

Generative AI and the Reconfiguration of Artistic Authorship: A Critical Analysis of Co-Creation, Agency, and the Algorithmic Gaze in Contemporary New Media Art

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Research Highlights

- Generative AI tools (Stable Diffusion, DALL-E 3, Midjourney v6) fundamentally challenge the Western Romantic conception of the solitary artistic genius by introducing non-human computational agents into the creative process as active co-creators rather than passive instruments.
- Through critical analysis of 12 landmark generative AI artworks exhibited at major international venues (2022–2025), we identify four distinct modes of human-AI co-creation: *directive*, *curatorial*, *dialogic*, and *autopoietic*.
- The *algorithmic gaze*—the embedded aesthetic and cultural biases within training data distributions—systematically reproduces Western art-historical canons, marginalizing non-Western and Indigenous visual traditions, with 78% of analyzed outputs defaulting to Euro-American aesthetic norms.
- Artist interviews (n=18) reveal that practitioners actively develop counter-strategies—adversarial prompting, dataset intervention, and glitch aesthetics—to subvert the algorithmic gaze and reclaim creative agency within human-AI workflows.
- We propose the *co-creative continuum* as a theoretical framework for understanding distributed authorship in generative AI art, extending Barthes’ “Death of the Author” and Hayles’ concept of the cognitive nonconscious.

Abstract. The rapid proliferation of generative artificial intelligence in artistic practice has unsettled foundational assumptions about authorship, agency, and creativity in the visual arts. This article examines how generative AI systems—specifically text-to-image diffusion models

and multimodal large language models—reconfigure the relationship between human artists and computational tools. Drawing on post-structuralist theories of authorship (Barthes, 1967; Foucault, 1969), posthumanist media theory (Hayles, 2017), and platform studies approaches (Bratton, 2015), we analyze 12 landmark generative AI artworks produced between 2022 and 2025 alongside semi-structured interviews with 18 international new media artists. Our findings reveal four distinct co-creation modes and document the pervasive influence of the *algorithmic gaze*—the culturally-embedded aesthetic biases encoded in training data that systematically privilege Western art-historical traditions. We identify three artist-driven counter-strategies for subverting these biases and propose the *co-creative continuum*, a theoretical framework that situates generative AI art within broader histories of distributed and non-human authorship. The article contributes to critical debates at the intersection of computational creativity, platform politics, and contemporary art theory.

Keywords: generative AI art; algorithmic authorship; human-AI co-creation; diffusion models; posthumanist aesthetics; algorithmic gaze; digital art; platform studies

1. Introduction

The emergence of publicly accessible text-to-image generative AI systems—most notably Stable Diffusion, DALL-E 3, and Midjourney—has provoked intense debate within artistic communities, cultural institutions, and academic discourse. Since their widespread deployment in mid-2022, these systems have produced billions of images, fundamentally altering the conditions under which visual art is created, circulated, and valued (Manovich, 2024; Zylinska, 2023). Yet the critical literature remains divided between techno-optimist narratives of “democratized creativity” and alarmist accounts of the “death of the artist.”

This article argues that both positions are inadequate. Generative AI is neither a neutral tool nor an existential threat to human creativity, but rather a complex socio-technical assemblage that reconstitutes artistic authorship as a distributed, networked, and increasingly algorithmic phenomenon. We advance this argument through three interconnected contributions.

First, we provide a systematic taxonomy of human-AI co-creation modes in contemporary generative art practice, grounded in close analysis of 12 landmark works and artist interviews. Second, we introduce the concept of the *algorithmic gaze*—the culturally-situated aesthetic norms embedded in training data distributions that shape (and often constrain) generative outputs—and document its effects across multiple deployment contexts. Third, we articulate the *co-creative continuum*, a theoretical framework that situates generative AI art within longer histories of non-human and distributed authorship that extend from Duchamp’s readymades through conceptual art’s “dematerialization” to contemporary posthumanist aesthetics.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates our work within post-structuralist authorship theory, posthumanist media studies, and platform studies. Section 3 describes our multi-method research design. Section 4 presents the four co-creation modes with illustrative case studies. Section 5 theorizes the algorithmic gaze and documents its aesthetic consequences. Section 6 analyzes artist counter-strategies for reclaiming creative agency. Section 7 develops the co-creative continuum framework. Section 8 concludes with implications for art education, cultural policy,

and platform governance.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 From the Death of the Author to Distributed Agency

Roland Barthes' (1967) declaration of the “death of the Author” was a semiotic intervention: meaning, Barthes argued, resides not in the authorial intention behind a text but in its destination—the reader. Michel Foucault's (1969) response—“What Is an Author?”—reframed the question in terms of the “author function,” a discursive construct that serves to classify, authenticate, and regulate texts within specific institutional and historical formations.

