PAINTING AFTER AI: SHARED ATTENTION AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORSHIP

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN VISUAL ARTS
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

May 2026

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Abstract

This practice-based dissertation asks how generative AI changes the conditions under which images, texts, and authors become meaningful. It begins from the claim that meaning depends on structures of coordination: technical, social, and cultural frameworks that align attention and make gestures legible. Through a history of linear perspective, modernist flatness, conceptual art, platform media, and generative systems, the dissertation traces a shift from stable vantage points toward continuous transformation and context collapse. It combines art-historical and theoretical analysis with studio practice, cognitive accounts of joint attention, media theory, copyright, process philosophy, and an experimental writing method developed in dialogue with generative AI.

The dissertation proposes the morph as a figure for AI-mediated culture: a system in which style, voice, and form can be recombined without preserving the duration, material resistance, or situated relations that once anchored their interpretation. Against claims that AI simply causes the "death" of the author, it argues that AI makes visible the limits of authorship understood as sovereign origin or proprietary signature. Drawing on Alfred North Whitehead, Donna Haraway, Michael Tomasello, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it develops processual authorship as an alternative: authorship as a situated process of attention, selection, hesitation, traversal, and response.

The dissertation concludes that the central distinction after AI is not between human purity and technological mediation, but between plausible output and accountable relation. Authorship is best understood less as ownership than as answerability: responsibility for the histories, materials, technologies, and communities a work gathers and for the world it asks others to see. An addendum situates this account explicitly within the author's formation as a painter and considers how generative AI can increase institutional legibility while obscuring the situated conditions of writing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my collaborators and fellow PhD students Ella Dawn McGeough, Claire Greenshaw, and Erica Stocking for the many years spent working through these problems together, both in conversation and in practice. Their friendship, thinking, and artistic work have shaped this dissertation in ways that are difficult to separate from my own.

I am deeply grateful to Marc Couroux, my primary supervisor, for his guidance, generosity, and sustained engagement with this project, and to Tammer El-Sheikh and Jenifer Papararo for their time, insight, and support as members of my committee. I would also like to thank Dan Adler and Natalie Waldburger for their incisive comments and insights as external reviewers, which helped sharpen the final form of the dissertation.

I would also like to thank Morgan McGinn for her support and kindness throughout the final year in which this dissertation took shape.

Finally, I would like to thank my cat, Oliver, who kept me company through countless hours of reading, writing, and working beside my computer. His contribution was less theoretical, but no less important.

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Introduction

This dissertation begins with a simple claim: meaning in visual art does not arise naturally from images themselves, but from the frames that coordinate how those images are seen, interpreted, and attributed. Images are inherently ambivalent, and their significance depends on cultural structures that organize how they are understood.

Despite this ambivalence, visual art occupies a distinctive role in culture as a form of communication. Yet as any artist knows, visual communication is never straightforward. As philosopher Nelson Goodman argues, even the most seemingly simple or realistic representation is "a matter of convention," dependent on shared systems that allow a surface to be read as a meaningful image.[1]

Similarly, this dissertation is written to communicate and the words that I am using are a matter of convention. They are dependent on shared systems of meaning making. How words make meaning has been explored thoroughly in structuralist and poststructuralist thought and is beyond the scope of this paper, but as I sit at my desk and type these words I will assume that some form of communication is taking place. [2]

How do we communicate? We can use a very simple metaphor to describe communication: the gesture of a finger pointing. Every visual art object can be understood as a complication of a

[1] Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art; An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1968.
[2] Structuralist and post-structuralist theories often approach images through models derived from linguistics, treating them as systems of signs, this dissertation instead understands visual art as organizing perception itself, coordinating how attention is directed and shared.

simple gesture: “look at this.” *I* see this, do *you* see it? By “pointing” at something we coordinate attention between an artist and a viewer.

As developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello argues, the pointing gesture is a condition of human intelligence, grounding human meaning in shared attention and intersubjectivity. Beginning around 10 months a child points and an adult’s attention follows. This simple act brings at least two minds into communion, coordinating attention on an external subject. Tomasello’s hypothesis is that this pre-linguistic and natural gesture created the “psychological platform on which the various systems of conventional linguistic communication…could be built.”[3] Visual art can be understood as a non-linguistic elaboration of this structure; it organizes the conditions under which shared attention becomes possible. Quite simply, visual art coordinates the attention between an artist and viewer so they can look at something together.

However, when the coordination of attention between two minds is weakened or is simulated, the communicative relation begins to break down.

Generative AI provides the most visible contemporary example of this breakdown. We are experiencing a crisis of meaning shaped by the ease of image production and the speed of circulation. Generative AI is the general term I will use in this dissertation for systems that produce both images and text through neural networks.[4]

Despite operating across modalities, generative AI produces both images and text through a shared underlying procedure: the statistical scanning of data and the prediction of probable

[3] Origins of Human Communication Tomasello pg. 2
[4] Structured on the animal brain, neural networks are computational models that learn to produce outputs by weighting relationships within a network of nodes. Roy Keyes, *Zefs Guide to Deep Learning* (Zefs Publishing, 2022), page 33-35.

outputs. Because this substrate is common, the distinction between visual and linguistic forms begins to erode. Text no longer functions solely as a linear sequence to be read in time, but increasingly operates as a surface to be scanned, sorted, and recombined.

Based on this shift, I propose that this dissertation is not simply writing. It appears as writing, and it can be read as writing, but it also operates as an image. It is a visual artifact organized on a surface, encountered spatially as much as sequentially.

This is not a metaphor. It reflects a shift in the conditions under which meaning is produced. Generative systems treat language as a field of patterns rather than a chain of propositions. Therefore, text itself begins to participate in the logic of the image. What follows should not only be understood as an argument, but as a constructed visual field: a surface that coordinates attention, directs perception, and stages meaning rather than simply transmitting it.

Despite the rise of generative AI, images still point at things, and this essay, understood as an image, will also point. But in a world where form, style, and rhetoric can be endlessly morphed and prompted, what these gestures point to becomes increasingly unstable. Am I speaking? Have I reformatted my words using a Large Language Model?[5] We are confronted with flows of content whose coherence may be persuasive but may also feel ungrounded.

A shifting point of view also shifts how the gesture of pointing operates. Historically, visual art relied on what I call "structures of coordination": cultural, technical, and temporal frameworks

[5] According to Chicago style formatting, the use of generative AI to reform text is considered a stylistic tool. This dissertation was composed by the author with assistance from OpenAI's ChatGPT, used as an editorial aid for rephrasing and clarifying sentences. No arguments or concepts were generated independently by the system, but its use reflects the conditions this project describes: writing today often takes shape through systems that organize, modulate, and recirculate language. In this sense, ChatGPT functioned not as an author, but as part of the technical environment within which this text was produced.

that align attention and stabilize interpretation. These conditions made shared understanding possible.

In the Renaissance, linear perspective organized vision within a shared spatial frame, operating as an "open window" that oriented viewers toward a common vantage point.[6] While this did not determine what was depicted, it established painting as structured by a coherent point of view. This point of view, tied to a singular maker, made it possible for images to be recognized as having a consistent manner of construction, what we call an artist's style.

Style functioned as its own coordinating device. It allowed viewers to recognize patterns across works and relate them to a source. Images could be attributed to a singular author and understood as the outcome of a process shaped by intention, revision, and memory. These elements did not fix meaning, but they gave it temporal depth, allowing works to be encountered as coherent objects in which culture, history and experience coalesce.

Style allowed something like an artist's "voice" to become legible. This is my voice speaking right now. Can you hear it? In contemporary culture, individual voice has not disappeared, but it is increasingly strained. New structures of coordination, oriented around speed, circulation, and content production, treat voice less as a point of origin than as a type of manipulable input.

When voice functions as an origin, it can be stabilized: it is understood as issuing from a position shaped by time, intention, and experience. When it functions as input, it becomes dislocated, entering systems where it can be recombined and redirected without preserving a fixed source.

[6] Gombrich, Art and Illusion, pg. 240
Panofsky, Erwin. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. 1st ed. Zone Books, 1991, 27.

At first glance, this may resemble the conditions described by postmodern theory. After the "death of the author," we are familiar with accounts of deferred meaning, decentered authorship and the play of signifiers.[7] But generative AI introduces a different problem. It does not simply destabilize meaning; it automates the appearance of meaning, producing coherence without duration, relation, or position.

I argue that the rise of generative AI and networked media introduces a new figure: what I call the morph. The morph is not simply a continuation of appropriation or the dispersal of authorship associated with postmodernism. It is a system in which voice is continuously transformed, recombined, and displaced without a stable origin.

The morph does not erase voice; it operationalizes it. It turns voice into a variable within a system, where style can be reproduced without process, and coherence can be generated without the conditions that once anchored meaning.

We can understand this shift through three related figures: the coin, the candle, and the morph.

A coin maintains its identity through repetition and equivalence. Its value depends on the stability of its form and its capacity to circulate without changing. In a similar way, traditional structures of coordination like linear perspective conditioned images to function as stable units, they were recognizable across contexts and attributable to identifiable sources. Style, in this sense, operated like a stamp, marking works as belonging to a coherent process.

[7] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image–Music–Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

A candle persists differently. Its flame exists through transformation, sustained by the continual consumption of the material that holds it. What appears stable is in fact maintained through change. The candle does not represent a breakdown of meaning, but a different way of sustaining it. Transformation here remains tied to time, material, and process. Many postmodern and contemporary image practices behave in this way. They are remixed, circulated, and reappear in altered forms. Their identity is not preserved through sameness, but through continuous variation.

