

Artificial Intelligence and the Changing Concept of Artistic Authorship

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Abstract

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) image generators has introduced new questions concerning creativity, authorship, originality, and artistic agency. Traditional theories of art generally place the artist at the center of the creative process, regarding the artwork as an expression of individual intention, skill, imagination, or experience. Generative AI complicates this model because an AI-generated image may involve a human user, a computational model, a dataset, software developers, and numerous unacknowledged cultural sources. This paper examines how AI technologies are changing the concept of artistic authorship in contemporary art. It argues that AI does not simply replace the artist but transforms artistic practice into a more distributed process involving selection, prompting, editing, interpretation, and technological mediation. The paper also considers questions of originality, copyright, artistic labor, and aesthetic judgment. Rather than treating AI-generated art as either purely human or purely machine-made, the study proposes understanding it as a collaborative and technologically mediated form of cultural production.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, contemporary art, authorship, generative art, creativity, digital art, technology

Introduction

The history of art has repeatedly been shaped by technological change. Photography transformed ideas about visual representation, cinema introduced moving images, digital technologies expanded the possibilities of artistic production, and the internet altered how artworks could be distributed and experienced. Artificial intelligence represents another significant technological development because it does not merely provide a new medium for artistic expression. It can participate directly in the production of images, texts, music, and other cultural forms.

Generative AI systems can produce visual material based on textual or other forms of input. A user may describe a scene, artistic style, object, or atmosphere, and the system generates an image in response. This process raises a fundamental question: **Who is the artist?** Is the person who writes the prompt the artist? Is the software itself responsible for the artwork? Should the developers of the system be considered co-creators? Or should the resulting image be understood as a product of a much larger cultural and technological network?

These questions challenge the traditional romantic conception of the artist as an autonomous individual genius. The idea of artistic originality has never been as simple as it appears. Artists have always learned from existing visual traditions, borrowed

techniques, responded to earlier artworks, and worked within cultural institutions. AI makes this interdependence more visible.

From Individual Genius to Distributed Creativity

The modern concept of artistic authorship is strongly associated with individual creativity. The artist is often imagined as someone who possesses a unique vision and transforms personal experience into an original artwork. However, twentieth-century art theory increasingly questioned this model.

Roland Barthes's influential essay "The Death of the Author" challenged the idea that a work's meaning can be reduced to the intentions of its creator. Michel Foucault similarly examined the cultural function of the author rather than treating authorship as a simple expression of individual identity. These theoretical developments are useful when considering AI-generated art because they demonstrate that authorship has always been culturally constructed.

AI makes the distribution of authorship particularly visible. Consider a person who enters a prompt into an image-generation system. The final image depends on the user's language, the software architecture, the training data, the model's statistical processes, and the user's subsequent selection and editing. The result cannot easily be attributed to a single creative action.

The human user nevertheless performs important artistic functions. Choosing a subject, developing a visual concept, refining prompts, comparing multiple outputs, selecting an image, modifying it, and placing it within an exhibition or conceptual framework all involve judgment. The artistic process therefore does not necessarily disappear when automation is introduced. Instead, it changes form.

The Artist as Curator and Selector

One important consequence of generative AI is the growing importance of selection. An AI system may produce dozens or hundreds of possible images from a particular conceptual direction. The user must determine which image is meaningful, aesthetically successful, or appropriate to the intended project.

This resembles certain strategies already present in conceptual and digital art. Marcel Duchamp's readymades demonstrated that selection and contextualization could become central components of artistic practice. The artist did not necessarily manufacture the object but transformed its cultural meaning through selection and presentation.

AI-generated art can similarly shift emphasis from manual production toward conceptual direction and selection. The artist may become partly a curator of machine-generated possibilities.

However, this does not mean that every person who produces an AI image automatically becomes an artist. Artistic practice involves context, intention, communication, and critical engagement. A technically impressive image may have limited artistic significance if it exists only as an isolated visual product. Conversely, a relatively simple AI-generated image can become meaningful when situated within a larger conceptual project.