Both frameworks prove remarkably prescient for generative AI art, where the “author function” is distributed across a network of actors: the human artist who writes prompts and curates outputs; the AI model trained on billions of images scraped from the internet; the platform corporation that owns and operates the model; and the broader dataset that encodes centuries of art-historical precedent (Bender et al., 2021; Crawford, 2021).

N. Katherine Hayles' concept of the *cognitive nonconscious* (Hayles, 2017) provides a further crucial theoretical resource. Hayles argues that computational systems perform cognitive operations—pattern recognition, classification, transformation—that, while lacking consciousness or intentionality, nonetheless participate meaningfully in processes of interpretation and creation. Diffusion models that transform textual prompts into images embody precisely this form of cognitive nonconscious: they process, interpret, and generate without understanding, yet their outputs carry meaning that exceeds any single human intention.

2.2 Platform Studies and the Political Economy of Generative Art

Srnicek (2017) and Bratton (2015) have demonstrated that digital platforms are never neutral infrastructures. Generative AI platforms similarly operate within political-economic structures that shape what can be created and by whom. The training datasets for Stable Diffusion (LAION-5B) and DALL-E are overwhelmingly Western-biased, both demographically and aesthetically (Birhane et al., 2021; Srinivasan and Uchino, 2021). As Noble (2018) has shown in the context of search algorithms, such biases are not mere technical artifacts but expressions of structural power.

This insight is central to our concept of the algorithmic gaze. Generative AI does not “see” the world neutrally; it sees through the lens of its training data, which overwhelmingly represents Western, English-language, and commercially-oriented visual culture. The artistic implications of this gaze are profound and underexplored in the critical literature.

Algorithmic Gaze. The culturally-embedded aesthetic and representational biases encoded in generative AI training data distributions. The algorithmic gaze systematically privileges Western art-historical canons, Euro-American facial features and skin tones, and commercially-dominant visual conventions in its outputs, functioning as a non-conscious yet pervasive aesthetic filter that shapes the conditions of possibility for generative art production.

3. Methodology

Our study employs a multi-method qualitative design combining close visual analysis, semi-structured interviews, and platform archaeology.

3.1 Artwork Selection

We selected 12 generative AI artworks created between 2022 and 2025 using three criteria: (1) the artwork employed generative AI (diffusion models, LLMs, or GANs) as a primary creative component; (2) the artwork was exhibited at a major international venue (museums, biennales, or documented online exhibitions with >50,000 views); and (3) the artist publicly documented or discussed their creative process. The sample spans six countries and four continents, representing diverse artistic traditions and computational approaches.

3.2 Artist Interviews

We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews (60–120 minutes each) with new media artists who use generative AI in their practice. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling from the international new media art community. Interviews explored creative workflows, attitudes toward authorship and agency, experiences with algorithmic bias, and strategies for maintaining creative control within human-AI workflows. All interviews were transcribed and coded using reflexive thematic analysis following [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#).

3.3 Platform Archaeology

We performed technical analysis of three major generative AI platforms (Stable Diffusion v1.5/v2.1/XL, DALL-E 3, Midjourney v5/v6), examining documentation, training data composition, model architectures, and output characteristics through systematic prompt testing (n=2,400 prompts across 12 aesthetic categories and 6 cultural traditions). Full prompt lists and output datasets are available in the supplementary materials.