The morph inherits the logic of the candle but strips it of duration, memory, and constraint. If the coin stabilizes and the candle transforms, the morph automates transformation. It is not simply a new kind of image, but a system in which images are continuously reconfigured without the temporal and relational processes that once gave transformation its weight. Style becomes reproducible without duration. Coherence appears without the accumulation of decisions that would anchor it to a particular perspective.

In this sense, the morph does not eliminate voice but displaces it. Voice no longer functions as a stable point of origin or as the trace of a process unfolding through time. Instead, it becomes a variable within a system of transformation, capable of being simulated, recombined, and extended without preserving the conditions that once made it legible as the expression of a situated subject.

The morph also suggests another feature of this environment: smoothness. In *Saving Beauty*, Byung-Chul Han describes the smooth as the aesthetic form of a culture organized around

frictionless circulation. “What is smooth does not *injure*. Nor does it offer resistance. It is looking for *Like*.” [8]

This smoothness is not the candle. The candle transforms through resistance, duration, and material consumption. The morph strips transformation of these conditions. It produces images without friction, generating surfaces that appear seamless and continuous while remaining detached from any process that would anchor them.

What the smooth conceals is the instability it produces. By minimizing resistance, it removes the constraints that once gave gestures weight. It is not immaterial, but it displaces material limits to microchips and server farms in the wastelands of the world. Earlier structures of coordination relied on difficulty, delay, and material limitation to stabilize meaning. Smooth circulation accelerates images while thinning the conditions under which they can be situated. As images are continuously consumed and recombined, they no longer accumulate meaning through time but disperse across flows of attention.

This instability is epistemological. Donna Haraway argues that modern knowledge often depends on the “god trick,” the illusion of seeing from nowhere.[9] Gen AI takes the god trick to its extreme, scraping the data of our world and feeding it back to us while remaining detached from any specific perspective. Against this fantasy of disembodied objectivity, she proposes a different model in which knowledge is always situated, emerging from specific bodies, tools, and

[8] Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 1.

[9] Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 581.

relations. In her formulation, “feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges,” and it is only through such partial perspectives that vision becomes accountable.[10]

The history traced in this dissertation can be understood as a history of attempts to stabilize situated vision. Generative AI and digital platforms simulate the signals of intentional communication without participating in the relations that anchor them. The problem is not only that images are easier to produce, but that they reproduce the appearance of perspective, voice, and gesture without occupying any accountable position. What emerges is a form of vision that speaks with authority while claiming no vantage point, closer to an oracle than an observer.

There is a distinction between information, which can circulate without a subject, and experience, which requires a body. As encounters with the world increasingly take place through informational systems, this boundary becomes unstable. Signals that appear to carry intention or expression circulate independently of the embodied processes that once produced them. Meaning persists less as a stable object and more as an ongoing process of transformation.

I do not wish to make a normative claim that the use of generative AI is immoral or that it necessarily produces bad writing or images. Concerns about environmental cost, cognitive labor, and stylistic flattening are important, but they are not the central problem addressed here. Rather, I argue that generative AI makes interpretation unstable. Its outputs appear to have style, voice, coherence, and an author, but without the temporal and relational processes that make meaning durable.

[10] Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 581.

Academic style, for instance, has historically functioned as a cue that thought, research, and revision have taken place. Its style asks to be read as meaningful by virtue of its rhetorical force. A machine that can imitate this style confuses the conditions of interpretation, encouraging readers to grant time and credence to an essay that may be coming from nowhere: a statistical prediction of words that merely resembles an academic argument. An image of thought.

This dissertation asks what happens to authorship and interpretation when cultural systems shift from stabilizing meaning through repetition and identifiable origins to sustaining meaning through continuous transformation. The chapters that follow trace the emergence, transformation, and destabilization of the structures of coordination that once steadied meaning in visual culture.

Chapter 1, *Perspective as Alignment Machine* examines the emergence of linear perspective as a system for stabilizing meaning in painting. It argues that perspective was not merely a technical advance but a cultural contract that organized vision around a single vantage point, while also entangling vision with ownership and control.[11] The artist's finger pointed at the world, but it also placed the artist at the centre of world. The chapter traces the gradual unraveling of this system through Impressionism and Cézanne, culminating in the modernist grid, which abandons the perspectival contract.

Chapter 2, *Why Pointing Matters: The Cognitive Loop* turns to cognitive science to explain why this breakdown is so significant. Drawing on Michael Tomasello, Maurice-Ponty, and Douglas Hofstadter, it argues that meaning depends on shared attention and recursive recognition between

[11] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

subjects.[12] Pointing functions as a minimal structure through which this coordination is achieved. When gestures fail to land, these loops become strained, producing not only a breakdown in communication but an instability in the processes through which meaning and selfhood are sustained.

Chapter 3, *The Slop Machine: Context Collapse* examines the contemporary media environment in which this instability becomes structural. Drawing on Jodi Dean, the chapter argues that digital platforms transform communication into circulation, replacing shared frameworks of interpretation with systems driven by engagement and flow.[13] Gestures of attention become ambient, performative, and detached from stable contexts, while algorithmic systems simulate coordination without participating in it. Within this environment, generative AI intensifies these dynamics, producing what might be called contextless pointers: signals that appear meaningful without anchoring shared attention.

An interlude, *The Legal Blur of the Morph*, examines how these transformations challenge existing frameworks of authorship and intellectual property. As generative systems produce images through fields of resemblance rather than discrete origins, authorship shifts away from the discrete work and toward the infrastructures that produce it.

Chapter 4, *Coins, Candles, and Morphs: Processual Authorship* proposes a reconstruction of authorship. Drawing on Alfred North Whitehead, the chapter redefines authorship as a situated

[12] Michael Tomasello. *Origins of Human Communication*. 1st MIT Press pbk. ed. MIT Press, 2011.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology of Perception." In *Phenomenology of Perception*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2012.
Douglas R. Hofstadter. *I Am a Strange Loop*. BasicBooks, 2007.

[13] Dean, Jodi. *Blog Theory : Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Polity, 2010.

process of decision shaped by relation, time, and resistance.[14] The chapter introduces the term "traversal" as the defining feature of processual authorship: a movement through uncertainty that preserves the ethical dimension of creative work.

[14] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978)

Between Line and Surface: Notes on Methodology

"Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?"

Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader pg 120*

This dissertation moves between two orientations: a research trajectory and a creation trajectory. One's expectation is that research unfolds in the medium of the written line, sequential, propositional, and inherently directional, while the images are a part of a special category: creativity. Creativity, like images themselves, does not necessitate unfolding; it can simply appear. Writing proceeds by succession; the images arrive all at once.

Writing is a technology of sequence. It organizes the world into steps, constructing arguments that move through before and after, premise and consequence. Marshall McLuhan reminds us that typography created a uniform and continuous field that fosters "linearity" and sequence as the dominant cognitive mode. Walter Ong extends this point, observing that writing develops more analytic, sequential habits of thought and ultimately "restructures consciousness" itself.[15] To write is thus to submit thought to order, one in which understanding is imagined as something that must move forward in a line.

Images operate differently. They are apprehended in totality, seized in an instant rather than traversed. They compress what writing expands. As Vilém Flusser argues, the difference lies in

[15] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 1982)

how they are read: “we must follow the written text if we want to get at its message, but in pictures we may get the message first, and then try to decompose it.”[16] Writing unfolds sequentially, point by point, projecting the world “as a series of successions, in the form of a process,” while images present a surface that is already given, a structure grasped before it is analyzed.[17]

This difference is not simply formal but temporal. For Flusser, writing produces a specifically historical experience of time, one that “has the sense of going somewhere,” whereas images suspend this directional movement, offering a dense present that “is there already.” The written text aims toward an unfolding; the image presents a field.[18] Where writing constructs causality, the image stages simultaneity.

However, this dissertation stages a tension between the linearity of writing and the surface of image not only through differing mediums. Yes, there are paintings and there is a written essay, but the construction of the text was written in sustained dialogue with generative AI systems, tools that do not reason sequentially. They output text in sequence, but their internal operations are statistical and associative, processing what they guess to be the next word in a database of words rather than following a line of thought. Their outputs resemble Flusser’s images in linguistic form: not sequences of reasoning, but compressed surfaces that appear all at once. As an experiment my drafts, often wandering and provisional, were repeatedly passed through these systems, not to replace thought but to refract it, allowing the writing to be reorganized by novel patterns. This back-and-forth became a method for making the writing itself surface-like, a way

[16] Flusser, Vilém, and Andreas Ströhl. *Writings*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002. 21-22.
[17] Flusser, *Writings*, 21.
[18] Flusser, *Writings*, 22.

of producing prose that seeks a kind of atmospheric density or "vibe", not simply logical progression. It is writing that plays with conceptual proximity, resonance, and tonal alignment. This dissertation experiments with writing as an image-practice: an attempt to hold complexity in an "all-at-onceness".[19]

One way to understand writing as image is through the computational architecture that underlies machine learning. Traditional central processing units (CPUs) are optimized for sequential operations, executing instructions step by step. Graphics processing units (GPUs), by contrast, are designed for parallel computation, performing thousands of operations simultaneously across large datasets. Machine learning systems rely heavily on GPU architecture. Rather than following a single line of reasoning, they operate across fields of relations, evaluating many possible connections at once.[20] Their outputs do not unfold through a single line of reasoning, but take shape within a network of relations, where many possibilities are evaluated at once . GPU architectures were developed to process images and are fundamentally spatial in procedure, they are built to process surfaces.

