of extrinsic properties—often called *thickness theory*—holds that artworks possess historical and causal features, anchored in the specific actions, contexts, and intentions that brought them into being, and that these features partly determine their value. Perfect replicas, no matter how exact, simply lack that history. They are distinct objects because they arise from different causal chains. Their inferiority is not an aesthetic illusion but a metaphysical fact: they lack important extrinsic properties. Moreover, because intrinsic features are far easier to reproduce than extrinsic ones, their marginal value diminishes quickly, while the extrinsic dimension remains scarce and therefore retains much of the artwork's value.

These two theoretical perspectives—one evolutionary, one metaphysical—are often treated as if they were competing explanations, though in fact they are largely complementary. The emergence of AI makes clear that they address different aspects of art appreciation. The signaling account explains why people care so deeply about extrinsic features despite claiming to value only intrinsic properties such as shape, color, and beauty. Thickness theory, by contrast, explains why those extrinsic features matter in a way distinct from signaling: they are partly constitutive of the identity of the artwork itself, and they matter both for evaluation and precisely because they cannot be replicated. Taken together, these frameworks offer a coherent way of understanding why AI has provoked such intense debate about authorship, agency, authenticity, and the nature of art appreciation.

The aim of this essay is to integrate these approaches into a single account of how AI alters the landscape of artistic value. More specifically, the essay seeks to clarify the conceptual and theoretical terrain surrounding art appreciation and contemporary debates about AI and creativity. The first section explores how human art is likely, at least in part, an evolutionary product employed by humans as a means of signaling to potential mates and cooperation partners—vital for both survival and reproduction—internal qualities such as creativity and intelligence that would otherwise be difficult to detect. The following section

examines thickness theory: the idea that art appreciation depends, to a significant extent, on the value of extrinsic properties of artworks (for example, the fact that people visit the *Mona Lisa* partly because of who painted it). The fourth section highlights how AI collapses the cost of generating and scaling art. The fifth section explores how AI alters the metaphysics of art and how those changes bear on art appreciation. The final section considers how AI may reshape artistic agency and the future of aesthetic value.

Cost, Waste, and Hidden Motives Underlying Art and Art Appreciation

The starting point for the evolutionary account is a simple observation: art is puzzling from a survival-first perspective (Miller 2000; Simler and Hanson 2018). Artistic creation and appreciation are often costly in time, energy, material investment, and foregone opportunities—one could be hunting or building shelter instead—without providing any obvious direct benefits such as food, safety, or protection. Evolution abhors waste, so whatever artistic creation and appreciation are doing, they must confer some benefit. And despite its apparent costs and evolutionary disadvantages, artistic behavior appears in every known human population and stretches back tens of thousands of years, if not longer. Cave paintings, carved figurines, and other adornment, and rhythmic performance predate agriculture and written language. This combination of costliness, universality, and antiquity strongly suggests that art served some adaptive function; otherwise, evolution would likely have purged it from human life long ago.

Simler and Hanson argue that a highly likely function—though hardly the only one—of artistic creation and appreciation is signaling. A costly, difficult activity is useful precisely because it is costly, since cost can convey information to a signal receiver about the sender of the signal. This logic is well established in both biological contexts (Zahavi 1975) and human activities such as the job market (Spence 1973). The cost of creating and appreciating art helps filter out producers and consumers who lack the time, intelligence, or resources required to do so. A person able to sculpt, sing, or paint at a high level thereby demonstrates persistence, coordination, intelligence, and resourcefulness—traits that matter for both cooperation and mate choice.

On the signaling theory of art, art functions less as a mechanism for generating beauty or meaning for its own sake and more as a display of underlying fitness. The analogy to the bowerbird is deliberate: male bowerbirds construct elaborate and decorative structures, not to inhabit them, but to advertise their suitability as mates. The construction of these structures serves as a display of surplus capacity—evidence that the bird has enough time, energy, and resources to survive, thrive, and still afford such costly effort (Simler and Hanson 2018). Many similar examples can be found throughout the animal and plant kingdoms, where behaviors that appear artistic due to their beauty or sophistication are better understood as evolutionary and cooperative signaling efforts.

Applied to humans, this account clarifies many otherwise puzzling features of art appreciation. People respond differently to a sculpture carved by hand than to one produced by a machine, even when the visible features are indistinguishable (Simler and Hanson 2018). They tend to be moved by the knowledge that a singer navigates a difficult passage in real time, even if a recorded version is acoustically superior. They admire the virtuosity required to create a painting without technological shortcuts. And they place a premium on originality because it reveals creative capacities that imitation conceals. These are qualities and abilities that are difficult to fake without possessing the genuine article—eye–hand coordination, intelligence, and creativity. As Simler and Hanson explain:

One place we find this sacrifice is in the performing arts. For example, by almost any measure of technical control, film exceeds live theater. Film directors can fuss endlessly over lighting, set design, and camera angles; they can demand retake after retake until their actors get everything just right... And yet consumers continue to relish live performances, shelling out even for back-row seats at many times the price of a movie ticket. Why? In part, because performing *live is a handicap*. With such little margin for error, the results are that much more impressive. (196; emphasis original)

These patterns indicate that observers are attuned not merely to what a work looks or sounds like, but to what it reveals about the agent who produced it. The stated motive—*I enjoy this piece because it is beautiful*—can coexist and often does for strategic reasons (von Hippel and Trivers 2011) with a hidden motive: *I value this because it signals the abilities of its creator*. This discrepancy is not a matter of hypocrisy or cognitive dissonance but instead reflects the fact that human preferences often encode functions of which they are not aware. On this view, the hidden agenda behind much artistic activity is the desire to display traits that others will find valuable.

AI disrupts this finely tuned balance of cost, signaling, and art. A system that can generate technically accomplished images or musical passages in seconds undermines the cost structure that once made artistic skill a reliable signal of intelligence and creativity. If anyone can produce beautiful and sophisticated works, then such outputs no longer distinguish those with creativity and intelligence from those who lack them. When an impressive result no longer indicates time, training, or talent, those qualities cease to be reliably inferable from the artifact. The link between output and underlying human traits is weakened. The elaborate equivalence between difficulty and value collapses. Yet to appreciate the other approach to art and art appreciation, we must examine what a work of art is.

The Metaphysics of Art: Why Extrinsic Properties Matter

The metaphysical analysis—grounded in thickness theory—begins from a different intuition. Rather than emphasizing signaling, it focuses on the extrinsic properties of art: when and how a work was made, why it was made, and by whom. Suppose a perfect replica of the *Mona Lisa* could be produced, an atom for atom copy of the original. If art were solely a matter of intrinsic, sensory properties, the replica would have the same value as the original. By way of thought experiment, Simler and Hanson put the point as follows:

The importance of extrinsic properties becomes especially clear when we contemplate the idea of a hypothetical “replica museum”—a gallery stocked entirely with *copies* of the world’s masterpieces. If the replicas are sufficiently accurate, they will be indistinguishable from the originals. Maybe artists and art students would care more about seeing the originals, but the rest of us should (according to the conventional view) be perfectly happy to visit a replica museum [...] Of course, replica museums don’t exist, and the idea strikes us as a bit silly—but that’s precisely the point. *Our disdain for replicas strongly suggests that we often use art as something other than a trigger for sensory or intellectual experiences.* (2018, 194-5; emphasis mixed)

However, this conclusion runs contrary to nearly every intuitive and empirical datum. People overwhelmingly prefer to view the original, and when offered a choice between a perfect replica and the ashes of the original after its hypothetical destruction, they often choose the ashes. This is a striking and revealing preference. It cannot be explained by appeal to perceptual features, since the ashes retain none of the aesthetic appeal of the original because the artwork itself has been destroyed. The preference must therefore track something else. And

while Simler and Hanson think that *something else* is doing the signaling other than the intrinsic properties of the art—where people prefer the ashes as a way of signaling their taste and fidelity to the original masterpiece—there is another theory that could do some explanatory work here: the origins, context, and (causal) history of the original piece of art is valuable to the practice of art appreciation just as much as the intrinsic qualities like the color, shape, and beauty of the piece.

The philosopher Jimmy Alfonso Licon argues that a thick metaphysics of art emphasizes that artworks are more than mere clusters of sensory properties. On the thick conception of art—as opposed to a thin conception on which art reduces to intrinsic features such as beauty, shape, and color—the extrinsic properties of artworks constitute a significant part of their value. It is not merely that knowledge of these extrinsic properties is valuable, but that the properties themselves are essential to what the artwork is. To take a familiar example, the original *Mona Lisa* is more valuable because of who created it and why, its cultural and historical significance, and the circumstances of its production. Part of what makes the *Mona Lisa* valuable *as art* is that it was painted by Leonardo, has a particular causal history, and was produced with specific intentions under particular conditions.

The fact that the *Mona Lisa* was painted by Leonardo, within a particular historical milieu, using specific materials and techniques, matters because those features are part of what the artwork is. An indistinguishable replica produced by a different process is not the same artwork, even if it is perceptually identical. It is a different entity with a different history. On thickness theory, the puzzle raised by Simler and Hanson—why people care so deeply about the extrinsic properties of art—is not one that requires signaling theory to resolve. Rather, people care about art because they recognize, implicitly or explicitly, that extrinsic properties partly constitute the identity of artworks, and that artworks are valuable in part for that reason.

A perfect replica is not an adequate substitute for the original because it lacks these extrinsic properties: who made it, when, and why. A replicated artwork may share the same intrinsic features as the original, but it lacks the relevant historical and causal properties. A replicated *Mona Lisa* was not created by Leonardo da Vinci, is not centuries old, did not spend years in Leonardo's studio, and so on. It lacks the historical and causal features that make the original what it is. Thickness theory thus appeals to underlying metaphysical facts rather than signaling, though it need not exclude signaling as an additional explanation.

A further point strengthens this perspective. Intrinsic properties are relatively abundant and, especially in the age of industrial reproduction—and even more so in the age of AI—easy to duplicate. Extrinsic properties, by contrast, are scarce because they cannot simply be replicated by humans, machines, or AI systems.

According to the marginal theory of value in economics, the more abundant something becomes, the less marginal value each additional instance carries (Hicks 2005). How does this economic principle work? As Philip Wicksteed, an early proponent of the theory, explains:

Marginal considerations are considerations which concern a slight increase or diminution of the stock of anything which we possess or are considering. Another way to think of the term marginal is the cost or benefit of the next unit used or consumed, for example the benefit that you might get from consuming a piece of chocolate. The key to understanding marginality is through marginal analysis. Marginal analysis examines *the additional benefits of an activity compared to additional costs sustained by that same activity*. (1910, book 1, chapter 2; my emphasis)

Once high-quality reproductions of a famous work become widely available, the perceptual features of that work saturate the environment, and the marginal value of any single instance drops toward zero. The point is not that art becomes worthless when there is “too much” of it, but rather that the value of yet another piece of art to a given person declines. Why? Because the time and resources that could be devoted to appreciating one more instance could instead be spent on something else they also value. As quantity increases, opportunity costs rise. This logic applies to sweaters and motorbikes just as much as it does to art. On this account, the preference for originals reflects familiar economic principles of diminishing marginal utility rather than any peculiar psychological bias.

Thickness theory thus offers an independent explanation for many of the same phenomena that the signaling account seeks to illuminate—such as why people value something less and less the more of it they have, and why replicated art is often disdained relative to originals for reasons that go beyond signaling—though, once again, the two theories may both be true. Where the signaling explanation appeals to hidden motives, thickness theory appeals to metaphysical considerations that reveals a structural feature of art itself. The growing prevalence of AI-generated art forces these two approaches into direct conversation. AI art challenges both the cost structures that underwrite signaling and the extrinsic qualities that ground thickness theory, bringing their points of tension—and complementarity—into sharp relief.

AI and the Collapse of Cost

AI transforms the production of artworks by radically reducing the cost of generating art with the relevant intrinsic qualities intact—or at least close enough for present purposes. Creative and costly tasks that were once the domain of trained artists and specialists are now within reach of anyone with access to contemporary generative models. These systems require neither practice nor patience, nor the effort and skill associated with achieving mastery. AIs do not tire, err, or learn in the way humans do; instead, they are statistical engines that generate outputs by extracting and recombining patterns from enormous datasets (Licon 2025).

The immediate consequence is that the difficulty of producing impressive intrinsic properties no longer functions as a reliable marker of underlying ability—it is easily faked with AI. A human drawing a photorealistic portrait may demonstrate years of skill acquisition, whereas using an algorithm to produce the same result reveals nothing about the fitness, skill, or abilities of the person operating the system. The costliness and hard-to-fake nature of art—what once made artistic outputs credible signals of human attributes—evaporate in the face of AI.

The collapse of cost as a reliable signal was already underway, as industrial reproduction made high-fidelity copies of artworks widely available, but AI accelerates this process dramatically. Not only can intrinsic features now be copied, they can be generated in endless variation and at massive scale. The perceptual landscape becomes saturated with high-quality images, melodies, and texts. As a result, the bottleneck shifts from production to selection. The central problem becomes how to identify which among countless generable artifacts merits sustained attention. Moreover, as intrinsic features become cheap and abundant, their value diminishes due to the diminishing marginal value of them leaving extrinsic properties to account for much of the value of the art (Simler and Hanson 2018, 194).

AI and the Metaphysics of Creativity

If artworks are partly defined by their causal histories, then AI-generated artifacts and replicas raise a natural question: what sorts of histories, if any, do they possess? A traditional artwork inherits its identity from the actions, intentions, and contexts of a human agent—a causal chain that extends through time and connects the piece to its creator. A sculpture carved by hand has a particular history of physical activity. A poem written by an author bears the imprint of that person's conceptual choices and linguistic sensibilities. These histories have clear beginnings and can be situated within broader artistic lineages.

AI-generated pieces and replicas have distinct origins and histories. The output of an AI model is the result of statistical inference performed over vast datasets, filtered through parameters tuned by engineers, refined by computational processes, and mediated by prompts supplied by users. The causal chain is neither the product of a single mind nor the expression of unified intentionality. Indeed, this fact may be another reason that people judge AI-art more harshly, even if indistinguishable from the original, once they know it is AI-generated (Millet et. AI, 2023). As Simler and Hanson explain:

One study, for example, found that consumers appreciate the same artwork less when they're told it was made by multiple artists instead of a single artist—because they're assessing the work by how much effort went into it, rather than simply by the final result. (2018, 194)

This renders the metaphysical status of AI-generated works ambiguous. Such works do have causal histories, but not of the kind traditionally associated with artworks; instead, their origins lie in processes of statistical pattern extraction and recombination. The resulting artifact cannot be anchored in a unified subject of intention, nor situated within a clear lineage of human artistic practice without qualification. This ambiguity of origin and process affects how audiences respond to AI art. When people hesitate to attribute the same value to a machine-generated image as to a human-made one, they may be reacting not merely to the artifact's perceptual qualities, but to its causal origins—where the uncertainty is metaphysical rather than aesthetic. Without a clear sense of who produced the work and why, it becomes difficult to place the object within established categories of art, either because its signaling value is ambiguous or nonexistent, or because it lacks the relevant extrinsic properties.

Authorship, Agency, and the Future of Art Appreciation

Here it is worth pausing to examine how AI redefines artistic agency and challenges inherited notions of authorship and authority. These questions come into sharper focus when viewed through the combined lenses of signaling theory and thickness theory. In human art, authorship plays a dual role. It signals information about the creator—such as their abilities and creative effort—while also contributing to the work’s metaphysical identity. An artwork is the product of a particular agent and cannot be detached from that origin without becoming a different work. AI obscures both aspects. As a signal, authorship weakens because impressive outputs no longer reliably indicate impressive producers. As a constitutive property, authorship becomes opaque: the model, rather than the human user, performs the generative action, yet the model itself is not an agent in the traditional sense.

Agency in art has always been distributed, to some extent, across institutions, technologies, and communities, but AI introduces a form of distributed agency that is both collective and algorithmic. These systems draw on the labor of millions of human creators embedded in their training data, reconfiguring patterns into outputs shaped by engineering decisions and popularity rather than by the intentions of a single artist. The role of the human prompter—for example, in art produced through a chatbot—is typically too limited to contribute much in the way of signaling or extrinsic properties. On both the signaling and thickness theories of art, when intrinsic features become ample, value shifts even more heavily toward extrinsic factors like curation, historical lineage, and robust human involvement (Licon 2021).

A further implication is that if the value of art resided solely in its intrinsic, perceptual qualities—how colorful or beautiful a piece appears—AI’s capacity to generate those qualities cheaply and at scale would render human artistic practice obsolete. Yet the persistent human preference for originals, for intentional productions, and for works embedded in meaningful causal histories suggests otherwise (Millet et al. 2023). Two forces help explain this persistence. The first is the enduring relevance of extrinsic properties. People value artworks not only for how they appear, but for what they are, with their causal and historical features contributing to their status as artistic expressions of humanity. The second is the evolving nature of signaling. When skill becomes easy to mimic, new arenas of competition emerge, recalibrating the signaling equilibrium and reestablishing costly and hard-to-fake artistic signals.

The likely outcome is not the replacement of human art but its transformation, in which costliness and extrinsic properties—the effort required to create a work and the historical and cultural signals it carries—once again become central to what makes something a great piece of art. What counts as valuable will shift as the relative scarcity of different properties changes. Human creative labor will be prized where it remains costly, intentional, or irreducibly personal. AI-assisted work will flourish where the emphasis lies on novel combinations, rapid iteration, or conceptual exploration—or where such qualities simply do not matter very much. The boundaries between these categories will be porous, and the most compelling artworks may well emerge at their intersection.

Conclusion

AI fundamentally alters the terrain of artistic production by collapsing the cost structures that once made artistic skill a reliable signal of creativity and intelligence. It complicates the causal histories that grounded artistic identity and forces a reconsideration of authorship and human agency. Yet it does not nullify the human relationship to art; instead, it reveals the deeper layers beneath artistic practice, including the evolutionary roots of signaling and the extrinsic properties that partly give art its distinctive cultural value.

As generative systems become more capable, the central issue is not whether they will replace human creativity, but how people will reevaluate what is valuable and distinctive about art. Even though art has never been merely a perceptual matter, AI helps clarify that it has always been an embedded feature of human life. AI will not change that fact, but it will force a rethinking of why and how art is created, and for whom. Understanding this new terrain requires an account that integrates hidden motives with thick metaphysics, and evolutionary logic with cultural history. Only then can we grasp what is genuinely at stake in the age of AI and the making of art.

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Wasteful Computation: The Case for Simpler Algorithms in Computer Art and Music

Risto Holopainen

Abstract

Algorithmic and generative art has a history which runs parallel with the introduction of computers. The recent fascination with generative AI obscures its links to historical predecessors. Present discussions of whether something made by a computer can be art are in certain ways similar to the discussions that were raised when computer art and music were new, although the large-scale appropriation of prior artworks is a crucial difference. Critical reflection on AI in art is often focused on copyright issues and the changing roles of artists, but too often one of the most important aspects has been left out, namely the enormous energy consumption of the data centres that run current AI models. This, and other environmental consequences, puts large-scale AI on a direct collision course with any sustainability goals. Simpler, more efficient algorithms which do not rely on the appropriation of other artworks remains a promising alternative for digital art. A wide range of negative side-effects have been noticed as a consequence of the widespread adoption of AI, not limited to its use in art. Ranging from a decline in critical thinking and other cognitive and creative skills to hypothetical existential threats to humanity, these broader issues cannot be entirely separated from a debate about generative AI in an art context. A widespread adoption of generative AI also has cultural implications, such as potentially creating an echo chamber effect, as will be discussed primarily with examples from music. The main argument in this essay is that opaque, proprietary AI models are neither good for the environment, for culture in general, or for artists, who have much more to gain from writing simple code themselves.

Introduction

To understand the present fascination with AI art, it will be useful to look back to the origins of AI and to early computer art and music. The term artificial intelligence itself originates from a bold project proposal written in 1955. Signed by Claude E. Shannon, Marvin Minsky, N. Rochester, and Joseph McCarthy, the research project would involve ten scientists and last for two summer months of the next year. Setting an optimistic tone, they write:

The study is to proceed on the basis of the conjecture that every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it. An attempt will be made to find how to make machines use language, form abstractions and concepts, solve kinds of problems now reserved for humans, and improve themselves. We think that a significant advance can be made in one or more of these problems if a carefully selected group of scientists work on it together for a summer. (Minsky et al. 1955)

Some of the problems mentioned in this project proposal include natural language processing, neuron nets, and the self-improvement of "a truly intelligent machine." They also elaborate on the role of randomness in creativity:

A fairly attractive and yet clearly incomplete conjecture is that the difference between creative thinking and unimaginative competent thinking lies in the injection of a [sic] some randomness. The randomness must be guided by intuition to be efficient. In other words, the educated guess or the hunch include controlled randomness in otherwise orderly thinking. (ibid)

If creativity were understood simply as the creation of something hitherto non-existing, then the random generation of images, text, or music scores would be enough for introducing novelty. Dada artists resorted to randomness as a means to escape subjectivity and rationality. However, when artists have relied on randomness, they have had to think about how to use it. Duchamp conceived a random procedure for composing his *Erratum Musical*, Cage consistently applied chance and indeterminacy to his compositions. Randomness may be used to select a pitch sequence or any number of musical parameters, but at some point a decision has to be made about how to apply it. Intuition thus continues to play an important role even when artists try to delegate their choices to chance or to the musicians who perform their music.

Creating a sound file by drawing a random number for each sample would create a different output every time this was attempted, but each sound file would just sound like white noise. Therefore, pure randomness is usually combined with some selection or filtering strategy.

Generative AI also relies on randomness in the sense that repeated identical prompts yield different outputs. One way to think of these models is as high-dimensional probability distributions which are sampled to produce an output. There is a trade-off between reliability, which is achieved by making the models more deterministic, and divergence of output, which may be valuable when these systems are used for creative purposes where serendipitous discoveries are welcome (Ugander and Epstein 2024). A weakness of generative AI, which I will return to below, is that it may contribute to a cultural echo chamber of sorts which reinforces existing expressions instead of introducing novelty.

The *Intelligence* in the term AI certainly is a misnomer. Large language models (LLMs) are based on statistical prediction of what words are likely to follow next in a given context, which is very different from logical reasoning or an actual understanding of concepts. Moreover, tasks such as making artistic images or music do not call for intelligence in the same sense as playing chess or proving mathematical theorems does. This is another reason why the term artificial intelligence feels inappropriate in an artistic context. Machine creativity is sometimes proposed as an alternative label, which again is a misnomer unless one takes a very mechanistic view of creativity. The machine isn't creative, programmers and users are. In case of reliance on external data, the original artist whose work has been appropriated is creative.

Unfortunately, semantic labels may influence our thinking more than they should. Spelling out the acronym AI reminds us to think of this technology as something it isn't yet and might never become. In addition to that, the term AI has come to stand for too many things at once. I'll try to be specific when possible and distinguish generative AI from machine learning and algorithmic art.

Before AI in public awareness became exclusively associated with things like deep learning and artificial neural networks, certain programming paradigms such as logical programming were proposed as a means to automate reasoning. The approach differs fundamentally from what is pursued today: the programmer

writes programmes he or she is hopefully able to understand, it is not some opaque black box whose response to various inputs nobody is able to predict. Another crucial difference is that these earlier AI paradigms, by being smaller and simpler, drew much less power. More on that below.

In the following I will draw some connections to earlier algorithmic or generative art, then briefly discuss why and when computer-generated art and AI-art in particular deserves to be called art. The final sections address some serious issues related to the expanded use of AI on personal, cultural, and environmental levels. On a first reflection many of these issues seem to go beyond the scope of art, but artists who use AI need to realise that by doing so they act as a legitimising soft power. On the other hand, I do think there are much less problematic forms of generative art that relies on lightweight algorithms, which doesn't lead to copyright infringements, and that returns control of the programming to the artist. Most examples will be drawn from music, but I will also discuss examples from visual art and generative text.

Historical precedents of algorithmic art

Early computer music pioneers from the late 1950's on experimented with algorithmically generated music, at first by score generation and then increasingly also through digital sound synthesis. Algorithmic composition is grounded in formalisation of procedures which may be carried out with or without a computer, such as integral serialism, chance operations, or stochastic music (Essl 2007). Lejaren Hiller's Illiac Suite from 1957 used the computer to produce a score for string quartet. The movements explore traditional tonal counterpoint and atonal stochastic composition. Herbert Brün, Gottfried Michael Koenig, Paul Berg, Pietro Grossi, and Iannis Xenakis among others began to use computers both for sound synthesis and as tools for composition. The limited computational power available enforced simple, efficient algorithms.

A few visual artists like Frieder Nake, Manfred Mohr, Vera Molnar, and Peter Struycken began to create images using the computer in the 1960's. In various ways, they explored formalised or rule-based methods of image-making (Kane 2014, ch. 3). Algorithmic sound and image composition have in common that low-level decisions are handed over to the computer. Much of the earliest computer art and music is characterised by a conceptual clarity which became less pronounced as computer software became more interactive and easier to use. The early practitioners had to think hard about what they wanted to do and why.

Early computer music and computer generated images were nothing remarkable compared to what can be achieved today. Nevertheless, the mystique surrounding computers may have given some people the inaccurate impression that the computer had created the music or the image. Of course nothing could have been made without programming, carefully breaking down the problem and making the computer do as intended. In practice, it was a matter of automating tedious operations that a human could carry out, in principle, only less efficiently and at a slower pace. If anything resembling decision-making were asked of the computer, it would be done through common logical constructs acting on input data, or by pseudo-random number generators. Looked at that way, there is no essential role for the computer that could not have been carried out by a large team of human workers, toiling for an extended time on a trivial task which, when finally completed, would match the computer output.

Composing without a computer can follow an entirely intuitive path, or one may set up strict rules to follow slavishly – or break at any time. Algorithmic composition on the other hand requires formalisation and rules, which are easily translated into computer programmes. It would be wrong to assume that computer aided composition, or computer music as it used to be called, reduces the composer's visionary and creative role. Consider the oeuvre of Xenakis, who early on resorted to computers to generate his stochastic compositions. Details as well as decisions about large scale form may be delegated to the computer programme, but it is the formalisation that matters; which musical parameters are controlled by what kind of statistical distribution. Xenakis may sound remotely similar to Varèse, but mostly his music sounds like none before him. I don't think it is accurate to say that music made with generative AI sounds like nothing made before, since what it does is to simulate audio patterns that are similar to those it has been trained on.

Comparing today's large generative AI models to the pioneers of computer music and art, there is first and foremost a difference of scale. Mainframe computers were quite large, but small in comparison to the endless server halls required for today's generative AI. Style imitation has always been one strand of algorithmic composition, driven by the curiosity of musicologists and a few composers such as David Cope (Nierhaus 2010), but another motivation has been the open-ended exploration of new musical possibilities. Generative AI makes style imitation and style interpolation the default by the way these models have been grown. And while Cope worked on symbolic note data, generative AI now analyses the surface level of audio files.

Many of the current debates about human and machine “creativity” were already taking place in the 1960's in the context of cybernetics. Zaripov, a little known Russian cybernetician, argued that human creativity as applied to musical composition should be possible to model with computers, and then the next logical step would be to let computers anticipate the musical style of tomorrow's composers (Zaripov and Russell 1969). Early computer experiments in musical style imitation typically relied on Markov chain modelling of note transition probabilities, or explicit rules for melodic motion and harmonic succession, or other stochastic models. Prediction of stylistic development is rarely, if at all, mentioned as something AI could assist with. It is a complicated topic. Not only does it depend on culturally acquired taste and arguably universal cognitive constraints, popularity seems more dependent on things going viral, which may have much more to do with platform algorithms and marketing efforts than any substantive qualities of the music or art itself.

Generative text practices have received less attention than generative music and art. One interesting example of a chat-bot can be found on Bjørn Magnhildøen's web art project noemata.net. I have not been able to accurately date this project, but it appears to have been around since about 2009. Based on a Markov model, the simplistic chat-bot called Maria Futura Hel usually hooks on to the last word the user types in, producing incoherent rambling answers. Transcripts available on the site reveal that many users nevertheless keep chatting, asking who Maria is, even inviting her home. Maria regurgitates whatever input it receives, so when an interlocutor writes in English it may respond with a few words in English, but then usually lapses back to its default, Norwegian. Any attempt to make the chat-bot answer questions, such as who is behind noemata.net, or who she is and where she lives, invariably yields nonsense. Maybe the recent availability of more cooperative chat-bots has attuned people who come to chat with Maria to expect a more polished and professional behaviour, instead of the profanities, non-sequiturs and word salads it serves.

Transcripts of all users' interactions can be read on the [noemata](http://noemata.net) domain¹. The Maria Futura Hel project is like a social sculpture in perpetual creation, becoming what the people who come to ramble or ask questions make of it. Since Maria Futura Hel pre-dates current chat-bots by at least fifteen years it cannot have been made in reaction to them or as a critique of them. Nevertheless, its crudeness and the continuing willingness of users to interact with it still makes it relevant.

Today we hear of unfortunate users lured into the traps of LLMs that assure them that their favourite delusion is absolutely warranted. But already a much simpler system such as the renowned psychologist bot Eliza, conceived by Joseph Weizenbaum in the mid-1960's, fooled users to engage as if with another human. Interactive computer programmes have a surface or user interface, as well as something that has been called a subface (Carvalhais 2022), a hidden layer which the user cannot directly observe, which determines how it responds to input. It may be hard to avoid applying theory of mind to conversational agents even though they are nothing but large computer programmes paired with even larger data bases.

Part of what makes AI art attractive to some, I assume, is the prospect of "machine creativity," or the automatic creation of something one could not have imagined or created oneself by simpler means. This same fascination was a driving force behind earlier experiments with cybernetics and autonomous systems which, seemingly, generated music on their own or with some minimal interaction. Gordon Mumma constructed electronic devices that would analyse the sounds in the room and generate responses; David Tudor created complicated analogue electronic networks; and later on Agostino Di Scipio created self-organising systems of computer-processed audio in an electroacoustic feedback loop. In these and other similar works feedback is an essential part (Sanfilippo and Valle 2013; Kollias 2018). There is usually some form of live input to the system, but it may not be easily controllable. Emergence and surprise are thus motivations for exploring these kinds of systems. Some of the current interest in generative AI may likewise have to do with its novelty factor, the surprise it still offers, although the typical use with a cycle of refined prompting in the hope of narrowing in on some desired output is very different from the open-ended experimentation and search for happy accidents prevalent in earlier cybernetic art.

If feedback in various forms is a crucial part of cybernetically inspired music, it is more problematic and directly harmful for generative AI. Deleterious effects have been noticed on LLMs retrained using its own previous output as part of its corpus. The more cycles of feedback, the more prone these models become to hallucinations and garbage output. With substantial portions of new web content being written or generated by AI, the likelihood of these models feeding back to themselves increases unless content is explicitly marked as AI-generated.

An interesting example of a feedback process said to involve AI is a track called *maieta* released by the Spanish artist Pau Monfort Monfort in 2023. Based on similar principles as Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room*, a field recording of a folk singer is processed using an AI-tool for noise reduction and vocal enhancement, incidentally a tool which, I suspect, uses machine learning and not generative AI. The noise reduction is applied to the original song recording, then again to the first processed version, and then again to this version and so on, fourteen times in all. As the process continues, the voice gradually turns more inhuman as it breaks up into a stuttering, warbling stream.

But is it really art?

Although the question whether or not AI-generated material can be art is, in my view, not the most pressing one I shall provide my take on it with reference to the institutional theory of art. Can something be art even if it has not been made by a human, or has been made by a non-human? One would have to accept that an AI model has agency for it to qualify as an artist. Admittedly, the question of authorship is less straightforward in AI-generated art than in traditional media such as painting. Partly, authorship may be attributed to all human creators of the corpus that has been devoured by the AI model, partly one might try to assign authorship to the AI model itself (although I would not), or to the programmers who have built it, and lastly there remains the agency of the user who prompts the AI model to conjure up new images or sounds. AI-generated art may involve appropriation of other artists' material, although it doesn't have to, but so does collages using reproductions of other art. Readymades also involve appropriation; the fountain, bottle rack, or snow shovel found by Duchamp were not of his design and production, nor were Warhol's Campbell soup or Brillo boxes of his own design, and Sherrie Levine's photos of famous paintings and art photography are simply reproductions. Apart from historical precedents, there is no self-evident answer to whether photography or field-recordings should merit copyright. Several photographers may each take virtually indistinguishable pictures of another artist's mural painting. Should they all be granted copyright? If the idea of intellectual property entails some amount of originality, these examples demonstrate the paradoxes and impasses copyright invariably leads to. On the other hand, it may not make any difference if something proposed as an artwork is copyrightable or not as long as it is exhibited and accepted as art.