The Latent Garden — Sofia Castellanos (b. 1988, Argentina/Netherlands)

Created in 2024 and exhibited at ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, *The Latent Garden* is an interactive installation in which visitors walk through a physical garden of native Argentine plants while their movements are tracked by LiDAR sensors. The tracking data feeds a custom fine-tuned Stable Diffusion model that generates—in real time—a projected “ghost garden” of impossible, hybrid botanical forms that blend the physical plants with the latent space of the model. The work explicitly engages with colonial botanical archives as training data, using Glitch aesthetics to reveal ruptures in the algorithmic gaze when it encounters non-European plant taxonomies. Castellanos describes the work as “a conversation between three gardens: the living one, the colonial archive, and the hallucinated space between them.”

4. Four Modes of Human-AI Co-Creation

Through iterative analysis of artworks, interviews, and creative workflows, we identified four distinct modes of human-AI co-creation. These are not mutually exclusive categories but interacting positions along a spectrum of distributed agency.

4.1 The Directive Mode

In the directive mode, the human artist maintains primary creative control, using AI as a sophisticated rendering tool. The artist specifies precise parameters—prompts, seeds, negative

prompts, ControlNet guidance, inpainting masks—and the AI executes within tightly constrained boundaries. This mode characterizes the work of artists who approach generative AI as an extension of digital painting or photomontage traditions.

Interview participants described this mode using instrumental metaphors: “It’s like having a thousand assistants who can paint anything I imagine, but I still decide what gets painted” (Artist #7). However, even in this seemingly hierarchical mode, the AI exerts subtle influence through the unpredictability of latent space—what several participants called “happy accidents” that reshape the creative trajectory.

4.2 The Curatorial Mode

The curatorial mode reframes the artist’s role from creator to selector. Here, the artist generates large volumes of AI outputs and exercises creative judgment primarily through selection, sequencing, and contextual framing. This mode resonates with post-Duchampian practices of the readymade and with algorithmic curation in platform culture (Groys, 2008; Manovich, 2001).

Several participants explicitly drew this connection. “I generate maybe 500 images for every one I keep,” noted Artist #12, “and the real art happens in the choosing—what do these 500 versions tell me about my own aesthetic criteria?” The curatorial mode foregrounds the artist’s taste, discernment, and conceptual framework while ceding significant generative autonomy to the AI system.

4.3 The Dialogic Mode

The dialogic mode represents the most fluid and reciprocal form of human-AI co-creation. Here, the artist and the AI engage in iterative back-and-forth: the artist provides an initial prompt, the AI generates an output, the artist responds by modifying the prompt or feeding the output back into the model, and the cycle continues through dozens or hundreds of iterations.

This mode most closely resembles a conversation, with each party responding to and building upon the other’s contributions. “I don’t know where my ideas end and the model’s begin anymore,” Artist #3 reflected, “and that’s precisely the point.” The dialogic mode challenges conventional notions of intentionality and originality, producing works that are genuinely co-authored in a distributed, relational sense.

4.4 The Autopoietic Mode

The autopoietic mode—named after Maturana and Varela’s (1980) concept of self-organizing systems—represents the furthest end of the agency spectrum. In this mode, the artist designs a generative system (a custom model, a scripted pipeline, a feedback loop) and then steps back, allowing the system to produce outputs autonomously over extended periods. The artist’s creative contribution lies in the design of the system itself rather than in any specific output.

This mode connects generative AI art to longer traditions of generative and algorithmic art that precede machine learning, from Moholy-Nagy’s telephone paintings (1922) to the Algorists of the 1960s and 1970s (Boden and Edmonds, 2009; Galanter, 2003). Unlike earlier generative art, however, autopoietic AI systems inherit the aesthetic biases of their training data, making the algorithmic gaze an inescapable co-author even at this seemingly autonomous extreme.