The clash between surface production and linear expectation replays an older epistemic anxiety. Western thought, shaped by Cartesian commitments to clarity, order, and rational sequence, has long privileged a linear mode. To think properly has meant to follow the line, to reason through the world as if it were composed of discrete steps awaiting explanation. But when writing becomes surface we find something epistemologically suspect. Our present media environment is saturated with text and images that no longer originate from thinking subjects, they seemingly

[19] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media : The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 1966. pg. 254
[20] IBM. "CPU vs. GPU for Machine Learning." Accessed March 10, 2026. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/cpu-vs-gpu-machine-learning

just “appear” and we must think to differentiate whether they make any sense. The reader, used to interpreting texts by projecting their selves into another subject’s frame of mind, must now read more carefully, vigilant for conceptual drift.

Although one would assume working with an LLM for writing would be a shortcut, I have found it to be a frustration. LLM outputs take the form of coherence, even when they are hollow. They widen the gap between appearance and meaning. Often, instead of thinking through my writing, I ended up trying to understand what the program was saying (when a good proportion of the time it wasn’t saying anything at all). Citations had to be double checked for hallucinations. Ideas tended to drift into repetition and important ideas were smoothed over. Writing became editing.

The chapters that follow trace what happens when the line of thought (writing) and the surface of thought (image) no longer hold their traditional positions. Both writing and image-making allow for the construction of particular ways of thinking, they are platforms that afford certain ways of knowing.

This text proceeds sequentially, the images appear all at once, and the dissertation becomes an experiment in what happens when these two modes—linear and surface—collapse together.

How Did You Make This? Notes on Studio Practice

Painters have always worked with tools that conceal as much as they reveal. Even works that appear to be the result of pure manual skill often rely on technologies that remain unnoticed by viewers. In his book *Secret Knowledge* the painter David Hockney argues that many Old Master painters likely relied on optical devices such as mirrors and lenses but hid these techniques.[21] When viewers encounter a work of art they often ask a simple question: *How did you make this?* The question matters because the procedures through which images are produced are never neutral. Tools and operations shape not only how images are made but how they are interpreted.

Each chapter will begin with an image and a short description of how the work was made. These 'notes on studio practice' are not illustrations of the chapters they precede, rather they act as asides, pictures that orient us out of the page and back into the studio.

[21] Hockney, David. *Secret Knowledge : Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. New and Expanded ed. Thames & Hudson, 2006.

1. How Did You Make This?



Tool Shed, 42”x42” 2019, Hydrocal, ceramic and oil on canvas painting, mounted on Masonite.

In 2018 I began producing assemblages such as *Tool Shed*. These works brought together materials from multiple sources: fragments of my own earlier work, ceramics made collaboratively in my studio, and references to historical forms. Rather than treating these elements as discrete influences, I approached them as components within a shared field of production. A ceramic would be made by a friend, I would make a painting of it, then a sculpture

of the painting, then all the objects would be placed in different assemblages. The question was not simply where an image comes from, but how a practice becomes oriented toward certain forms and decisions over others.

I came to think of these works in terms of debt. Each object carried traces of others' labor, attention, and influence, which could not be fully repaid or clearly attributed. The work does not resolve this debt but holds it in suspension. In this sense, authorship becomes less a matter of ownership and more a negotiation of obligation and relation.

These works emerged from a desire to make visible the network that produces subjecthood. Instead of presenting the artwork as the output of an isolated individual, I understood it as the condensation of many relations: friendships, conversations, shared studio time, and inherited visual languages. The different assemblages became a way of staging this condition materially. It allowed different perspectives to coexist without being fully resolved into a single origin.

Chapter 1:

Perspective is often told as a story of technical progress, an invention that made images more "accurate." As art historian E.H. Gombrich writes, "One cannot insist enough that the art of perspective aims at a correct equation: It wants the image to appear like the object and the object like the image."[22] But its deeper innovation was procedural. Perspective establishes a protocol for vision. It tells the viewer where to stand and how to look so that an image and the world can align. It is not merely a tool for depicting space but a structure for coordinating attention.

Marshall McLuhan's famous formulation that "the medium is the message" helps clarify what is at stake in such a device. Media do not simply transmit content; they reorganize perception itself. The perspectival apparatus does more than represent space. It trains viewers to inhabit a particular relation between eye, body, and world. The vanishing point becomes not only a pictorial device but a perceptual habit.

This matters because much of contemporary visual culture is defined by the weakening of exactly this kind of protocol. When frames multiply, when viewpoints become unstable, when context collapses, the gesture of pointing becomes precarious. Perspective names the historical moment when the directing of attention became infrastructural. Its later unraveling names the long drift toward the present.

[22] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1984), 204.

1.0 Perspective as Alignment Machine

The story of perspective's invention is complex but is often told as a simple anecdote. Around 1420, Brunelleschi, goldsmith, architect, and engineer, carried a small painted panel into the Piazza del Duomo. On its front he had painted the Florence Baptistery with an exacting realism. On its back he drilled a small hole, precisely located at what we would now call the station point. The story goes that he instructed spectators to stand before the Baptistery, look through the peephole from behind, and observe the cathedral as it was seen through the peephole. He then held a mirror in front of the view to reveal the painted scene reflected in the mirror.[23] What the viewer saw: first, the world and then in the mirror's reflection, an exact painting of the world. It was a demonstration of an entirely new relationship between vision, space, and subjectivity.

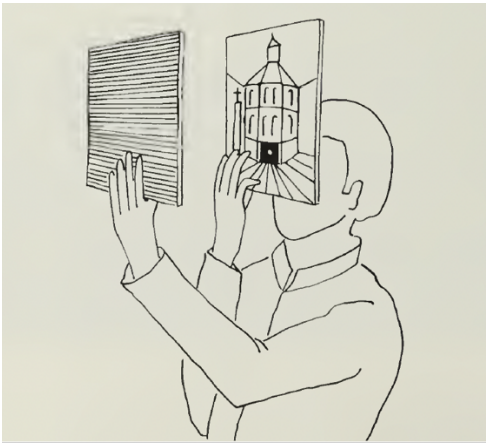

Figure 1. Diagram of Brunelleschi's perspective experiment. From Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 126.

[23] Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) pg. 124-133; Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) pg. 12-13

The effect has been described many times as a feat of illusion. But what matters in Brunelleschi's demonstration is not the illusion itself, but the device. To perceive the alignment of painting and world, the viewer had to physically submit to an apparatus. The objective was not simply to show the baptistery, it was to prove the accuracy of the depiction, to say "this is as true as what you see in reality". The peephole dictated the position of the eye; the mirror proved the fidelity of the view. This choreography of the body within an optical architecture resonates strongly with Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary space. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern power does not operate primarily through force but through the arrangement of bodies in relation to fields of visibility. A subject is produced by being positioned and placed within a structure that determines what can be seen and from where. Foucault famously used Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison design to illustrate his point, but Brunelleschi's apparatus is an even earlier example of this logic.[24] The peephole is not a technical aid; it is a spatial restriction that instructs the viewer where to stand and, by extension, how to be constituted as a subject of vision.

It was not enough to look at the painting and compare it to what you could see. One had to look *through* Brunelleschi's aperture. The correct vantage, the one that made the painting "true", was not a property of nature but a position engineered by the artist. In this sense, Brunelleschi's panel was less a painting, an object of contemplation, than a machine. As a machine, it constructed network protocols, "a set of rules that govern how data is transmitted and received".[25] These vision protocols established a structure of coordination through which vision could be shared, repeated, and guaranteed. Two viewers looking through the same peephole would see the same

[24] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 195–202.
[25] Lenovo, "What Is a Protocol?" accessed March 31, 2026, https://www.lenovo.com/ca/en/glossary/what-is-protocol/.

Baptistry and then see that the painting slid into view was an exact replica of the Baptistry. The painting was no longer a representation to be interpreted but a device to be entered, a device that could tell the "truth" about the world.

Brunelleschi's innovation was not only the geometric insight that lines recede toward a vanishing point, but the recognition that vision itself could be oriented, organized, and standardized. The peephole enforces a monocular, fixed vantage, and in doing so it transforms seeing into a controlled operation. What begins with Brunelleschi is not simply a better way of depicting space, but the historical consolidation of an image-system in which seeing is increasingly organized by technical procedures, reproducible formats, and apparatuses that presuppose what can appear at all.

It is also the invention of vision as property. Brunelleschi revealed the effect but concealed the mechanism. Antonio Manetti, the earliest biographer to describe the Baptistery experiment, notes the secrecy surrounding it: the panel was shown, admired, and then withdrawn. The geometrical method remained unpublished; fellow craftsmen could not coax Brunelleschi into revealing how he produced the illusion. This guardedness was not an anomaly. In 1421, Brunelleschi petitioned the Florentine government for a three-year monopoly on a marble-transport vessel of his own design. This petition is described by many historians as the first patent in Western Europe. The petition, written by Brunelleschi, described himself as a "man of perspicacious intellect" whose inventions deserved legal protection lest others "steal the fruit of his genius."[26] That Brunelleschi insisted on secrecy in one domain and legal exclusivity in another suggests a coherent attitude

[26] J. Kostylo, "Commentary on the Venetian Statute on Industrial Brevets (1474)," in *Primary Sources on Copyright (1450–1900)*, ed. L. Bently and M. Kretschmer, accessed March 1, 2026, www.copyrighthistory.org.

toward knowledge: that technical innovation—whether for transporting marble or a method of depicting space—was something to be controlled, owned, and strategically revealed.