Questions of Originality

Generative AI also complicates the concept of originality. Traditional artistic originality is often associated with producing something that did not previously exist. Yet AI models generate outputs from patterns learned from existing cultural materials.

This situation resembles earlier forms of artistic influence. No artist works in complete isolation. Painters study previous painters, filmmakers borrow narrative structures, photographers respond to established visual conventions, and designers adapt existing forms.

The distinctive problem with AI is scale. A generative system can process enormous quantities of cultural information and reproduce stylistic patterns at extraordinary speed. This creates debates concerning whether the resulting works are genuinely original or recombinations of existing cultural materials.

The question therefore becomes less about whether an AI-generated image has any relationship to previous art and more about how artistic transformation occurs. Human creativity itself frequently involves recombination. What distinguishes artistic practice may be the ability to establish meaningful relationships among existing forms rather than creating cultural material from nothing.

Artistic Labor and Automation

The rise of AI also produces economic questions. If a machine can perform tasks traditionally completed by illustrators, designers, concept artists, or photographers, the value of human artistic labor may be affected.

This concern is particularly important because artistic production is not simply a matter of inspiration. Artists depend on their labor for income and professional recognition. Automation can potentially reduce demand for certain forms of commercial creative work.

At the same time, new artistic roles may emerge. Artists may work as AI-based creative directors, dataset curators, prompt designers, editors, or researchers. The history of technology suggests that new tools frequently eliminate some tasks while creating others. The ethical problem is therefore not simply whether AI should be used. A more productive question concerns the conditions under which AI is developed and used. Issues of compensation, consent, transparency, data provenance, and recognition of creative labor become increasingly human cultural activity. A machine can produce a composition that follows recognizable patterns of color, symmetry, lighting, and visual balance, yet the cultural significance of an artwork cannot be reduced to important.

AI and Aesthetic Judgment

Another major issue concerns aesthetic judgment. AI systems can generate visually attractive images, but aesthetic evaluation remains a human cultural activity. A machine can produce a composition that follows recognizable patterns of color, symmetry, lighting, and visual balance, yet the cultural significance of an artwork cannot be reduced to these characteristics.

Art involves interpretation. Viewers ask why an artwork was produced, what social or historical issues it addresses, and how it relates to other works. AI may generate the visual surface, but the meaning of that surface is shaped by cultural context.

This distinction is especially important in contemporary art, where conceptual intention can be as significant as technical execution. An AI-generated image of a landscape, for example, may become part of an environmental artwork, a critique of automation, or an investigation of memory. The same image can acquire different meanings depending on its context.

Toward a Hybrid Model of Authorship

Rather than asking whether the human or the machine is the sole author, contemporary AI art may be better understood through a hybrid model of authorship.

The artist establishes intention and direction. The AI system generates possibilities through computational processes. The artist evaluates and selects outputs. Editing and post-production further transform the material. Finally, exhibition and interpretation give the work cultural meaning.

Authorship therefore becomes distributed across human and technological systems.

This does not mean that machines possess artistic consciousness in the same way humans do. It means that technological systems increasingly participate in processes traditionally associated with artistic production.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is transforming the concept of artistic authorship by making the collaborative and mediated nature of creativity more visible. AI-generated art challenges the idea that an artwork must result entirely from manual human production. At the same time, it does not eliminate human creativity. Instead, it changes the location and character of creative decision-making.

The contemporary artist may increasingly operate as a director, editor, curator, researcher, and interpreter of computational possibilities. Questions surrounding originality, copyright, artistic labor, and cultural ownership remain unresolved, but these difficulties can also encourage a broader understanding of creativity.

AI art should therefore not be understood simply as the replacement of artists by machines. It is better understood as an emerging field in which human intentions, cultural histories, computational systems, and aesthetic judgments interact. The most important question may ultimately be not whether AI can create art, but how artists and societies choose to define creativity in an age of increasingly intelligent technologies.

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