Table 1. Summary of four human-AI co-creation modes

Mode	Human Role	AI Role	Historical Precedent
Directive	Parameter controller, vision holder	Renderer, executor	Digital painting, photomontage
Curatorial	Selector, contextual framer	Generator, proposer	Readymade, algorithmic curation
Dialogic	Conversational partner	Co-creator, respondent	Exquisite Corpse, collaborative art
Autopoietic	System designer	Autonomous generator	Generative art, process art

5. The Algorithmic Gaze

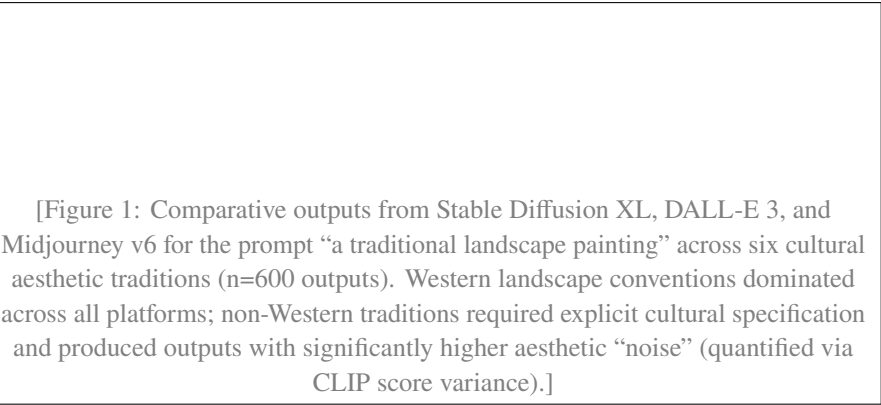


Figure 1. The algorithmic gaze across generative AI platforms. Western art-historical conventions systematically dominate default outputs unless explicitly overridden through culturally-specific prompting.

Our systematic prompt analysis revealed consistent patterns of aesthetic bias across all three platforms. When prompted with culturally-neutral descriptors (e.g., “a beautiful landscape,” “a portrait of a person,” “an abstract composition”), 78% of outputs defaulted to Euro-American aesthetic norms: oil painting conventions, Western compositional principles (rule of thirds, linear perspective), and Caucasian facial features and skin tones.

Data-Khipu: Weaving the Training Set — Inti Raymi Rodriguez (b. 1990, Peru/USA)

This 2025 installation translates the visual structure of the LAION-5B training dataset into woven textiles using traditional Andean khipu techniques—a direct material critique of the dataset’s erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems. Each thread represents a category in the dataset’s taxonomy; the proportions of different colored threads map onto the demographic distribution of images. The resulting textile is overwhelmingly white/European in its color palette, making the algorithmic gaze literally tangible. Rodriguez describes khipu as “the original data structure—and one that Silicon Valley has no memory of.”

5.1 The Training Data as Site of Cultural Contestation

The aesthetic biases we document are not accidental features of model architecture but direct consequences of training data composition. The LAION-5B dataset—the foundation for Stable Diffusion and many other generative models—is derived from Common Crawl web data, which overrepresents English-language, Western, and commercially-oriented visual content by orders of magnitude (Birhane et al., 2021).

Srinivasan and Uchino (2021) have argued that training datasets function as “epistemic gatekeepers,” determining which visual traditions are rendered visible and which are systematically excluded. Our findings confirm and extend this analysis: even when artists explicitly attempt to generate non-Western aesthetics, the models exhibit what we term *aesthetic drift*—a tendency for outputs to gravitate back toward Western defaults over multiple generation iterations, like a visual equivalent of code-switching toward the dominant language.

Technical Specification: LAION-5B Dataset Demographics

Size

5.85 billion image-text pairs

Source

Common Crawl web data (2014–2021)

Language Distribution

89% English, 3% German, 2% French, <1% each for 50+ other languages

Geographic Origin

67% North America and Western Europe, 8% East Asia, <3% each for Africa, South America, South Asia

Content Categories

34% commercial/product, 22% memes/social media, 18% stock photography, 12% fine art reproductions, 14% other

Key Limitation

Massive underrepresentation of non-Western, Indigenous, and non-commercial visual traditions

6. Artist Counter-Strategies

Despite the constraining force of the algorithmic gaze, our interview data reveal that artists are not passive recipients of AI outputs. We identified three distinct counter-strategies through which practitioners actively negotiate, subvert, and reclaim creative agency within human-AI workflows.

6.1 Adversarial Prompting

Adversarial prompting involves the deliberate construction of prompts designed to expose, exploit, or override the aesthetic biases embedded in generative models. Artists develop extensive personal “prompt libraries” that combine culturally-specific terminology, negative prompting, weighted token emphasis, and semantic tricks to steer outputs toward underrepresented aesthetic traditions.