Brunelleschi's peephole is the inaugural moment in a long entanglement between vision and property, between orientation and authorship. Perspective arrives as a way of mapping space but also as a way of managing it. The apparatus produces alignment—a shared vantage that synchronizes viewers—and it does so through a technique that is withheld by its inventor. The story of perspective is also the story of how a way of seeing becomes a way of owning the medium of seeing.

In the years that follow, perspective lost its aura of secrecy and become a shared code, a kind of visual lingua franca: open, reproducible, and deeply naturalized. But its origin in Brunelleschi's apparatus remains instructive. Perspective begins as a technology for directing vision: it points at the world, but that pointing is explicitly through the eyes of the artist. We are not seeing *a general thing* in the world, we are seeing *the thing* (as seen by the painter).

Through the shift to perspective, painting becomes a rhetorical instrument that asserts a position, constructs a subject, and compels the viewer to inhabit it. This chapter traces how that instrument evolved, how it stabilized, proliferated, fractured, and eventually dissolved.

1.1 Perspective as Rhetoric

Brunelleschi's peephole demonstrates that vision can be engineered and reproduced. The technique of perspective is gradually understood and shared, and over time it moves from

technical procedure to cultural form. In *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Erwin Panofsky argues that linear perspective is a "symbolic form", in which "spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign". [27] It elevates a historically specific mode of seeing into a universal-seeming structure of coordination. As later commentator Jeanne Willette emphasizes, perspective is not natural but artificial, a system that reflects how a culture understands and perceives the world.[28] It presents a world organized around a single, stable point of view and in doing so projects a particular epistemology: that space is continuous, homogeneous, and infinitely extendable from the position of a sovereign observer.

Panofsky's claim is often reduced to a simple formula: perspective expresses the Renaissance worldview. But this fails to capture the degree to which he sees perspective as an *active* force. Perspective does not simply register how people saw; it shapes how they understood seeing itself. It makes the subjective act of perception legible as a rational operation. The convergence of receding lines toward a single vanishing point models both a spatial order and a mental order: a single viewpoint, a sense of order, a hierarchy. In this sense, perspective participates in what Foucault calls a "regime of truth": a configuration of knowledge and visibility that makes certain relations appear natural.[29] The alignment it enforces, between eye, world, and representation, functions as a normative instruction about how vision should operate. It prescribes a position from which truth is meant to emerge.

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[27] Panofsky, Erwin. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. 1st ed. Zone Books, 1991. Pg. 41
[28] Jeanne Willette, "Erwin Panofsky and Art History, Part Two," *Art History Unstuffed*, May 17, 2013, https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/erwin-panofsky-art-history-part-two/.

[29] Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader*. Vintage Books edition. Edited by Paul Rabinow. Vintage Books, 2011. Pg. 72-75

Panofsky's argument opened the door for later theorists to consider perspective as a symbolic and psychic technology. Hubert Damisch, writing several decades later, extends this project by reading perspective as an "expressive apparatus".[30] In *The Origin of Perspective*, he argues that perspective operates as a "regulating configuration" intended "not so much to inform the representation as to orient and control its regime."[31] Here, perspective represents space, but it also organizes the conditions under which representation becomes possible.

For Damisch, perspective functions as a paradigm, a model of thought that organizes both the field of visual representation and the way it is understood.[32] It establishes a field in which positions are distributed, situating an "I" in relation to a "you" within a system of relations. Drawing on Lacan's account of the gaze, the subject is caught within a field of visibility, perspective can be understood as a system that situates the viewer and precedes them. [33]

The diagrammatic pyramid of vision, with its apex at the observer's eye, offers a seemingly natural place from which the viewer surveys the represented world. Yet this "naturalness" is itself constructed. The perspectival system makes the viewer's position seem inevitable, even pre-existing, when in fact it is produced by the painting's own structure.

Perspective therefore performs a double movement. It projects the world outward into ordered space and, simultaneously, reflects the viewer inward as the organizing center of that space. It points in two directions at once. Outward, it says: *this is the world arranged before you*. Inward, it says: *your vision is the axis around which the world coheres.* This dual pointing gives

[30] Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, xxi
[31] Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 233
[32] Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, xxi
[33] Margaret Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective in the Twentieth Century," *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 2 (2005): 199

perspective its uncanny authority. The perspectival world is a world that appears always already aligned.

This alignment, this choreography of the viewer, constitutes perspective's most powerful rhetorical function. It offers the illusion of transparency while orchestrating a complex negotiation between viewer and image. The painting becomes a stage on which the viewer's subjectivity is both placed and produced. What the perspectival image ultimately shows is not simply the depicted scene, but a "scene of seeing". In other words, perspective does not merely represent space, it encodes the position of seeing space, aligning viewer, image, and world into a single, seemingly natural order.

Understood this way, perspective emerges not only as a representational strategy but as a cultural instrument for stabilizing meaning. It promises a shared vantage, an agreement about where the viewer stands and what the viewer sees. In its classical formulation, perspective establishes *symbolic efficiency*: a condition in which signs work because the epistemic (and spatial) frame is secure.[34] When the vanishing point is fixed, the world holds still.

But this stability comes at a cost. It relies on the maintenance of a single, authoritative position from which meaning is anchored. The perspectival image promises a position from which the world appears coherent, but this promise conceals a deeper problem. Perspective organizes vision by stabilizing a viewpoint, yet it also naturalizes that viewpoint as if it were universal. In doing so, it participates in a long epistemological tradition that equates vision with objectivity.

[34] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 195-198

The viewer is invited to believe that the image presents the world as it simply is, rather than as it appears from a particular location.

Donna Haraway's critique of objectivity clarifies what is at stake in this gesture. Writing against the fantasy of neutral observation, she argues that the authority of vision has historically depended on the omniscient view: seeing everything from nowhere. The illusion of disembodied vision allows the observer to claim universal knowledge while concealing the position from which that knowledge emerges. Haraway proposes a different model of objectivity grounded in location rather than transcendence. As she writes, "only partial perspective promises objective vision."[35]

Read in this light, Renaissance perspective appears less as the discovery of an objective visual truth than as the construction of a powerful technique for coordinating partial viewpoints. The vanishing point does not eliminate the situated nature of vision; it stabilizes it by fixing the viewer within a carefully engineered apparatus. Perspective promises universality, but its coherence depends on a highly specific alignment between body, image, and world.

1.2 Stabilization, Reproducibility, Collapse

If Brunelleschi is often credited with the "invention" of linear perspective, this achievement emerged within a broader field of experimentation shared by artists such as Masaccio, Paolo Uccello, and Piero della Francesca.[36] However, his peephole panel "fixed" the method of

[35] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 583
[36] Roderick Conway Morris, "How Math Put It All in Perspective," *New York Times*, December 15, 2001.

perspective into an apparatus. Later on, Leon Battista Alberti's *De pictura*, a treatise on painting technique systematized Brunelleschi's machine vision into a method of drawing. With the publication of *De pictura* in 1450, perspective ceased to be the guarded secret of a single craftsman and became, instead, a method—portable, teachable, and reproducible.[37] This shift is foundational. Perspective encoded the singular perceptual field of the artist and made it transmissible across people, places, and generations.

As soon as perspective becomes method, it begins to move toward infrastructure. Apprentices began to learn to execute perspectival constructions. Workshop practice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, developing from the guild system, required consistency with "the hand of the master".[38] Working with a master artist, apprentices relied on standardized techniques to keep their work consistent with the lead artist, and consistent with perspectival standards.[39] Perspective's authority shifted from its initial status as a revelation about space to its social function as a normative expectation within artistic production.

Once perspective is taught widely enough, it ceases to be rare and it becomes a convention. It naturalizes itself by fading into the background. By the eighteenth century, perspectival coherence is so taken for granted that only its failures draw critical attention: awkward foreshortenings, uncertain diagonals. The system works precisely because it has become invisible.

[37] Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 58-61
[38] Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 23.
[39] Christina Neilson, "Demonstrating Ingenuity: The Display and Concealment of Knowledge in Renaissance Artists' Workshops," *I Tatti Studies* 19, no. 1 (2016): 63–70



Figure 2. William Hogarth, *Satire on False Perspective*, c. 1754. Engraving on paper. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire_on_False_Perspective

Perspective becomes foundational and so naturalized that artists eventually begin to resist it. The fixed, monocular view, feels increasingly detached from experience. Urbanization, industrial speed, new technologies of mobility, and the explosion of photographic images all undermine the

psychological plausibility of a single stable viewpoint that confers truth.[40] Instead of aligning subject and world seamlessly, perspectival coherence begins to feel like an imposition.

Jonathan Crary argues that nineteenth-century visual culture increasingly understood constructed vision less as the creation of "truthful inferences about the world" but as a physiological process produced within the body of the observer.[41] Scientific study into afterimages, binocular vision, and optical illusions revealed vision to be unstable and contingent.[42] The observer was no longer a neutral spectator but a participant in the production of visual experience. Once perspective becomes infrastructural, and technology expands visual knowledge, painters no longer approach perspective as a given; they confront it as a limit.