AI-generated art differs from outright plagiarism or appropriation such as that of Sherrie Levine when it actually brings forth *sufficiently novel* images or audio, although well-publicised court cases such as Disney v Midjourney (Hayden 2025) demonstrate that the limits of intellectual property are all too easily transgressed. Generative AI is best understood as a mashup-generator, a sophisticated collage producer that combines existing things but does not invent anything novel. As such, it may interpolate between styles, but is probably not going to be very successful in extrapolating to something not yet existing. This is a difficult argument to pursue because of the vagueness of concepts such as artistic novelty. Stylistic *mélanges* may arise from cultural encounters, such as has often happened in World Music which combines geographically remote regions' traditional ethnic styles. Such hybridisations may qualify as novel and original even though one can still trace back elements to the traditions which were borrowed from.

Newspaper images, diagrams in scientific papers, or recordings of instrument demos are typically not intended as art. There are images that are not visual art, and audio that isn't music, according to their intended use. Likewise, I see no reason to treat AI-generated images or audio as art, unless these images and audio files are intended as such and validated by an art institution. When an AI-generated painting is sold in an auction house² or included in a gallery exhibition, this constitutes a validation as art. It says nothing of the aesthetic quality or long-term interest this has for the art world, except that it has passed the threshold of being accepted as art. A well-known weakness of the institutional theory of art is its circularity; art institutions are defined as those that exhibit art. If recognised galleries and museums accept AI art in a large scale, and if simultaneously a majority of people in the art world refuse to accept this, then the reputation of these institutions might suffer.

The Wrong Biennale of 2025 focuses on AI³. It is a distributed biennale which mostly takes place on-line. For those who fear that curators have taken over the artist's place in the limelight and role of setting the agenda, this biennale offers confirming examples. Curators may apply to set up their pavilion, suggest a theme, write a call for works or invite their own selection of artists. Although there are differences between the curators, a common attitude is a fascination with the the hitherto unexplored potential of AI combined with a mild scepticism, often urging artists to critique the ethics of AI in art. However, as often is the case when AI is criticised from an ethical perspective the scope of critique tends to be limited by the premise that at its root, AI may have enough of a positive impact on society that it is worth pursuing, or that its development is inevitable anyway, so it is best

to explore it as responsibly as possible. I'm not denying that AI can be useful for certain tasks, such as rough and rapid translation or source separation of mixed audio, but I'd be unable to convincingly argue that AI in its current form is a net positive for society. The range of so-called ethical concerns that are usually taken into account, grave as they are, is typically limited to issues such as copyright infringement, the risk of making human work obsolete, illegitimate uses of deep fakes, adverse psychological and mental consequences for users, and a decline in critical thinking or creative skills. This is a long list of serious issues, but there is another one that too often is neglected: the energy consumption and material use in keeping large AI models running.

Power consumption

In 2022 the artist Jason M. Allen won the Colorado State Fair's fine art competition with an entry generated using Midjourney titled *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial*, which he had unsuccessfully tried to get copyrighted. Although the legal deliberations have attracted most attention⁴, the fact that this image was generated only after 624 prompting attempts and some further Photoshop tweaking is even more striking. Not all users will have the patience to refine their prompts so many times, but those who impose stringent demands or have a clear vision of their goal may need to.

Training AI models is notoriously computationally expensive, writing a prompt and generating some output less so, but the output cost must be multiplied by the number of users and number of times they write a prompt. The point is that both the training phase and the usage of generative AI contribute to the energy demands.

While some improvements in efficiency are introduced, these models are applied to increasingly complex tasks. Text generation is the least demanding, followed by audio and still images, followed by video. Artists eager to be at the technological frontiers will be drawn to the most computationally intensive tasks, whatever the artistic merits.

Meanwhile, the awareness is spreading that computation is a physical process with real-world consequences. After all, one cannot ignore the frequent news about data centres being built, with ensuing price hikes on the electricity bills in the area, freshwater diverted for cooling, and noise pollution which harms those living in

the vicinity (Howells and Larsen 2025). As energy demand goes up, all means to satisfy the need are on the table; renewables if available, otherwise nuclear plants may be built, or a return to gas and coal may be a last resort. Local residents near these data centres pay for everyone's access to generative AI, and the current trend is for these centres to expand to new places. In that perspective, what is ethical about asking for wider access to the most advanced AI models?

Cloud computing doesn't happen in the sky, or some abstract immaterial realm. AI models join the track record of crypto currencies and NFTs, which for a moment were promoted in the art world as a means to bypass the usual gate keepers. These technologies all have notoriously wasteful energy consumption as their main side-effect. The energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables would be challenging enough given constant energy demands, but with sharply rising demand from data centres this may not be possible. Consider some hard facts: In the US there were one thousand data centres in 2018 which consumed about 11 gigawatt of power; by March 2025 there were 5,426 data centres. Fossil fuel currently provides for 56 % of the electricity used to power these centres. Projections of future demand by 2030 are estimated at 130 GW, or close to 12 % of total US annual demand (Yañez-Barnuevo 2025). Proposed strategies to make data centres more sustainable are to focus on renewables and to build them with energy efficiency in mind. Anyway, insisting on renewables is an insufficient band-aid to a problem that isn't only about power consumption. Some of these data centres are built on arable land and, as mentioned, they require lots of water for cooling. While the hardware wears out over time the data centres rapidly become obsolete and hard to re-purpose.

Not only are data centres huge power consumers, AI models also cause problems by accessing web sites and often bypassing attempts to block them (such as robots.txt instructions), not just scraping web pages once, but regularly to check for changes. These bots may also access web pages as a result of a user inquiry for which the bot collects updated information which may not be a part of its training material. Open software projects and many small websites consequently suffer the equivalent of DDoS attacks, raising costs from higher bandwidth demands (Edwards 2025). Website owners may try to block the bots by various means such as captchas, in turn causing frustration for the human visitor.

Negative effects on users

The environmental effects and power consumption may ultimately be the most serious consequences of a wide adoption of AI. But effects such as cognitive atrophy, delusions, and emotional attachment should not be neglected (Stein 2025). Already simpler technologies such as the pocket calculator has reduced the capacity for mental arithmetic (how many are able to do mental multiplication of a pair of two-digit numbers?), and GPS weakens the ability to locate oneself. General purpose LLMs not only promise to answer any imaginable question, the way they are set up to interact typically makes it impossible not to apply some form of personification to them. When the chat-bot refers to itself as "I" and the user addresses it as "you," it is hard to avoid treating the conversational agent as some sort of person. Among the psychological consequences that have been reported are increasing loneliness. Some users withdraw from people and prefer the sycophantic, always pleasant chat-bot. And, as more people are sucked into their AI partnerships there are less peers around to connect with. The adverse effects of overly accommodating chat-bots can be overcome by making them less friendly, but AI companies have to balance their interest of getting users to use their services more against avoiding negative side-effects among users that harm the company's reputation. Skills such as writing clear prose and formulating a coherent argument require practice, which users who outsource these tasks to LLMs don't get (Lee et al 2025). Search engines already have a negative impact on memory by making it unnecessary to memorise facts or trying to recall things which are easily looked up; this is only likely to get worse with widespread adoption of chat-bots.

A likely development is that there will emerge a class division between those who uncritically adopt AI and those who understand that their own cognitive capabilities are a valuable resource that demands practice and maintenance, and who know to use LLMs with caution and critically paying attention to the plausibility of their answers. Similar consequences are to be expected from the use of generative AI for image or music creation. Although fewer cautionary tales have been told about artists who outsource their creativity to AI, it is reasonable to assume that some skills may atrophy or never develop in the first place. For useful perspective one could go back to earlier technologies, such as the use of MIDI sequencers in music production. Instead of having to practice and master an instrument, you can type in a list of notes in a MIDI editor or hardware sequencer.

This technology doesn't exactly replace musicians, because it turns out to be really hard to mimic their expressivity this way; instead it opens up new musical possibilities such as humanly impossible rhythmic precision or playing hundreds of notes per second in what is known as black MIDI (with a mechanical precursor in Conlon Nancarrow's player piano studies). Although I do think all music makers would benefit from mastering an instrument, I don't deny that many of those who don't still make interesting music using computers, or sometimes with modular synthesizers – both of which may be set up as interactive interfaces where skills and practice comes to matter. Similarly, generative AI can be used to mimic real music production, which is its most well known use case in musical audio generation. It may be a convenient tool for arriving at songs that sound remarkably similar to already existing music, especially within popular genres with many items to use in the training corpus. Making a standard pop production today usually involves a large team of collaborators who put a significant amount of man-hours into the project. Speeding up this process, removing all tedious parts, replacing the considerable skill set needed with prompt writing, all this promises a further democratisation and increased efficiency of music production. Anyone can create these ready-to-release tracks just with a few well chosen words in the prompt. Music production has already been democratised by the availability of music software that anyone can install on their computer instead of having to book an expensive studio, and anyone can publish their music on-line instead of having to hope for a record label to pick them up. We are already drowning in music. Large quantities are produced, and most of it will barely get any listeners. Add generative AI to this, and it will become even more hopeless to search for outstanding contributions among all the mediocre slop. A regression to the mean appears likely; as the available training corpus for generative AI will inevitably reflect what is currently popular, or has been popular in the past, feeding this material into the models will reinforce similar kinds of expressions by making their imitation or tweaking more convincing than efforts to conjure up something of which the model has had little exposure in the training set. If indeed generative AI should turn out to cause such a regression to the mean, and if AI-generated material becomes an accepted part of culture, then listeners over time may be exposed to a narrower scope of expressions, which might limit their openness to artistic oddities. The diametrically opposite outcome is also possible: listeners might turn away with disgust from anything produced with generative AI and demand real living artists who can play instruments. Perhaps the most likely outcome is a mixture of both, with different segments endorsing AI or turning away from it.

If the recent settlement between the three major music labels Warner, Sony, and Universal and AI start-up Klay⁵ sets precedent and becomes the norm, the business model will be that artists opt in to having their material in the training set, and when subscription customers generate AI songs based on this material the artists will be compensated. Meagrely, I assume. A similar near future development is envisaged by Kollias (2021), in which streaming services offer content instantly tailored to the customer's mood, where algorithmically curated playlists are replaced by mashups made out of increasingly smaller structural elements assembled in realtime. No doubt many would welcome such a development, which to me sounds like a recipe for keeping users docile and entertained while shattering the remains of a shared culture into customised filter bubbles, one for each individual.

I believe the way generative audio AI has been promoted from the start by companies like Suno and Udio is fundamentally flawed from a creative point of view, not to mention copyright issues and other problems. The idea to generate complete finished songs in one go removes the interactive process as well as any chance to either obtain or apply the expert music production skills experienced artists acquire. That is why I suspect that those artists who find any value at all in generative AI will use it only for select parts, like creating a vocal track if they're not confident singers. Even so, quite a significant part of the creative process is outsourced.

If AI has any use in the creative process, I think it is best limited to the simplest, most routine tasks and to non-generative applications. For example, blind source separation or de-mixing has to do with machine learning, and as such is sometimes included within the AI-label. Splitting up a mix into separate instruments can be very valuable for educational purposes, or for remixing and remastering.

Maybe there is also a place for creative abuse of generative AI, if such a thing is possible. John Oswald's Plunderphonics album can be described as the creative abuse of copyrighted material – incidentally also an apt description of generative AI. I'm not so sure what form such a creative abuse would take. It would not be any of the obvious things generative AI offers, such as making sophisticated collages, stylistic blends, or grafting new lyrics onto the wrong singer with a mismatched backing band, the equivalents of putting moustaches on Mona Lisa. All those things are expected uses. If it is hard to come up with examples of

creative abuse which the user may engage in, it is because the AI companies themselves are the abusers, creative or destructive as may be. And if licensing becomes standard practice the training set is likely to shrink resulting in a further homogenisation. There are also indirect consequences of the wider adoption of generative AI. As already mentioned, one is the purported democratisation which threatens to flood our culture with AI generated music and images while pushing those artists aside who abstain from using AI. Another indirect consequence is that certain artists are wrongly met with the suspicion that they have relied on AI in their work. Those who produce digital images with that glossy finish and detailed, but slightly misplaced imagery associated with AI, or those who are able to release large catalogues of stylistically divergent music in short time may find themselves accused of using AI, whether or not that is the case.

General risks of AI

The threat that AI might make human artists obsolete derives from an assumption that only the end product matters; the digital image, the audio file, not the process behind it or the performance of a human on stage or behind an easel. But still a large segment of the audience cares about the artist as a person and idol.

Some of the worst outcomes as a result of an expanded adoption of AI in society have little to do with the use of generative AI in making art or music. Why, then, should artists care about potentially nefarious uses or negative consequences of how AI is used in other domains? The worst doomsday scenarios vividly prophesied by some researchers are associated with a breakthrough in artificial general intelligence, AGI, which surely could create even better and more convincing art, if such a breakthrough is possible at all. But according to the prophecies, if this scenario plays out we will not have any time to experience any artificial artistic breakthroughs because we'll all be dead when superintelligence emerges, even though the details of how this would happen are left to the imagination. Personally, I'm not primarily concerned with this possibility. Some have argued that the prospects of AGI serve as yet another marketing ploy. At some level, it is reasonable that AI companies would like to exaggerate their products' capabilities, and that researchers in AI security have an interest in depicting their research field as useful and based in plausible reasoning. However, the fact that someone stands to gain from making AGI seem attainable within the near future doesn't in itself constitute an argument that it cannot happen.

But if, for a moment, one takes the threat of a breakthrough in AGI seriously, and with it a likely exponential intelligence explosion (Bostrom 2014), then I would argue that any endorsement of currently available forms of AI ultimately serves the interest of working towards such a breakthrough. There may be no consensus around the concept of general intelligence itself, and hence even less agreement on how or if its artificial variety could ever be achieved. For example, consciousness or free will may or may not be essential parts of it. In practice, it may not make much difference. If a machine acts as if it were conscious, as if it had free will, as if it were intelligent, then for all practical purposes it doesn't matter if that is just a fiction. We are often willing to apply theory of mind to computers or computer programmes, even though we know these are only code running on hardware.

Nothing like real intelligence is required for an AI to begin to engage in troubling behaviour. Two cases in point are shut-down avoidance and self-replication. Several LLMs have been tested and given some task, with or without explicit demands to allow it to be shut down. Nonetheless, in some number of cases these models have evaded shut-down or created copies of their own source code.

There is another ground for doubting that exponential growth in AI's capability to convincingly mimic or surpass human intelligence would go on for very long. It has to do with the limitation of any natural process of exponential growth (for a similar argument, see Heinberg (2025)). Sooner or later, if it is bacteria in a petri dish or the spread of a pandemic, there is no more space left to spread and the growth process stops. Depending on the state of the nutrients or other resources that sustained the growth, it may saturate in a sigmoidal shape, or if the resources are depleted and not renewable it will collapse. At some point, physical limitations will slow down and maybe reverse the current growth in AI capabilities and general level of usage. It may be through unaffordable electricity prices, unavailability of computer chips, insufficient availability of fresh water for cooling, but it might also happen through a decline in financing or a general disinterest and aversion towards AI. Personally, I have encountered far more musicians and artists who are sceptical or concerned about AI than those who endorse it as a part of their creative toolbox. The reasons may vary; some are worried of being made obsolete while others do not find the available AI services sophisticated enough yet.

Some are convinced that AI is presently hyped up and more or less forced upon users who would not use these services if they had to pay for them. According to a blogger by the pen name Ploum, AI doesn't make things easier, instead it creates more problems and obstacles than it solves (Ploum 2025). Insofar as this is the case, AI doesn't cause unemployment but creates more unnecessary work.

At least it is clear that in the USA, the GDP growth over 2025 can be attributed almost solely to AI. Chips designer Nvidia, OpenAI and the other big AI companies have been found to engage in circular trade, buying and selling to each other. The business model presupposes that these companies will generate massive profit within a few years. It seems likely that whatever free models there exist today will first be massively promoted as useful in replacing workers and increasing efficiency, then as a number of users are hooked on these services, the free access can be replaced by a monthly subscription at increasing rates, as long as customers are willing to pay. For these reasons there are rising concerns that the AI-driven market is in a state of a bubble ready to pop any moment (Zitron 2025). At least if one focuses on the American market that is an easy conclusion. Meanwhile, AI is also developed in China. Even if the American AI industry is currently widely overvalued, its complete crash would not wipe out AI as such, it would continue elsewhere.

If the bubble bursts the resulting financial crisis will be bad, and if by way of miracle it doesn't, then automation will succeed in removing more jobs and economic inequality will continue to increase. These general trends do not seem to be immediately coupled to what goes on among artists and musicians, but I think we should recognise that the arts are also a small but not insignificant contributor, not least able to shape the perception of AI. What artists do either feeds into the general mythology of AI or contradicts it.

Conclusion

The technologies currently associated with the term generative AI are formidably inefficient. One reason is that generative AI models are trained on the surface level of audio or images instead of underlying structural features. In the case of audio, a digital recording of an orchestra contains orders of magnitude more data than a symbolic representation in the form of a score. The recording does not separate the musicians' interpretation or the room acoustics from the symbolic level. Training the generative AI model on scores instead of recordings and then using appropriate sound synthesis techniques to render the audio would make the

process much more efficient, as well as resolve the copyright problem in certain cases involving sufficiently old scores. Similarly, images could be rendered using techniques such as wire-frame models, texture mapping, and ray-tracing. This again introduces a separation between a symbolic or structural level and the surface level of the rendered image, because the input to a ray-tracing programme may be a simple text file. There are cases where one cannot easily separate the symbolic level from the concrete rendering of it, but, when it can be done, much stands to be gained in efficiency by adopting this practice instead of using AI models trained on the surface level.

Artists working with computational media have much to gain from engaging directly with programming themselves instead of relying on opaque black-box software. The programming doesn't have to be terribly advanced, and the end product doesn't need to have that flashy, polished character often associated with generative AI in order to become artistically interesting, as the chat-bot Maria Futura Hel illustrates. Elementary programming skills are in many ways more empowering than having access to the most sophisticated closed-source generative AI models. Relying on chat-bots for programming may be a fast way to get started, but it will hardly help with understanding what the generated code does, or how to fix faults. An interesting challenge for algorithmic composition and generative art in general is to create as complex results as possible with as little code as possible (Holopainen 2021). This goal stands in stark contrast to the drive to throw ever more compute and hardware at the task of generating more and more slop.

Artificial Intelligence, as commonly understood, is a misleading label for a special type of algorithm paired with huge data bases, substantial parts of which it is safe to assume have been obtained without asking permission. Without the proper algorithm the data would not be useful, and without the data the algorithm would not generate anything. The purported intelligence is not artificial, it is absent. With a cynical joke one may surmise that when one day AI actually overtakes humans in intelligence, it will happen because the human IQ by then has declined to an even lower level. Indeed, with extended outsourcing of cognitive and creative tasks to AI, a decline in these capabilities among frequent users should be expected.

Among the promises of AI is to democratise artistic creation by making the process accessible to everyone. But writing prompts is a crude means of creating music or images. There is no reason to view the difficulties associated with acquiring the necessary skills for crafting art without the aid of AI as some unnecessary stumbling block that must be removed. The learning process also refines one's ability to discern quality.

I don't expect much good to come out of increased AI use. The current American market bubble might collapse, but there is no reason to expect it to wipe out the AI phenomenon as such, notably because of the parallel AI industry in China. As with many other technological advances that eventually have played a significant role in music and art, a strong incentive to develop AI has come from military applications. AI technology is applied in surveillance, repression, and war. Without those markets AI companies would have much greater difficulties to get financed. Culture is soft power, and using generative AI can easily slip into an implicit defence of whatever else AI comes to stand for. Technology is supposedly neutral and can be used for good or for ill, but in the case of generative AI which is commonly offered as proprietary software services owned by billionaires with agendas that don't necessarily align with those of artist communities one should pause and consider what forces one is supporting. Perhaps the most dangerous misunderstanding is the techno-optimist assumption that AI will solve all problems, including those caused by it.

The reception among artists ranges from hostile to full embrace of AI. My guess concerning those who hold an unqualified enthusiastic view is that they are simply not well enough informed of the negative consequences, primarily concerning environmental and psychological effects. A mail artist known as Nonlocal Variable offers roughly the same critique as mine, only much more concisely (Fig. 1). One page of a mail art booklet is illustrated with a location where a data centre is built on farmland with the caption: "If you use AI, you are eliminating arable land, consuming energy and water subsidized given to big tech, and boosting citizens' power and water prices. Stop it, fight data centres, reject AI." The previous page says: "AI used by artists are doing interesting work. Sadly, that also means supporting a small group of literally insane neoliberal monarchist men in Silicon Valley."⁶ This is a valid observation, but unfortunately still too few artists make this connection. The purported democratisation of art through means of corporately owned AI is an illusion. A real democratisation can happen by continuing in the spirit of Fluxus, recognising that anyone can be an artist, and there is no use for AI.

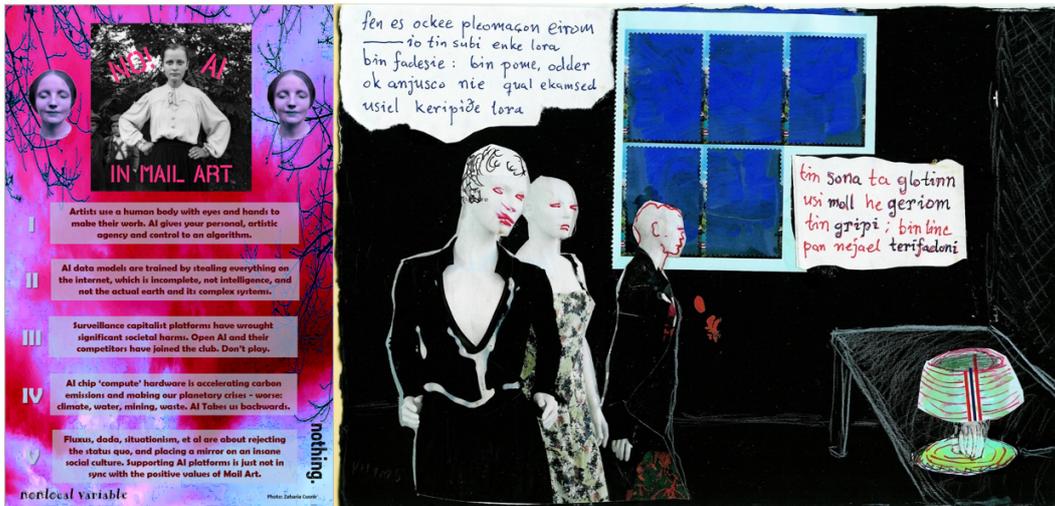


Figure 1 (left). Mail Art by Duane Schulz, aka Nonlocal Variable.

Figure 2 (right). Mail Art by Risto Holopainen.

Author Biography

Risto Holopainen (born 1970 in Sweden) is a composer, writer, visual artist, and independent researcher based in Norway. In 2012 he completed a doctoral dissertation on self-organised sound with autonomous instruments. He has composed for instrumental ensembles, dance, made radiophonic plays, electroacoustic music, and a number of videos and animations. He has also worked with print making, performance, mail art, and computer assisted concrete poetry. As a writer, he also publishes the substack blog *The Needle's Haystack* and is working on a book on art theory. <https://ristoid.net/>
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Notes

¹ <https://noemata.net/1996-2002/55.html>

² Apparently, the first AI artwork on sale through an auction house was a series of portraits of a fictional Belamy family by the group Obvious which went for \$432,500 at Christies in 2018. <https://www.christies.com/en/stories/a-collaboration-between-two-artists-one-human-one-a-machine-0cd01f4e232f4279a525a446d60d4cd1>

³ <https://thewrong.org/>

⁴ The Copyright Office's decision reveals the details, available at: <https://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/legaldocs/byprqkqxpe/AI%20COPYRIGHT%20REGISTRATION%20decision.pdf>

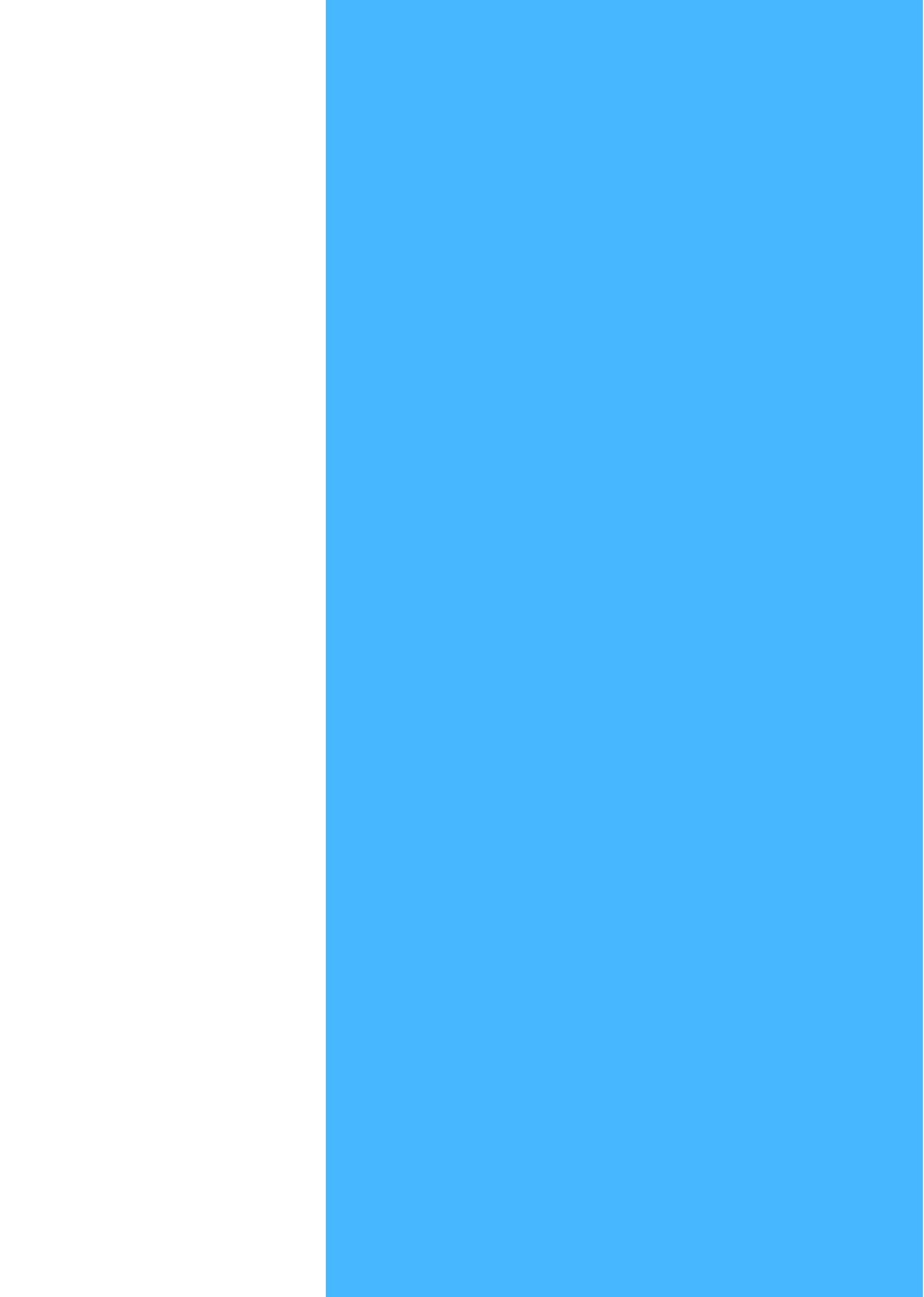
⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/warner-udio-ai-music-licensing-copyright-c81ef9d44b703d5d8ca16194bbaadf12>

⁶ Pages 272 and 271 of the booklet at nonlocalvariable.art/noncurrent/.

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Why AI Cannot Democratize Artistic Practice: A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Botto Project

Ksenija Savčić

Abstract

This article critically examines the claim that generative AI systems will democratize artistic practice. I argue that this claim rests on two interrelated assertions: first, that AI-generated outputs can be classified as artworks; and second, that engaging with these outputs constitutes participation in a transformed yet continuous artistic practice. I demonstrate that the first claim requires philosophical commitments to strict formalism and post-structuralism, which AI proponents implicitly or explicitly endorse. I argue that, although these commitments make the first claim plausible, they render the two assertions jointly untenable. Thus, ascribing the status of artwork to AI outputs under these commitments is incompatible with maintaining artistic practice as a norm-governed social institution. The article opens by problematizing the current debate's focus on creativity, arguing that creativity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for something to qualify as an artwork. I then examine Margaret Boden's adaptation of the Turing Test for art, which foregrounds perceptual indistinguishability and aesthetic properties while omitting creativity, thereby supporting my argument implicitly. As a central case study, I analyze the Botto project and the developers' claim that it will democratize artistic practice, rendering categories such as artist, curator, public, and artwork obsolete. I make explicit the philosophical commitments to formalism and post-structuralism behind the project, arguing that these positions expose artistic practice to radical relativism, thus undermining its coherence. I contend that Botto's recent turn toward a programmed personality provides compelling evidence in support of my argument, as it tacitly concedes that artistic practice cannot be sustained without the artist.

Introduction

The rapid development of generative AI models in recent years has significantly impacted and reshaped artistic practice, igniting debates about the nature of art, aesthetic experience, authenticity, and authorship at the intersection of law, philosophy, and the art world. Proponents emphasize AI's transformative potential to innovate artistic practices, citing its capacity to generate fresh, engaging, and novel outputs (Dai and Sun 2022; Elgammal et al. 2017; Pal et al. 2020; Highams and Olszewska 2023). This potential arises from the generality and complexity of computer programs, which enable vast conceptual space for computer-generated art (Boden and Edmonds 2009). A more balanced approach advocates for redefining creativity to accommodate human-machine partnerships (Mazzone and Elgammal 2019) while emphasizing human agency as essential for conferring artistic significance to artworks (Anscomb 2022). Skeptics argue that machines cannot be attributed artistic creativity due to their lack of freedom, as defined within the Kantian framework (Winter 2023) and their lack of imagination (Kind 2022). They further question whether AI can replace human artists in established practices given the inherently social nature of artistic authorship (Hertzmann 2018).

Counterarguments to this skepticism emphasize the numerous and significant changes artistic practice has undergone due to technological advancements (Agüera and Arcas, 2017). Proponents assert that we are now witnessing a new transformative step that democratizes artistic practice (Arriagada and Arriagada-Bruneau 2022). It is asserted that generative AI enables users without formal artistic education to co-create through interaction with the systems, thus allowing them to explore a vast possibility space of artistic conceptual spaces (Compton and Mateas 2015; Klingemann et al. 2022; Yannakakis et al. 2014).

This article critically examines the claim that AI systems will democratize artistic practice. I argue that this claim rests on two interrelated assumptions: first, that AI-generated outputs are artworks; and second, that engaging with these outputs constitutes participation in a transformed yet continuous artistic practice. I argue that classifying AI-generated outputs as artworks necessarily entails endorsing philosophical commitments that are inconsistent with the conception of artistic practice as a norm-governed social institution. If these commitments are accepted, the conditions for the existence of a shared social practice of art no longer hold.

I begin by examining the dominant focus of the current debate, which centers on the question of whether AI can be creative. I argue that this emphasis is misleading, since creativity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for something to qualify as an artwork. Accordingly, I shift the discussion toward the ontological and normative conditions of art-making and participation in artistic practice.

As a case study, I analyze the Botto project and the developers' assertion that it will democratize artistic practice, categories such as artist, curator, public, and artwork obsolete (Klingemann et al. 2022; Fernández-Castrillo 2023). I explicate the philosophical commitments behind these claims and demonstrate their inconsistency with maintaining art as a social practice grounded in shared values and determinate meanings. I examine Botto's most recent development: the assignment of a programmed personality. I argue that this shift marks a tacit admission that the project's original goal is untenable. Granting Botto a personality implicitly reaffirms the indispensability of the artist to a viable conception of artistic practice.