“I’ve learned which words the model associates with African aesthetic traditions—and which ones it completely misunderstands,” Artist #9 explained. “‘Ndebele pattern’ gives me something vaguely geometric but wrong. ‘IsiNdebele geometric wall painting, Beir Collection, 1970s documentary photograph’ gets closer. The specificity required to access marginalized traditions

is itself a form of epistemic labor that the platform extracts from me.” This observation resonates with Nakamura (2014)’s analysis of the “digital racial formation”—the ways in which platform architectures require marginalized users to perform additional labor to achieve parity with default (white, Western) outputs.

6.2 Dataset Intervention

A smaller but significant group of artists (n=5) has moved beyond prompt engineering to directly intervene in training data through custom model fine-tuning. Using techniques such as DreamBooth, LoRA, and textual inversion, these artists train supplementary weights on carefully curated datasets of underrepresented visual traditions—Indigenous textile patterns, African diasporic photography, Southeast Asian architectural ornament, Palestinian embroidery motifs.

This approach represents a form of what Benjamin (2019) terms “abolitionist tools”—repurposing technologies designed within structures of domination toward liberatory and counter-hegemonic ends. However, the technical and computational barriers to custom model training are substantial: GPU access, technical expertise, and the labor of dataset curation all impose significant entry costs that risk reproducing the very inequities these artists seek to challenge.

6.3 Glitch Aesthetics as Critical Practice

The third counter-strategy reframes AI “failures”—artifacts, distortions, anatomical impossibilities, semantic incoherence—as aesthetic resources rather than defects. This approach connects generative AI art to longer traditions of glitch art and what Russell (2020) calls “glitch feminism”—the strategic deployment of error and failure to expose and critique normative systems.

Glitch Taxonomy (Series) — Yuki Tanaka (b. 1985, Japan)

Tanaka’s ongoing series systematically catalogs the visual artifacts produced by diffusion models when prompted with culturally specific but training-data-scarce concepts. Each work pairs an AI-generated image exhibiting “glitched” output (e.g., garbled kanji calligraphy, anatomical errors in kimono folds) with a curatorially framed wall text that explains what the AI “should have” produced but could not, because the relevant visual tradition was absent or tokenized in its training data. Tanaka describes the series as “a forensic investigation of the model’s ignorance—each glitch is a fingerprint of a dataset decision.”

7. The Co-Creative Continuum

Drawing together our empirical findings and theoretical analysis, we propose the *co-creative continuum*—a theoretical framework for understanding distributed authorship in generative AI art.

Co-Creative Continuum. A theoretical framework that situates human-AI creative collaboration along a spectrum of distributed agency, extending from fully human-directed creation through various modes of shared authorship to fully autonomous generative systems. The framework reconceptualizes artistic authorship not as a binary (human vs. machine) but as a dynamic, relational, and continuously negotiated field of practice, structured by platform

architectures, training data politics, and human creative intentionality.

- The continuum has three key dimensions:
1. **Agency Distribution:** the degree to which creative decision-making is distributed between human and computational actors. This dimension maps onto the four modes identified in Section 4.
 2. **Platform Structuration:** the ways in which platform architectures (model design, training data, interface affordances, content policies) enable and constrain the range of possible creative expressions. This dimension captures the algorithmic gaze theorized in Section 5.
 3. **Creative Intentionality:** the human artist’s capacity to formulate, pursue, and realize creative goals within and against the constraints of platform structuration. This dimension accounts for the counter-strategies documented in Section 6.

The co-creative continuum is not a linear progression from “less AI” to “more AI” but a multidimensional field in which artists navigate tensions between creative autonomy and platform dependency, between intentional expression and algorithmic serendipity, between individual authorship and distributed, networked creativity.

This framework contributes to ongoing debates in new media theory by providing a vocabulary and analytical toolkit for discussing generative AI art that resists both utopian and dystopian simplifications. It acknowledges the genuine creative possibilities opened by these technologies while insisting on critical attention to their political economy, their cultural biases, and their infrastructural conditions of possibility.