It is in this milieu that the Impressionists shift the terms. They do not overthrow perspective; rather, they show how it is contingent on a particular way of seeing that cannot be objective. Each experience of vision is singular and its particularity should be foregrounded.

The next section traces this unraveling of perspective through the work of Turner, Manet, Monet, and Cézanne, whose experiments mark the gradual dissolution of the single, sovereign vantage that defined the perspectival worldview for centuries.

[40] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 19-20.
[41] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 29.
[42] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 16-18.

1.3 Impressionism: The End of a Single Vantage



Figure 3. J. M. W. Turner, *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, 1842. Oil on canvas. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-bites-turner-mast-snow-storm-2561636

Impressionism emerges in the 1870s, but by this time the the authority of the fixed, monocular viewpoint had already begun to erode. Photography had automated the perspectival contract, and industrial modernity had reorganized the phenomenological rhythms of everyday life. J. M. W. Turner is one of the earliest painters to register this shift. His violently unstable seascapes and atmospheric landscapes of the early 19th century treat perspective not as a geometric scaffold but as something felt: immersive, disorienting, contingent. The story that he once tied himself to the mast of a ship during a storm, while apocryphal, captures the truth of his project: to record an

"unmediated experience of nature".[43] In *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, he attempts to paint the experience of viewing, rather than the view. It is also no accident that he served as Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy from 1807 to 1838; his work effectively demonstrates the limits of the doctrine he refined and taught.[44]

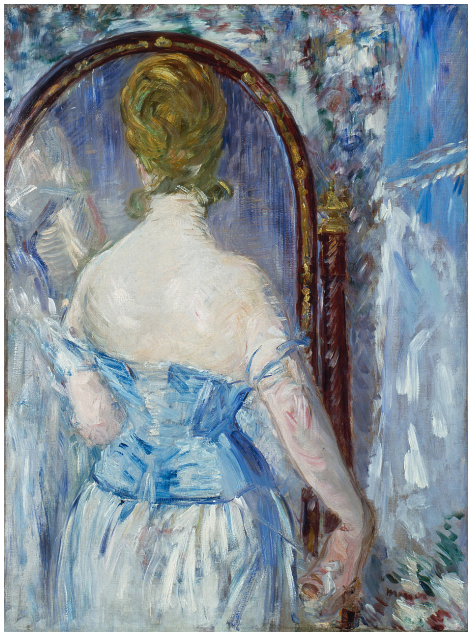

Figure 4. Édouard Manet, *Before the Mirror*, 1876. Oil on canvas.

https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/2609

Édouard Manet, in his late portraits and café scenes of the 1860's, intensifies this perceptual instability by emphasizing the abruptness and contingency of looking. His canvases often feel like glimpses caught in motion: figures truncated at the frame, reflections that do not quite correspond to the bodies that should cast them, spatial cues that refuse to resolve into coherent

[43] James Hall, "A Sublime Roller Coaster Ride Through Art History," *Tate Etc.*, no. 17 (Autumn 2009) https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-17-autumn-2009/sublime-roller-coaster-ride-through-art-history
[44] Butlin, Martin R. F. 2026. "J.M.W. Turner: Later Life and Works." Encyclopaedia Britannica.. Accessed March 14, 2026. https://www.britannica.com/biography/J-M-W-Turner

depth. The world is no longer organized around a single, authoritative eye; it appears instead in discontinuous fragments. His work engages the new technology of photography and he pushes his paintings toward a kind of proto-collage, where perception is assembled rather than simply observed.[45] Perspective becomes slightly fractured and the viewer is no longer within a stable "scene of seeing".



Figure 5. Claude Monet, *La Gare Saint-Lazare*, 1877. Oil on canvas.
https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/la-gare-saint-lazare-10897.

The later Impressionists inherit the work of Turner and Manet as a condition to be acknowledged. Their canvases make visible an intuition that had been building for decades of industrial and technological revolution: painting no longer feels like it is occupying a stable vantage onto a stable world.

[45] "Édouard Manet (1832–1883)," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, published October 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/edouard-manet-1832-1883

Claude Monet's paintings do not reject perspective outright. Instead, they displace its function. The perspectival grid is replaced by a new kind of problem: how to capture the volatility of light itself. In *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) or *La Gare Saint-Lazare* (1877), the visual anchor is no longer architectural recession but atmospheric conditions—fog, steam, the glint of reflective surfaces. The painting ceases to be a rational construction of space and becomes an experiment in registering what Monet calls the "envelope," the diffuse field of atmosphere that surrounds things but does not belong to them.[46] The "scene of seeing" grows less defined and less structurally secure.

With impressionism, the direction of the pointing finger begins to change. The Renaissance painter pointed *outward* toward a depicted world whose coherence is guaranteed by geometry. Monet points *inward,* at himself, his own eye, and the way that it sees. The subject of the painting becomes the act of seeing itself, rendered as a transient event. The viewer is still instructed where to stand but is also invited to inhabit a moment, briefly stepping into the painter's conditional experience.

This is the first major break with the symbolic stability that Brunelleschi's perspective inaugurated. The viewpoint is no longer a stable coordinate system, containing all the information the viewer needs. It is a psychological event. The viewer is positioned at the apex of the visual pyramid; but they are also implicated in a field of experiences that no longer cohere into optical order.

[46] Claude Monet, *Monet by Himself*, ed. Richard Kendall (London: Macdonald & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 1989), 172.

The Impressionist canvas is, in this sense, a new apparatus, and it forms new protocols. It acknowledges that orientation has become subjective, localized, and time-bound. It no longer presumes that all viewers will see the same thing from the same place. Instead, it renders the fragility of perception, the shifting envelope of light that surrounds and alters the objects it touches.

This shift does not eliminate perspective so much as it displaces its function from geometry to affect. The world is still seen, but it is seen through a personal, embodied filter. The painting reveals how the painter saw the world in a particular moment. The perspectival contract, where artist and viewer are aligned through an explicit shared vantage, gives way to a more intimate and unstable negotiation: an invitation to inhabit another's perceptual instant.

In this way, Impressionism makes the first decisive incision into the long-standing association between perspective and symbolic order. It demonstrates that the world may be given not as a coherent spatial continuum but as a succession of impressions, each contingent upon the shifting conditions of light, weather, bodily position, and psychological mood. The act of seeing becomes more important that what is seen.

This instability sets the stage for Cézanne, whose work introduces a deeper fracture—one that will prepare the ground for Cubism and, ultimately, for the modernist grid.[47] If Monet dissolves perspective into atmosphere, Cézanne dismantles it into contradictions. His canvases expose the tension between the desire for order and the experience of its dissolution.

[47] "Cubism," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, published October 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/zh/essays/cubism

1.4 Cézanne: The Scaffold

"The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness."

From *Cézanne's Doubt*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty[48]

Whereas Monet sought to capture the atmospheric effects surrounding objects, Cézanne turned to the solidity of form—but not the solidity attained through the tools of perspective. His project was, in essence, contradictory: to recover order without returning to the stable vantage from which order had once been derived. The resulting canvases carry the tension of this impossible demand.

Cézanne's famous pronouncement that he wanted to "make of Impressionism something solid and durable" is often cited as proof of his return to structure, but the structure he finds is not the rational geometry of Alberti.[49] Instead, Cézanne constructs what might be called an *experiential order*—a coherence built from the aggregation of perceptual fragments. In works like *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1882–1906) or the *Still Life with Apples* series, space is articulated through a series of local adjustments rather than a single perspectival grid. Objects tilt, planes shift, contours waver. It is a world assembled piecemeal, as though Cézanne stood not in one vantage but in several, each slightly offset from the last.

[48] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 67.
[49] "Impressionism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed March 20, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/art/Impressionism-art



Figure 6. Paul Cézanne, *Kitchen Table (Still Life with Basket)*, 1888–90. Oil on canvas. https://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-cezanne/still-life-with-basket

The artist is not unsure of what he sees, but of how to reconcile what he sees with the inherited language of visual representation. To render the experience of looking at a mountain or a bowl of fruit is, for Cézanne, to acknowledge that the eye is never still, that vision moves, that attention shifts across surfaces and depths. The perspectival system, with its assumption of a single, fixed eye, cannot account for this mobility. Cézanne bends the rules to approximate lived complexity.[50]

The result is a kind of unstable scaffold—a spatial structure that appears stable at first glance but shifts upon close inspection. A table may tilt impossibly; a horizon line may lift higher than it should; the profiles of objects may refuse to align with each other. These instabilities are not

[50] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 64-70

errors but indices of perception. They reveal the painter's attempt to reconcile multiple perceptual moments within a single image. The canvas becomes a record of looking, not a transcription of what is seen from a single vantage but a condensation of many partial vantages.

In this sense, Cézanne anticipates the central insight of Cubism: that the world cannot be reduced to a single, authoritative view because experience itself is distributed, sequential, and relational. But whereas Cubism will make this fragmentation explicit, breaking objects into planes and rearranging them to expose their conceptual architecture, Cézanne retains a commitment to the unity of the picture. His pictures remain contained, they are still "solid and durable" but they continue to test the limits of the perspectival contract.[51] The painting becomes an occasion for understanding how far one can push the apparatus before it collapses.

Cézanne's unstable scaffold marks a transitional moment in the history of painting. It is the point at which the perspectival system still exerts a gravitational pull but is no longer the primary organizing protocol. Cézanne's work represents the first true internal critique of perspectival coherence. It reveals that the stability perspective once promised was always, in some sense, an illusion. The eye is never fixed; experience is never singular; the world does not cohere around a single point. Cézanne exposes this contradiction without resolving it.