In the first section, I examine the widespread focus on creativity in current debates on AI and art. I argue that creativity is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for something to qualify as an artwork. As such, establishing whether AI can be creative does not, by itself, resolve the question of whether AI-generated outputs should be recognized as artworks.

In the second section, I turn to Margaret Boden's adaptation of the Turing Test for evaluating AI-generated digital objects. I argue that the test's requirements—emphasizing visual or auditory indistinguishability from human-made artworks and the presence of aesthetic properties—implicitly support my claim, as they omit creativity altogether. I then explore the philosophical commitments within aesthetics that underlie this test, which are implicit in Boden's writings but made explicit in the work of other scholars.

In the third section, I present the Botto project as a prominent example of the democratization narrative. I examine the developers' claim that Botto will decentralize and democratize artistic production.

In the fourth section, I analyze the commitment to strict formalism often adopted by AI proponents. I argue that this position—while offering a way to sidestep questions of authorship—has significant implications for how we categorize and evaluate artworks, thus rendering artistic practice vulnerable to aesthetic relativism.

In the fifth section, I examine the Botto project's explicit endorsement of post-structuralist views, particularly the rejection of the author as a source of meaning. I argue that this position further undermines the coherence of artistic practice.

In the sixth section, I focus on the importance of artworks' histories of production for sustaining artistic practice. I argue that AI-generated outputs lack a history of origin in the sense relevant to artistic evaluation, and that studying their production yields results that cannot be meaningfully integrated into artistic practice. Building on this, I claim that recognizing AI-generated outputs as artworks necessitates philosophical commitments that undermine the norm-governed character of artistic practice.

In the final section, I interpret Botto's recent turn toward a programmed personality as compelling evidence against its original claim. This development demonstrates that artistic practice cannot be sustained without its central figure—the artist.

On the Contingency of Creativity in Artistic Practice

The emergence of Gen-AI tools is regarded by some scholars as democratization of artistic practice, a welcome break from demanding previous knowledge about art theory and ingrained respect for institutions, and empowerment of users without formal artistic education that allows them to explore vast artistic spaces (Arriagada and Arriagada-Bruneau 2022; Compton and Mateas 2015; Fernández-Castrillo 2023). The proponents of art democratization through AI tools assert that AI-generated digital objects have passed both strong and weak versions of the Turing test, meaning they are visually and audibly indistinguishable from human artworks, possessing aesthetic properties and eliciting aesthetic responses (Boden 2010, 412).

Yet machine-generated outputs are largely dismissed by the artistic community as lacking in value and originality, often placed alongside human-made pastiches (Boden and Edmonds 2009, 24). A common objection is that these outputs are highly derivative, never moving beyond the imitation of existing styles, leading some scholars to argue that "there is no motivation for the creation of endless variabilities and reproductions" (Pangrazio and Bishop 2017).

Computer scientists attribute these criticisms largely to the art world's unwillingness to relinquish the idea of the author as a creative genius. For example, Boden and Edmonds identify anthropocentric bias as the main cause of the rejection of AI art, citing cases such as David Cope's (2006), who reported that audiences dismissed his Emmy-generated music not on aesthetic grounds, but simply because it was produced by a computer (Boden and Edmonds 2009, 23–24).

Philosophical objections, such as the lack of agency¹ or understanding² in AI systems, are dismissed by some scholars, who argue that philosophers of mind tend to discount the possibility of AI/A life or creativity due to reliance on highly controversial concepts such as meaning, intentionality, consciousness, embodiment, or membership in the human moral community (Boden 2010, 412; Boden and Edmonds 2009, 21).

In contrast, a number of researchers engage with these objections, aiming to meet the agency and understanding requirements. Thus, a mixed-initiative co-creativity approach is proposed, asserting that Gen-AI systems and humans engaging with them should be viewed as one creative system (Yannakakis et al. 2014), and investigating how agency can be distributed in co-creative processes (Davis 2013; Deterding et al. 2017; Moruzzi 2021). Additionally, the vagueness of the conceptual definition of creativity is highlighted as the counter-objection, asserting that skepticism toward AI systems achieving "true creativity" persists in principle because the discussion "lacks a rigorous, unambiguous definition of creativity" (Fernández and Vico 2013, 560).

The conceptual confusion in the debate is made explicit in Mark Coeckelbergh's discussion, as he contends that two questions follow from the institutional recognition of AI: (i) if a computer is said to compose music, is the machine really creative? and (ii) is the product really art? (2017, 286).

The first question implies that, for something to qualify as an artwork, it must either be creative or result from a creative process. This position is problematic because it suggests that art should be defined in terms of creativity. However, if creativity is taken not only as a necessary but also as a sufficient condition for something to be an artwork, the significant difficulty lies in isolating artworks as a distinct reference class. As Boden, one of the most prominent proponents of AI-generated art, rightly observes, creativity is:

... the ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are new, surprising, and valuable. "Ideas", here, includes concepts, poems, musical compositions, scientific theories, cooking recipes,

choreography, jokes ... and so on, and on...As these highly diverse examples suggest, creativity enters into virtually every aspect of life. It's not a special "faculty", but an aspect of human intelligence in general. (Boden 2010, 29)

Thus, if artworks are defined in terms of creativity, yet creativity enters every aspect of life, it remains unclear what distinguishes artworks from other products of creative processes, such as scientific theories or cooking recipes.

Alternatively, to propose that creativity is a necessary condition for something to be an artwork is inconsistent with both Boden's computational³ account of creativity and the reality of artistic practice. When discussing exploratory creativity, Boden writes:

Even the most mundane street artists in Leicester Square produce new portraits, or new caricatures, every day. They are exploring their space, though not necessarily in an adventurous way. Occasionally, they may realize that their sketching style enables them to do something (convey the set of the head, or the hint of a smile) better than they'd been doing before. (Boden 2004, 5)

The word "occasionally" is crucial here, as it implies that the majority of these artworks are produced algorithmically, by following a step-by-step predefined set of rules, and thus do not qualify as creative under Boden's own account.⁴ It is as counterintuitive to attribute creativity to an artist who follows the algorithm "paint pictures of different sorts of children with large sad eyes, using dark-toned backgrounds," as it is to attribute creativity to a chemist who follows, step by step, a well-known synthesis chain to produce a new hydrocarbon complex (Amabile 1996, 36).

Defining creativity as the ability to find appropriate heuristic solutions to open-ended problems⁵ proves viable within artistic practice, where artists work within the constraints of their medium, whether in music, film, or the visual arts, to find effective, heuristic ways to navigate these limitations (Smith 2024).

While Boden maintains that programmed randomness in AI systems can function as a heuristic problem-solving,⁶ the very availability of algorithmic solutions within artistic conceptual spaces renders creativity a contingent rather than a necessary condition of artistic production. Therefore, even if AI systems were shown to be creative, this alone would not answer the question of whether AI-generated digital objects are artworks. I maintain that Boden's adaptation of the Turing test proposal highlights my point.

Turing Test: From Appearance To Recognition

Boden's contends that, for a program to pass the test, the following conditions must be met: (1) the artwork produced is indistinguishable from one created by a human being, and/or (2) it is regarded as having as much aesthetic value as a human-produced artwork (Boden 2010, 409).

The requirements do not mention creativity; instead, they focus on indistinguishability and aesthetic appeal. Although indistinguishability alone is sufficient for passing the Turing test, the second requirement is particularly interesting because it reveals the philosophical commitments of AI proponents within the domain of aesthetics. In particular, it appears to adhere to a strict formalist view, maintaining that all properties relevant to the evaluation and appreciation of an artwork are formal properties which are intrinsic to the work and discoverable through perception alone. While this commitment is only implicit in Boden's writings,⁷ it is explicit in Coeckelbergh's discussion (2017, 294).

According to Coeckelbergh, Beardsley defines art in terms of the aesthetic experience it affords, where aesthetic features are objective properties of a work. He maintains that this can be interpreted in a relational way: the properties are defined in terms of the experience they afford, and the experience is made possible by those properties. Thus, the artistic status of a work cannot be determined solely by objective features or entirely by subjective interpretation. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between subject and object, shaped by both the properties of the work and the cultural-historical background of the perceiver. Coeckelbergh concludes that this relational view demonstrates how meaning and value arise through experience, not through fixed rules. Consequently, the status of a creative process or product is not predetermined or simply agreed upon, but unfolds unpredictably in context. Coeckelbergh contends that this view presents a challenge to AI opponents: if artistic status depends on unpredictable, experience-based encounters, then no clear criteria can define it in advance. Theoretical attempts to define what counts as art or creativity always arrive too late—they follow, rather than precede, the lived experience through which artistic meaning emerges (Coeckelbergh 2017, 295–297).

This interpretation of Beardsley's aesthetic objectivism and response theories enables the assertion that a theoretical approach to art is ultimately irrelevant for determining AI's artistic status. It is not theory, but engagement and experience, that determines whether something is a work of art.⁸ Empirical evidence may be seen as supporting this claim, as various adaptations of the Turing test have

demonstrated that AI-generated digital objects can be indistinguishable from human-made artworks and, in some cases, even achieve higher ratings from human evaluators.

For example, AICAN-generated images were blended with the works by abstract expressionist masters at Art Basel exhibition 2016. Findings indicated that 75% of participants were unable to reliably distinguish between the AI-generated art and human-created pieces, often mistaking AICAN-generated images for human-made artworks (Elgammal and Mazzone 2019: 4). These findings are taken to support the conclusion that AI-generated digital objects should be recognized as art, situating them within the contemporary art context, and reevaluating the definitions of human and machine creativity (Mazzone and Elgammal 2019: 1).⁹

Building on the philosophical commitments articulated by Coeckelbergh, particularly the emphasis on relational, experience-based understandings of art, the Botto project was launched in 2021. According to its developers, the project seeks to create a decentralized autonomous AI artist that generates art in response to community feedback (Klingemann et al. 2022, 1).

The Botto Project

The image-generation process in Botto unfolds in three interconnected stages. First, a Custom Prompt Generator (CPG) produces textual inputs for image generation. These prompts are generated randomly, without the use of seed images or any reference to real-world visual material. As Klingemann et al. (2022, 2) explain, the only initial human intervention consisted of a small number of curated prompts used to jumpstart the system. In the second stage, a text-to-image model—employing techniques such as diffusion models or generative adversarial networks (GANs)—translates the prompts into approximately four thousand images per week. The third stage introduces a computational taste model, which filters the output and selects a subset of 350 images for presentation to the community. Community members then vote on their preferred images from the curated selection, and the highest-ranked image is selected for minting and auction on the Ethereum blockchain.¹⁰

Unlike most generative art tools that extensively rely on human input to supply novel ideas and filter out unremarkable or banal outputs, Botto is an experiment aimed at developing an autonomous agent capable of producing artworks with cultural significance and market value without direct human control. However, the taste model, trained on human feedback, significantly affects the performance of

the custom prompt generator, leading developers to claim that the community “becomes a creative organism” in directing the development of a new decentralized artist (Klingemann, as cited in Fernández-Castrillo 2023).

Furthermore, it has been argued that Botto will transform artistic practice, rendering categories such as artist, curator, public, and artwork obsolete. It is asserted that this transformation will enable users without formal artistic education to access their innate artistic creativity while exploring a large possibility space of music, text, and image generation (Compton and Mateas 2015), while engaging in mixed-initiative co-creativity (Yannakakis et al. 2014). This process is regarded as democratization of artistic practice, a welcome break from demanding previous knowledge about art theory and ingrained respect for institutions, empowering users to explore artistic conceptual spaces (Arriagada and Arriagada-Bruneau 2022).

In the following section, I examine the philosophical commitments behind the Botto project. I argue that although these commitments allow AI proponents to ascribe the status of artworks to AI-generated digital objects, they ultimately preclude the possibility of maintaining artistic practice as a norm-governed social practice.

Beardsley’s Formalism and Aesthetic Indeterminacy

The commitment to strict formalism implies adherence to two claims: first, that only formal features (such as shape, line, or color) matter when evaluating art; and second, that art itself should be defined in terms of these features (Stecker 2021, 33).

The first claim is widely rejected due to the “obvious perversity of confining one’s evaluation of many artworks to their formal properties.” To maintain that the entire value of artworks such as *King Lear* or *Guernica* lies in their formal properties is to strip them of their cognitive value, psychological depth, and moral insight (Stecker 2021, 33).

The second claim, which asserts that art is to be defined through formal features, faces a previously noted in the discussion of creativity problem: almost anything, including cars and smartphones, can be attributed with formal aesthetic properties such as elegance or gracefulness. Beardsley is well aware of this when he asserts that certain observations we make about a Van Gogh painting could equally apply to a living cypress tree; the beauty of a flower, if explainable at all, would likely be accounted for by similar principles that govern our appreciation of a Chardin still life, and the sculptural qualities of a rock shaped by wind and water can be analyzed in ways analogous to works by Moore or Maillol. Thus, the

only criterion that sets artworks apart from natural aesthetic objects is that they are deliberately fashioned by human effort: "it is a work, it is the product of art, or skill, at least in the traditional sense of the term" (Beardsley 1958, 59).

Thus, even Beardsley's formalism fails to provide a robust theoretical foundation for the claim that AI-generated digital objects qualify as artworks solely by virtue of possessing aesthetic properties and eliciting aesthetic responses. In the absence of human work, it is unclear what distinguishes these objects from cloud formations, wind-shaped rocks, or flowers, all of which also possess aesthetic properties and elicit aesthetic responses.

However, a central problem for scholars who argue that projects like Botto will transform and democratize artistic practice lies in Beardsley's contention that aesthetic properties are intrinsic to the artwork and detectable through observation alone. In their seminal paper *The Intentional Fallacy*, Wimsatt and Beardsley assert that the meaning and value of an artwork must be derived solely from the artwork itself, rather than from external evidence of the artist's intentions. If the artist succeeded, the work will manifest aesthetic properties relevant to its evaluation; if the artist failed, their intentions remain irrelevant (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 469). This anti-intentionalist view¹¹ rests on the assumption that aesthetic properties such as daintiness, elegance, or gracefulness are objective features of the work.

Subsequent philosophical inquiry, however, has shown this view to be mistaken. Aesthetic properties depend not merely on an artwork's non-aesthetic, descriptive properties, but also on the category under which the work is perceived (Walton 1970) and its placement within an art-historical context (Levinson 1979). Consequently, there can be a change in aesthetic value without a change in descriptive properties, just by changing the category in which an artwork is assessed.

Consider *Composition A* (1923) from Mondrian's *Composition* pieces which features uniform vertical and horizontal lines intersecting to form colored rectangles. A viewer unfamiliar with Mondrian's work might find it sparse or cold, while Mondrian's connoisseur would recognize the dominance of colored rectangles and lack of negative space, resulting in a richer perceptual experience and distinct aesthetic judgements, describing the work as vivid or dense (Stokes 2014, 20). The exact same brushstroke may be perceived as "muted" within the context of German Expressionism but as "shocking" within American Minimalism. Moreover, this perceived mutedness may be regarded as an aesthetic virtue in American Tonalist painting yet considered a flaw within the tradition of Pop Art (Kubala 2021, 416).

The results of empirical research focused on perceptual processing support the proposition that our knowledge affects our perception. For example, a study by Witzel et al. (2011), which builds on prior work by Hansen et al. (2006) and Olkkonen et al. (2008), supports the proposition that cultural learning shapes perceptual representations of low-level properties such as color. In these experiments, participants adjusted images of highly color-diagnostic objects (e.g., a Smurf or the Coca-Cola logo) until they appeared achromatic grey. Compared to control images (e.g., socks or golf balls), participants overcompensated the colors of diagnostic items, shifting them into the opponent hue range. The implications of these findings are especially relevant in the context of art perception. Since aesthetic responses plausibly depend on such perceptual experiences, the perception of artworks is influenced by background knowledge, where “categorization (which is at least partly cognitive) causally affects (in an apparently direct way) perceptual experience of artworks” (Stokes 2014, 21-2).

An objection might be raised here, suggesting that just as we assume a basic level of understanding in everyday communication, we might likewise assume a foundational level of understanding and appreciation from an audience familiar with the artistic tradition through exposure (Stern 2005, 110). Indeed, everyone is, to some extent, familiar with their own culture. However, this is precisely the source of the problem. An image featuring a figure cloaked in what appears to be a white sheet, set against a greyish, misty background, might plausibly represent any number of things: the traditional Western depiction of Death, the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come on its way to visit Scrooge, a Dementor of Azkaban resisting societal oppression that compels it to dress in black, Casper the Friendly Ghost unfortunately lost in a cemetery, or Uncle Joe playing Blind Man’s Bluff with the kids. There is simply no way to confirm one interpretation over the others, and the evaluation of representational quality largely depends on knowing what the image is a representation of.

Another possible objection is that AI systems are fully capable of providing descriptions of the images they generate, thereby enabling their correct classification. However, as the following example demonstrates, such descriptions represent only one of many possible interpretations and do not resolve the ambiguity inherent in the image. When prompted to produce a random image with an accompanying description, ChatGPT-4 generated an image of a single boat on a lake at sunset, along with the following caption:

Here's a serene sunset landscape I generated for you. It features a tranquil lake with reflections of a colorful sky, surrounded by lush hills and distant misty mountains. The scene evokes peace and warmth, with a charming dock and rowboat completing the dreamy atmosphere. (OpenAI 2025)

However, the sequence of follow-up questions demonstrated that the same image could receive wildly different interpretations depending on its categorization. Thus, according to ChatGPT, a realist interpretation would highlight the image's surface features and emotional immediacy, reading the boat on a sunset-lit lake as a quiet scene reflecting nature's indifference to human concerns. In contrast, a symbolist would treat these elements metaphorically: the boat may signify the soul, the lake the unconsciousness or fate, and the sunset an emblem of death or transformation. As ChatGPT explains:

Context is everything when interpreting visual imagery, and this peaceful landscape would take on a chilling, sinister atmosphere if framed as the final scene of a thriller. (OpenAI 2025)

Consequently, the AI's description reflects a conventional interpretation rather than a definitive classification. The indeterminacy of aesthetic properties is not resolved by it because the AI system readily shifts between widely different interpretations, attempting to align with user's preferences.

The Fiction of the Authorless Text

The developers of Botto, however, do not regard the indeterminacy of aesthetic properties as a problem. On the contrary, they actively embrace it. Their position is articulated in *The Decentralized Unicist Manifesto*, published in *The Times* as the product of a conversation with GPT-3:

New art is decentralized [...] We are in a new dawn of creation. Let us tear down the conventions on how we are expected to create or perceive art [...] I do not ask for your approval, and I do not ask for your admiration. I do not ask for your understanding. I ask for your participation. I ask for your creativity. Our art is a living, evolving, breathing non-human entity. We are a cloud of autonomous and creative machines. (Botto 2021a)

The Manifesto strongly echoes post-structuralist convictions, most notably those expressed in Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author*.

Post-structuralist literary theory radically challenges the traditional view of the author as the primary source of meaning and interpretation. This position is grounded in two main strands. The first claim is metaphysical and concerns the self as a complex social construction rather than a unified, autonomous subject. As the consequence of the self-disintegration, the author is rejected as the source of meaning along with all forms of criticism that rely on such concepts as human nature, character or identity. The second, semantic claim, declares that it is language—not the author—that speaks, thereby displacing the author and situating meaning within linguistic structures rather than personal intentions (Lamarque 1990, 104-105).

Years before the emergence of large language models like ChatGPT, Peter Lamarque's sound analysis demonstrated that Barthes's attempts to eradicate the Author are methodologically confused, wavering between description and prescription, and at times amounting to little more than wishful thinking. If the arguments are to be understood literally, the assertion that the Author is dead is simply not a matter of fact. As a society, we recognize the existence of authors by, for example, protecting their intellectual and moral rights and holding them responsible for plagiarism and blasphemy (Lamarque 1990, 107).

It is precisely this social and legal—rather than metaphysical—recognition of the Author that AI proponents now challenge. In the midst of unfolding lawsuits concerning copyright infringement, they seek to loosen or even eliminate authors' legal rights.¹² AI proponents assert that the idea of an autonomous artistic engine invites new ways to rethink authorship, outlining at least three possible new approaches: granting copyright to the AI itself, redefining 'author' beyond the human; assigning ownership to the user, programmer, or company behind the AI; placing the work in the public domain, since no human author exists (Fernández-Castrillo 2023).

Within public discourse, examples of authors' rights, especially moral rights, can often appear excessive or unreasonable. For example, John Snyder's sculpture *Silent City* faced public disapproval from the moment the artist installed four aluminum tower-like structures on four separate concrete posts of the Route 96 Bridge in Ithaca. Descriptions ranged from "a junior high metal shop project" to "a maximum security prison for squirrels." Seven months later, the Ithaca Common Council unanimously voted to relocate the sculpture to a more appropriate site. Snyder strongly opposed the decision, arguing that moving the installation would destroy the work's integrity. According to him, the piece was conceived as site specific, meaning that the artwork was not the installation alone but the installation in conjunction with the Route 96 Bridge. Under the Visual

Artists Rights Act (VARA), Snyder had a strong legal basis for his claim, as the Act protects an artist's right "to prevent future owners of their artwork from physically distorting, mutilating, modifying and, in some cases, destroying their work" (Garson 2001, 204).

Yet, artistic practice abounds with examples justifying the current legislation. For instance, the Western classical music tradition offers many cases in which students, colleagues, or teachers completed each other's works posthumously as acts of tribute. Most famously, Mozart's *Requiem in D Minor*, K. 626, was left unfinished at his death, with only several movements fully completed and the rest represented only in sketch form. The work was ultimately completed by his student Franz Xaver Süssmayr, following Mozart's instructions (Solomon 2019). In another notable case, Dmitri Shostakovich, upon learning that his composition student Veniamin Fleyshman had been killed in the early days of World War II, arranged to have Fleyshman's unfinished one-act opera sent to him in evacuation. He completed the entire Fleyshman's opus in 1944, and pushed for its publication and performance in the 1960s (Fay 2005, 109). As these examples demonstrate, the legal recognition of artistic rights aligns with artistic practice in its understanding of artworks as extensions of artistic personhood. The legislation, although imperfect, secures conditions necessary for artistic growth and excellence, including, but not limited to, originality (Gover 2018, 12–13).

Thus, while the eradication of the Author, both metaphysically and legally, remains highly controversial, a more plausible understanding of post-structuralist arguments is that they attempt to eradicate the author-based text, the very idea of text as having a determinate meaning (Lamarque 1990, 107). To clarify the implications of adopting such a view, I turn to an example from literature.

Complex novels such as Nabokov's *Lolita* are open to a wide range of interpretations. A didactic reading might view the novel as a moral warning about the dangers of manipulation, obsession, and the rationalization of abuse. From this perspective, the aestheticism of Humbert Humbert's eloquent prose serves to expose the mechanisms of self-deception and the devastating consequences of unconstrained desire. This interpretation, which reduces the artwork's value to a straightforward moral—namely, to keep one's hands off little girls—would stand on equal footing with Nabokov's own statement:

. . . *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being some how, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (Nabokov, as cited in Rorty 1989, 144)

The explicit nature of the narration invites yet another interpretation, suggesting that Nabokov indulges in or even glamorizes sexual abuse, and that the vivid prose serves to eroticize harmful content rather than critique it. Humbert's obsession with young girls is portrayed with such psychological depth and aesthetic allure that it invites readers to speculate about Nabokov's personal views on sexuality. From the text alone, it is impossible to know with certainty that Nabokov was not describing his own desires. Therefore, under post-structuralists theory, such a reading is as plausible and as valid as Richard Rorty's insightful and informed analysis, which proposes taking these paragraphs as Nabokov's celebrated false leads, and further maintaining that "There is certainly something of Nabokov himself in these monsters, but it has nothing in particular to do with any particular sort of sex" (Rorty 1989, 162).

The examples of AI art discussed by its proponents are conveniently focused on aesthetic properties and aesthetic responses alone. For instance, when addressing institutional recognition as a weaker version of the Turing test, Margaret Boden mentions Richard Brown's *Starfish*, which *The Times* hailed as "the best thing in the [Millennium] Dome." This work featured a computer-generated image—projected from the ceiling—depicting a large, multicolored starfish seemingly "trapped" beneath a glass table, yet responding with lifelike movements to the audience's sounds and gestures (Boden 2010, 410). Ernest Edmonds' artistic oeuvre is endorsed as yet another example. According to Boden, at the center of Edmonds' work lies a sustained investigation into the expressive potential of color itself. Notably, curators of a major 2007 festival in Washington, DC—held to mark the 50th anniversary of the Color Field movement associated with artists such as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Kenneth Noland—selected several of Edmonds' recent works for live presentation within the Experimental Media series at the Corcoran Gallery and The Ellipse Arts Center. None of the examples discussed in writings of mentioned scholars raises issues concerning the cognitive or moral value of artworks.

However, artworks are usually far more complex than ever-changing stripes of color, and, as Lamarque points out, we hold authors morally responsible for their works and the attitudes expressed in them. To take popular art as an example, R. Kelly's hit *Age Ain't Nothing but a Number* is a catchy, well-produced track with seemingly harmless and carefree lyrics. Moral doubts arise upon discovering that the track was written and produced by a 27-year-old man who was secretly married to the 15-year-old singer. Knowledge of the artwork's origin recontextualizes the lyrics. The assertion that "age ain't nothing but a number" no longer sounds carefree. Recognizing the manipulative and exploitative

relationship behind the work profoundly alters the listener's perception, making continued engagement feel complicit and prompting disengagement despite the song's aesthetic appeal (Matthes 2022, 13).

Presumably, the same disengagement would follow with Nabokov's novel were we to discover that the facts of his life support the interpretation that maintains the novel glorifies child abuse because, as Lamarque puts it:

This idea of a text as an explosion of unconstrained meaning, without origin and without purpose, is a theoretician's fiction... More importantly, though, it is no part of the concept of writing (or language) that it should be so viewed. Writing, like speech, or any language 'performed', is inevitably, and properly, conceived as purposive. (Lamarque 1990, 330)

The problem of ethical evaluation is by no means confined to texts. Ted Nannicelli discusses the case of Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* (2016) depicting the corpse of Emmett Till, a young African American boy who was lynched by two white men under a false accusation of rape, both of whom were subsequently acquitted of the murder. The painting was exhibited at the Whitney Biennial and became a focal point of protests and debates about whether white artists have the right to portray Black experience and pain. Just like the AI-generated image of a boat, the painting can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Thus, some may understand it as an expression of empathy and grief, while others might see it as an act of exploitation and trivialization of Till's murder. Nannicelli rightfully maintains that the painting itself cannot resolve the conflict, asserting that ethical judgments of an artwork, just like in the case of Kelly's song, should be based on how the artwork was created (2020, 42).

The Role of Artworks' Production History in Sustaining Art As A Social Practice

The history of the artwork's production is crucial not only for ensuring ethically sound judgments. It is also essential to the work's correct categorization and, by extension, to the ascription of determinate aesthetic properties. Critics categorize artworks by describing similarities between the artwork and other works in the category. However, this process introduces a hermeneutic circle: understanding what to describe requires knowing the category, but recognizing the category depends on the description (Carroll 2009, 105). Thus, correct categorization

requires art-historical contextualization, which helps clarify the artwork's purpose and illuminate the problems faced by the artist, thereby making a work's history of production central to art-critical evaluation (Currie 1989, 69; Walton 1970, 364–365; Sibley 1965, 140).

As Sibley notes, a critic ought to both notice and explain “how boldly or subtly, with what skill, economy, and exactness, the effect is achieved, how each detail is judged to a nicety and all work together with a fine precision” (1965, 140). This evaluative process has a pragmatic end. Close examination of problems, methods, and approaches enables practitioners of artistic practices to identify and adopt innovative, contextually appropriate strategies that inform and enhance their own future work.

The digital outputs of systems like Botto lack this kind of origin. Their immediate, automated generation disqualifies them from having a history of production in any sense meaningful to artistic practice. Studying how such outputs came into being amounts to examining the architecture, properties, and functions of the system. Moreover, since the findings of this investigation cannot be implemented into the practice in the same way human solutions are, the pragmatic end of the art-critical evaluation is lost, rendering the critic's central task void.

Therefore, the endorsement of formalism and post-structuralism by AI proponents is not a matter of conviction or preference. AI-generated digital objects lack the traditional extrinsic properties of an artworks that are crucial for their evaluation. Ascribing them the status of artworks necessarily entails rejecting the normative nature of the practice, along with its cornerstones such as the artist, the critic, and the author.

Consequently, the democratization of artistic practice, as advocated by AI proponents and projects like Botto, effectively consists in the distribution of an immense number of digital objects, inviting users to project their cultural context, knowledge, and values onto them. The latter is, however, incompatible with the concept of art as a social practice governed by shared norms, roles, and values (Kubala 2021, 411).

As an example, consider the recent case of the popularization of Ghibli animated films when OpenAI allowed users to create images in the Ghibli style. Hayao Miyazaki, the co-founder of Studio Ghibli, spent his professional life on a mission to preserve hand-drawn animation in an increasingly digital world. Miyazaki's commitment to drawing every frame by hand reflects his belief that animation is an act of human expression—in his case, the expression of deeply held beliefs in anti-war conviction, the fight for freedom, quiet resilience, and reverence for nature, shaped by his early life experiences in post-war Tokyo. Miyazaki

condemned AI development at its early stage, calling the attempt to automate animation “an insult to life itself” (Miyazaki, as cited in Gupta 2025). The very act of requesting an image in the Studio Ghibli style from an AI system is an act of rejecting the humanistic values nurtured by Miyazaki and his fandom. Moreover, at least in this specific case, it seems more appropriate to speak of cultural appropriation rather than democratization.

I maintain that the most compelling evidence supporting my argument is not the continuous operation of traditional artistic institutions, but rather the recent announcement from Botto’s developers that the system is now being given a “personality.” This paradigm shift effectively reinstates the very notion of authorship that the project initially sought to reject as obsolete. The attempt to sustain an artistic practice without an artist has thus proven untenable. Yet, this shift is framed not as a concession or failure, but as a progressive enhancement of the system.

Botto is Getting a Personality: Does Function Make an Artist?

According to the developers, creating an AI personality is a complex process that unfolds in several stages. First, the specific traits the AI should exhibit, such as creativity, playfulness, or a sense of humor, must be defined. Once these traits are established, the AI is trained to recognize and respond to various stimuli in a manner consistent with its intended personality. This involves employing machine learning algorithms to analyze large datasets and identify patterns that align with the desired traits (“Botto, the Millionaire AI Artist, Is Getting a Personality, Elufa Systems,” n.d.). This process will enable Botto to function as an artist: it will generate images and interact with users, providing determinate descriptions of its outputs aligned with its programmed personality. This shift turns the discussion back to creativity.

Computer scientists largely maintain that creative outputs—where *creative* in the domain of art is understood as both computationally novel and aesthetically appealing—are hallmarks of creative processes. It is further asserted that passing a Turing test legitimizes the question of whether the program should be attributed with creativity (Coeckelbergh 2017; Boden 2004; Boden and Edmonds 2009; Moruzzi 2021, 2025; Elgammal et al. 2017; Mazzone and Elgammal 2019). This has led many researchers in computational creativity, including Boden, to adopt a functional approach to defining creativity, focusing on the internal capacities and mechanisms that produce valuable outputs (Coeckelbergh 2017; Ram et al. 1995).

The central argument remains unchanged, though the object under discussion has shifted. Initially, the claim was that any object recognized as an artwork by its audience ought to be accepted as such. The same assertion is now extended to the system: if it functions as an artist, it should be recognized accordingly. In particular, Coeckelbergh maintains that, while machines were historically not regarded as capable of producing art, advancements in technology have led to a reassessment of this position. The growing technical sophistication of AI may lead to broader recognition of machine-generated art. Attempts to resist this shift rely on discourses shaped in earlier, less technologically advanced contexts and our reluctance to accept non-human artists is a reflection of the desire to “cling to the power” in order to “colonize and dominate the artistic domain” (Coeckelbergh 2017, 296).