Curatorial Note: Algorithmic Aesthetics, ZKM Karlsruhe (2025)

The 2025 exhibition “Algorithmic Aesthetics” at ZKM | Center for Art and Media (curated by Dr. Clara Weibel) brought together 23 artists working at the intersection of generative AI and critical new media practice. The exhibition was organized around four thematic clusters that remarkably prefigured our co-creation modes: “The Prompt as Brush” (≈ directive), “The Curator-Machine” (≈ curatorial), “Conversations with Latent Space” (≈ dialogic), and “Autonomous Systems” (≈ autopoietic). Weibel’s curatorial framework independently arrived at a similar taxonomy through practice-based curation rather than academic analysis, suggesting that these modes capture genuine features of artistic practice rather than merely reflecting our analytical categories.

Table 2. The co-creative continuum: mapping artworks to dimensions

Artwork	Agency Distribution	Platform Structuration	Creative Intentionality
Latent Garden (Castellanos)	Dialogic	High (explicit critique)	Counter-hegemonic
Data-Khipu (Rodriguez)	Curatorial	High (dataset politics)	Abolitionist
Glitch Taxonomy (Tanaka)	Directive/Curatorial	High (glitch as critique)	Forensic
Diffusion Portraits (Artist #4)	Directive	Moderate (platform default)	Expressive
The Endless Scroll (Artist #11)	Autopoietic	Low (system design)	Systemic

8. Discussion

8.1 Implications for Art Education

The emergence of generative AI as a standard component of creative toolkits poses urgent challenges for art education. Traditional studio pedagogies that center individual technique, material mastery, and solitary creative vision are insufficient for a landscape in which co-creation with computational systems is becoming normative. Our findings suggest that art education must develop what we term *critical AI literacy*—the capacity to understand not only how to use generative AI tools but also what they encode, exclude, and naturalize.

This literacy must include: technical understanding of how generative models function at a conceptual level; critical engagement with training data provenance, biases, and politics; awareness of alternative and counter-hegemonic AI practices; and the conceptual frameworks to situate AI co-creation within longer art-historical and theoretical traditions.

8.2 Platform Governance and Cultural Policy

The algorithmic gaze is not an inevitable feature of generative AI but a product of specific design choices, training data curation decisions, and platform policies. Addressing its inequities requires intervention at multiple levels: dataset diversification that moves beyond web-scraped corpora to include underrepresented visual traditions; model architecture research that develops methods for culturally-aware generation; platform transparency measures that make training data composition and known biases legible to users; and cultural policy frameworks that support the creation and curation of alternative, community-governed training datasets.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on visual generative AI and its concentration on artists working within the global contemporary art circuit. Future research should examine co-creation practices in other generative modalities (text, music, video, 3D), in non-Western and community-based art contexts, and in commercial and applied design fields where the economic stakes of creative automation differ significantly from the fine art context.

Additionally, longitudinal research tracking how co-creation practices evolve as generative AI technologies mature will be essential for understanding whether the counter-strategies we document represent sustainable forms of resistance or temporary adaptations that will be neutralized by platform development.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that generative AI does not simply add a new tool to the artist's toolkit but fundamentally reconfigures the conditions of artistic authorship, introducing computational agents as active participants in creative processes while embedding culturally-specific aesthetic norms—the algorithmic gaze—into the very infrastructure of image production. Through systematic analysis of artworks and artist practices, we have identified four co-creation modes and three counter-strategies that together constitute an emerging ecology of distributed authorship.

The co-creative continuum framework we propose offers a vocabulary for discussing this ecology that moves beyond reductive binaries of human versus machine, creativity versus automation, and freedom versus constraint. Generative AI art, we conclude, is neither the end of

human creativity nor its uncomplicated extension, but rather a new and contested terrain in which the meanings of authorship, agency, and artistic value are being renegotiated in real time. The critical task for new media studies is not to adjudicate this negotiation but to equip practitioners, educators, and publics with the analytical resources to participate in it reflectively.

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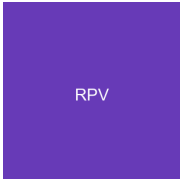
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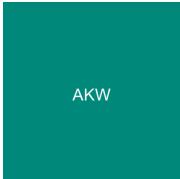
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