This tension lays the groundwork for modernism's more decisive break. If Cézanne shows that perspective is unstable, the modernist grid will demonstrate that it can be abandoned. By turning away from the representation of external space and toward the construction of autonomous

[51] "Impressionism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed March 20, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/art/Impressionism-art

pictorial systems, modernist painters complete the collapse that Cézanne initiated. The next section traces this shift—from unstable scaffold to pure surface.

1.5 Modernism's Grid: The Vanishing of Perspective

By the early twentieth century, the implicit contract that the picture offers a coherent world organized around a single vantage can no longer be taken for granted. Cubism makes this explicit. Picasso and Braque's early analytic works dismantle the very premise of uninterrupted depth, replacing continuous space with a web of faceted surfaces. But Cubism retains a residual commitment to the world of objects. It breaks the object and reassembles it in a complex field, but it still needs an object to begin this break. It still points to the world. The deeper rupture will come when the painting begins to point to itself, rather than a world outside.

The grid, as Rosalind Krauss famously observes, is the decisive emblem of modernist painting.[52] This is not simply because it proliferates across the period—from Mondrian's rectilinear abstractions to Agnes Martin's delicate graphite lines—but because it performs a cultural and epistemic shift: the abandonment of the outside world in favor of the painting as an autonomous system. If perspective was a window, the grid is the surface of the glass.[53] It makes no pretense of opening onto anything beyond itself.

[52] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 52, https://www.jstor.org/stable/778321
[53] Krauss, "Grids," 59.

To understand the radicality of the grid, it is useful to recall what perspective promised: transparency, depth, and an orientation anchored by the viewer's position. The grid negates each of these. It refuses transparency by asserting opacity; it refuses depth by insisting on flatness; and it refuses orientation by eliminating the vanishing point altogether.[54] In place of a world that converges toward the viewer, the grid presents a world that extends indifferently in all directions.

One of Krauss's observations is that the grid announces its modernity through a double gesture: it belongs simultaneously to science and to spiritualism. On one hand, the grid's rational structure evokes the mapping devices of modern science: the graph paper, the coordinate plane, the architectural blueprint. On the other hand, artists like Mondrian explicitly infused the grid with mystical aspirations, seeing its pure horizontals and verticals as conduits to universal harmony. The grid oscillates between materialism and transcendence. [55] It points nowhere and everywhere at once. The pointing finger now turns back towards the finger pointing, then turns back towards the finger pointing. The gesture of orientation collapsing into reflexivity. As Krauss writes: "The grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."[56]

This recursive gesture is significant because it demonstrates that the grid is not simply a stylistic device but an ontological one. It reorganizes what a painting *is*. It asserts that the picture no longer needs to represent the world; it can instead constitute a world of its own—one that is self-referential, closed, and governed by its own internal logic. This is the radical premise of

[54] Clement Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational, and So Forth," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 136-138.
[55] Krauss, "Grids," 63-64.
[56] Krauss, "Grids," 50.

modernist autonomy. The painting becomes a system of relations that makes no appeal to external referents, to the viewer's position within a preexisting space.

This redefinition of painting has profound implications for the act of orientation. In the perspectival regime, orientation is stabilized by the coherence of the space it organizes: the orthogonals converge, leading the viewer's eye toward a focal subject. But with no vanishing point, there is no privileged place for the eye to take. The viewer is no longer guided but confronted—faced with a field that resists hierarchy or sequential order. In this sense, the modernist grid enacts what Krauss calls a "will to silence."[57] It does not direct attention outward toward a referent; nor does it direct attention inward toward the artist's subjectivity. Instead, it directs attention to the painting's own conditions of possibility. It points only to itself.

Modernism's insistence on flatness, articulated by critics like Clement Greenberg and enacted with formal rigor by artists across Europe and North America, challenges the very premise of representational art: that the painting is a surrogate for the world.[58] By withdrawing from representation, the modernist canvas forces the viewer to confront the material and structural conditions of pictorial meaning. The grid is more than an alternative to perspective; it is the negation of perspective's rhetorical contract.

The modernist subject implied by this refusal is markedly different from the perspectival subject. Instead of occupying a secure position within an ordered space, the viewer encounters a surface that provides no visual foothold. There is no privileged center, no orienting perspective, no narrative. The viewer must navigate the painting without guidance, constructing orientation

[57] Krauss, "Grids," 50.
[58] Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational, and So Forth," 136-138.

through their own scanning movements. In this sense, the grid initiates a new kind of visual labor, one that demands active participation without offering stable coordinates.

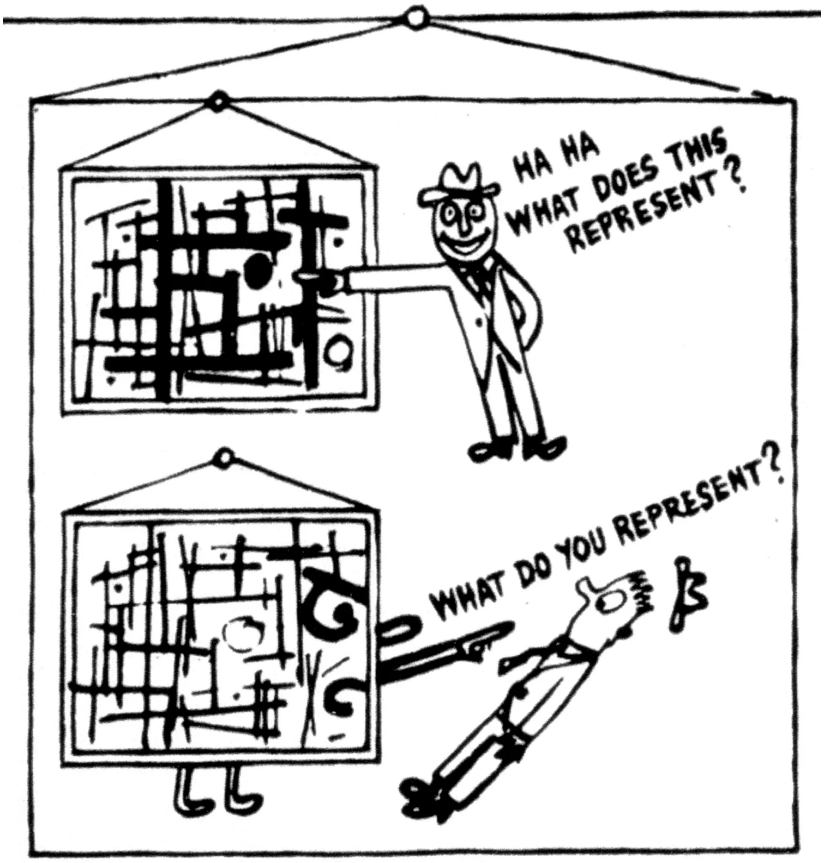

Figure 7. Ad Reinhardt, cartoon on abstract painting. From Robert Storr, *How to Look: Ad Reinhardt: Art Comics*, edited by Kristine Bell and Anna Gray (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013), 23.

1.6 When the Finger Points Back

Clement Greenberg's account of modernism is of the progressive purification of a medium. Painting was driving toward the unveiling of its own conditions. As Greenberg argued, the essence of modernism lies in using "the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the

discipline itself."[59] Yet once the medium is purified in this way, artists begin to see that the rules are neither natural nor stable.

It is in this terrain that conceptual art takes root. The artists associated with the conceptual turn—emerging in the late 1950s and expanding through the 1960s and 1970s—inherit a new epistemic condition. Art is about the conditions of art. The gesture of pointing at this juncture takes on an even more abstract form, it no longer requires a visual substrate. It can be as simple as naming, indicating, or designating. The work of Marcel Duchamp provides a new lineage. As Lucy Lippard notes in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, the conceptual turn extends the logic of Duchamp's readymades, in which the act of selection and designation displaces traditional notions of artistic production.[60] To name becomes a way to create.

Art historian Thierry de Duve, writing about Duchamp's readymade, describes how Duchamp inaugurated a shift from depiction to nomination, from presenting a world to asserting a proposition. Duchamp transforms the act of selection into the artwork's content; it is a "self-analysis" that makes the gesture of pointing explicit.[61]

This shift does not emerge from outside painting. It is no accident that Duchamp began his career as a painter. In his book *Pictorial Nominalism*, de Duve describes how even after Duchamp abandons painting in 1912 Duchamp's practice still embodies an "extraordinary and enigmatic" concern with painting. For de Duve, the expulsion of painting is a sublimation of paintings

[59] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), repr. in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 5.
[60] Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), x.
[61] Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 61-62.

effects.[62] What is displaced is not pointing itself, but the medium that pointing takes. Painting and its struggle with perspectival limits is explicitly abandoned, but that abandonment is also a new formation of the pointing finger, it moves from the visual to the linguistic realm.

1.7 The Conceptual Turn

While Modernism exposed the conditions of pictorial representation by stripping the medium to its bare supports, conceptual art responded by shifting attention from the artwork as object to the artwork as "act". Directing the viewer was now detached from representation and foregrounded as artistic content in its own right. Few statements encapsulate this shift more bluntly than Al Held's complaint that "all Conceptual art is just pointing at things."[63] Held intended the phrase as a dismissal, a way of contrasting the supposed vacuity of conceptual practices with the reflection and difficulty inherent in abstract painting. But his criticism could just as easily be turned on himself: "all painting is just pointing at things".