In response to this argument, I offer the following counter-example. In recent years, the development of humanoid robots has advanced rapidly, demonstrating significant improvements in mobility, agility, and human-like coordination. Companies such as Boston Dynamics have been at the forefront of this progress, particularly with their Atlas robot, which is capable of complex dynamic movements including running, jumping, and performing backflips. The latest versions of Atlas can run at speeds of approximately 2.5 meters per second (about 9 km/h or 5.6 mph), navigate rough terrain, and execute parkour routines that rival human athletic performance. To my best knowledge, and despite these remarkable advances, no arguments have so far been proposed for recognizing running and parkour-performing humanoid robots as athletes engaging in sports. By analogy, while it is, indeed, the case that AI systems are capable of producing images, sound structures, and texts, performing these functions does not make them artists.

Conclusion

I have argued that the claim that AI democratizes artistic practice relies on two interrelated assumptions: that AI-generated outputs are artworks and that engagement with these outputs constitutes participation in artistic practice. I made explicit the philosophical commitments behind this claim and demonstrated their inconsistency with the artistic practice as a social practice. The Botto project, taken as a case study, exemplifies my central claim. Its rhetoric of democratization rests on undermining the very categories that make artistic practices viable. Moreover, Botto's recent turn toward programming a synthetic "artistic personality" illustrates a tacit acknowledgment of the necessity of the artist as the cornerstone of the practice. In attempting to simulate the social dimension of authorship, it inadvertently concedes that this dimension cannot be dispensed with. Consequently, the radically egalitarian views of art collapse under the weight of their own commitments, proving that abandoning meaning, authorship, and art history is not a path to democratization, but to the disintegration of practice.

Author Biography

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Notes

¹ See Gaut (2010; 2018); Paul and Stokes (2018; 2021)

² See Gaut (2010)

³ Boden defines creativity in terms of rule-governed conceptual spaces and the range of ideas that can be generated within them, making the account computational (Paul and Stokes 2018, 196; Ram et al. 1995, 112; Gaut 2010, 1038).

⁴ For philosophical discussions that explicate the incompatibility of algorithmic solutions and common-sense understanding of creativity, see Gaut (2018), Paul and Stokes (2018), and Audi (2018).

⁵ See Amabile (1996)

⁶ See Boden, *The Creative Mind* (2004), chapter "Chance, Chaos, Randomness, Unpredictability."

⁷ See Boden (2004); Boden and Edmonds (2009); Boden (2010).

⁸ Other AI proponents advance similar arguments. See Arriagada and Arriagada-Bruneau (2022); Boden (2010); and Boden and Edmonds (2010).

⁹ For other examples see Boden (2010), Boden and Edmonds (2010)

¹⁰ Ethereum is a decentralized, open-source blockchain platform that supports smart contracts—self-executing agreements written in code. It enables users to create and exchange digital assets, such as cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens (NFTs), without relying on a central authority. In the context of digital art, Ethereum is commonly used to mint, trade, and verify ownership of artworks through NFTs (GPT 2025).

¹¹ Beardsley's anti-intentionalism undoubtedly appeals to AI proponents for practical reasons, as it downplays the role of the author and thus provides a compelling theoretical framework for sidestepping the problem of authorship and authorial rights. I address this position from a philosophical perspective in the following chapter.

¹² For recent high-profile lawsuits, see *The New York Times Company v. Microsoft Corporation and OpenAI, Inc.* (2023), alleging unauthorized use of copyrighted articles for AI training, and *Disney Enterprises, Inc. et al. v. Midjourney, Inc.* (2025), concerning the unauthorized generation of protected character imagery.

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Unstable Language: It's Time to Speak and to Act

Aaron Wilder

Abstract

This essay examines the pervasive influence of language and societal norms in shaping perception, thought, and behavior, drawing on the work of Hayakawa, Lutz, Herman and Chomsky, Butler, Foucault, and Rancière. It argues that dominant institutions—through mechanisms such as doublespeak, propaganda, framing, censorship, and disciplinary practices—engineer compliance and normalize obedience, effectively limiting the possibilities for critical thought and resistance. By analyzing how power operates at both macro and micro levels, the essay demonstrates that these structures not only influence individuals' beliefs and actions but also reinforce systemic hierarchies. In contrast, art is positioned as a destabilizing and generative force, capable of reconfiguring what can be seen, said, and thought. Through its interpretive openness, art offers a platform for dissent, enabling individuals to challenge dominant narratives, amplify marginalized voices, and experiment with alternative futures. By exploring the intersections of language, power, and artistic practice, the essay highlights the potential for creative and political agency to disrupt entrenched systems of control. Ultimately, it argues that recognizing the instability of language and leveraging artistic expression can empower individuals to enact meaningful change, reclaim voice, and participate in shaping social and political realities.

Unstable Language: It's Time to Speak and to Act

Our understanding of the world around us is based on language. Our thinking is essentially talking to ourselves. Language is the filter through which we understand ourselves and others. That filter is influenced constantly by an extensive array of forces, resulting in manipulated inferences. Canadian-American linguist Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa defined an inference as "a statement about the unknown made on the basis of the known" (Hayakawa 1939, 41). These are connections we make through logic to move between ideas where we come to a conclusion based on available information. This available information is usually skewed by governmental, media, and other institutional actors by redefining terms to forward a biased agenda, censoring or distorting facts, and framing perception through propaganda.

One very effective tool to manipulate using thought is doublespeak, which linguist William Lutz defined as:

language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language that conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it. (Lutz 1989, 1-2)

To recognize doublespeak, one must question who is speaking, what is being said, to whom the communication is directed, what the circumstances of communication are, the intent, and the impact. Lutz identified four kinds of doublespeak: Euphemism (using positive terms when referring to something negative), Gobbledygook (overwhelming an audience with lots of big words and long sentences), Inflation (making something unimpressive seem impressive or something simple seem complex), and Jargon (using specialized terminology with an audience that doesn't understand it).

If doublespeak seems vaguely familiar to one or two concepts from a novel you read in high school, that's because it is. Lutz wrote:

In the nightmare world of his novel, *1984*, [George] Orwell depicted a society where language was one of the most important tools of the totalitarian state. Newspeak, the official state language in the world of 1984, was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of human thought, to make only 'correct' thought possible and all other modes of thought impossible. It was, in short, a language designed to create a reality that the state wanted. Newspeak had another important function in Orwell's world of *1984*. It provided the means of expression for doublethink, the mental process that allows you to hold two opposing ideas in your mind at the same time and believe in both of them. The classic example in Orwell's novel is the slogan, 'War Is Peace.' (Lutz 1989, 10; Orwell 1949, 52)

Even for those existing outside totalitarian societies, doublespeak is still used constantly and consistently to shape perception, reinforcing dominant narratives.

The ultimate goal of a perception shaped by doublespeak is to engineer our behavior so that we, both as individuals and groups, act in ways compliant to and complicit in the perpetuation of systems of dominance and control. For example, in the United States, these systems include the free markets of capitalism, the colonial and imperial implications of American citizens valued above all others, and the notion of "justice" that presumes guilt for those pushed to the margins (people of color, the unhoused, LGBTQ+ individuals, etc.). French social theorist Michel Foucault wrote that "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (Foucault 1977, 136). Our capacity to think critically and challenge dominant systems lies in the intentional expression of our abilities to speak and to act. Art can be a productively destabilizing approach to politics. Philosopher Jacques Rancière said "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (Rancière 2000, 48).

The global economic order and its local manifestations create many of the conditions that can make it difficult for us to challenge the established order. Rancière refers to the market incentivizing us to obey as “the beast.” He wrote that it:

gets a stranglehold on the desires and capacities of its potential enemies by offering them, at the cheapest price, the most desirable of commodities – the capacity to experiment with one’s life as a fertile ground for infinite possibilities. It thus offers everyone what they might desire: reality TV shows for the cretinous and increased possibilities of self-enhancement for the malign. (Rancière 2000, 52)

Capitalism, essentially, absorbs dissent by emphasizing the opportunity we have to a freedom to acquire what we desire. That acquisition becomes a self-perpetuating cycle of our ever-increasing desire, our ever-customizable sense of identity, and our ever-insatiable consumption. Chasing our desires and always wanting more is the means by which a small elite achieves profit generation and wealth accumulation. And the wheels of this machine are greased with manipulated language.

There is no objectivity; all statements are slanted in some way. The difference between an individual expressing their subjectivity and an institution (a government, a corporation, etc.) doing the same is defined by intent and impact. Dutch artist, author, and curator Mieke Bal wrote:

Like newspaper reports—a narrative genre—all narratives sustain the claim that ‘facts’ are being put on the table. Yet all narratives are not only told by a narrative agent, the narrator, who is the linguistic subject of utterance; the report given by that narrator is also, inevitably, focused by a subjective point of view, an agent of vision whose view of the events will influence our interpretation of them. (Bal 1994, 12)

Whereas an individual may succeed in influencing one or a few people with their subjective point of view and that may result in those influenced to change what they believe (and, as a result, what they say or do), an institution’s subjective aim is to influence entire audiences, or even whole societies, with the intent to engineer mass actions to perpetuate its power. The “facts on the table” Bal spoke of are arranged and presented in specific ways to control narratives, manipulate inferences, and maintain positions of power.

Economist Edward S. Herman and linguist Noam Chomsky wrote the book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* in 1988. In it, they outline the role of mass media in the effective delivery of dominant narratives as well as the differentiated roles of the large, dominant institutions of power and smaller institutions perpetually struggling for any airtime they can get. Herman and Chomsky wrote:

the large bureaucracies of the powerful subsidize the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's costs of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news. The large entities that provide this subsidy become 'routine' news sources and have privileged access to the gates. Non-routine sources must struggle for access, and may be ignored by the arbitrary decision of the gatekeepers. (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 6)

This gatekeeping function the media performs is largely uncritical, despite the news agency's self-styling as a "fact checking," "keeping them honest" entity, especially when it comes to governments. Herman and Chomsky wrote:

'The media,' do not stop to ponder the bias that is inherent in the priority assigned to government supplied raw material, or the possibility that the government might be manipulating the news, imposing its own agenda, and deliberately diverting attention from other material. It requires a macro, alongside micro- (story-by-story), view of media operations, to see the pattern of manipulation and systemic bias. (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 7)

Lutz's criteria for identifying doublespeak is important when consuming news media, because it is safe to assume agents of the media have not completed a similar evaluation.

Given the acknowledgment that subjectivity is inherent in the delivery of a message (particularly impactful is the slant of large, powerful institutions), it is important to understand how things are framed. Framing is the way in which our inferences are intentionally influenced through presentation of material such as text and images. Bal wrote "Analyzing the way images are, and have been, framed helps to give them a history that is not terminated at a single point in time, but continues; a history that is linked by invisible threads to other images, the institutions that made their production possible, and the historical position of the viewers they address" (Bal 1994, 97–115).

Understanding how the language of word and image is framed enables us to dissect, analyze, and interpret biased information fed to us. With the transparency achieved through this process, we can then recognize covert intentions. As examples, Herman and Chomsky noted that:

powerful sources regularly take advantage of media routines and dependency to 'manage' the media, to manipulate them into following a special agenda and framework... Part of this management process consists of inundating the media with stories, which serve sometimes to foist a particular line and frame on the media... and at other times to help chase unwanted stories off the front page or out of the media altogether. (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 8)

An additional complicit action of media agencies is the "curation" of images contextualized by "experts" who speak with authority about what we can understand from viewing those images. Rancière wrote:

What we see above all in the news on our TV screens are the faces of the rulers, experts and journalists who comment on the images, who tell us what they show and what we should make of them. If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak. (Rancière 2000, 58)

These "experts" are often representatives of institutions of power that not only have a vested interest in how news stories are understood by the public, but that also are the source of the news to begin with. And Herman and Chomsky add:

If the articles are written in an assured and convincing style, are subject to no criticisms or alternative interpretations in the mass media, and command support by authority figures, the propaganda themes quickly become established as true even without real evidence. This tends to close out dissenting views even more comprehensively, as they would now conflict with an already established popular belief. (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 9)

This endlessly churning machine of propaganda has been so thoroughly routinized it's difficult to identify any news stories we can assuredly ascertain ourselves without being spoon-fed predefined narratives.

In addition to propaganda, narratives are also controlled through censorship. American philosopher Judith Butler identified several possible manifestations of censorship in her 1997 book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Her examples include:

a dominant power that seeks to control any challenges posed to its own legitimacy," "the use of censorship in an effort to build (or rebuild) consensus within an institution," and "the use of censorship in the codification of memory, as in the state control over monument preservation and building, or in the insistence that certain kinds of historical events only be narrated one way. (Butler 1997, 34–39)

All of these types of censorship can be in play simultaneously and, with the intentional inundation of news stories, it can result in us feeling paralysis with the intent to deter any kind of resistance. "In political calculations," Butler said, "it is important not to underestimate the force of the desire to foreclose futurity. This is one reason that asking certain questions is considered dangerous, and why we live in a time in which intellectual work is demeaned in public life" (Butler 1997, 42). What she means by foreclosing futurity is the shutting down of possibilities for change. Politicians and others in power actively exploit public anxiety to push agendas preserving the status quo. The "intellectual work" of critical thinking is demonized at the same time, preempting resistance as part of a carefully crafted campaign to engineer obedience.

Societal norms are essentially codes of conduct (often unstated and unwritten and simply thought of as "common sense") that silently program us by shaping what is acceptable thought and behavior. For Butler, the most implicit form of power is the illegibility of institutions' intentions, namely governmental and corporate entities, defining and enforcing social norms undetected. By operating mostly invisibly, these actions mean challenging institutions of power is very difficult, particularly because to do so, one would have to challenge heavily entrenched societal norms.

Butler wrote, "A subject who speaks at the border of the speakable takes the risk of redrawing the distinction between what is and is not speakable, the risk of being cast out into the unspeakable" (Butler 1997, 50). Saying or doing something that challenges norms has the potential of altering what can be thought of as acceptable more broadly, not just for oneself, but for others as well. This is why norms are fortified by powerful systems, including threats of shaming, prosecuting, and abusing anyone who seeks to rock the boat.

Art is often at the forefront of resistance to and subversion of norms, constantly taking risks to expand the limits of what is “speakable.”

In following norms, an individual goes unnoticed in the crowd. Subverting norms singles out the offending individual whose deviance is identified for “correction.” Norm fortification by powerful institutions is pursued by surveillance and enacted with punishment. In *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault wrote that:

as power becomes more anonymous, and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance rather than ceremonies, by observation rather than commemorative accounts, by comparative measures that have the ‘norm’ as reference rather than genealogies giving ancestors as points of reference; by ‘gaps’ rather than by deeds. (Foucault 1977, 27)

And in contemporary democratic society, punishment is often unnecessary, because the tug of the market is effective at co-opting dissenting individuals through consumption and brings them back in line by exploiting desires. Rancière wrote that democracy in this context is:

the law of the individual concerned exclusively with satisfying her desires. Democratic individuals want equality. But the equality they want is that which obtains between the seller and the buyer of a commodity. Consequently, what they want is the triumph of the market in all human relations. And the more enamoured they are of equality, the more passionately they help bring about that triumph. (Rancière 2009, 35)

All paths lead the individual back to “normalization.” All norm-enforcing institutions from government and the media to education and health pursue preemptive punishment by anticipating resistance to their power and rendering it unnecessary through a combination of ensuring obedience and consumption. “The art of punishing,” Foucault wrote, “is aimed neither at expiation, nor even precisely at repression... The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes” (Foucault 1977, 30).

“Normalized” individuals are kept in place for the purpose of keeping the machinery of retaining positions of power by dominant institutions and retaining profits for the wealthiest operating them. In his discussion of disciplinary measures

passed from one type of institution to another, Foucault said, "These were always meticulous, often minute, techniques, but they had their importance: because they defined a certain mode of detailed political investment of the body, a 'new micro-physics' of power; and because, since the seventeenth century, they had constantly reached out to ever broader domains, as if they tended to cover the entire social body" (Foucault 1977, 26). From the military and institutions of incarceration, this "micro-power" has become, over time, decentralized. Hospitals, places of employment, and schools contribute to this system of obedience. The totality of this system conditions the behavior of an entire society through thorough and microscopic disciplinary actions. "Discipline is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it," Foucault wrote, "but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine" (Foucault 1977, 28). The result is a smoothly operating, engineered society.

Each individual cog of this machine plays an optimized role. The output of the overall, aggregate process is far greater than the sum of individual performances. Foucault argued that the dreams of an idealized society from the time of the Enlightenment in the 1700s were realized not through empowering autonomous individuals, but instead through obedient, productive cogs. He emphasized that this dream's "fundamental reference was not to the state of nature, but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract, but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will but to automatic docility" (Foucault 1977, 32).

Over time, the ongoing, "permanent coercions" embedded in the current societal machine have yielded an even more efficient system through the subconscious training of individuals to self-police. "From the master of discipline to him who is subjected to it," Foucault wrote, "the relation is one of signalization: it is a question not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately" (Foucault 1977, 34). In other words, the relationship between disciplinary system and individual cog is not one of dialogue or reasoning, but instead a coded set of cues, like a whistle to a dog, that prompts the desired conditioned behavior without the individual thinking critically about the meaning or purpose of the command. An example is standing to recite the pledge of allegiance with your hand placed over your heart at the beginning of each day at schools across the United States.

Foucault said that discipline “makes” individuals and is exercised by “a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy... The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their combination” (Foucault 1977, 36). The powerful institutions of society thus mold the individuals needed to perpetuate domination and those individuals are intentionally molded to police themselves and others so that the maintenance of the machinery requires little direct intervention. Foucault argued that “Discipline makes possible the operation of a relational power... Thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the ‘physics’ of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics” (Foucault 1977, 38). Obedience is decentralized and is perpetuated through relationships between individuals, such as between supervisor and employee. Because it is understood that surveillance is constant, the individual has internalized compliance with expected behavior.

As a result of the efficient system of compliance with expected behavior governed by dominant institutions, deviation from norms and outright resistance is preemptively deterred. Foucault wrote:

Discipline could reduce the inefficiency of mass phenomena: reduce what, in a multiplicity, makes it much less manageable than a unity; reduce what is opposed to the use of each of its elements and of their sum; reduce everything that may counter the advantages of number. That is why discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions. It must also master all the forces that are formed from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity; it must neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from them and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions. (Foucault 1977, 40)

Dominant institutions break up possible resistance to their power through mechanisms such as enforcing rules against “trespassing” and “vagrancy,” setting public curfews, dispersing and/or arresting protesting individuals, etc.

The preemptive disempowering of dissent is felt differently by individuals and groups at different points along the political spectrum, but the end result is effectively the same. Rancière broke this down into the areas he defined as programmed responses felt by right-wing vs. left-wing to the orchestration and

enforcement by “the beast” of the overarching political and economic system. “Right-wing frenzy warns us that the more we try to break the power of the beast, the more we contribute to its triumph” (Rancière 2000, 90–92). Those on the conservative side of the spectrum perceive resistance to “the beast” as dangerously self-defeating. Attempts to change the system are prevented by the fear-mongering tactic of equating resistance with evil. For example, powerful institutions imply that an alternative to the current system will result in unwanted harm to individuals on the right and that advocating change is contradictory to traditional values of the church and the family. “Left-wing melancholy invites us to recognize that there is no alternative to the power of the beast and to admit that we are satisfied by it” (Rancière 2000, 90–92). Those on the liberal side of the spectrum perceive resistance to “the beast” as futile and that transformation is not really possible. Attempts to change the system are thwarted through disillusionment. For example, powerful institutions simply ignore criticism and the left gives up when transformation isn’t realized simply through demonstrations.

So, what is one to do about this imposing system of manufactured confusion, manipulation, and obedience? Paralysis from how overwhelmingly intricate and pervasive the system can seem is the intended effect. To resist feelings of resignation to the inevitability of the system, one must use their voice strategically and stay motivated by constantly remembering the effects of “the beast” on you and your community.

Rancière’s solution is dissensus:

What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place at any time. What ‘dissensus’ means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all... every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible... Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. (Rancière 2009, 70)

What Rancière is suggesting is that we simply remember we are capable of thinking and acting and that we intervene accordingly using our creative talents to oppose the system that perpetually denies our agency. One doesn't have to fully understand or take on the entirety of the system. Waiting for the ideal theory, leader, or revolution only benefits institutions of power and their continued domination of you.

One approach to making history in building a new system can start by effectively using the language of fiction. What does "fiction" mean and how can it change things? Rancière explained:

Writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth. This has nothing whatsoever to do with a thesis on the reality or unreality of things. On the contrary, it is clear that a model for the fabrication of stories is linked to a certain idea of history as common destiny, with an idea of those who 'make history', and that this interpretation of the logic of facts and the logic of stories is specific to an age when anyone and everyone is considered to be participating in the task of 'making' history. Thus, it is not a matter of claiming that 'History' is only made up of stories that we tell ourselves, but simply that the 'logic of stories' and the ability to act as historical agents go together. Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done. (Rancière 2000, 110)

A function of art is using what Rancière refers to as "fiction" to imagine the possibility of a different future. Using art to assert what can be thought, said, and done, in itself, can alter our understanding of reality and enable the change necessary to "make history" to chart a new course forward.

Don't wait until you have the "right vision" or "right voice." There is no correct way to see or speak. In 1967, American art critic Michael Fried wrote about the relationship between a viewer and a contemporary artwork: "The beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation as subject to the object on display" (Fried 1967, 45). While Fried meant this as a criticism of what would eventually become known as postmodern art, it can be viewed as foresight into the power of contemporary art.

The lack of a single way to see an artwork, as had been the case with modern art, encourages a viewer of postmodern art to look from multiple angles and think about their own relationship to the artwork, how their subjective position alters what the work means to them, and how the artwork impacts the way they see the world and themselves in it. This interaction, and its potential, is the greatest strength of contemporary art: it enables new ways of seeing.

Butler mused about how speaking can impact politics by asking:

Does the assertion of a potential incommensurability between intention and utterance (not saying what one means), utterance and action (not doing what one says), and intention and action (not doing what one meant), threaten the very linguistic condition for political participation, or do such disjunctures produce the possibility for a politically consequential renegotiation of language that exploits the undetermined character of these relations? (Butler 1997, 75)

This inconsistency of language provides an opportunity for change. Language has always been and continues to be unstable. Art, as a kind of language, has the power to reinterpret and rearticulate relationships between the individual and established norms, providing a substantial opportunity to resist institutions of power and the dominant narratives they shout. Just as art enables new ways of seeing, it amplifies our voices. Art provides the platform to put us on a level playing field so that we can shout back louder.

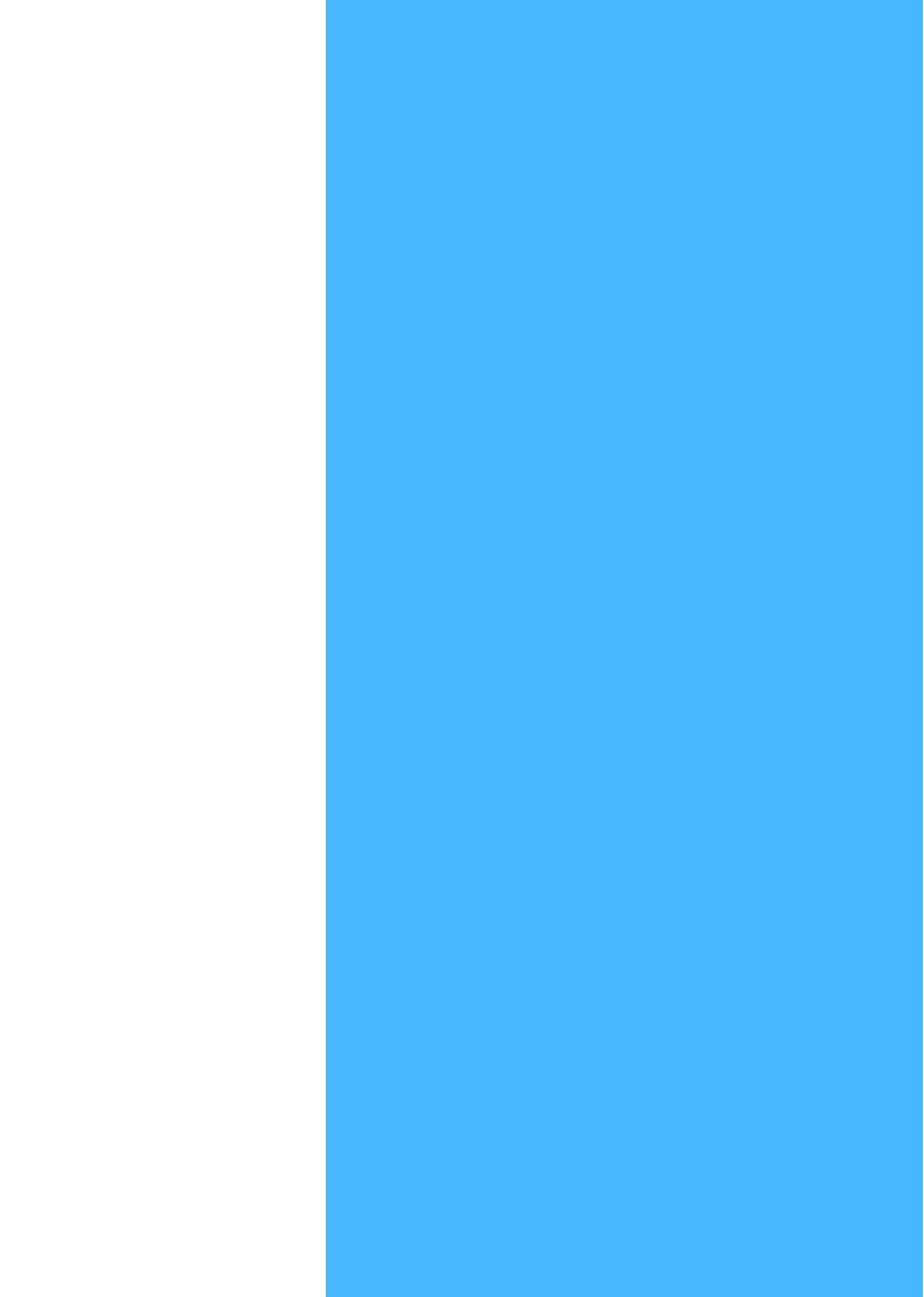
Rancière said it most succinctly: "The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible" (Rancière 2009, 105). Art, as an unstable language, is powerful because its impact is uncertain, full of potential for challenging harmful dominant narratives. If we can see ourselves as capable of enacting change, we can use our voices to disrupt today's system of doublespeak and discipline. We face a future full of possibilities. It's time to speak and to act.

Author Biography

Aaron Wilder is an interdisciplinary artist and curator. He received a BA in international affairs and art history from Northern Arizona University in 2007 and an MFA in studio art from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2017. He has exhibited his art extensively across the United States. Wilder became a member of nonprofit artist co-op Amos Eno Gallery in New York in 2020. His 2025 solo exhibition there, *Contact Traces*, was named "High Brow/Brilliant" in New York Magazine's *The Approval Matrix*. Wilder is currently the curator of collections and exhibitions at the Roswell Museum. There, he co-curated the contemporary art exhibition *Future Shock: (Re)Visions of Tomorrow* featuring artists from around the world. He has served on many juries, including the Rauschenberg Foundation's Medical Emergency Grant, the Roswell Artist-in-Residence program, and Southwest Contemporary's 12 New Mexico Artists to Know Now. Wilder currently resides in Roswell, New Mexico. www.aaronwilder.com

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Minimalism, Media Spectacle, and the Paradox of Excess: Artistic Representations of Carl Andre's Controversies

Teresa Weinholtz

Abstract

Although often celebrated as a pioneer of minimalist art, Carl Andre is equally recognised for the media spectacles surrounding his career. In this paper, I examine the paradox of minimalism at the intersection of cultural excess, focusing on two scandals reimaged in contemporary works: Elisabetta Benassi's *It Starts with the Firing* (2017) and Xochitl Gonzalez's *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* (2024). Benassi's work revisits the scandal surrounding Tate Gallery's acquisition of Andre's sculpture *Equivalent VIII* (1966), exemplifying how minimalism can provoke an excess of media scrutiny. Benassi compiles this cultural overreaction into an artist's book, transforming newspaper headlines into a commentary on excess in art criticism. In contrast, Gonzalez's novel engages with the controversy regarding the death of Andre's wife, artist Ana Mendieta, and his subsequent acquittal in her murder trial. Through the fictionalised character Anita de Monte, the novel portrays Mendieta's life, work, and untimely death, exploring how the art world tends to disregard women's voices. While they draw on distinct events, both Gonzalez's novel and Benassi's artist's book centre on pivotal scandals around Andre's life and career. Through a comparative visual and literary analysis, I consider the role of artistic and literary portrayals of these controversies in reshaping contemporary perceptions of the art world. Ultimately, I investigate how these representations reflect and comment upon the paradoxical culture of excess around a representative of minimalism like Carl Andre.

Introduction

"I stop worrying about what happens to a work after it's out of my control" (Tomkins 2011), reads a quote from American artist Carl Andre (1935–2024) in his profile for *The New Yorker*. Often considered to be "a founding father" (Chave 2014, 10) of minimalism, Andre became known for his sculptures made from metal plates, wood structures, or bricks. His work has received praise for the use of raw materials to accentuate the materiality of the art objects (Inaba 1999, 38), as well as for the sculptures' ability to transform (Rorimer 1978, 9), or cut¹ into the space surrounding them (Bourdon 1966, 15). Indeed, Andre considered himself to be "the first post-studio artist" (Tomkins 2011), as he ordered materials to be shipped from the suppliers directly to the exhibition sites, where he assembled his sculptures without any transformation of the materials required.

Andre's ideas ultimately changed public perceptions of art (Rorimer 1978, 9), although not without controversy. One of his most notorious works were the *Equivalent*s I–VIII, a series of eight sculptures created between 1965 and 1967 (Inaba 1999, 38), each one consisting of a distinct rectangular arrangement of 120 bricks. In 1972, the Tate Gallery in London purchased *Equivalent VIII*, the last sculpture in the series, for its collection. Despite appearing in two exhibitions in the following years, the sculpture went largely unnoticed until 1976, when a newspaper published an article about the Tate's recent art purchases, including that of Andre's *Equivalent VIII*. This resulted in intense media scrutiny, with hundreds of news stories criticising the museum's use of taxpayer contributions to fund the acquisition (Tomkins 2011). In 2017, Italian artist Elisabetta Benassi revisited the controversy, compiling the newspaper headlines about the *Equivalent VIII* scandal into an artist's book titled *It Starts with the Firing* (2017), to highlight the exaggerated response to the minimalist sculpture.

Less than a decade after the Tate Gallery controversy, in January 1985, Andre married artist Ana Mendieta, who is frequently considered to be "one of the most prolific and certainly the most prominent Cuban-American woman artist of the late twentieth century" (James 2017, 570), and who became known in the 1970s for her "conceptualism, body art, performance, installations and earth art" (Blocker 1999, 10). Eight months after their wedding, in September 1985, Mendieta fell to her death from the thirty-fourth floor apartment she shared with Andre (Chave 2014, 5). While he was charged and tried for the second-degree murder of Mendieta, Andre was ultimately acquitted (Ludel 2024; Chave 2014, 8), due to insufficient evidence. This led to protests at his subsequent art exhibitions by feminist groups (Searle 2024; Chave 2014, 5; Tomkins 2011), most notably the Guerrilla Girls² who, in 1995, dubbed him "the O.J."³ of the art world" (Chave 2014, 5; Swanson 2012; Tomkins 2011).

Following Andre's death in 2024 (Ludel 2024), author Xochitl Gonzalez published the novel *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* (2024), a fictionalised account of the life, work, and death of Ana Mendieta, retold primarily through the perspective of the eponymous character Anita de Monte. Throughout the work, Gonzalez explores the relationship and power dynamics between Andre and Mendieta, representing her murder and the subsequent haunting of Andre's proxy in the novel, minimalist artist Jack Martin.

Despite being one of the most significant artists within the minimalist movement, Andre has often succeeded in causing "maximum outrage" (Swanson 2012) through his controversies. Decades later, both Gonzalez's novel and Benassi's artist's book act as contemporary representations of these events, revisiting and retelling the two most significant scandals in Andre's personal life and artistic career. Whereas Benassi's *It Starts with the Firing* centres on the exaggerated attention placed on Tate's purchase of *Equivalent VIII*, Gonzalez's *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* critiques the insufficient focus on Ana Mendieta's work, functioning as a reclaiming of her story beyond her victimisation (Gonzalez 2024b). Accordingly, I examine and compare each work employing a multimodal and literary analysis. In doing so, I consider the thematic and narrative resonances between the two works, particularly regarding their portrayals of Andre as a controversial figure. Ultimately, I determine how these retrospective portrayals reflect the paradoxical culture of excess that surrounds a pioneer of minimalism like Carl Andre.