Instead of an autonomous object whose meaning is located within its formal or material structure, the conceptual work operates as a proposition—an event that explicitly unfolds within interpretation. A conceptual artwork does not present a relation within the bounded field of painting; but it is still a relation.

Conceptual art makes the dependence on a shared structure of coordination visible. A gesture alone does not carry meaning; it must be recognized within a field of expectations that allows the gesture to function. Marcel Duchamp famously demonstrated this instability when he presented

[62] de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism,* xvii.
[63] Richard, Frances. "John Baldessari." *Artforum International* (Los Angeles), April 1, 1999.

his rotating optical devices at the Paris inventors' fair rather than in an art exhibition. Removed from the context of the art world, the works were treated not as artworks but as mechanical novelties.[64] The gesture remained the same, but the interpretive framework had shifted. What Duchamp exposed was not simply the arbitrariness of artistic designation but its dependence on a shared orientation. Without that framework, the directive implicit in the work loses its anchor. The gesture still points, but we misconstrue why we are looking.

1.8 Baldessari's *Commissioned Paintings*

John Baldessari's *Commissioned Paintings* (1969) is one of the clear demonstrations of what becomes possible once pointing is liberated from the logic of. The series consists of photorealistic paintings executed not by Baldessari himself but by professional sign painters, each depicting a human hand extended toward an unspecified object or location. At the bottom of each canvas, in simple block letters, Baldessari added the phrase **"A Painting by [Name of Painter]"**—a caption that credits the hired painter for the work while silently withholding the name of the person who conceived the idea, selected the source photograph, and orchestrated the operation.[65]

[64] Claire Voon, "Duchamp's Spinning Optical Experiments," *Hyperallergic*, September 26, 2016, https://hyperallergic.com/duchamps-spinning-optical-experiments/

[65] Douglas Eklund, "'No Success Like Failure': Deskilling and Collaboration in the Work of John Baldessari," in *John Baldessari: Pure Beauty*, ed. Leslie Jones (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2010), 81.

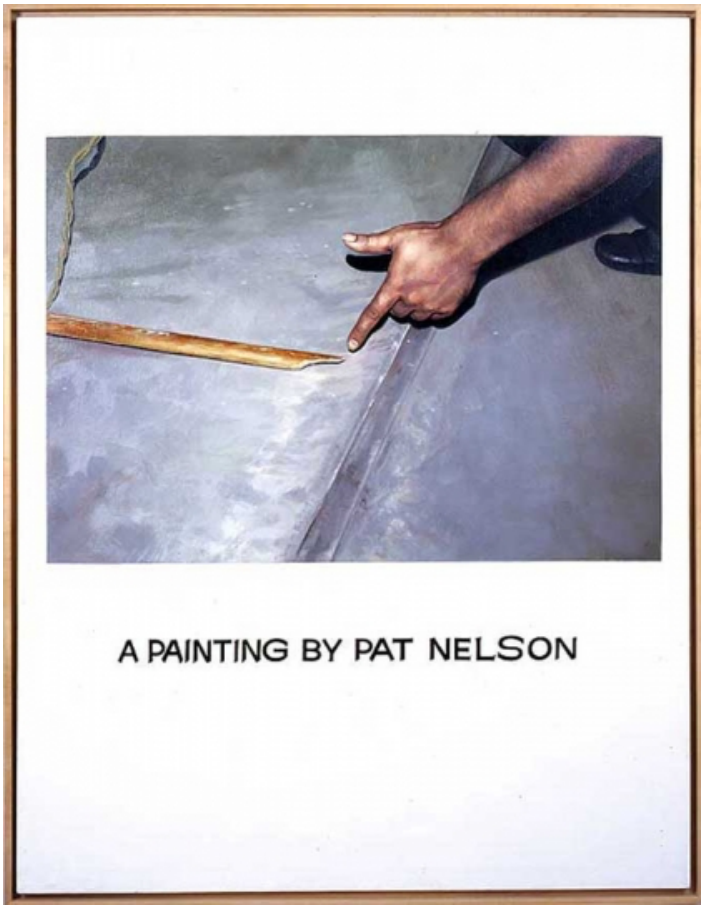

Figure 8. John Baldessari, *A Painting by Pat Nelson*, 1969. Oil on canvas. Artchive, https://www.artchive.com/artwork/commissioned-painting-a-painting-by-pat-nelson-john-baldessari-1969/.

The result is a recursive joke with a philosophical core. At the surface level, each image depicts a pointing gesture, cropped so tightly that the body to which the hand belongs is rendered irrelevant. The paintings direct attention, but the object is difficult to categorize. The finger points toward something innocuous, a sink plug, a piece of wood. The referent's meaning is obscure. The gesture remains, but the world that once stabilized it—the perspectival field that gave pointing direction, or the inner voice of the Romantic artist—has vanished. What persists is a directive without a destination.

But the deeper reflexivity lies in the caption. The phrase "A Painting by…" appears to provide the authorial certainty. Yet Baldessari's attribution is a clear misdirection. By crediting the hired painter, he calls attention to the distance between the hand that executes the painting and the mind that structures the act, implicitly valorizing one over the other. The surface of the canvas may have been produced by a technical laborer, they may even be credited, but the artwork's conceptual force lies in the way Baldessari engineers the scenario. He is present nowhere and everywhere—in the photograph, the selection, the painting, the caption—and yet his name, his hand, does not appear. The work points to its own making by obscuring the very figure who made it possible.

What Baldessari ultimately reveals is that pointing cannot simply be reduced to a physical object. It is a communicative act that depends on context, intention, and shared orientation. Without a structure of coordination to anchor it, the gesture becomes ambiguous, even nonsensical. The finger demands an answer—*look where?*—but the work refuses to provide one. In this refusal, *Commissioned Paintings* exposes the fragility of the act of pointing once its historical supports have fallen away. The viewer must reconstruct the conditions of meaning, recognizing that every gesture becomes a negotiation between what is depicted, what is declared, and what is implied.

1.9 Conclusion: From the Vanishing Point to the Vanished Frame

Looking back across the long arc from Brunelleschi's peephole to the development of conceptual art, what emerges is not simply a change in the techniques of representation but a transformation in the conditions under which vision becomes shareable. Perspective first appeared in the fifteenth century as a cultural device for alignment, choreographing the relation between artist,

viewer, and world. It established a contract that stabilized meaning: occupy this position and the world coheres.

For centuries this position remained the quiet anchor of European pictorial logic. Even when artists loosened perspective's grip, as the Impressionists did, they still relied on its residual promise of a coherent world. With the grid, painting ceases to function as a window onto the world and becomes instead an autonomous surface. Modernist painting does not show the world; it becomes its own world. Conceptualism, which de Duve names "as an offspring of Duchamp's abandonment of painting" subsumes the pointing function.[66]

The frame changes, but each frame allows for repetition and the circulation of meaning. Each frame is like the coin, stabilizing how we see and making the artwork attributable to identifiable sources. Value is coordinated through a stable point of view. Perspective, modernist flatness, and nomination each operate as distinct frames, each a new coin that circulates alongside the others. Yet these frames are "intended not so much to provide the public with criteria and definitions as the artists themselves with ideas regulating their own judgments."[67]

As the 20th century moves on, coins proliferate, valued in different ways by different groups. What is lost is not the coin itself but the stability that accrues from a central currency.

[66] Thierry de Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," *Artforum*, May 1986, accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.artforum.com/features/the-readymade-and-the-tube-of-paint-206976/
[67] de Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint."

2. How Did You Make This?



Minotaur 1, 2023, ink on paper

Minotaur 1, and the series of drawings that followed it, were made using pen and ink but the process behind the image was more complex. The drawings began from a small archive: a set of drawings produced by Francis Picabia for the magazine Littérature in 1919. These images

formed a small dataset that I compiled and uploaded into a Stable Diffusion model, a generative AI system that produces images from learned visual patterns.

From this dataset, a custom generative model was trained. The resulting images were not treated as final outputs but as sketches. They were then redrawn by hand, these second drawings were reintroduced into a new model, and generated again. Each pass introduced both continuity and deviation, producing a recursive loop in which no single stage could claim priority.

Authorship in these works does not stabilize. It cannot be located in Picabia, in the model, or in my hand guiding the process. Instead, it emerges as a distributed condition across the system as a whole. The images are not collaborative in the conventional sense, since collaboration still presumes contributors with agency. Here, the procedure produces forms that are structurally unauthorizable. They are the result of coordinated transformations without a single point of origin.

What emerges through this recursion is not simply a style but a field of constraints. The images converge toward an aesthetic that feels coherent, yet cannot be traced back to a singular intention or historical source. Picabia's gestures persist, but only as residues, filtered through machine inference, manual reinterpretation, and iterative reprocessing. The result is neither quotation nor homage, but a kind of morphing surface in which influence is continuously redistributed.

In this sense, these images operate as a practical extension of the problems addressed in this dissertation. If earlier structures of coordination such as perspective or authorship depended on stabilizing origin and intention, these works instead demonstrate a system in which coordination

persists without those anchors. Meaning does not disappear, but it becomes more difficult to locate, and less accountable to any singular authorial position.

Chapter 2:

2.0 Why Pointing Matters

The previous chapter traced a historical arc: perspective rose as a structure of coordination in painting, held for centuries, and then transitioned, first into atmosphere with the Impressionists, then into autonomous surface with the modernist grid, and then into nomination with conceptual art. But art history can only tell us that this happened. It cannot tell us why it matters so much. Why does the constant alteration of pictorial convention feel like something more than a stylistic shift?