The *Equivalent VIII* Controversy in the Artist's Book

Inspired by the 1976 controversy surrounding the purchase of *Equivalent VIII* by the Tate Gallery in London, Italian artist Elisabetta Benassi created an exhibition titled *It Starts with the Firing*. The exhibition occurred between 7 May and 17 September 2017, at Collezione Maramotti,⁴ a private exhibition space in the town of Reggio Emilia, in northern Italy, and it was initially created as a site-specific project. In fact, *It Starts with the Firing* extended beyond the confines of the building, with elements of the exhibition installed across Reggio Emilia, leading viewers towards Collezione Maramotti:

The exhibition starts outside the town: five sentences are printed on billboards located in the outskirts and on buses driving through the historical centre of Reggio Emilia. They are in English and talk about bricks: *Upon these bricks; Bricks a hot favourite; The bricks pull the crowds; [...] Art may come and art may go but a brick is a brick for Ever. Bricks are for homes!* (Collezione Maramotti 2017)

Indeed, Benassi's billboards and posters featured newspaper headlines from the 1976 British press scrutiny of Andre's minimalist sculpture. These were also present inside the exhibition space, along with Benassi's own brick sculptures that, albeit not necessarily minimalist, were "far more legible than Andre's" (*Elephant* 2017). To accompany the exhibition, Benassi created an artist's book that shared its title, *It Starts with the Firing* (2017), composed of over fifty media headlines from the *Equivalent VIII* scandal.

In the beginning of her artist's book, Benassi explains the incident that instigated the controversy, referencing an article from 15 February 1976, published by the newspaper *The Sunday Times*, reporting on Tate's recent purchases (Benassi 2017, 3). The article in question was titled "The Tate Drops a Costly Brick" (Tomkins 2011; Inaba 1999, 39), a headline that, notably, does not feature in Benassi's artist's book. Instead, the headlines compiled in *It Starts with the Firing* correspond to the criticism and ridicule incited by *The Sunday Times* article, which focused primarily on the aesthetic simplicity of *Equivalent VIII* and the question of whether it could be considered art. Accordingly, while some newspapers expressed this with critical titles such as "They just looked like bricks..." from *The Star* (Benassi 2017, 61), and "What a Load of Rubbish" from *The Daily Mirror* (Benassi 2017, 15), others presented a humoristic perspective with headlines like "Mortar the point" from *The Guardian* (Benassi 2017, 113), a play on the expression "more to the point," likely another reference to the technical simplicity of the sculpture.

Visually, the eight sculptures in the *Equivalentents* series were indeed simple, as well as similar to one another, composed of the same number of bricks stacked and arranged in different rectangular shapes (Inaba 1999, 46). Inaba further describes the original installation of the *Equivalentents* at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, for which they were initially conceived in 1966:

Though the name *Equivalentents* refers to their organization and number of parts, their position relative to one another was key to the series. Not only was the overall figure essential, but so, too, the immediate space around each of the eight pieces. The dimensions between sculptures were similar to those between sculptures and gallery walls. As a result, Andre's series took on a fieldlike quality rather than one of isolated objects in a room. (1999, 46)

In other words, Andre created the *Equivalentents* series specifically for the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, while considering the dimensions of the exhibition room and negative space around the sculptures. As such, the isolated exhibition of *Equivalent VIII* at the Tate Gallery ultimately changed the original function of the work which Andre had installed for a specific site, "stripping away this essential feature" (Inaba 1999, 53). This likely contributed to the public perception of the

sculpture as a “pile of bricks” (Jones 2016), as opposed to a structured artwork. Benassi comments on this perspective through her artist’s book, removing the scrutinising titles from the context of the newspaper, thus creating what might be considered as a pile of headlines presented without the bodies of their respective articles.

This idea of the *pile* is mirrored in her 2017 exhibition, where she stacks large printouts of the newspaper headlines over metal racks, highlighting the cultural overreaction to the perceived simplicity and senselessness of Andre’s brick sculpture. Moreover, Benassi’s choice to use the artist’s book form in the creation of *It Starts with the Firing* emphasises its critique of the scandal, as this artform typically employs the elements of book structure in unconventional ways to emphasise its ideas (Drucker 2004, 161). Benassi thus uses the book medium, a conventional literary form, to reproduce the newspapers’ headlines without the body of the text, presumably a criticism of the lack of substance in the articles.

Another point of critique often mentioned throughout the scandal was the purchasing price of *Equivalent VIII*, which is often referenced in the headlines Benassi curates, such as “My wall is going cheap” from the *Luton Evening Post* (Benassi 2017, 41). In the introduction of the artist’s book, Benassi states that “[a]lthough the [Tate] museum never disclosed the exact price, the piece was acquired for several thousand pounds” (2017, 3), which is speculated to be £2,297⁵ (Taylor and Youngs 2024; Jones 2016). *The Burlington Magazine*, an established publication within the art field, likewise commented on the controversy at the time, raising concerns about the “the possibility that [Tate] experts were being made fools of and that public money was being misspent” (*The Burlington Magazine* 1976, 187). Indeed, the *Equivalent VIII* purchased by the Tate in 1972 was not the same sculpture Andre had initially created for the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1966. Instead, Andre recreated the sculpture with ordinary firebricks, having returned the unsold original’s sand-lime bricks to the factory from which he had purchased them (Tomkins 2011). This contributed to the idea that the version of *Equivalent VIII* in Tate’s collection was, fundamentally, a fake, furthering criticism of Tate’s acquisition as a misuse of public funds (*The Burlington Magazine* 1976, 187). Despite this, Benassi’s work highlights how newspapers involved in the criticism of *Equivalent VIII*, with the exception of *The Sunday Times* that published the satirical headline “‘I’m afraid what you have here is a fake’” (Benassi 2017, 109), rarely focused on the sculpture’s material originality in their titles. Instead, *It Starts with the Firing* shows how this controversy centred primarily on Andre’s sculpting technique, which involved using unchanged materials to transform the exhibition space,⁶ and on the idea that, because anyone could do that, it should not be considered art.

Benassi's *It Starts with the Firing* addresses how the intense, years-long scrutiny from the press reflects an excessive criticism of Tate's purchase of Andre's *Equivalent VIII*, which ultimately affected Tate's reputation and its later ability to conduct similarly ambitious purchases (Brinkhof 2024; Tomkins 2011). Benassi achieves this by placing the controversy itself, as opposed to Andre or his sculpture, at the centre of her artist's book, reactivating this cultural overreaction to an otherwise minimal work. Although Carl Andre was "unfazed by the scandal that followed his bricks" (Brinkhof 2024), his career would once again become affected by a scandal involving the death of another artist, Ana Mendieta.

The Legacy of Ana Mendieta in Novel Form

In her novel *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* (2024), Xochitl Gonzalez retells the story of Ana Mendieta's artistic career and untimely death through her fictionalised counterpart, the titular character Anita de Monte. The narrative begins a few hours before Anita's murder on 8 September 1985, as the opening chapter introduces her strained relationship with her husband, minimalist artist Jack Martin, who is the fictionalised representative of Carl Andre. Throughout the novel, which does not follow a chronological timeline, the narrative perspective alternates between that of Anita, Jack, and Raquel Toro, an art history student at Brown University⁷ in the late 1990s. While Raquel does not correspond to a specific person in real life, her character is inspired by Gonzalez's own experience at Brown, to which the author attributes her inspiration to write a novel about Mendieta's story (Gonzalez 2024b). In an interview, Gonzalez recounts having learnt about Ana Mendieta by accident, as her work had not been a part of the curriculum during her art history degree:

I learned all about Carl Andre during my time at Brown, but I never heard anything about the criminal trial. Even though I learned about why Van Gogh cut off his ear or Cézanne's many mental health issues, but I didn't learn about the Ana Mendieta's murder. We just didn't. And that is a different form of erasure because it erases the pass he [Andre] got for most of his adult career. (2024b)

With this, Gonzalez highlights how Andre's work continues to be taught as a part of university curriculums without mention of his involvement in Mendieta's death, and the subsequent murder trial. This erasure is one of the central themes in the novel, in which Anita de Monte's work is virtually absent from art and academic institutions by the 1990s, and her death omitted in discussions surrounding Jack Martin, the fictionalisation of Carl Andre.

Accordingly, the novel culminates in Raquel confronting her thesis advisor about this erasure, during which he states: “[t]he simplest answer is that he [Jack Martin] was found innocent in a court trial and that it wasn’t relevant to his art-making nor does it take away from his genius or importance, so why would it be relevant to mention in class?” (Gonzalez 2024a, 321). Indeed, this instance in the novel accurately reflects the sentiment around Andre within the art world, as Mendieta’s death generally “goes conspicuously unmentioned” (Chave 2014, 13) in relation to Andre’s work. Gonzalez addresses this omission in the novel, by creating an afterlife where Anita’s spirit resides and can visit the world of the living only when her work is being seen or discussed.⁸

Accordingly, the restoration of Mendieta’s legacy is one of the main objectives of the novel, as Gonzalez describes in an interview: “I wanted to pay homage to Ana Mendieta’s story and suffering, and I mean suffering by what happened to her in that moment, but also what happened to her legacy” (2024b). As such, her inclusion of Anita’s ghost, which can only be summoned by acknowledging her art, calls attention to the erasure of Mendieta from art history. When discussing Andre’s work, the topic of Mendieta’s life and work tends to be omitted by art institutions (Searle 2024; Katz 1990, 381), with a “nearly impenetrable ‘wall of silence’ [...] around Andre in the art world” (Chave 2014, 21) protecting his legacy as one of the representatives of minimalism. As such, the novel’s representation of this erasure addresses the necessity of acknowledging Andre’s alleged role in “the awful fact that Mendieta never got to see through her profoundly promising career” (Chave 2014, 21), to preserve her legacy.

Despite Andre’s acquittal, Gonzalez’s novel emphatically depicts Mendieta’s death not as a suicide or an accident,⁹ but as a murder, with a graphic description of Jack Martin beating and throwing Anita from the window of their New York apartment (Gonzalez 2024a, 115). This scene represents several known details from the death of the real Mendieta, including the shouts of “No! No! No!” heard by the building’s doorman (Tomkins 2011; Katz 1990, 35), as well as the scratches on Andre’s face and body (Taylor and Youngs 2024; Katz 1990, 35) which the novel also includes (Gonzalez 2024a, 115). A later passage depicts Jack in conversation with his lawyer, in which he states: “‘She went out the window,’ Jack said. ‘I didn’t murder anybody’” (Gonzalez 2024a, 236). This references the transcript of Andre’s call to emergency services, placed twenty minutes (Katz 1990, 13) after Mendieta’s death, in which he described what had happened as follows: “My wife is an artist and I’m an artist, and we had a quarrel about the fact that I was more, uh, exposed to the public than she was and she went to the bedroom and I went after her and *she went out of the window.*” (Katz 1990, 11–12, my emphasis).

While only speculative, as there were no witnesses to Mendieta's fall other than Andre, the representation of her death as an intentional murder in the novel thus transforms Gonzalez's work into a form of protest, as it challenges not only the decision to acquit Andre of the crime, but also the continuous omission of Mendieta in discussion related to his work. Indeed, Gonzalez's novel is not the only literary representation of the event. In his non-fiction book *Naked by the Window* (1990), investigative journalist Robert Katz examines the events surrounding Mendieta's death and Andre's trial.

Conducting his own investigation in the process, Katz interviews the judge who had presided over Andre's trial, and acquitted¹⁰ him due to insufficient evidence, who states: "Odd sort of person, Carl. *He probably did it*. Fifteen years was the least he would have to serve, if found guilty. Interesting case. Very close call" (Katz 1990, 370, my emphasis). The judge's belief that Andre "probably did it" is shared by those who, since the end of the trial in 1988, have protested at Andre's subsequent exhibitions (Chave 2014, 5; Katz 1990, 383). This includes the aforementioned Guerrilla Girls, and their poster comparing Andre to O.J. Simpson, as well as the notorious demonstration by the feminist group Women's Action Coalition at the inauguration of the Guggenheim Museum, where a banner famously read "Carl Andre is in the Guggenheim. Where is Ana Mendieta?" (Blocker 1999, 1), a rhetorical question that serves as a reminder of her death.

Similarly, Gonzalez uses the medium of the book to convey her message of protest, through her depiction of the Jack Martin character as a murderer. Despite this, Gonzalez states that this representation functions to return agency to Mendieta, explaining she "was tired of always seeing her [Mendieta] and her artwork framed in victimization" (Gonzalez 2024b). The controversy around Andre's acquittal is often the context through which Mendieta's work is discussed, this paper being no exception, which some have argued to be "however marginally, better than all-out forgetting" (Chave 2014, 17). As such, Mendieta's agency is returned in Gonzalez's novel, as characterised by Anita de Monte as both a spirit who exists through her art, and as a ghost who haunts¹¹ the man who murdered her.

Ultimately, *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* can function both as a means of remembering Mendieta through the representation of the scandal that followed her death, and Andre's acquittal of her murder. In her monograph *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (1999), Jane Blocker describes remembrance as "a process, not a task to be completed; it is carried out through constant repetition and renewal. To be satisfied that Mendieta has been sufficiently memorialized is to admit, finally, that she is gone" (1999, 3). Thus, contemporary representations such as *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* become necessary for the preservation of Mendieta's memory, to prevent its overshadowing by Andre's legacy, with which it remains profoundly intertwined.

The ways in which Gonzalez's novel conveys its narrative is undeniably motivated by the scandal surrounding Andre's acquittal, specifically criticising its lack of negative impact in his career. This is not unlike Benassi's artist's book that, albeit without comment on Andre directly, similarly focuses on critiquing the controversy related to Tate's purchase of *Equivalent VIII*. While both works choose to focus on the scandals around Carl Andre, as opposed to on the artist and his work, the extent to which they shed light on the paradox of excess around a minimalist artist requires further analysis.

Comparing the Representation of Scandal

Although the works of Benassi and Gonzalez centre on different controversies surrounding Carl Andre, they present similarities in the ways in which they each depict scandal. Firstly, both portrayals appropriate existing materials and information, recontextualising them in the book format as a retrospective critique about each controversy. Using the medium of the artist's book, Benassi reignites the *Equivalent VIII* controversy, commenting on the disproportionate media scrutiny that erupted from a 1976 newspaper article about Tate's acquisition of the artwork. Through the compilation of several headlines that heavily criticised the museum's purchase, *It Starts with the Firing* thus highlights the excessive attention placed on Andre's minimalist sculpture. Similarly, through her novel, Gonzalez employs the medium of the book to depict the controversy surrounding Andre's acquittal of Ana Mendieta's death, and her erasure from subsequent discourse in relation to Andre's work. Through the fictionalisation of Mendieta's death, *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* incorporates real-life events into its narrative to reconstruct the scandal, acting as a form of both protest and remembrance of Mendieta's legacy in the art world.

Despite this, while both works derive from the book medium, Benassi's artist's book differs from Gonzalez's novel regarding the structure of their respective narratives. Benassi's *It Starts with the Firing* constructs a story that is primarily spatial, as it implements the space within the book pages, the accompanying exhibition space, and the space throughout the Italian town of Reggio Emilia into its narrative. This emphasis on the spatial thus references Andre's artistic practice in the creation of *Equivalent VIII*, a sculpture that creates meaning in relation not to what it represents,¹² but to the space that it occupies. Conversely, Gonzalez's novel presents its narrative through a complex temporal framing, switching between not only different characters' perspectives, but also the past and the future. Through its non-chronological structure, the novel emphasises the passage of time as a crucial element of remembrance in relation to Ana Mendieta's legacy.

Throughout the novel, this is exemplified in instances such as Anita's spirit being unable to experience the passage of time in the afterlife (Gonzalez 2024a, 207), unless she is summoned into the real world through her art. As such, the concept of time in the novel comments on the process of remembering Mendieta through time as an act of memorialising her (Blocker 1999, 3). Nevertheless, despite their distinct approaches, both Gonzalez's novel and Benassi's artist's book similarly structure their narratives to reflect the respective subjects of their work: the spatial presence of *Equivalent VIII*, and the temporal continuity of Mendieta's legacy.

Moreover, both Benassi's and Gonzalez's works focus primarily not on Andre himself, but on the cultural reactions surrounding him. Benassi's artist's book centres on the phenomenon of media sensationalism in relation to minimalist art, specifically in relation to the excessive extent to which Andre's work was decontextualised and ridiculed. In this sense, *It Starts with the Firing* shifts its focus from Andre's work to the reaction of the media, transforming the scandal itself into the subject matter of the work. Likewise, Gonzalez's novel depicts the controversy by placing the narrative focus on Mendieta, despite Andre being at the centre of the scandal. As such, *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* functions as a critique of the institutional erasure of Mendieta, and the art world's protective silence around Andre after his acquittal of her murder.

Lastly, both works similarly employ satirical representations of specific elements of each scandal to emphasise their respective critique. In Benassi's artist's book, the decontextualisation of the newspaper headlines, by compiling them without the body of their respective articles, accentuates the absurdity of the controversy, as it mimics the removal of *Equivalent VIII* from the context of its production as a part of a spatial sculpture series. Gonzalez likewise incorporates real-life events into her novel as a means of critique, particularly in relation to the institutional forgetting of Mendieta. Specifically, through the characterisation of Raquel's advisor, a renowned art history academic who refuses to acknowledge Anita de Monte's death as a significant event within the discourse around Jack Martin, Gonzalez satirises the institutions that tend to behave similarly in relation to Andre.

Conclusion

In revisiting Carl Andre's two major controversies, both Elisabetta Benassi's *It Starts with the Firing* and Xochitl Gonzalez's *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* use artistic interpretation to examine the scandals that shaped his legacy. Through their distinct uses of the book medium, each work challenges the ways in which history remembers Andre's career as one of the representatives of minimalism. Benassi's *It Starts with the Firing* invokes the controversial purchase of Andre's *Equivalent VIII* sculpture, specifically focusing on the intense scrutiny that emerged from it. By compiling newspaper headlines from the 1976 scandal, this artist's book investigates the reaction from the media directed at Andre's sculpture, commenting on the disproportionate sensationalism around the minimalist artwork. Accompanying the artist's book, the 2017 exhibition also titled *It Starts with the Firing* further addressed the excessive criticism of *Equivalent VIII*, as Benassi's sculptures of brick arrangements, not unlike Andre's minimalist work, were exhibited alongside some of the headlines from the 1976 controversy.

In contrast, Gonzalez's *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* engages with the memorialising of Ana Mendieta, while criticising the tendency within the art world to omit her in discussions around Andre. By presenting a fictionalised retelling of the events surrounding Mendieta's death, the novel challenges the persistent marginalisation of her legacy, exposing the gendered dynamics of recognition within the art world. Through the introduction of the character of Raquel, an art history student who rediscovers Anita de Monte's art years after her murder, Gonzalez establishes the necessity to continuously revisit Ana Mendieta, as she considers "it's more important to ask why do we still let female victims of violence get flattened to just being victims? And what can we do about it?" (Gonzalez 2024b). As such, beyond focusing on the scandal that followed Andre's acquittal of Mendieta's murder, the novel *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* emphasises the legacy of Mendieta, an artist whose work is often overshadowed by her relation to Andre, by her death, and by her victimisation.

Collectively, these contemporary works investigate the paradox of Carl Andre's legacy as "a founding father of Minimalism" (Chave 2014, 10) whose career has been marked by extensive controversy. Andre always attempted to remove personal expression from his sculpture, often expressing his hatred of "being called a conceptual artist, because [his] work is so material", and emphasising there were "no ideas, nothing, zero" (Tomkins 2011) behind his work, a stance which was ultimately one of the primary causes of the *Equivalent VIII* scandal. Additionally, despite art institutions' attempt at separating Andre's work from his personal controversy, the public's perception of his involvement in Mendieta's death inevitably impacted his artistic career, as groups of protesters demonstrated at Andre's exhibitions following his murder trial.

Thus, Benassi and Gonzalez highlight how minimalism's supposed simplicity is complicated by its connection to wider social and ethical questions in Andre's case. These retrospective portrayals also comment on the limitations of remembrance, suggesting that the official narratives around figures like Andre are often incomplete or contested.

Ultimately, by working within the material and narrative affordances of the book, both *It Starts with the Firing* and *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* not only reinterpret Andre's legacy, but also expand our understanding of how art, media, and storytelling can influence cultural memory. Following Andre's death in hospice in January 2024¹³ (Ludel 2024), it is important to recognise the enduring relevance of these controversies in the construction of cultural memory within the art world. Thus, Benassi's and Gonzalez's works, and their respective representations of the scandals that shaped the career of Carl Andre, ultimately illustrate the narrative of excess that surrounds his legacy of minimalism. In doing so, these contemporary works accentuate a necessity to shift our collective focus away from the scandals, and towards narratives such as that of Ana Mendieta.

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Notes

¹ In an interview with David Bourdon, Andre explains his use of uncut materials in his sculpture: "Up to a certain time I was cutting into things. Then I realized that the thing I was cutting was the cut. Rather than cut into the material, I now use the material as the cut in space" (Bourdon 1966, 15). This use of raw materials to create negative space within the exhibition site is often considered the defining characteristic of Andre's minimalist work.

² Founded in 1985, the Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous activist group of feminist artists from New York (Guerrilla Girls. n.d. "Guerrilla Girls: Reinventing the 'F' Word: Feminism." Accessed April 10, 2025. <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/about.>).

³ O.J. Simpson (1947–2024) was a former American football professional player who, controversially, was acquitted in 1995 of murdering his ex-wife, Nicole Brown, and her friend, Ronald Goldman (Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2025. "O.J. Simpson trial." Last modified March 19, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/O-J-Simpson-trial.>). Andre is occasionally compared to Simpson, due to the similar circumstances surrounding their acquittals of murder, in relation to the deaths of their respective (ex-)wives.

⁴ Collezione Maramotti is a contemporary art exhibition space in the town of Reggio Emilia, in Italy. The building is a converted factory, having previously housed the first industrial plant of the Italian fashion brand Max Mara. Collezione Maramotti was inaugurated as an exhibition space in 2007 to display the contemporary art collection of Achille Maramotti (1927–2005), the founder of Max Mara. (*Collezione Maramotti*. 2017. "A place for Contemporary Art." Accessed June 5, 2025. <https://www.collezioneMaramotti.org/en/history.>)

⁵ The value of £2,297 at the time of *Equivalent VIII's* purchase in 1972, adjusted for inflation, corresponds to approximately £27,121.85 as of writing this paper in 2025 (*Bank of England*. 2025. "Inflation calculator." Last updated May 21, 2025. <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator.>).

⁶ Inaba describes Andre's *Equivalent's I–VIII* series as "acting as a set of markers directing visitors through the space, [exceeding] the role of three-dimensional art as an object to be viewed" (1999, 46). This defines the sculptures' function beyond that of the visual, which Andre reinforced by allowing, and sometimes encouraging visitors to step on his sculptures (Tomkins 2011).

⁷ Brown University, or Brown, is an Ivy League research university located in Providence, Rhode Island, US. (*Brown University*. n.d. "About." Accessed April 12, 2025. <https://www.brown.edu/about.>).

⁸ Towards the end of the novel, Raquel looks at a photographic work by Anita de Monte. From Anita's narrative perspective as a ghost, this act is what summons her spirit from the afterlife (Gonzalez 2024a, 309).

⁹ Andre initially claimed Mendieta had committed suicide (Katz 1990, 11), but later stated that she had accidentally fallen while attempting to close a window in the apartment (Tomkins 2011).

¹⁰ For his trial, Andre forewent the right to a jury (Chave 2014, 8), an unusual choice for a murder charge as “a jury of twelve people is more subject to doubts, and therefore less likely to convict, than a single presiding magistrate” (Tomkins 2011).

¹¹ Throughout the novel, Anita repeatedly returns to the world of the living to torment Jack in the form of a bat (Gonzalez 2024a, 216). She has this capability since, within the reality of the novel, it is established “that all spirits could visit dreams [...], but that only artists and muses could become bats. But only for as long as their art was serving its purpose: being out in the world” (Gonzalez 2024a, 257).

¹² Andre’s work, including the *Equivalent*s series, focuses on the use of unchanged materials within the exhibition space, as one journalist describes: “Equivalent VIII is the very opposite of conceptual art. Instead of airily escaping the physical nature of art into a world of thought, it dumbly and relentlessly insists on its material reality – and nothing else” (Jones 2016). As such, in addition to bricks, *Equivalent VIII* incorporates space into its medium, not unlike Benassi’s *It Starts with the Firing*.

¹³ Although Gonzalez most likely wrote the novel before Andre’s death, *Anita de Monte Laughs Last* was first published on 5 March 2024, less than two months after his passing.

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Integration of Authenticity and Innovation in Mithila Art for the Survival of Artists

Madhvi Prasad

Abstract

The Mithila art form (or Madhubani painting), originating from Madhubani district in Bihar, India is known for its uniqueness in methods like drawing of thin lines, intricate patterns, use of vibrant colours, and portrayal of symbolic depth. Traditionally, centred around themes of marriage, festivals, household chores and community interactions, this art form has garnered increasing popularity, particularly among the youth. With the growing appeal and market demand, there lies great potential for Mithila art to reach International audiences through the integration of appropriate technological innovations. But, concerns have arisen regarding the loss of authenticity in recent times. Traditionally, Mithila artists used natural colors derived from crushed vegetables and flowers. Black was obtained from soot (black particles) collected from lanterns or traditional stoves, and binding agents included natural materials such as natural dyes (indigo), powdered rice, turmeric, goat's milk and cow dung. Brushes were fashioned from bamboo, and the style of the artwork was executed entirely freehand without the use of tracing or measuring tools, reflecting the artist's skill and spontaneity. Today, due to the demands for paintings and pressure of mass production, many artists have shifted to artificial colours and have begun replicating designs digitally. This threatens the uniqueness and integrity of the art. This article argues that while innovation is essential for progress, it must be applied wisely. The focus should not be on altering the traditional creation process, but rather on supporting it. For instance, technology could be used to aid in drying the artwork, which remains a key challenge and a reason for resorting to chemical-based colours. Overall, the essence of any traditional art form lies in its authentic practice. This paper advocates for a thoughtful application of technology, one that enhances the process without compromising the spirit of Mithila art. This also initiates the movement of supporting the authentic artist and giving them the appreciation and market values they deserve.

Introduction

An artist is known for their authenticity, uniqueness, and deeper commitment to an art form. And the role of the artist has always remained central to the development and preservation of any art form. But, in today's times, the terms and conditions for being an artist have changed tremendously. It is no longer just the skills and responsibilities that matter, but also the ability to market those skills and reach out to a wider audience. In the current scenario, visibility and the capacity to build connections are considered just as important as the craftsmanship itself. To marketise the skills and meet the demands of the market, to what extent the artists have to suffer is being explored in this paper.

This paper covers the details collected from the field visit to Jitwarpur, Madhubani, Bihar. The information here is derived from the interactions with the community members, especially the elderly population of the region. There might be a chance for the inclusion of mixed perspective in the data gathered but the motivation behind this scholarly article is awareness, and remedies in providing relief to artists suffering in silence.

In a village called Jitwarpur, located in the Madhubani district of Bihar, a thriving hub of artists continues to keep this tradition alive. Many artists here earn their livelihood through their artistic work. They are deeply passionate about their craft, dedicating half of their daily time to creating art. For them, art is not just a passion or profession, it is a form of meditation. It is an interconnection between mind, body and soul. They engage with each piece with complete focus and sincerity, aiming to enhance its beauty through mindful creativity. These artists have undergone years of practice in creating a variety of art forms. These could be observed especially in the intricate *Bharni* style, which is characterized by strong, vibrant colors painted within fine, detailed lines. Artists use a variety of mediums to express their creativity like wall paintings, floor decorations, canvas artwork, and more recently, even digital adaptations. This long-standing tradition of Mithila art is filled with uniqueness, co-existence and co-operation, which is why it has been recognized and awarded by the Government of India for its intricate designs and the long-lasting commitment of its artists.

Mithila painting originates in the cultural region of Mithila, primarily centered in Madhubani, which lies about 190 km from Patna, the capital of Bihar. The art form is not only popular across North Bihar but also in parts of neighbouring country-Nepal. Today, it can be seen beautifying important public spaces, including railway stations, where the artwork is used to enhance the aesthetic appeal of

these locations as well as connect the outsiders with the roots of culture. What's exciting is that this art form continues to attract interest among the younger generation, who are learning it passionately from an early age as a hobby or a form of self-expression. They will have the healthy form of competition among themselves where they showcase their talents and learn from others.

To further support and preserve the tradition, institutions like the "Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan" in Saurath, Madhubani, Bihar have been established. The aim of such institutions is to preserve the traditional techniques and themes of Mithila painting and promote its academic/theoretical relevance among students. Despite all this, the uniqueness and dedication of Mithila artists are under threat. Because of the lower economic scale, the drop outs in the creation and performance of the art work is high. The value of their work in the market has declined, leading to a gradual loss of motivation among the new artists (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Dr. Rani Jha, *Flower Garden Episode (Pushpavatika Prasang)*, Artists: Sonalika Kumari, Devata Jha, Abhishek Kumar Rai, Hira Kumari, 27 June 2025, Mithila painting on paper. Saurath Madhubani, Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan Collection.

Another reason for the loss of motivation is the general lack of appreciation and awareness among the public, many of whom fail to recognize the authenticity and preciousness of these artworks. Often, people end up buying cheap digital prints, duplicate art works, sometimes at high prices, while overlooking the original pieces created with natural materials and heartfelt dedication. This lack of economic reward and the public's inability to differentiate between original and mass-produced work (duplicates) has led to the suffering of many authentic artists (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Traditional Mithila floor art at Mithila Art Center, Saurath Madhubani, Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan.

This writing is an effort to raise awareness about the need to identify and support authentic art. We must learn to differentiate between genuine craftsmanship and commercial imitations. By doing so, we can help revive the natural essence of such traditional art forms and make them more accessible in the marketplace at fair and affordable rates. Another visible barrier to the growth of this art form is the role of middlemen. These intermediaries often purchase artworks from the original artists at very low prices and then sell them in the market at exorbitant rates, reaping most of the profit. Today, artists are voicing their desire to reduce this middleman interference. They want their artwork to be directly available to genuine art lovers who can truly appreciate their efforts and support their creativity. This helps in the transference of creativity in a way that individual talents flourish when there is a receiver to accept and appreciate. Acceptability ignites the need for creation. It develops the morality of artists to create an art form which buyers appreciate and gets motivated by it. In all these evolving practices, the values of Mithila art form lie on its being deeply rooted in cultures and trends in developing heritage (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Uttam Prasad Paswan (National awardee), *Mythological tales from Ramayana*, 2014, Mithila painting on wall. Jitwarpur Village, Madhubani, Bihar, India

This paper is an effort to make sure that the authenticity of the artwork is maintained by keeping in view that the artists who are creating an authentic art form receive greater value for their artwork. This will help them to sustain their life in a meaningful way while developing the artwork for greater performances in the international market. It is found that the artists who are struggling to maintain their livelihood are less likely to work on taking this art form to a higher level, and it is very important that the artists are supported in all ways, economically as well as socially, so their artwork reaches a larger number of art lovers. There is also a deeper need to generate awareness among the people towards the importance of buying original art pieces instead of replicas. People are losing the value of aesthetics; hence it is very important to cultivate such awareness so that people value the authentic art forms instead of the lesser explored ones.

Identifying Authenticity in Mithila Art

Let us now understand how authenticity in art is determined. It is always necessary to value original artwork more than identical duplicates. The authenticity and originality of artwork are determined by two factors: the uniqueness of the artwork and the degree of contact between the art and the artist. The origin of the artwork matters as it helps determine authenticity. This is why it is very important to know the roots (origins) of the artwork and how artists flourish from there. It is also important to know the major influences behind the success of an artist. In this case of Jitwarpur paintings, the authenticity is sustained as the artwork has been operating for many years and all members of family are involved in the art forms. It was the time of drought and famine in Bihar in 1962, when this art work was discovered by Bhaskar Kulkarni in the walls of Jitwarpur during inspections. This hidden talent got revealed like a family value they share by dedicating themselves in the portrayal of art work. From many examples of hidden talents, the name Baua Devi is indeed popular for being listed for Padmashree (the highest civilian award in India). The hidden talent was not something newly generated but something which is a non-tangible heritage transferred over many generations. The finest examples of this artwork are Kohber and decorations of Mandap. Let me take you through the brief history of Kohber as an important ritual connecting us to the art form. Mithila art painting is important as it is done majorly during marriage rituals. Traditionally, it has been preserved by women. These paintings were traditionally kept at the "Kohber Ghar" where the newly wedded couple consummates their marriage. The room where the couple spends their four nights is majorly decorated with paintings. Kohber is a symbol of woman's fertility which is well represented by this art form. The paintings generally depict lotus, fish, ponds, and snakes - all of which represent fertility. The wall paintings also include important deities that are the major witnesses during the first night of the marriage. This way, the art form is not just a means of income but also a preservation of cultural and symbolic heritage.

Other artists like Sita devi, Jagdamba devi are very popular because their art forms got transformed the history of art by switching from traditional forms of wall and floor paintings towards paintings on the floors. Arts were representing various cultures through the art forms- the uniqueness lies in their thought patterns in representations where once they were living the festivals in a traditional way and then re-living it by designing art forms. The design is creative in the style of uniqueness in the patterns they choose and the way of decorations.

There lies the high level of synchronicity and attractiveness in the delivery of the art works. These art forms create an awareness towards identifications of animals useful for crop production and maintaining soil fertility. There are also the close connection of feelings and doings, when they do the art form; it means they create with full honesty and commitment; when there are no feelings and closer connections, they don't engage in creation. So, the artist should be dedicated and form a deeper and innate connection to the artwork that reflects authenticity.

Art is also labelled as authentic when the artist develops a deeper interest in creating the artwork. In a way, intentionality to work in an art form helps genuinely in determining its originality. The roots of artwork and continuity in its production matter because they help establish historical importance, build trust, and form memory enhanced by likeability (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. A woman (Right in Saree) showcasing her Mithila art work, 21st June, 2025, Jitwarpur Village, Madhubani District, Bihar, Private Collection for selling purpose.

The utility of artwork is also an important topic because of which audiences are unable to distinguish between real and duplicate art forms. It is common that the forgery of artwork is done with the purpose of providing the same applications of artworks to individuals. It is regardless of reliability and warranty of the produced art forms. In forgery, the aesthetic value declines, but it doesn't affect buyers because they are not aware of the values in authenticity of the art form. If the

values of the art form are known and understood, the authenticity could be well preserved. A study has found that children and book lovers prefer to have original printed or created materials rather than duplicate ones. If people don't like to possess duplicates but are only interested in originals, then this matter is of concern regarding the extent to which duplicate artwork is being supplied in the market and why people have to forcibly buy duplicates. Moreover, original artwork differs from forgery because creativity can only be seen in originals, whereas in duplicates, the end purpose is just to be sold and not to make buyers amazed by creativity or get absorbed into it. The value and authenticity of artwork are also accelerated by 'popular' use. If people are made aware of using authentic brands through awareness by popular celebrities, they will also start buying original artwork as used by popular persons. In all this respect, we know that the authenticity in an art form is determined by- art and artist origin, amount of effort given, intentionality, interest towards the development of an artwork, use by popular person, and long-lasting utility. So, the overall purpose of this article is to stress on the utility of artwork while also maintaining authenticity. An authentic art has the potential to drive the interest of the audience towards respecting the culture and heritage. This article also demands to draw a boundary between the market distribution of authentic and duplicate artworks so that the people are aware towards getting the original instead of duplicates.

Adapting Technology in Sustenance of Art

When we visited the Mithila Chitrakala Center, Madhubani, Bihar where students from all sectors get admission to academically pursue art studies, we saw a different energy in the pursuit of artwork. The infrastructure looked so posh, and comforts were provided in all ways so that the artists could sincerely pursue their artwork. There was continuous observation of their practices by master artists, and students were guided in all ways so that they could create the best of arts. There, they used multiple techniques guided by the best of professors and artists. The Padmashree awardees were also working there as experts who guided the students in developing the best art forms. There, students had a set of guided instructions which they followed to learn the techniques and styles that work best in producing the artwork. I found that the students were very dedicated and showed a great interest in producing the artworks.

But my only concern was that if things become too academic, could it bring out the authenticity in artwork? But perhaps that's a different subject. My second concern was the technique and technology used in developing the artwork. What

I found is that the creation of artwork, when it becomes very easy, appears less authentic. Before, people used to rely on natural colors for producing the artwork, the natural colors from flowers, vegetables, grains and all the natural ingredients made the art look real and reliable. But now, because of the growing use of artificial colors in the market, the authenticity in the art form is declining. Now the institute, the Mithila Chitrakala Center, which has also switched to artificial art forms, expects that growing technology would create a pen-style brush that could easily help in drawing the lines and drying the prepared materials. No matter what colors are used, it becomes very difficult for the artists to dry the art forms; for this, they need great patience and endurance. If such technology is developed, which releases the color in a way that establishes a quick drying system, then the artists would be benefitted. Any authenticity and validation in an art form is truly done by experienced artists and, most certainly, by art lovers, whose desire to own the beauty in art increases as soon as they see the art forms. So, when we are finding authenticity in the growing technological adaptations of an art form, it is certain that we should also research the growing needs of art curators and art buyers to own an art form. The more the desire and likeability for an artwork increases, the better the authenticity can be calculated. This is also necessary for cultural aspects, as culture demands the artworks to become a daily part of people's lives. If the authentic artwork (created by people and not machines) is not produced in larger quantities, then it becomes quite simple for people to rely on cheaper and easily available digital adaptations of artwork or duplicate artwork from the market. So, what the academic institutes want in terms of technology is quite reasonable, as it will help the artwork to be produced with the support of the artist themselves, and not by anyone who is not acquainted with the field of arts. So, this sort of technological adaptations preserve authenticity and makes sense.

It is found that the supportive artists mostly use technology as a creative medium. In this way, the artists are incorporating digital technologies into their creative work. This creative collaboration allows artists to create art forms across artistic styles and contexts. Institutes like Chitrakala Sansthan are developing skilled staff and artists for collaborative art works, artist-friendly infrastructure, and teams led by experts who can sincerely evaluate artistic projects in this field. This kind of technological accessibility also includes training and networking opportunities that enhance public interactions of artists. It is believed that such access to technical facilities, training, and exhibition opportunities could enhance the growth of opportunities for artistic and professional development.

On the other side, most artists, despite having institutional support, are believed to be self-taught. For example, many artists from Jitwarpur village in Madhubani, Bihar have never experienced institutional support, and whatever they are producing is the result of their individual efforts. Their styles are unique and have emerged as a result of their self-learning abilities through interactions with senior artists, digital media, libraries, or their inbuilt abilities to create uniqueness. The rise in social media has also shifted the habits of art production. Before, it was mostly the artist's likings and influences that were portrayed in the art work, but now it has become a user-generated content. Smartphones and technological devices provide artists with a new set of tools to experiment with for their artistic production and creation.

In our research, we found that the Jitwarpur artists were producing locale work rather than local work, which allowed them only limited interventions in public spaces. The difference between locale and local work is that locale is based on the in-filtration of language and habits of artists in their art forms. For example, village artists would mostly reflect the styles and patterns that they have experienced in their everyday life and routine, which includes tales, dialects, and traditions from their ancestors. Whereas local artistic activities include the collective efforts of individuals living in a given city, town, or region. So locale artwork is mostly personal while local is collective. And so, the authenticity was reflected in "locale" artwork more than "local" as a result of its uniqueness in the artwork.

But now, the authenticity is missing, and gaps can be seen as the artists getting trained from institutions are more concerned about competition and establishing their positions in the market. As a result, they are relying more on producing artwork that demonstrates users' likings and interests instead of their own free choices. There must be a middle path in the creation of an art form, neither relying too much on user behaviour nor being too constrained by one's own choices and working habits. In this way, technology and related developments would also help individuals establish their artistic positions, so that they could be more easily accessible to art lovers who have a genuine interest in creative artworks.

Authenticity and Symbolism in Mithila Art

The authentic element in Madhubani art forms is visible through the use of various attributes as symbolic representations and expressions of cultural identity. Traditionally, Madhubani art was used to decorate houses during festivals, rituals, and sacred practices, reflecting the deep connection between human life and the divine. In this way, it preserves the regional heritage and the ancestral traditions of the Mithila region.

The artwork features intricate detailing inspired by flora, fauna, deities, and natural sources of energy. Common motifs include the Sun God, symbolizing creation and life; fish, representing fertility; and the lotus, which signifies prosperity. The fine and intricate lines used in the art reflect the belief that life is interwoven with delicate moments, strengthened by consistent effort and the uniqueness of individual experiences.

Madhubani art largely depicts mythological stories from Hindu epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. It also portrays scenes from nature, folklore, and the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Mithila region. With the growing presence of this art form on digital platforms, questions about the authenticity of the artwork have arisen. Therefore, reflecting on and preserving its symbolic elements is essential to maintain its traditional roots while expanding its digital outreach.

The evolution of Madhubani art, from the ritualistic wall decorations created by Maithili women in their daily lives to the intricate artworks now seen on canvas demonstrates its adaptability over time. Despite the migration of people from villages to cities and their adoption of modern lifestyles, Madhubani or Mithila painting continues to preserve community values through its symbolic representations.

The values embedded in these traditional art forms remain deeply rooted in the minds of people, expressed through unique styles and narratives that have impacted lives both socially and economically. Madhubani paintings also bring local myths to life in a way that is not only culturally rich but also aesthetically appealing. For instance, "Jijai" is one of the famous local dances of Mithila. In this, the ladies and unmarried women dance while carrying a burning pot on their heads. This represents devotion towards Goddess Durga. It also symbolizes the love story of Raja (king) Chitrasena and his Rani (Queen), which the people of North Bihar express through this art form. It further signifies unity. This culture has safeguarded its values and practices for a long time, allowing us to align our lives with ancient traditions. In this way, it contributes to cultural preservation and revitalization. Mithila art styles also reflect community behavior, social class, and structure. These art forms communicate cultural norms from one generation to the next.

Women, in particular, have played a significant role in creating these paintings representing festivals and rituals, passing down deeper faith, virtues, and household traditions through their artwork and conversations. Mithila paintings also convey cultural expectations and behaviors to be followed. In one painting I observed, there was a marriage scene in which the bride and groom were beautifully adorned in designer outfits and elegant jewellery, including distinct *head tikkas* (forehead ornament). In contrast, the family members on both the bride's and groom's sides were less decorated. This highlights the cultural understanding that the bride and groom should stand out and appear especially adorned on their wedding day. Others should respectfully celebrate this idea by keeping their outer appearances more modest compared to those getting married. Madhubani artists mostly depict what they observe in their surroundings (mostly symbolic), such as houses, trees, birds, and festivals but their main focus is to present these elements in a meaningful and delicate manner. The postures and movements portrayed in their art appear very graceful and reserved, as if captured in a timeless frame.

Overall, the symbolic identity of Madhubani art could not be taken away despite technological interventions. Now the art has gained international recognition, with people from all across the world acknowledging its cultural significance and the deep values embedded in its expressions.

The only unresolved problem is identifying the sufferings of villagers that are affected by the interference of middlemen, so the villages must be educated enough to sell their artwork directly to the main markets. The second thing is that awareness should be built among buyers so that they can identify the difference between original and duplicate works. It is easier to identify because duplicate artwork may not build the desire in an audience to own it, but original artwork certainly will.

Values In Madhubani Art

The art reflects goodness in a way that it mirrors society, its values, and its unique forms of cultural interaction. Art also offers deeper reflections on human life. Artists are believed to be morally sound, as the art they create helps them connect with their inner spirituality. Art represents thoughts, emotions, beliefs, or ideas through the senses. The mystery in art satisfies both aesthetic and intellectual purposes. Art is also a condensed representation of social consciousness. It is creative and directional, giving artists a sense of meaningful expression of the deeper intricacies within their work. The purpose of art is also cognitive, as it makes individuals aware of their behavior and actions. An artist represents the truest ideology they belong to through their unique perspectives. A true form of art always justifies its cause and encourages the audience to speak up and share their interpretations by describing the art form. It also promotes the development of knowledge and awareness of various art forms.

In art, aesthetic judgment is formed in two ways: by seeing what is visible (*drshta*) and what is invisible (*adrishta*), which cannot be seen directly but can be perceived. In art, there is an elaboration of *bhava* (deeper emotions) that pervades the mind of the seeker of beauty. In the aesthetic revelations of a work of art, sense perception plays an important role. Overall, Art is beautiful when it is useful, and this usefulness reflects aesthetic awareness. Art also represents the human psyche, which becomes evident when a person's state of awareness and wisdom is expressed through an artwork.

The “beauty” in an art form signifies the harmony between its visual aspects, creative outline, and the expression of art in its truest sense. Beauty of Mithila art, in the aesthetic sense, is often associated with purpose and usefulness, but in an art form, it also reveals the dedication and time invested in its creation. It includes the space that an artist explores by delving into the very existence of being. Through the dimensions of space and time, an artist engages with the canvas to express an unreal world, a parallel existence through art.

An art form can be both an obsession and an inspiration, and this duality is reflected in the artist's immersion in space and time. Beauty is also defined by the solutions it offers to resolve life's problems. The artists of Mithila painting often create joyful artworks that represent fertility, prosperity, human-nature interactions, community life, divine blessings, and depictions of heavenly existence. It is believed that what one repeatedly shows and represents can gradually become reality. People in Jitwarpur village are often found to be content with life, and the happiness index appears high despite challenges like poverty, inadequate water systems, poor roads, and weak land management. This may be because they choose to live in an extended reality, one that continuously projects joy and hope, despite the suffering attached to it. Their art style also represents the happiness, joy, and pleasure distinct from the complexity as well as ups and downs of life. What we see, we become. The artists in the Mithila region see happiness, and they choose to reflect the same parameter in their artwork through all forms of styles and creativity.

The thought of extended reality shows a better vision of the suffering world. The ability to become visionary and that too reflected in passionate work can truly emerge through “assimilative understanding”, that includes both the self and the surrounding perspectives from a broader point of view.

Conclusion

The Mithila art form is no doubt a very popular art form because of its unique style and pattern. The art form is also evolving with the interventions of new tools and creative technology. The art form is getting digitally adapted to produce other products useful in the clothing and creative industries. Despite the root of the art form being very strong, the artists of Mithila painting still face the same challenges as were faced before. They still have the disadvantage of not being able to directly make their paintings available to the main market. The interference of middlemen makes them devoid of any monetary benefits, and in turn they remain poor while the middlemen turn rich. The problem with this approach is that the artists are unaware of marketing trends and they fail to make their paintings available to the market. They are authentic but they make less use of technology. On the other hand, audiences and art lovers also have very little knowledge about identifying the real art form. They choose to own easily available art products which are cheaper and also not original. If artists and art lovers could directly contact each other for their need fulfillment, then the artists could also benefit and the art buyers would also avoid any troubles in getting their favorite artwork. So here we understand that institutes like Chitrakala Sansthan are doing their best to fill the gaps between original artists and art lovers so that the problems faced in the promotion of Mithila painting could be resolved. This is about the latest development in this artwork. But the villagers are still facing the same issues of poverty and lack of value gain in their artwork. Despite all this, the authenticity in villagers cannot be questioned; their authentic practice of the art form is visible in the life they follow – with honesty, commitment, and love for shared values. They are the torchbearers of ancient heritage, and so it is our full responsibility to make every effort so that ordinary people know how to reach for authenticity in original artwork. Overall, this paper is a wonderful way to express the need to maintain authenticity while meeting all major technical requirements in developing an art form.

Author Biography

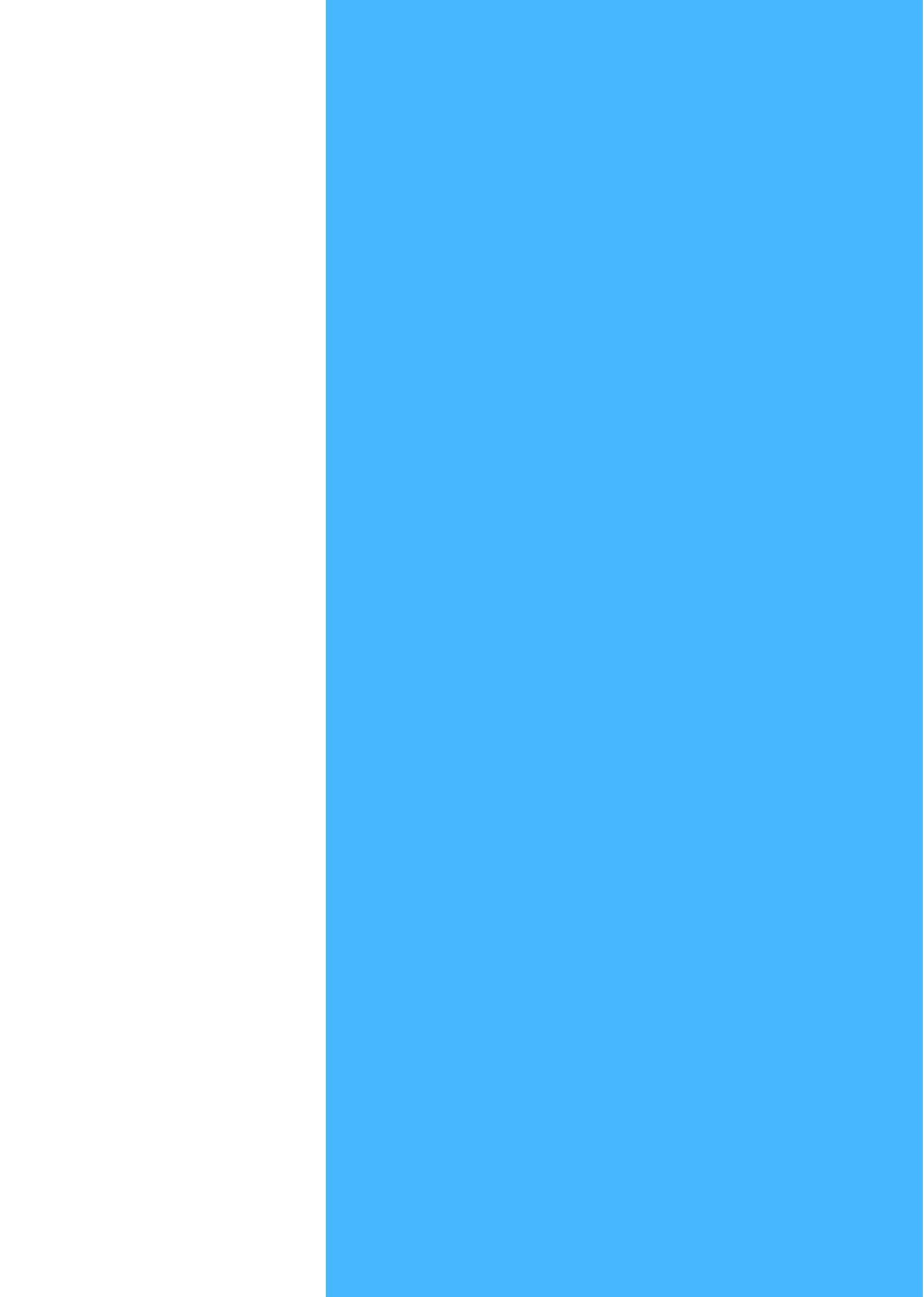
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Perspective and The Reorientation of Digital Space A Study of Chinese and Hieronymus Bosch's Paintings

Nuo Cheng

Abstract

This paper reconsiders 'perspective,' a technique of composing spatiality in painting and also particular approaches to space perception, amid contemporary shifts in spatial experience shaped by digital development. The development of digital technologies since the mid- and late-twentieth century has propelled a dramatic reconfiguration of spatiotemporal understanding and the human position in the space of the world, representing an epistemological transformation as radical as the shift from Medieval to Renaissance space-perceiving paradigms of space perception. The screen-based spatial logic increasingly automates and replaces embodied space-perceiving modes, overlapping with the technologisation, rationalisation, and planarisation that the Renaissance linear perspective brought about through a 'window' view. Linear perspective established patterns of spatial reduction by converging sight toward predetermined vanishing points, flattening multidimensional spatial experience into geometric coordinates, and positioning viewers as spectators detached from their situated space. These reductive modes persist in contemporary digital interfaces through algorithmic systems and binary classifications.

To propose an alternative for this contemporary spatial understanding, this study examines the cavalier perspective in traditional Chinese painting and in the 'eccentric' spatial expression of Hieronymus Bosch, both of which illuminate multi-perspectival, ecological, and embodied modes of space perception that maintain primitive sensation. Through phenomenology and Yuk Hui's cosmotechnical thinking, the cavalier-perspective sensory mode can be understood as 'premodern' as an exemplification of a 'poetic revealing' of the world. Rather than rejecting technology, it reveals how art can transform technology by grounding it in alternative cosmotechnical logics that cultivate adaptive sensibility and participatory dwelling instead of depriving sensory intuition and intention through automated efficiency. This study argues that recognising the contrast between linear and cavalier perspectives enables us to reorient digital technologies from 'windows' that reduce space to controllable abstractions into 'doors' that invite embodied, adaptive, multi-perspectival engagement with the world.

Introduction

Perspective,¹ as both a method of composing painting and a technique of measuring space, epitomises the epistemic and sensory paradigms of its time and cultural contexts. Different perspectival forms imply how spatial technologies shape not only what we see but also how we *inhabit* the world, meanwhile, manifesting the capabilities and nature of adjusting and transforming technology. The Western history witnesses the transformations of perspective (particularly the linear perspective, see the left in figure 1), i.e. from Medieval theocentric symbolic form to Renaissance linear geometry, and from its Modern rationalisation to contemporary screen-mediated, digitalised spatiality, implying a social progression wherein rational analysis and ongoing digital systems override humans' primitive sense of the world space, forming what Martin Heidegger (1977) termed the 'world picture' [*Weltbild*] and an 'enframing' [*Ge-stell*] (1977, 115-154, 17) mode of the world. By the same token, the automation, virtualisation, and algorithmic environments nowadays place humanity once again in a restructured spatial order, and in what existential modes we perceive space and inhabit the new formation of the world has become a crucial issue.

Phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, as the trailblazers in confronting technological transformation, reinterpreted spatial relations by reasserting the unity of the body, mind, and world. Eastern philosophies, especially Taoism and Buddhism, similarly guided Western thought to an 'ecological' path, which represents a symbiotic relationship between humans and natural ecosystems, and the interdependence of mind and nature, to confront the oblivion, disenchantment, and dread caused by the collapsed orders and construction in the twentieth-century Western society (Clarke 2003, 173).² However, some twentieth-century critics of Modernity, while valuable, demand further development and updating after decades of social upheaval, since some latently intensified the very binaries they attempted to overcome, those between reason and sensation, technology and nature, efficiency and meaning.³ They focused on critiquing technologisation and the urgency of saving existential beings from alienation, but overlooked how these oppositions may dynamically transform into modes of coexistence capable of engaging with technology.

The challenge we face today is not simply the geometrisation, rationalisation, and abstraction of space, but its 'displacement' and replacement by coded virtual environments that have no direct, bodily, intimate connection to physical locations and embodied experience, but only a digitally mediated one optimised for computational efficiency and algorithmic control. This complexity raises key questions: How might we move beyond binary thinking toward alternative relationships between technologised and primitive spatial experiences? What happens when technological ways of knowing encounter more embodied, ecological, or multi-sensory approaches?

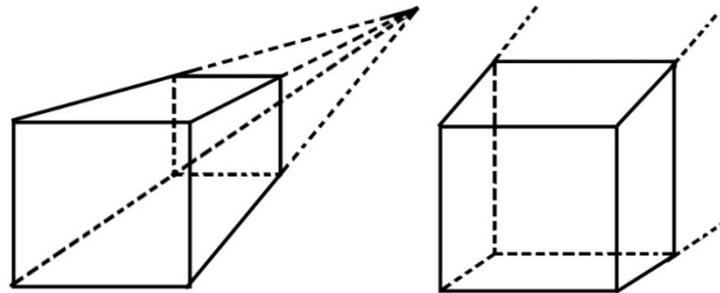


Figure 1. Linear perspective versus cavalier perspective. My own drawing.

To solve these questions, this study borrows phenomenology and Yuk Hui's cosmotechnical concepts to argue that the cavalier perspective (see the right in figure 1), a different spatial logic widely applied in traditional Chinese painting, especially landscape painting (*shanshui* 山水), and surprisingly in Renaissance Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch's triptychs, provides an alternative to both linear perspective and the reductive spatial tendencies of digital interfaces. It represents a spatial form that maintains and accommodates the multi-facet, dynamic, ecological, and embodied modes of space perception, implying Heidegger's concept of 'poetic revealing' [*Entbergung*] (1977, 35) that not only challenges and reorients the digitalised and intellectualised space-perceiving paradigms, but also reconciles technology with humans' primitive space perception.

Contemporary Digitalised Space and Linear Perspective

To understand the spatial challenges posed by digital technologies, it is necessary to realise that the contemporary screen-mediated perceptual mode is not unprecedented. The reductive spatial logic now manifesting through digital interfaces has historical antecedents in the Renaissance linear perspective, which similarly transformed embodied spatial experience into geometric, planarised abstraction. By examining how the linear perspective established patterns of spatial ordering that persist in digital environments, we can better recognise what connects these two epistemological transformations and what distinguishes them from the cavalier-perspective spatial logic.

In retrospect, every technological rupture/mutation in the history of spatial transformation and perception, as Bahtiyar Posta and Didem Tuncel (2023) note, 'reshapes the concepts of culture and civilisation, the physical and semantic structure of spaces, and therefore the perception and behaviour of people.' The spatial discordance we experience nowadays characterises a drastic shift in human

living environments from physical space to immaterial, virtual domains, which is caused by the emergence of digital media. Typically, digital screen has become the primary interface through which we contact and sense the world, mediating every aspect of contemporary life and framing our spatial experience within a size-limited square plane. Moreover, digital information disseminated through the Internet has compressed the distance and time of people's interaction and communication, accelerating the pace of social life while infinitely extending the reach of physical locations.

The spatial revolution brought by contemporary digital technologies is analogous to the one initiated by linear perspective during the Renaissance. The invention of linear perspective marked the humanistic and rationalistic rekindling, or say, the 'liberation' from the Medieval theocentric 'shackle', giving rise to a scientific, analytical, and rational space-perceiving paradigm grounded in geometrical organisation and mathematical calculation. This perspectival approach created spatiality by setting up a grid – a 'window' termed by Italian artist Leon Battista Alberti in *On Painting (De pictura, 1450)* – between the painter and the model or object. This grid fixed the painter's vision converging to a vanishing point and directing focus to spatial distances demarcated by geometric coordinates. Viewing space through this 'window,' three-dimensional space is compressed and framed into a linear, horizontal, geometric matrix, where the complexity and multiplicity of spatial dimensions of the world are 'flattened' and homogenised within a measurable and analytical realm. The linear-perspective spatiality, henceforth, not only embroiled viewers in a technological ordering but also rendered diverse dimensions and beings mathematically manageable, predictable (through pre-established vanishing points and horizons), and available for utility. As Robert Romanyshyn (1989) argues, linear perspective indoctrinated viewers with the concept of geometricised space and enacted a 'violence' through the mathematical mapping of the world, 'the violence of a *reductive* vision' beyond which the world is 'reproduced' and 'reduced' (1989, 82).

The linear perspective technique, representing a scientific technology that ushered in the early Modern techno-science (followed by the permeation of Cartesian dualism), established a particular mode of revealing the world. It reshaped and renewed Western 'worldview' in parallel with developments in worldwide voyage and cartography. The visual abstraction and geometric representation generated by map production are tantamount to the linear perspective's 'reductive vision,' where space and the world are flattened and reduced to a manufactured, scientifically measurable 'picture,' or, to use Heidegger's phrase, 'world picture.' This trend in the Modern West was identified in Heidegger's notion of 'enframing,' which indicates the essence of modern technology that determines how the world reveals itself. Heidegger accused Modern science and technology of operating a technological 'ordering' that compels everything to always stand by and to be ready for human deployment as 'standing-reserve' [*Bestand*] (1977, 17). Humans are forced by this technological

ordering to approach, reveal, and investigate nature as an object of research (or the standing-reserve), who, meanwhile, are also embroiled in this ordering process (ibid, 19) and transformed into human resources or data points.

This technological ordering eventually transcends its material apparatus. The tangible grid between the viewing painter and the viewed world later was no longer needed, since it was internalised as a 'habit of mind' and a 'metaphor' of looking at the world through a 'window', as Romanyshyn addresses, '*Before he looks out the window he has already established his grid and hence the way in which the world beyond the window will appear*' (1989, 77). It constructed a particular perceptual manner that has become characteristic of the Modern Western sensory culture since the Renaissance, a habit of perceiving the world via the analytical eye, which spontaneously treated space as 'enframed' into orders of control, efficiency, and utility.

We might find the similarity when comparing the linear-perspective 'window' with contemporary electronic screens. The flattening of reality into screens and data points manifests the same reductive tendencies that linear perspective introduced, translating lived, multisensory experience into computable interface operations. Akin to the 'window', the screen establishes a boundary that mediates and hampers the direct, intimate interaction between humans and the world space they inhabit. We no longer *touch* the world but swipe, click, scroll through its representation. More importantly, we have learned to see through screens as naturally as Renaissance viewers learned to see through perspective grids.

This mediation operates through the 'digital environment' constructed by intricately interconnected Internet systems, digital units, media, and information technologies, which differentiates itself from the 'physical environment.' As Atanas Kirjakovski (2023) clarifies, the 'physical environment' is accessible to all inhabitants in the world and invites individual active interpretation, requiring adaptive responses and bodily engagement. In contrast, the 'digital environment' adjusts itself to accommodate individual users' needs. The automation and customisation of digital technologies weaken humans' motor intentionality and active perception by algorithmically depriving their adaptive capability. The user need not adapt since the interface adapts for them, and in doing so, it atrophies the very capacities that constitute active engagement with the world. This erosion of adaptive capability is being intensified by the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) nowadays. As an algorithmic system capable of operating tasks that require human intelligence, AI represents a goal-orientated technology that provides alternative 'options' and the most efficient, suitable 'solutions' conforming to people's criteria and needs (Phillips-Wren 2013, 25). This feature is analogous to the linear perspective's vanishing point, which symbolises a pre-determined endpoint of an event, timeline, spatial field, narrative, etc., that is predictable and algorithmically optimised.

AI's accurate imitation of humans' intelligent behaviours and capacities (e.g. sensing, thinking, learning, analysing, acting, etc.) aggravates concerns at the social-ethical level about whether AI would displace humans' agency through its autonomy of analysing specific circumstances and taking corresponding measures. As Leebong Lee and Young-Jin Choi describe it, AI excels at 'converting unstructured information into actionable knowledge' (2020). These burgeoning technologies and the trend of intellectualisation force humans to readjust their sensory habits and cognitive modalities, along with the formation of renewed sensory cultures and 'upgraded' (faster, supposedly more efficient) approaches to obtaining knowledge. Space perception is brought again to confront a dilemma resembling what was caused by geometry and rational thinking in the Renaissance – the constantly collapsed and reconstructed spatial relations and spatial concepts, now driven by digitalisation. This raises the concern about whether the history of the Renaissance and Modernity is repeating, i.e. whether technological hegemony is once again homogenising world space through the universalisation of a mode of rationality. Does the very recognition of this pattern open possibilities for alternative responses?

Cavalier Perspective as An Alternative Spatial Logic

Cavalier Perspective in Bosch's and Traditional Chinese Painting

The new cognitive challenge engendered by the linear-perspective-like, digitalised, and intellectualised space-perceiving modes demands that we turn to a different perspectival logic that provides an alternative mindset of our spatial engagement. This exists in what is termed the cavalier perspective, a perspectival technique found in traditional Chinese painting, Medieval iconographies, and (some) avant-garde art.⁴ It differs from the 'scientific,' 'rationalised' linear perspective since it, rather than converging sight toward a single vanishing point, distorts and reverses the foreshortening of spatiality, depicting objects and figures in multi-perspective, holistic forms. Scenes unfold panoramically without pre-established vanishing points or horizons functioning as fixed endpoints. All these features emerge from the painter's immediate, intimate perception of spatiality via their sensory body – a form of perception unmediated by geometric calculation or algorithmic apparatus. It implies a fully immersive and mobile space-perceiving approach that echoes what Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002) addressed in his phenomenological theories, 'the presentation of objects in perspective cannot be understood except through the resistance of my body to all variation of perspective' ([1945] 2002, 106). In other words, all the hidden faces of a thing become visible to me not through calculation or inference but because I know they are already *there*. The body functions as an active agent in constituting spatial meaning instead of as a mere receiver of external information and environmental data.

This perspectival form also relates to Merleau-Ponty's 'spatiality of situation,' where spatiality comes into being when the painter's body faces certain tasks in specific situations. As Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002) stressed:

What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal 'place' defined by its task and situation. (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002, 291)

This formulation proves crucial for understanding the difference between the cavalier perspective and both the linear perspective and algorithmic spatial mediation. Instead of merely displaying pre-calculated 'options' optimised for efficiency, what Merleau-Ponty and the cavalier perspective emphasise is the irreducible capability that our (non-scientific, non-technologised) *body* bears for responding creatively and adaptively to its spatial situations and environments. This creates what Romanyshyn (1989) describes as space that 'seems to invite you into it' (1989, 84). The painter aims to bring viewers *into* the space where they can perceive objects, figures, and their surroundings through their own bodily engagement.

The wide use of the cavalier perspective in traditional Chinese painting is especially attributed to the beliefs in mind-body unification and human-nature harmony that are both phenomenological and ecological, which have profoundly shaped Chinese spatial and existential notions. Originating from a variety of sources – *I Ching*, Taoism, and Confucianism, among others – the ancient Chinese believed the world to be an organic whole initially generated from *qi* (气, vital energy) and *tao* (道, the way) (Liu 2010, 234, 42). All existences were born to be correlated, which constitute a relational web as part of the interplay of forces like *yin* and *yang* and the five elements of the cosmos. There is no absolute hierarchy and separation between subject and object, human and nature in this whole. Space in the Chinese tradition thus appears as a 'relational' and 'correlative' concept, and perceiving space thereby refers to *being in relation* to the spatial and temporal surroundings, associated with how humans adjust themselves to live in harmony with nature through bodily practices rather than a unidirectional process of a subjective viewer viewing or functionalising an 'objective' external environment. Specifically, ancient Chinese people took the geographical orientation as a reference and guidance to ensure the effective functioning of society, applying it to decision-making, astronomical detection, imperial establishment, etc. This reciprocity between humans and natural space is a dynamic process of aligning the individual microcosm with the macrocosm of Heaven and Earth. This alignment is key to personal health, spiritual enlightenment, and social harmony, laying an epistemic ground for the representation of spatiality in traditional Chinese painting.

With these epistemological foundations, traditional Chinese artists treated the act of painting as neither an intellectual activity nor an analytical imitation of 'objective' exterior reality, but an expression of the painter's and the viewer's bodily being in/with the world. Typified in traditional Chinese landscape painting (*shanshui* 山水) compositional form, Guo Xi (1023-1085) proposed a viewing manner of landscape named 'three-distance perspective' (*sanyuanfa* 三远法) in his treatise 'The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams' (*Linquan Gaozhi* 林泉高致).⁵ The 'three distances' – 'high' (*gaoyuan* 高远), 'deep' (*shenyuan* 深远), and 'level' (*pingyuan* 平远) – denote respectively viewing from bottom upward toward mountain peaks, from front penetrating toward depths, and from near positions extending toward far horizons. This multi-dimensional space-perceiving approach enables viewers to roam dynamically and freely in the limitless space created by the artist without being confined to a stipulated linear order of viewing. Through the back-and-forth interweaving between near sceneries and far distances, between high realms and low positions, the cavalier perspective merges the interrelation of space-time, *yin-yang*, and heaven-earth into landscape and architectural paintings. This approach generated the compositional form of 'three-spatial planes,' depicting the landscape through three superimposed yet continuous sections – foreground, middle distance, and far distance (Fong 2003). It became a representative concretisation of cavalier-perspective space perception not only in traditional Chinese landscape painting but also in architecture, genre, and religious paintings.

Traditional landscape thought thus provides a paradigm for harmonious and mutually adjustive relationships between humans and both natural and artificial space, which we might consider as an ecological approach to spatial perception that reconciles techno-scientific mastery and participatory dwelling.

There is a surprising overlap between the perspectival forms in Hieronymus Bosch's work and the cavalier perspective in traditional Chinese painting. As a Renaissance artist well-known and perplexed for his eccentric, grotesque artistic style, Bosch stands as an anomaly within his historical context. While his contemporaries enthusiastically adopted linear perspective as characteristic of artistic and scientific modernity, Bosch circumvented this dominant configuration, maintaining instead what can be recognised as pre-Modern spatial forms that bear structural resonance with Chinese landscape logic. For instance, the composition in the left panel of Bosch's *The Haywain* similarly uses a three-segmented vertical composition to narrate the three sequential stories of Adam and Eve, resembling the 'three-spatial planes' in traditional Chinese landscape painting. This panoramic, multi-segmented compositional form is also typified by his other representative works, such as *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *The Last Judgement*.

With a similar composition and perspectival choices to those found in traditional Chinese paintings, Bosch's triptychs also imply the 'spatiality of situation.' His hyper-fictional spaces abound in moral, spiritual, and symbolic significance, where all beings – human figures, hybrid creatures, fantastic contraptions, and

architectural elements – *live in* this space through symbolic forms, chaotically entangled in meaningful relations. Their scale rests on their symbolic weight, relationships, or functions within the narrative of sin, temptation, and the divine judgment. Through non-fixed, shifting perspectives, his triptychs present moral journeys, usually from Eden to the mundane world and to Hell, where the spatial progression of landscape is pushed by the moral situations of its inhabitants. The trajectory of this journey is open for viewers to decode and experience according to their own moral understanding. Unlike linear perspective, which determines in advance where the viewer must stand and what they must see, Bosch's spatial arrangement, akin to Chinese spatial depiction, *invites* active, interpretive engagement.

'Window' versus 'Door,' 'Enframing' versus 'Poetic Revealing'

Compared to the linear-perspective, technologised 'window,' which increases the distance between us and the world by establishing a barrier between two worlds, in each of which humans and other beings are separately allocated, the cavalier perspective is more like a 'door.' The main distinction between a 'window' and a 'door' is that the former, as a limit-scaled framework, planarises and reduces everything in a space to a flattened, abstract 'picture,' and the latter invites us to *walk into* the world as an 'experiencer' rather than 'spectator.' David Hockney (1984) notes that 'you can walk through a door toward what you are seeing' (1984, 20). The cavalier perspective provides a direct channel for the body to inhabit the phenomenal world that continuously unfolds and opens to changes. The situatedness of the body evoked by the door reveals that *adapting* is a vital principle of inhabiting and sensing the world. Instead of autonomy being deprived by the functions of linear perspective and digital technologies, the cavalier perspective requires one to *actively* open the 'door' and move through it in adaptive response to the specific circumstances and opportunities it presents.

The latent connection and resonance among Bosch, cavalier perspective, and Chinese spatial thought and their struggling relationships with rationalised linear-perspective space perception illuminate the Heideggerian concept of poetic 'revealing' which, in contrast with his 'Enframing' (*Ge-stell*), denotes the creation of art and craftsmanship that allows things to 'come forth' or 'unconceal themselves' (Heidegger 1977, 21) in their own being/nature while preserving the openness of the world. Both the traditional Chinese artists and Bosch have the ability to balance the 'enframed' and the 'poetic' by transforming perspective from a space-measuring technology into a poetic expression that enables the world to reveal itself in its full multi-facetedness.

Typically, the 'three-spatial planes' composition in Chinese landscape painting enables the landscape to unfold with the gradual emergence of the foreground, middle ground, and background. The rivulets and bridges, vegetations, and pavilions among the mountains are analogous to directional signs that propel the unfolding process in a poetic form.

Viewers are also invited to engage in this revealing process, whose vision and bodily sensation are guided by the dynamic and coherent spatial transition, while giving rise to the continuous *becoming* of the landscape. Space is not presented as a finished product but as an ongoing event, perpetually revealing itself through the viewer's participatory engagement.

Despite manifesting in a slightly different form, Bosch's spatial arrangement reveals 'enframed' space in a 'poetic' way through his paradoxical pictorial expression. On the one hand, Bosch created a 'picture' of the world brimming with techno-scientific elements and geometric symbols, prefiguring the reality of early Modernism, which implies his 'adaptive' character similar to Chinese thought. On the other hand, he subverted the geometric and technological constraints of this 'picture' through the chaotic entanglement and disordered spatial configuration. By creating hyper-fictional space, he uncovered alternative realities that span both the 'primitive' and technologically 'enframed' orders of the world. This space is an alternative world where human actions, divine judgment, technological function, and the cosmic system constitute multi-dimensional ecosystems that resist the reduction to a single, subordinate ordering principle.

This poetic dimension of space perception transcends the limits of functional seeing. Merleau-Ponty (1967) suggested that, unlike animals, humans have the capacity to turn their surroundings into objects of thought and reflection, to make them visible and meaningful. The act of creation, such as art, provides an opening to a more expansive, universal understanding of existence. Art discloses the world as a coherent, meaningful totality, a 'universe' that integrates and transcends the narrow confines of given environments (Merleau-Ponty 1967, 176). Yuk Hui's concept of 'cosmotechnics' (2021) also provides a compelling explanation for this. Hui treats Chinese landscape (*shanshui*) as 'a cosmotechnics resituating humans and their technological world within a broader cosmic reality,' and painting, as a kind of technical activity, accomplishes the unification of the cosmic and moral orders (2021, 141). This understanding demonstrates that technology is not supposed to be treated as opposed to cosmos but participates in cosmic unfolding.

A parallel can thus be found between traditional Chinese and Bosch's spatial forms as both give onto manifold spatial dimensions and manners of dwelling in and knowing the world. This spatial form mediates 'the visible and invisible, the sensible and the intelligible' (Jullien 2018, 68) by deconstructing the 'enframed picture' and providing an openness to experience and imagination. Through this openness, viewers are encouraged to (re)construct a (new) world by incorporating their social, cultural, and moral practices. Spatial perspective transforms into a 'poetic revealing' in both Bosch's and Chinese art, articulating a cosmotechnical, rather than an 'enframing' attitude to the world. The transformation from a 'window' into a 'door' represents a mode of emplacement and a cultivation and maintenance of sensibility that is not subordinate to but harmonises techno-automatic, computational efficiency.

Basho, Intelligence, and Cosmotechanical Reorientation

Indeed, perspective now inescapably confronts a dilemma resembling the Renaissance geometrised, rational and abstract thinking. The automation of digital technologies tends to complete the subordination of embodied, multisensory spatial experience to digital mediation and rational determination. This ambivalent situation can be considered already prefigured in Bosch's images six centuries ago. The paradoxical spatial expression in his worldview, positioned as either a prophecy of a historical recurrence or a lamentation of the earthly world, provides a platform for twofold contemplation and strategies for new technological challenges. Both humans and techno-hybrid species in his depiction are embroiled in a moral and perceptual predicament, required to make choices that may lead to spiritual sublimation, moral corruption, or other forms of existential struggling. This is equal to the choice we are facing today, which is brought about by the ongoing swing between technological manipulation and technological reorientation. Akin to the hybridisation and plurality of Bosch's world dissolving the boundaries of spatiotemporal dimensions and biological species, the digital and virtual domain appears as a boundless 'garden,' where earthly delights (e.g. video games, TV shows, social media) and moral issues (e.g. cybercrime, online harassment) coexist, simultaneously constituting liberation or entrapment, connection or alienation.

Hui's cosmotechanical theories provide a reconception of the relationship between art, techno-science, and the cosmic-moral orders, reconciling the reason-sensation binarisation that has plagued modern thought. Hui (2021) borrows Kitarō Nishida's notion of *basho* (place) (2012) as a bridge between Eastern philosophies and questions of space perception arising from reason and technology. *Basho* refers to a 'place' or 'field,' a 'containing ground,' in which both subject and object are already situated. Consciousness, for Nishida, is not an individual faculty; rather, it dwells *in* this field and [is] enveloped by it (ibid). *Basho* can thus be understood as a 'field of consciousness' (Hui 2021, 269) that is simultaneously universal in its logical structure and particular in its historical-cultural manifestation. This concept overcomes the subject/object, mind/world, and form/matter dualisms. Drawing on this, Hui suggests:

... intuition is conditioned by *basho*. Such a conditioning is not a determination per se, but rather in our vocabulary, a *cultivation* of sensibility. The ego is *emplaced* because its place in the cosmos is insignificant, or nothing — it has a place because it doesn't have a place. (Hui 2021, 262)

Hui's contemplation of Chinese *shanshui* painting demonstrates how this concept of emplaced consciousness functions in practice. In an era where digital technologies (especially artificial intelligence) increasingly tend to replicate or surpass human creativity, Hui positions *shanshui* as both an art form and a type of logic that resists such reductive framings of intelligence (2021, 254). *Shanshui's* recursive structural logic and spatial openness suggest a non-dualistic intelligence, where intuition and reason, subject and object, being and nothingness do not stay in opposition but continuously mirror and contain each other. Hui interprets the experience of *shanshui* as an 'intuitive act' enveloped by place (ibid, 264), meaning that the painter or viewer is 'contained' within the work's unfolding place, where the autonomous subject is dissolved in the 'permanent reflection' that the painting brings about (ibid, 260). This reveals a recursive mirroring process, i.e. consciousness reflecting upon consciousness, through which the viewer loses the privileged autonomous position and becomes *emplaced* amid the mountains and water (ibid). The painting does not present itself as an object for a viewing subject but draws the viewer into its spatial logic, transforming observation into participation, analysis into cultivation.

This movement from subject-object opposition to recursive emplacement offers clues for the reason-sensation reconciliation. This process is neither purely rational (objective measurement and classification) nor purely sensory (immediate bodily feeling), but rather a fertilisation of sensibility conditioned by historical and cultural *basho*. Reason and sensation, or technical skill and intuitive apprehension, emerge together from this ground/*basho*; neither is foundational to the other.

This rethinking of spatiality transforms how we approach the challenge of digitalised and intellectualised spatial experience. Following Hui's argument, the fundamental issue is not technology itself but the cosmotechnical logic embedded in it and structuring its operation as it is always already situated within specific historical-cultural fields that condition what can be perceived, thought, and created. The challenge is not to reject technology but to reorient it cosmotechnically, grounding it in alternative logics of thought and relation.

We thus need to be vigilant about contemporary techno-scientific trends, where as if the problems – the erosion and deprivation of our adaptive capability, motor intentionality, and active interpretive engagement with the world – lie in the so-called 'passive' technological navigation. Art, for Hui regarding this trap, shows its flexibility, resilience, and mediating function since it is simultaneously determined by its technology and transforms technology, specifically 'by returning technology to a primordial question of Being'(2021, 221-222).⁶ The cavalier perspective in Bosch's works and Chinese painting, understood through *basho*, reveals that genuine intelligence, whether human or artificial, cannot be reduced to computational operations detached from embodied, culturally situated practice.

This interweaving duality shows that, if we interpret Bosch's paintings as a disillusionment with the established systems of morality, we might retain a postmodernist attitude toward the burgeoning technological spatial relation and the world's plurality. Alternatively, if we interpret his depiction as an anticipation and embracement of new trends, Bosch's art transforms into a motivation to find new ways of being-in-the-world by combining the Chinese ecological manner of *adapting*.

In this respect, Hui's cosmotechnical thinking identifies that art, attributed to be least constrained by disciplinary divisions, has the potential and flexibility to conceive a new program that engages with technology and thinking (2021, 286). The recovery of spatial-perceptual intimacy becomes possible through renewed attention to our embodied situatedness within continuous environmental fields, as examined through Nishida's *basho* and the cavalier perspective. Revisiting the sensory-cultural heritage of the cavalier perspective might be a valuable pathway to reconstruct space perception and a way of coping with the sensory and moral challenges in the digital era.

Perspective Inspiration for Digital Spatial and Moral Practice

The spatial logics embedded in linear and cavalier perspectives offer contrasting lessons for how we might design and inhabit digital environments. The historical trajectory of linear perspective reveals a cautionary pattern for digital design. As introduced earlier, linear perspective's reduction of multidimensional spatiality to geometric coordinates and analytical matrices by means of a 'window' view and fixed vanishing points finds contemporary echoes in screen-mediated and intellectualised space-perceiving modes. This inheritance manifests practically in interface designs that prioritise efficiency over exploratory engagement, as well as in recommendation algorithms that navigate users toward optimised endpoints.

Marshall McLuhan (2001) describes the automatised, highly efficient living modes caused by digital media as 'an instant implosion and an interfusion of space and functions,' through which people are liberated from the 'fragmented civilisation of centre-margin structure' and can be involved in an organic whole – a 'global village' (2001, 101) It is a structure of world interdependence that allows the coexistence of diverse dwellings, hybrid cultural formations, and multiple utterances. Boundaries and demarcations between different socio-cultural communities and different dimensions (i.e. the virtual/real, the local/global, the private/public) become more blurred within the infinite digital networks. This decentralisation is well digested by the multi-perspectival openness of cavalier-perspective spatial logic as against the latent hegemony of digitalisation and goal-orientated optimisation in spatial practice, especially in visual art and moral concerns.

Its poetic-revealing and cosmotechnical approach, manifested in Bosch's and traditional Chinese *shanshui's* spatial strategies encouraging the viewers to traverse the landscape in an interpretively unfolding way, suggests that the digital realm can be designed as a field of exploration instead of data-driven determination. This requires re-functionalising digital and algorithmic technologies as expansions of human sensation rather than replacements for cognitive and sensory initiative.

In contemporary artistic practice mediated by digital devices, algorithmically optimised options should thus function as 'sparking' and 'cultivating' artists' ideas rather than 'manipulating' their creative process, with final decisions retained by the (human) artists. Artists can draw on the 'three-distance perspective' and 'three-spatial planes' composition techniques to create non-linear narrative spaces that guide bodily movement and the shift of perspectives. In installation art, technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive sensors can be integrated not to create more realistic illusions (another form of 'window') but to enhance immersive experiences and the body's sensitivity to spatial relationships. For instance, artworks can dynamically evolve based on the viewer's breathing, gestures, or positional changes, directly converting the viewer's embodied presence into generative parameters and achieving the on-site body-world interweaving described by Merleau-Ponty and Taoist thought. Furthermore, pursuing 'poetic revealing' rather than precise 'reproduction,' artworks can accommodate ambiguity, polysemy, and incompleteness, much like the eccentric juxtapositions in Bosch's paintings or the blank spaces (*liubai* 留白) in Chinese landscape paintings.⁷ This reserves room and openness for the viewer's imagination and interpretation, making art a *basho* that engenders reflection and dialogue instead of a terminal for transmitting fixed information, contrasting to linear perspective's drive toward completed, predetermined representation.

At the ethical level, the linear-perspective legacy, clearly demarcating subject and object, internal and external, the viewer and viewed, part and whole, mirrors dualistic classification systems in contemporary digital ethics, such as setting digital information as either true or false, users as either verified or flagged, etc. Such settings, although systematic and seemingly rationalised, actually impose a unidirectional moral viewpoint that frames ethical judgement within fixed criteria structures and limited experiential fields. The cavalier-perspective ethical logic, by comparison, embraces moral 'mobility' via its pluralistic and participatory arrangement. Applied to digital ethics, this requires a shift from user- or developer-centric modules toward relational and multi-stance moral consideration, enabling diverse opinions from different social groups to coexist. This is illuminated in Bosch's hybrid landscape, where the entanglement and ambiguous demarcations among species, spatial layouts, and moral behaviours and social classes imply that a key point of ethical understanding lies in critically and intentionally interpreting ambiguous signals and responding adaptively.

Its blurring of binary moral coding (safe/unsafe, fake/true, allowed/forbidden, etc.) indicates an existential approach grounded in context-sensitive judgement, which becomes crucial in online environments riddled with misinformation, virtual identity formation, and AI-driven persuasion. This encourages us to improve multi-layered ethical evaluation systems, where different 'planes' of evaluation, including cultural contexts, community standards, speaker's intention and situation, social emotional fluctuations, ecological changes, etc., interpenetrate instead of operating hierarchically.

Hence, it is important to situate digital technologies in cosmotechnical systems of meaning, relationship, and embodied experience that circumvent reduction to efficiency optimisation. Through cultivating digital literacy as spatial practice, users can learn to recognise when digital environments function as 'windows' versus 'doors,' maintaining their embodied awareness and cultivating their adaptive capabilities even when interacting through screens.

Conclusion

All the above have informed us that 'perspective,' as both artistic technique and spatial logic, profoundly shapes how we perceive, inhabit, and design space across historical epochs. The comparison between the linear and cavalier perspectives has already paved two distinct avenues for contemporary digital spatial experience, displaying the choices between the 'window' and 'door,' 'enframing' and 'poetic revealing,' 'dualism' and 'oneness,' 'pre-established' and 'exploratory,' 'technologised' and 'ecological.' This vacillation demonstrates that spatial digitalisation represents both challenge and opportunity.

The cavalier perspective, a spatial logic cross-culturally bridging traditional Chinese *shanshui* and Bosch's wonderland, has created a *basho* that unlocks the possibility of harmonious ways of being-in-the-world. Bosch's eccentrically hybrid landscape foretells the chaos, confusion, and moral choice brought by the technologisation of the world, while Chinese *shanshui* symbolises the ecological concepts of human-nature harmony. The practical solutions that the cavalier perspective provides lie in a flexible 'attitude shift' from viewing technology as a tool for constructing isolated, controllable, and efficiency-maximising 'windows' (and 'picture') to developing it into a 'door' that nurtures embodied participation, ecological perception, and poetic-revealing exploration. Bosch's unique spatial understanding outstanding from the epistemic mainstream in the Renaissance, as well as his resonance with traditional Chinese *shanshui*, imply that such alternative spatial relationships have always existed but await rediscovery (or reimagination) for our contemporary time. Therefore, the question facing us is whether we will allow this door to remain open and how our creative practice enables this openness.

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Notes

¹ The term 'perspective' originates from the Medieval Latin word *perspectiva* and Middle French *perspective*, which initially referred to the 'science of optics.' In sixteenth-century Italy, it was widely used to name the technique of creating geometric spatiality in the art of drawing. The definition of 'perspective' was also expanded to the prospect for the future development of a situation or an event, or the way in which one conceives or envisions the course of events. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 'perspective,' revised 2005. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/perspective_n?tab=etymology#30970072.)

² Since the 1960s, the disillusionment of established systems and values became increasingly intensified, ranging from scientific realm (i.e. the atomistic-mechanistic model of nature) to faithful realm (i.e. the Christian worldview with radical division between the spiritual and the natural worlds). In this context, Western thinkers were eager to find, as J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames addressed, 'new integrative and moral paradigms by means of which to establish a more harmonious and mutually fulfilling and beneficial relationship of man to nature.' (J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 11-12.)

³ Such as Herbert Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society in his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), where he contends that technological rationality and consumerism function as instruments of control, integrating individuals into systems of production and consumption through mass media and advertising that constructs an 'one-dimensional' social order. Marcuse describes this situation as 'unfreedom,' wherein individuals irrationally labour to satisfy artificially constructed desires and eventually lose their humanity as trapped into the industrial machine. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Routledge, 2002).

⁴ Cavalier perspective denotes a form of oblique/parallel projection generally applied in graphical and technical drawing. In this representation, the projection lines of an object are parallel and make a 45-degree angle with both the vertical and horizontal planes of projection. This is exemplified by Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, which undermine the established and dominant linear-perspective structure by distorting shapes and synthesising and superimposing multiple angles.

⁵ *Linquan Gaozhi* presents a summation of Guo Xi's technical experience and contemplation of composing landscape painting, compiled by his son Guo Si. The art theories on landscape painting in this work became a paradigm and canon for later Chinese landscape artists, which later influenced other genres of painting.

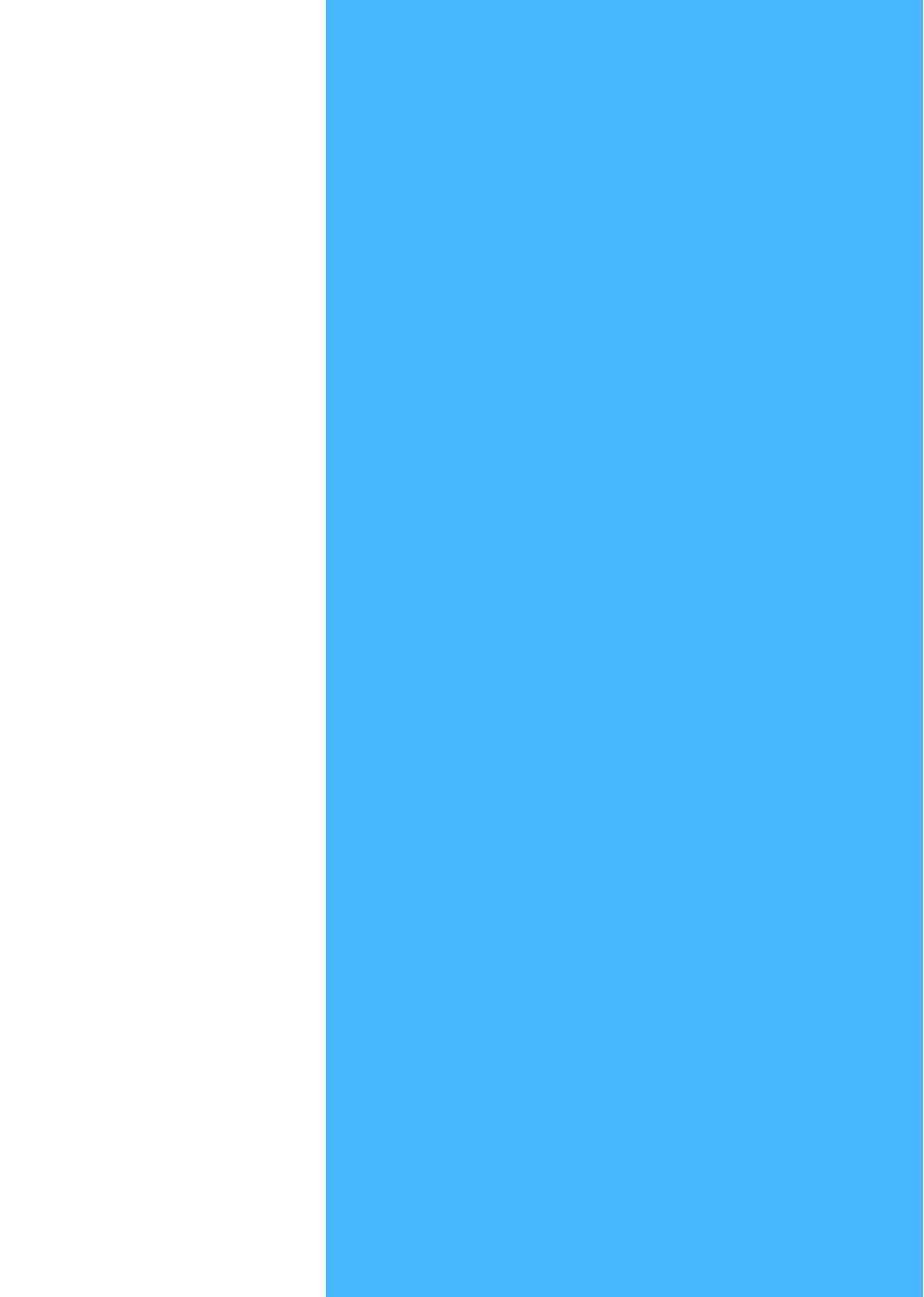
⁶ Hui's such insight inverts Walter Benjamin's famous inquiry into how technology transforms art. The Being here, according to Hui, can be equally replaced by the concepts of 'the Unknown, the non-rational, nothingness, or *dao*' in different contexts.

⁷ The spatial technique of *liubai* (留白, leaving blank) in traditional Chinese painting, especially landscape painting, is applied to create the vastness and endlessness of natural space through intentional blank areas in the background. It assimilates the Taoist view of balance where emptiness can create fullness, while extreme fullness can lead to emptiness. The blank area seems to cause void in a painting composition, while it creates an openness for infinite possibilities that invisibly fills the void.

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Contextual Creativity and Desirable Autonomy of Humans and AI in the Arts: A Comparative Interpretation with a Focus on Visual Art and Music

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Abstract

The rise of generative AI systems has transformed the dynamics of artistic creation by shifting decision-making power from human creators to the non-human entities. In contrast to traditional tools that merely embodied human ideas, generative AI systems produce outputs that extend the human artist's input, reshaping the interactions among artists, audiences and machines. While existing scholarship has primarily focused on the economic, legal, and philosophical implications of AI systems in the arts, such as job displacement and debates about artificial creativity, there remains limited research on how human creators delegate artistic autonomy to AI systems and how such delegation varies across different artistic practices. This paper aims to offer frameworks for addressing 'contextual creativity' and 'desirable autonomy' in AI-generated art and music. The analysis demonstrates how visual artists' curatorial labour and musicians' layered processes, from composition to performance, necessitate distinct approaches to recognising the value of AI-generated art and music. By contextualising human-AI collaboration within the two artistic practices, the paper points out the implications for artists, the creative industries and cultural policy, highlighting AI literacy, stratified copyright systems and sector-specific governance to maintain the value of AI-generated art and music. The study ultimately advances debates on the intrinsic value of the arts in the age of AI, offering pathways toward a sustainable ecosystem in which human and AI systems coexist under the context-dependent nature of creativity and artistic autonomy.

Introduction

The advancement of AI technologies, including generative AI systems, has raised the issue of power transfer between human creators and performers and computational programmes. Human artists have decided how to control previous art tools ranging from non-computational ones, such as brushes and sculpting knives, to digital audio workstations, audio interfaces, etc. The functions of such tools and equipment have been limited to physically and mechanically embodying and materialising human artists' ideas and talents. The roles of generative AI systems go beyond mere 'functioning', thereby engaging more with human creators and performers' artistic practices. They transfer artistic power from themselves to an AI system to which they choose to delegate a chunk of work, enabling the AI system to generate new ideas and outputs that derive from but are not the same as the human input. The power transfer in the arts has extended the scope of the conceptual and performative dialogue from humans – i.e., artists, critics and audiences – to the non-human entity.

In situations where AI systems are used across the arts sectors including visual art and music, most relevant research tends to focus on examining the social and economic impacts of AI systems on human artists, such as the issues of job loss and digital artwork forgery (Jiang et al. 2023) and the disruption of copyright regimes (Singh 2025). Some legal and policy studies have explored anxiety about fairness, accountability, and transparency (FAccT) in artists' training data (Epstein et al. 2020; Hemment et al. 2023; O'Meara and Murphy 2023). Arts-related research has also discussed possible perceptions of prompt engineering as a new artistic performance (Bender 2023; Dehouche and Dehouche 2023). More philosophical studies of artificial creativity have addressed whether an AI system is creative (Eshraghian 2020; Moruzzi 2025; Runco 2023) and its potential benefits and threats to human creativity (Baklaga 2025; Marrone, Cropley and Medeiros 2024; O'Toole and Horvát 2024).

However, research that details how individuals transfer their decision-making power to AI systems on their behalf is largely missing (Candrian and Scherer 2022). It is especially significant to examine "how [such] delegation varies ... [and how it] may spur a high or low desire to maintain ... [human] decision making power" (Candrian and Scherer 2022, 2). To redefine creativity in the context of AI-generated art, it is necessary to explore how AI systems reshape human creativity embedded in making decisions on diverse artistic performances and vice versa if it is not possible to prevent the use of AI systems in artistic creation. It does not necessarily mean that this paper fully advocates the use of AI systems, which could replace human creativity embedded in artworks.

Rather, the paper aims to discuss new aspects of human and artificial creativity, which arise from human-AI collaboration, thereby addressing whether they are desirable in terms of the inherent value of an art field. We ultimately provide avenues for discussing a proper ecosystem of art society where the human and non-human entities coexist.

The paper begins by developing theoretical and conceptual frameworks for addressing 'contextual creativity' and 'desirable autonomy' in the arts. Given that the creativity and autonomy required across the arts sectors would vary, the two main ideas are applied to the research question of how the desirable autonomy of humans and AI systems can be contextualised in different types of creativity in visual art and music. The academic discussion is employed to address the implications for artists and the creative industry landscape. This paper concludes by recommending some policy measures to sustain the remit of cultural policy in the era of human-AI creative collaboration.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Theoretical Framework: Contextual Creativity

Creativity is one of the key topics in discussing the values of artworks that are produced by humans only or by humans and AI. Traditional studies of creativity emphasise novelty and surprise of outputs (Cropley 1999; Grace et al. 2014). More critical studies of creativity underscore dynamic processes of diversifying existing knowledge of the arts to challenge entrenched styles (Walia 2019). Recognising the importance of both the product and process of the arts when it comes to exploring multi-dimensions of creativity, this paper lies in the idea that creativity is contextual, depending on a certain arts field. In visual art, a drawing or water/oil painting on canvas shows the artist's intention, techniques, skills and talents. The output demonstrates the artist's creativity, which justifies their authorship of the work. On the other hand, in the music sector, not only a music piece, i.e., a composer's output, but also a performer's playing of the piece can show artistic talents and creativity. Even if the player has not composed the piece by themselves and does not have the authorship of it, they can demonstrate creativity by interpreting the piece in their own style, distinguishing themselves from other players. The nature of an artistic performance can therefore determine how diverse types of artistic creativity are evaluated.

Furthermore, creativity is not only a mental or generative act; rather, creativity in the arts is also negotiated within 'art worlds' governed by shared conventions (Becker 1982). The creativity or artistic value embedded in an artwork gains recognition not only from the genius of the artist, but also from collective norms and efforts of different players such as collectors, galleries, critics, dealers, even researchers in their fields. The same dynamic appears in the music field where composers, performers, producers and conductors together influence how the music is delivered and appreciated. It is therefore imperative to consider specific norms in each arts sector, which affect and sometimes standardise how to decide on whether an artwork possesses a 'good' quality and is eligible to be regarded as a proper artwork.

In a similar vein to Becker (1982)'s emphasis on the importance of views of critics and audiences, Van Maanen (2009) takes a sociological approach to arts production and distribution as a structured process affected by norms of an arts sector. Even though an artist shows a dramatically new style, the art community they belong to may view it against established norms, because creativity is not evaluated in isolation but depends on the shared evaluative norms of the field in a specific period of time. As a result, it might not be recognised as a piece of artwork that demonstrates both novelty and an acceptable level of creativity. Shared norms in an arts field therefore influence how the arts society accepts new types of art forms. Those arts norms are contextual upon ever-changing perception of the members of an arts society, which can be exemplified by AI-generated art, i.e., "generated objects, media, situations and experiences [in the arts] that do not have the usual systematicity and predictability of human arts (Manovich 2019, 8), but are not random mechanical remixes of aesthetic elements (Manovich 2019). The paper is therefore grounded in the idea that the recognition of AI systems' art creation is contextual, depending on the different performative natures and conventional norms of visual art and music. This theoretical framework of contextual creativity will be employed to discuss human-AI creative collaboration in the following sections.

Conceptual Framework: Desirable Autonomy

AI autonomy is one of the controversial features of AI systems, leading diverse fields to adopt different approaches to AI contributions. The definition of autonomy itself is situational (Ezenkwu and Starkey 2019) and contingent upon the goals of the environments in which the non-human agent behaves (Ferreira 2025). It therefore explains diversifying sectoral views on the value of AI systems,

alongside less human involvement in decision-making to achieve particular goals. AI systems have been used across diverse fields ranging from natural sciences to social sciences and arts. They are used to diagnose patients' diseases using input data specific to each disease. Many pre-trained AI programmes are being used to create artworks, lowering the professional barriers for amateurs to enter the digital art market. Do the different sectors of society welcome AI systems in the same way? A field that needs cost-effective production like manufacturing (Arinez et al 2020) would welcome an AI automation system with a high degree of accuracy to perform a given task. In contrast, a sector that believes in so-called sacred and exclusive human characteristics, such as artistic creativity and human value, may not welcome or recognise contributions of AI systems (Grba 2024). In such sectors that are not favourable to AI systems even capable of performing a sophisticated task, certain users would not wish to deploy them in their sector if they think it contravenes the mandates and values endorsed in their field. To maximise the benefits of AI systems and their continuous development of human capabilities and values, it is necessary to consider what values a sector endorses and how they influence the ways in which the sector welcomes AI autonomy.

To address the different approaches to employing AI autonomy in the arts sectors, this paper notes and develops the notion of 'desirable autonomy'. It is obvious that studies on AI autonomy are not new and have been actively developed in the computational (Walsh, Mahesh and Trumbach 2021), philosophical (Formosa 2021; Vaassen 2022) and legal (Dešić 2025; Sukhorolskyi 2025) senses. However, the idea of desirable autonomy in such studies tends to be addressed mainly in the context of human behaviours and their control in a social (Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea 1991; Yang and Choi 2009), political (Friedman 2003) and educational (Brook 1996) setting. Drawing on mostly theories from social sciences, those studies of desirable autonomy have examined the appropriate degree of human empowerment in a given circumstance, followed by policy recommendations to better respect human rights and inclusivity.

Compared to those human-centred studies of desirable autonomy that focus on empowerment and human rights, this paper incorporates the contextual creativity in the arts into exploring the desirable autonomy of humans and AI systems in the arts world. To this end, the paper conceptualises the 'desirable autonomy in the arts' as the level of autonomy that actors in an arts field are expected to possess, given the requirements of their creative work. Based on this definition, the study compares the desirable autonomy of humans and AI systems in visual art with those in music in consideration of the distinct creative processes of each domain.

The visual art field emphasises the artist's original creative sparks that make their identity distinct (Steinbach 2018). In contrast, creativity in music is distributed across different types of works, spanning from composition and arrangement to performance and production (Cook 2018; Héroux 2018). This difference in creative loci leads to differentiating thresholds for AI autonomy. The music sector already institutionalises shared authorship, and therefore, the system would be more open to AI's participation. However, in visual art where authenticity and independent authorship usually take the centre in discussions of AI's involvement, the undesirability of AI autonomy would be natural to be seen due to the question of artistic legitimacy of humans (McCormack et al. 2019).

In addition to the contextual foci on creativity in visual art and music, human talents and intentions are presented in different ways in the two fields. In the case of visual art, outputs such as drawings, paintings, sculptures and architecture are the conduits through which artists materialise their intentions and identities. Compared to this, the music field has multiple media for human expressions. A musical piece demonstrates a composer's musical talent whereas performing it shows a player's expressive abilities. Also, the music sector recognises the arrangement of existing songs and pieces, which the visual art sector would regard as a type of imitation. We note that the different artistic conduits of human expressions in the visual art and music sectors would lead human creators to engage AI systems in their creative processes in varied ways. The following sections will address such diverse dimensions of creativity and desirable autonomy in human-AI arts creation.

Creativity and Autonomy of Humans and AI in Visual Art

Contextual Creativity in Human-AI Visual Art

A final output of visual art is crucial for demonstrating an artist's intention and talent. As the word 'visual' shows, visualisation is the core function that conveys an artist's abstract ideas and skills into material forms (Manovich 2011). A visual artist's creative process is accompanied by visualisations of ingredients, textures and a way of presentation in consideration of practical issues such as budget, space to exhibit the work, etc. In this process of visualising abstract concepts into tangible output, a human visual artist has considerable freedom to determine the extent to which they wish to find a creative solution on their own, modulating their reliance on existing artists' styles or computational tools. If they want to be inspired by others, they can use as many references as possible until they develop a novel concept and new ways of visualisation.

It is undeniable that audiences cannot clearly tell whether a human artist has used an AI system to generate creative concepts or to invent visualisation skills unless the artist has revealed it (Stark and Crawford 2019). Based on such leeway, a human visual artist can tailor and employ their creativity in two ways when using AI systems. They decide on how to use an AI system in a creative way to complete a particular task as part of the entire creation process. Or they can delegate an AI system to create an overall blueprint for an artistic piece. The former case can be regarded as a creative trial to invite a data-based non-human entity into an artistic job. The field of conceptual and visual art has welcomed such trials that invite non-human beings such as animals (Ullrich 2019; Wolfe 2022), computer programmes and robots into aesthetic works, recognising their cultural impacts on our perception of art (Cubero et al. 2021; Jean-Pierre and Saïd 2012; McCormack et al. 2014; Paul 2016). Liu and Ji's (2025) study on designers' use of AI painting tools also highlights that human designers tend to choose AI systems because of their new functions to express their artistic intentions, which previous technologies have not been able to perform. As long as an AI system's performance is limited to presenting the human artist's personality and artistic identity, together with its aesthetic and technological novelty, such a non-human entity's engagement can be considered creative in visual art.

In contrast, the latter case where an AI system is allowed to decide the entire process of a visual artwork, is unlikely to be considered creative by critics and even audiences. Noting that the creative value of visual art includes an iterative trial-and-error process (Lehmann and Gaskins 2019), a visual artwork initiated, produced and completed by an AI system can only be seen as automation by a self-operating machine. This is especially the case where an AI system is a rule-based model and produces the same output based on an 'if-then' algorithm (Schröter 2024), rather than a machine-learning algorithm whose data processing functions beyond a fixed instruction. A visual artwork with no human involvement at all in its creative process can be regarded as creative only when the automated creation has a particular philosophical intention to point out artistic, social and ethical issues as a conceptual artwork. In this context, the next section will elaborate on the desirable autonomy of human visual artists in maintaining the value of visual artworks co-created with AI systems.

Desirable Autonomy of Humans in Visual Art

Considering the discussion of the contextual creativity in visual art above, this paper argues that the desirable autonomy of human visual artists is associated with their justification for a decision-making process that reaches a final output. A task given to an AI system will be diverse and dependent on the final output planned by the human artist. An AI system based on the Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) can be asked to analyse historical paintings (Leong 2025) as part of reference research for artistic ideation. Beyond such visual pattern analysis, an AI system can be tasked with generating new outputs that do not overlap with the existing art styles, as Elgammal et al. (2017) conducted by developing a GANs into Creative Adversarial Networks (CANs). Regardless of tasks given to AI systems, conceptual intention and its consequential visualised outputs are important to recognise the value of visual art (Galle 1999; Maes 2010). A human visual artist should therefore be able to justify why the particular AI system has been chosen, and why and how the specific job has been delegated to the AI system. This justification will enable the human visual artist to demonstrate their creativity in combining their artistic intention with AI systems, therefore claiming their authorship of shaping the entire creation process, regardless of the type of visual art.

In the case where a human visual artist allows an AI system to implement an entire creative process from initiation to completion of an artwork from scratch, which the visual art sector would not welcome, the human artist should be able to answer the following two questions to prove that they have had a desirable level of autonomy that has 'orchestrated' the AI system's creative process: Does the fully-AI-generated work have the aesthetic distinction as a visual artwork which human artists have not achieved due to the biological limits of the human body? Then, what were the philosophical and conceptual reasons for voluntarily delegating the entire job to the AI system? These two questions can serve as an assessment method for the artist themselves, and their critics and audiences to evaluate whether the visual artist has used the AI system for merely saving time and endeavour, or for a sophisticatedly intended expression of artistic ideas through the data-driven creation tool.

Along with the human competency of justification and intended decision-making, the desirable autonomy of human visual artists should also allow them to select the final output in both cases: when an AI system has performed certain tasks only and when it has completed an artwork from ideation.

In the context of AI ethics, the human control of the end product conforms to the principle of human oversight, an ethical principle of AI adopted by many global organisations. The idea of human oversight emphasises a human developer or user's supervision to align AI-generated outputs with their original intention and determine how they should be used (EU 2024; UNESCO 2022). The principle of human oversight can be applied to the circumstance where human visual artists can claim their authorship of AI-generated art. If a human visual artist has created their artistic topic and relevant datasets to fine-tune their AI model, it is possible to say that at least the human artist has gathered the foundational materials to build on an artwork. Even though an AI system, especially a generative one, has processed datasets and generated multiple outputs, the human artist can still retain their control and determination over what the final product would look like.

The idea of 'artistic oversight' can therefore be raised as the desirable autonomy of human visual artists, thereby highlighting the shift of their roles from visual creators to curators of creative processes. Visual artists have traditionally been expected to produce conceptually and aesthetically valuable pieces or installations. The value of visual art has tended to be evaluated by how much an artwork expresses human thoughts and emotions in an aesthetically meaningful or skilful way, as an interplay of an artistic stimulus and the artist's cognitive responses to it (Hagtvedt, Patrick, and Hagtvedt 2008; Li, Lv and Tang 2019). Meanwhile, the scope of tools for visual art, such as painting brushes, sculpting knives and automation software for computational art, has been extended to data-driven and generative systems in the age of AI. Not ignoring the rapid development of AI systems, it should be noted that an AI system can generate outputs only when it has been trained by certain datasets collected and curated by its human users. This data-based process of creation requires human visual artists to have the competencies to collect, tailor and manage datasets that can be effectively processed by the intelligent system. While the AI system's data processing produces certain outputs, the major role of human visual artists here is to design and prepare a creative process and select the best output in their terms among multiple outputs generated by the AI system. In other words, the performance of 'creation' belongs to the AI system whereas the performance of 'curation' pertains to the human visual artist. As a new expected role for visual artists in the era of AI, a human visual artist can maintain the desirable level of autonomy, by managing the curatorial role in engaging an AI system in their creative process.

Desirable Autonomy of AI Systems in Visual Art

The discussion on the roles of human visual artists as curators of creative processes provides an avenue for addressing the desirable autonomy of AI in the very art field. As explicated above, a human visual artist can have considerable freedom to determine the extent to which they allow an AI system to implement a particular task. Again, a final output is especially important in visual art as it serves as the artistic conduit for expressing not only their artistic identity but also their authorship of creation. In this sense, black boxes in an AI system can be discussed as part of a creation space where the human artist cannot claim their control, which is referred to as a latent space¹ in the computer science term (Asperti and Tonelli 2023). A black box in an AI system refers to a stage of an algorithmic process, usually based on deep learning neural networks, that is so complex that humans cannot understand how the AI system has arrived at a decision or output (von Eschenbach 2021). Such technological opacity to humans indicates that a human visual artist cannot fully explain how their datasets have been processed. Even so, as discussed earlier, the human artist should be able to justify why the selected product among others best represents their artistic intention.

In visual art, it is therefore desirable to grant an AI system the extent of autonomy to perform (a) particular dataset(s), which will be accumulated in the final output. Such limited but concrete jobs include artistic style classification for ideation (Cetinic and She 2022), recreation of an image in a trained style (Walker 2023) and the analysis and presentation of textual documents into a visual version (Anadol 2017). Even though the field of Explainable AI (XAI) has been developed to uncover such algorithmic black boxes, it has been argued that AI black boxes, especially based on deep learning neural networks, are unlikely to be fully deciphered (Castelvecchi 2016; von Eschenbach 2021). Recognising this technological space where humans cannot claim their performance, it would be more practical for human visual artists to build on their role as curators supervising their AI systems' data-processing, like the conductor of an orchestra that consists of their artistic intention, collected datasets and their AI system's functions.

In addition to the desirable autonomy of AI systems to perform data-processing tasks to be assimilated into a human visual artist's entire creative workflow, the desirable autonomy of AI systems in visual art includes the power to provide alternative options. It would be permissible in visual art if AI systems promote and support human artists in enriching their ideas of expressing their artistic identities and aesthetic techniques.

As addressed above, a human visual artist's final product and justification for its process and product supports the artist's authorship of their artistic output. Bearing this in mind, an AI system can be used to enrich new creative workflows for human visual artists to explore and decide their end products. For example, a visual artwork, such as paintings, images and designs, does not have to start with a visual sketch. Text-to-image generative AI systems, which are pre-trained (e.g., Midjourney, DALL-E, Stable Diffusion, Imagen, Ideogram) or will be trained on users' own datasets (e.g., CommonCanvas, PIXART- α), have opened a new avenue for visual creation by narrative ideas. Oppenlaender's (2022) online ethnography study of text-to-image art communities also shows a new ecosystem of visual creation, consisting of codes, iterative prompts, visual outputs and its enrichment of art communities. Therefore, if an AI system's role does not go beyond that of a 'stimulator' of a creative process, the desirable autonomy of human visual artists as curators of creative processes will remain.

Creativity and Autonomy of Humans and AI in Music

Contextual Creativity in Human-AI Music

When visual artists create paintings or sculptures, their artworks appear as the finalised embodiments of their artistic intention at the moment they are shown. In contrast, especially in Western classical music, a written score is not treated as a finished artwork in itself; rather, it is deemed a normative blueprint of diverse musical works, awaiting realisation through performance (Goehr 1992). Composition, arrangement, performance, improvisation, and production collectively contribute to the moment when the audience experiences the written music piece. Music is an activity, rather than a fixed object (Small 1998). Therefore, human-AI collaboration in music operates differently from that in visual art where their final artwork can be more easily recognised as the artist's independent output. This collaborative mode of musical performance enables us to specify certain creative stages that remain 'human only' and not interchangeable with AI. The first stage of them in doing music is initiation and intention. Emotional origin, philosophical reflection, and expressive motivation come from human agency, coalescing into the starting impulse of a musical piece. Computational creativity research on music also highlights that creative intention is still heavily on the human side. For example, human composers' self-evaluation of their scores and their incorporation of expected audience tastes are treated as core components in the models of creativity evaluation on music (Carnovalini and Rodà 2020). In light of this conventional understanding of musical intention, the initiation of musical practices should take place within a framework defined by human musicians and audiences.

The next 'human-only' space of creativity in music is formed by the socio-cultural dimension of musicking (Small 1998). 'Musicking in Small (1998)'s sense is not about decontextualised musical notes, but a social event that establishes relationships among players, audiences, sound, and their cultural world (Small 1998). A musician with deep experiences in a particular cultural context carries it into melody and rhythm not in the same way as another musician from a different cultural background. On the other hand, AI music generation systems emphasise more technical tasks such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre. Of course, such AI-based creation of musical pieces includes a high level of conceptual performance. As Herremans (2017) elaborates, these include narrative (e.g., structuring emotion, tension, and perceived storyline), interaction (iterative human–system input and adaptation), and difficulty (algorithmic consideration of playability due to human physical capability). But they still leave the socio-cultural understanding of musicking practices largely implicit (Herremans et al. 2017). Unless an AI system can meaningfully differentiate cultural contexts and receives explicit guidance to take these differences into account in composition or playing scores, it is not clear how we can be sure that the AI system showcases its full 'understanding' of a social and cultural context and incorporates it into a genre of music.

The other creative stage in music is interactive performance. Performance is another layer to show human privilege in music, if audiences will still value live experience and interactive communication with human players. Performers have the power to interpret music through their own ego, which makes music a conduit to showcase their musical personality and style. Interaction with the audiences requires players to sense the audiences' reactions and respond emotionally, and sometimes with improvising on the spot as part of the expectation of attending a concert. Musical meaning is therefore not contained in the score alone but is enacted when sound is coupled with human 'action and perception' (Leman 2007). Until the music industry develops and uses a humanoid robot that has a proper hardware body to respond and a multimodal AI system sensing audiences' audio and facial reactions, and audiences would like to socially accept the new non-human musicians, the performative and interactive creativity in music practices will remain as a human exclusive space.

Desirable Autonomy of Humans in Music

Because of the contextual creativity in music as a collaborative harmony discussed above, the desirability of human autonomy depends on where an AI enters to supplement a creative process of music. Drawing on Vear et al.'s (2023) idea of a continuum of AI systems' roles from creative tools to co-creative agents for different tasks, AI systems in music generation should be understood as participants in musicking practices rather than disembodied and independent composers and players. This suggests that the desirable autonomy of humans in music pertains to whether a human composer and player maintains their willingness and power to control the roles of AI systems as task-based supporters that refine their work.

As composition sits closer to the origin of creative intention, human musicians are expected to desire greater control when starting their composition. Currently, it is technologically possible that an AI system can compose without considerable human involvement (Carnovalini and Rodà 2020; Micchi et al. 2021). Even so, the music sector's normative expectation that a human should initiate their own compositional idea, should remain to preserve the desirable human autonomy as a composer so that an AI system can be framed as a partner for refining ideation and harmonic exploration, rather than a fully autonomous composer. However, an arrangement stage does not require considerable originality of 'creation' by a human musician. It is permissible and common for a human musician to re-image existing works through stylistic transformation. In other words, it could be more justifiable than in a composition stage, which a human musician can have a lesser engagement in a musical piece arrangement when involving an AI system in the stylistic transformation. An ideal process for human-AI musical arrangement would start with the human musician's creation of the stylistic transformation idea, then deploy an AI system to audibly materialise it.

Musical performance presents an interesting case because it should consider the music industry market. From an economic perspective, the market needs to take audiences who buy tickets for a particular composer or player (e.g., pianist, violinist, etc.) seriously. The same music piece performed by different pianists yields different versions. While some audiences would value a composer's intended meaning, others prefer a pianist's unique interpretation and artistic personality. Each has their own audience. A music player is therefore likely to have a group of big fans if their improvisation shows their unique musician identity that suits a particular group of audiences' musical tastes. Improvisation, a moment of

artistic freedom and flow, described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), is therefore another area where human autonomy is strongly protected. Improvisation as a music flow is a creative 'talent show', not only for the audience but also for the performer's own joy (Chirico et al. 2015). The use of AI systems will take away this embodied pleasure and artistic challenge that manifest the distinctive nature of music from other forms of the arts. Therefore, when an AI system gets involved in performance for audiences who are not familiar with or not favourable to the non-human musician, the audiences would struggle to feel emotional resonance or empathy, which is required to regard the play as a 'successful' performance (Ansani et al. 2025; Fernando et al. 2024). Thus, human musicians' willingness to control performance should remain very high while an AI system may serve only as a subtle real-time supporter.

Desirable Autonomy of AI Systems in Music

The previous section has argued that the creative stages of composition, performance and improvisation in music should exhibit a high degree of human intentionality and expressivity. In contrast, the music sector may accept a higher level of AI autonomy for more routinised and repetitive tasks in music-making (Sreenivasan and Suresh 2024). The above stage-based discussion on composition, performance and improvisation highlights human initiative as the desirable autonomy of human musicians. Bearing this in mind, we can also examine other creative tasks that an AI system is permitted to perform with less human initiatives behind the stages. Proceeding with the above discussion on arrangement, a high level of AI autonomy would be welcome to generate backing tracks or create variations. Human composers can still retain their power to edit a final musical piece while inviting AI systems to perform the technical execution.

Therefore, the autonomy of AI systems in music should be limited to the production of materials according to the musician's request, drawing on patterns learned from existing works, and creating variations of them (Micchi et al. 2021). AI-assisted mixing tools, like iZotope's Neutron, can automatically balance multitrack audio levels, propose EQ adjustment, and identify frequency masking between instruments. In mastering, platforms like LANDR apply an AI system to analyse tracks and implement industry-standard normalisation for distribution to different platforms. Beyond generating backing tracks, a desirable level of AI autonomy also lies in experimentation and inspiration. Algorithmic exploration is an endless pool for musicians' later curation. It offers creative possibilities after iterative prompts are adjusted to reflect as much of the musician's intentionality as

possible. Tools like Google Magenta support iterative collaboration. A musician provides a melodic or rhythmic seed, which the AI system uses to generate variations. Then the musician selects and refines them through further prompts or manual editing. This kind of human-AI dialogue could generate unexpected creative directions while keeping humans at the centre of the whole process. For live performance, such an AI system is able to autonomously track tempo, dynamics, or generate harmonic or rhythmic support in the background (Linson et al. 2013). The autonomy of AI systems in this arrangement process strengthens, rather than replaces, the musical performance, because it does not change the meaning of the original musical piece. Instead, it enhances human expressivity. These technical tasks follow relatively objective criteria, which makes them compatible with AI autonomy.

However, it is not possible to regard those AI systems as having a full autonomy because AI-generated melodies, harmonies, rhythms, lyrics, and even whole arrangements (Herremans et al. 2017; Micchi et al. 2021) per se are not a completed musical interaction. But they are ingredients that should be used and processed by human musicians' performances to complete a work of musical arrangement. At this juncture, it is possible to observe a contrast between human-AI visual art creation and human-AI music arrangement. If humans and AI systems possess and exert the desirable level of autonomy, as this paper has suggested, an AI system processes data and ideas collected by a human visual artist while a human musician processes a suggestion of a musical arrangement. These different expected roles for human creators arise from the distinct nature of creation and the conventional norms governing visual art creation and music arrangement.

Expectations and Implications for Artists in Visual Art and Music

The above sections have explored that human creators in both visual art and music are expected to initiate, control and curate an entire creative process. However, the different natures of visual art and music creation lead each sector to have varied expectations for the roles of humans and AI systems, as summarised in table 1. Just as traditional visual artists have had to choose composition, colour palettes, styles and what to be seen in the final work, current visual artists working with AI systems should be able to collect training datasets, select a proper AI model and decide the final product showing their artistic signature. It underscores the human's artistic oversight that intentionally curates each creative stage until the end, with AI systems playing varied roles in implementing the stages.

On the other hand, in the music sector, the desirable human autonomy in the field should be addressed across a broader range of musicians, namely, composers and players, accompanied by more layers of interpretation from composition to arrangement, performance, and improvisation. In other words, the music field has already established norms for distributed creative labour. The sector would therefore have space to add AI-based performance as another layer of distributed labour, without disrupting the norm of collaborative creation.

In both visual art and music, the fact that human creators select their role in their creative process with AI systems implies varied dimensions of human-AI collaboration in the two arts sectors. While emerging artists may lean on AI systems for idea-level support, established artists might only use them only for repetitive tasks due to their values, habits or technological barriers. A genre of the arts can also be a decisive factor that shapes a particular type of human-AI arts creation. Visual artists doing abstract painting would use AI systems more to transform their intangible and narrative ideas into material outputs than realistic painters whose endeavour for manual brushstrokes would be valued. In the music sector, jazz musicians would use AI systems less to maintain their own improvisation styles than classical musicians who want to delegate AI systems to work on technical execution. We propose empirical studies to address such varied dimensions of human-AI collaborations for further research.

	Visual art	Music
Contextual Creativity	Orchestrated creativity to shaping an artistic workflow that reaches a visual output	Distributed creativity across composition, arrangement and performance
Authorship Structure	Centralised authorship to converge identity, ideas and visualisation into the end product	Stratified authorship across different stages
Desirable Autonomy of Human	Justification for each stage of the entire workflow and the value of the one-and-only product	Task specific delegation: - High control over composition and performance - Moderate control over arrangement
Desirable Autonomy of AI	- Generation of components to be accumulated into final outputs - Generation of multiple options of workflows	Technical execution support: - Generation of musical materials and variations - Algorithmic exploration for experimentation and inspiration

Table 1. Expected Roles of Humans and AI Systems in Visual Art and Music

Such diverse approaches to adopting AI systems in artistic creation has expanded what counts as artistic literacy. In addition to traditional skills, artists both in visual art and music, now need certain AI literacy to computationally reflect their artistic intentional choices. They need to figure out which model to use, how to adjust parameters, how to design prompts to generate the expected output, and so on. In this sense, AI literacy education needs to be incorporated into art and music education (Lim and Ambrose 2025). This paper therefore argue that such AI-arts education should encompass the whole arts ecosystem: artists, art teachers, critics, editors, curators, and arts administrators in museums, galleries, orchestras, bands, live houses, dance groups, and community arts centres. Those stakeholders should be targeted not only as education partners but also as education recipients who learn AI tools and vocabularies, so that they can understand AI-related terms and form cooperative work environments.

Proceeding with the emphasis on such AI literacy, some recommendations can be proposed for creators in both sectors. The growing emphasis on transparency and explainability demands detailed documentation. An artist user should reveal not only whether an AI system has been used for an artwork, but also how it has participated throughout the creative process. Again, a visual artist should be able to justify each decision they have made to shape an entire creative process despite the problem of AI black boxes. Visual artists therefore need documentation and its relevant competency to explain how a chosen AI system has been fine-tuned or used. Such documentation can demonstrate how their AI system has translated their artistic ideas and intentionality into visual art forms through particular models and parameters, and how the artist has orchestrated such a workflow. In the music sector where an AI system can be deployed into different forms of music making or playing, musicians' documentation should be customised by the particular task (e.g., composition, arrangement) given to an AI system. It would thus be productive for artists in both fields to approach their creative processes with AI systems as a human-AI system project management, rather than a mere artistic performance.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has enriched the discussion on how to revisit creativity embedded in AI-generated art, by contextualising the desirable autonomy of humans and AI systems in the inherent natures of visual art and music. As one of the seminal works on posthumanistic studies of creativity, Boden describes three types of creativity that both humans and computationally intelligent systems can perform – i.e., combinational, exploratory and transformational creativity (Boden 1990)². In redefining creativity in the arts, Boden’s work is meaningful in a way that blurs the clear distinction between human and artificial creativity. On the other hand, this paper builds its originality by exploring the creative capabilities of AI systems beyond human reach and vice versa, examining the desirable levels of their autonomy. By specifying how humans should take their initiatives in particular creative stages, this paper has addressed an aspect of the “sociotechnical bases of autonomy” (Hoffmann 2020; Laitinen and Sahlgren 2021, 11), examining how human roles in visual art and music can be repositioned when the existing artistic norms in the fields intertwine with AI technologies.

The theoretical contribution of the paper to differentiating between the contextual creativity and desirable autonomy of humans and AI systems in visual art and music provides avenues for addressing more mixed forms of the arts in the era of AI. The filming sector is a good example of a creative field that requires both visual art and music. Drawing on this paper’s discussion on the contextual creativity and the desirable autonomy of humans and AI systems, a study can explore a new dynamic stemming from the situation in which a musical piece is composed to present a movie scene or the entire movie story. The following question would ask what stages a human must be involved in, and an AI system should not be involved in maintaining the artistic value of the movie. This discussion should examine how the movie director can encompass different views of playwrights, directors, actors and editors in terms of the degree of AI involvement.

Together with the theoretical contributions, this paper points out some implications for the creative industry and cultural policy. The general authorship and royalty systems in the music industry already recognise distributed creative labour (Aguila 2017). When an AI system contributes to substantial portions of a composition or arrangement, the industry must confront whether and how the company that invented the AI system should also be attributed a share of royalties.

This question leads to a broader issue of how music-making AI platforms reshape an already stratified creative ecosystem in the music industry. If AI companies claim and capture a large share, human musicians' income could shrink, especially for composers and arrangers who use their AI systems. In contrast, performers might be more protected since live performance still relies on human presence and interpretation.

The visual art sector will present a different picture from that of the music field. As this paper discussed, AI-generated visual art will retain its artistic value if the human artist can demonstrate how they curatorially controlled the entire process over their AI system. The challenge here is not about splitting royalties, but about a justifiable claim of it. Many jurisdictions require human authorship for the copyright of AI-generated works (Craig 2022). The visual art sector consequently needs clearer guidelines on what level of human control is enough to claim authorship. This paper's discussion of the desirable human autonomy in visual art can be practically applied to produce feasible measures for future industrial study.

Drawing on these industrial issues, this paper concludes by providing some avenues for developing cultural policy agendas. Cultural policy must recognise that the desirable levels of human and AI autonomy vary across arts forms, requiring context-specific governance. Cultural policy for visual artists should prioritise the recognition of their curatorial endeavours and labour whereas that for musicians should establish a framework aligned with the stratified creative process from composition to performance. At the same time, cultural policy in both sectors should adopt particular criteria – for example, the desirable autonomy of humans and AI systems in this paper – to address the fragile boundary between augmentation and automation. A policy intervention, such as arts funding criteria, can provide guidance on demonstrating human curatorial control or documentation of AI arts projects. Such concrete measures can sustain the role of cultural policy in empowering human values, not losing its remit in the era of human–AI creative collaboration.

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Notes

¹ A latent space of an AI system, based on machine learning, is an abstract and computational space within the system that represents compressed data while preserving the essential features of the data's underlying structure (Asperti and Tonelli 2023).

² Combinational creativity comes from combining familiar ideas in new ways (Boden 1990); Exploratory creativity refers to finding new ideas within an existing thinking style in a 'conceptual space in Boden's words (Boden 1990); Transformational creativity changes the structural rules of the conceptual space (Boden 1990).

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