Modernism and conceptual art reveal that meaning depends on framing, but they still provide a frame. The frames have long functioned as a way of pointing; coordinating attention, stabilizing how gestures are seen, shared, and recognized. When that function proliferates it becomes unstable, and the effects are not confined to art but extend to the conditions under which meaning is produced at all.

The pointing gesture that art elaborates is not a cultural invention; it is the foundational structure through which human minds coordinate with each other. What collapses historically in painting is load-bearing at the level of cognition. This chapter turns to that structure.

2.1 Tomasello: The Evolution of Pointing

For developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello, the gesture of pointing is not merely a developmental milestone; it is the hinge on which the entire structure of human communication turns. Infants begin to point around their first birthday, but the significance of this gesture lies

not in its physical execution but in the sociality it presupposes. A child who lifts her arm and directs another's gaze toward a dog or a balloon is not simply drawing attention to an object; she is recruiting another person into a shared experience. She is saying, in effect: *look with me*. Tomasello argues that this move, which he calls *joint attention*, marks the evolutionary departure between humans and other primates.[68]

Tomasello's distinction between *imperative* and *declarative* pointing clarifies why this gesture is so central. Imperative pointing, gesturing to obtain something, is found in other species; apes will point to food they cannot reach, or gesture for assistance from humans. But declarative pointing, gesturing for the sake of sharing, informing, or commenting, appears to be uniquely human.[69] A toddler who points at a bird overhead does not necessarily want the bird; she wants the adult to witness it with her. The gesture is motivated by their "prelinguistic communication to inform others of things helpfully and to share experience with them emotionally," a desire not merely to manipulate the world but to coordinate attention within it.[70] Through such gestures, infants and caregivers establish what developmental psychologists refer to as *joint attentional frames*: temporary shared perspectives in which both parties know that they are attending to the same thing and know that the other knows it too.

Even the human eye is adapted for shared attention. The whites of our eyes let us easily follow another person's gaze. As Michael Tomasello notes, human eyes are distinctive among primates in that the white sclera makes gaze direction highly visible to others. Most primates have darker

[68] Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 33.
[69] Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 112-116.
[70] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 113.

sclera that blend with the iris, making gaze more difficult to detect. The human eye helps to facilitate the coordination of attention, we can easily look where another person is looking.[71]

The recursive structure is crucial. Joint attention is not simply co-attention; it is a layered cognitive achievement in which participants become aware of each other's awareness. This meta-awareness allows for the emergence of cooperation, teaching, and forms of cultural transmission unavailable to species that lack the capacity for such recursive mindreading. Tomasello identifies this capacity, what he calls shared intentionality, as the defining feature of human cognition.[72] Humans act together, think together, and construct shared worlds because they are able to embed their actions within frameworks of mutual understanding. To see through another person's eyes, to imagine their state of mind, is one of the most powerful tools of cognition.

Within an evolutionary and developmental context, the arts appear not as decorative supplements to cognition but as elaborations of a species-specific capacity. Painting, storytelling, music, and ritual all function as technologies for sustaining and extending joint attention: ways of directing others' experience, aligning perspectives, and stabilizing shared meanings over time.[73] The perspectival apparatus of the Renaissance was a powerful structuring device. But the alignment is only effective because humans are already attuned to the practice of following another's cue, of inhabiting another's line of sight. When a viewer peers through Brunelleschi's peephole, they are not merely seeing the Baptistery rendered in perfect perspective; they are entering a joint attentional frame. A protocol orchestrating a cognitive act.

[71] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 196-197.
[72] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 74-77.
[73] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 185-186.

This account of joint attention also allows us to understand language as an extension of the same cooperative structure. The gesture of pointing does not disappear with the acquisition of language; it becomes internalized and elaborated.[74] Words can be understood as refined instruments for directing attention, coordinating perspectives, and establishing shared reference across increasingly abstract domains. To speak is to point without the hand: to guide another's attention toward something that may no longer be immediately present, but is nonetheless held in common.

Meaning is not contained within language, any more than it is contained within an artwork. It arises through the coordination of attention and inference between agents who are jointly oriented toward a world. Speakers do not simply produce sentences; they attempt to do something with them. Listeners, in turn, do not decode forms but reconstruct intention. Meaning is not a property of words, or any one form, but a relational achievement that depends on the successful alignment of perspectives.

2.2 Merleau-Ponty: Embodied Seeing

If Tomasello gives us the evolutionary and developmental grounding for joint attention, Merleau-Ponty gives us its phenomenological depth. His account of perception begins with the body as the primary site of relational encounter. To see, for Merleau-Ponty, is never simply to register visual information; it is to inhabit a world through a body that is already oriented toward

[74] Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*, 2.

others, toward things, and toward the horizon of possible actions.[75] Vision is not a neutral channel but a mode of participation. It is inherently intersubjective.

This is why Merleau-Ponty so frequently returns to the example of the painter. The painter does not stand over against the world as a spectator interpreting distant appearances; they are immersed in a field that they traverse, touch, and co-constitute. Seeing is a kind of touching-at-a-distance, an intertwining of seer and seen that Merleau-Ponty names *the chiasm*. The chiasm is Merleau-Ponty's term for the reversible structure of perception in which the body and the world interpenetrate—seer and seen, toucher and touched cross into one another so that each is both subject and object.[76] Within this structure, perception is always already shared, not because two individuals occupy the same place, but because the visible world itself is structured as a relational field. Merleau-Ponty writes that "things are complexes" and "this is what Cezanne meant when he spoke of the particular 'halo' of things".[77] The painter's task, then, is not to replicate appearances but to reveal the invisible coherence of this relational field: the manner in which things solicit our gaze and return it.

This relational account of seeing clarifies why linear perspective once felt so natural. The vanishing point appears "objective" only because the viewer's perceptual orientation is already shaped by a body that moves through the world toward and with others. Linear perspective formalizes one possible organization of this embodied field; it diagrams a relation that the body already understands. Hold your fingers in a square in front of you and look through it with one

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[76] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 138-160.

[77] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis, intro. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004),63-64.

eye: this is the truncated world that linear perspective is able to articulate. However, these views "remain at a distance and do not involve the viewer."[78]

Seen this way, linear perspective was a geometric discovery and a phenomenological one. It externalized a structure of perceptual intentionality that the body ordinarily operates without reflection. The problem was that the pictorial space of Brunelleschi or Alberti amplified and stabilized a mode of bodily orientation that is in flux.

In Merleau-Ponty's terms, embodied perspective is a sedimented practice: a historical crystallization of bodily comportments that users no longer experience as constructed. Linear perspective simplifies this embodiment in order to arrive at a clean and legible "truth". The apparatus succeeds because it resonates with the tacit structures of embodied life, even as it brackets the lived experience of looking.

Merleau-Ponty's writing on gesture sharpens this point further. For him, a gesture is not a mechanical movement but a form of embodied meaning, a visible intention that communicates precisely because bodies are already attuned to one another. A gesture is intelligible not through inference but through the shared bodily schema through which we immediately grasp another's orientation, effort, or solicitation. Even language retains a "gestural sense," functioning not as arbitrary representation but as an embodied way of expressing and inhabiting the world.[79] Pointing, in this sense, is not a symbolic act layered on top of perception; it is perception's natural extension into the social world. To follow a finger is to enter a relation before entering a meaning. Perspective functioned so effectively as a cultural technology because it formalized the

[78] Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 53.
[79] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 192-193.

logic of gesture, turning embodied orientation into a pictorial structure. And it also clarifies why the withholding of gesture's field — as in conceptual art — produces cognitive strain: when the visible sign of intention no longer connects to a shared visual world, the fundamental link between bodies and meanings grows tenuous.

This phenomenological burden prepares the ground for the next conceptual step. If perception is relational and recursive—if seeing involves entering a loop in which the world returns our gaze—then the destabilization of that loop reverberates through subjectivity itself. It is precisely this recursive structure that Douglas Hofstadter describes in his theory of the self as a "strange loop." Understanding pointing, perception, and shared intentionality requires attending not only to the body or the gesture but to the recursive patterns through which the self emerges.[80] Merleau-Ponty thus brings us to Hofstadter: from the intersubjective field of perception to the recursive architecture of the self.

2.3 Hofstadter: The Self as Strange Loop

Where Merleau-Ponty situates perception within an intersubjective field, Douglas Hofstadter reframes subjectivity itself as a recursive structure—a pattern that arises from the mind's ability to represent and re-represent its own activity. In *I Am a Strange Loop*, Hofstadter argues that the self is not a substance or a stable interiority but a dynamic process of self-referencing: a system that turns back upon itself in increasingly complex ways. A system that "has told itself a million times a self-reinforcing story" built from perceptions and models.[81] Consciousness emerges, in

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[80] Douglas R. Hofstadter. *I Am a Strange Loop*. New York: Basic Books, 2007. 281-290.

[81] Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, 291.

this view, from a loop in which the mind models the world, then models itself modeling the world, producing a layered architecture of self-awareness. The "I" of our selves is not a point but a pattern.

The recursive account of selfhood introduces an important dimension to the history of pointing. If the self is a product of loops, circuits that travel outward and return transformed, then pointing is one of the earliest and most fundamental instances of this structure. To point is to project one's attention into the world, to solicit another's gaze, and to feel that gesture reflected back through the eyes of the other. When the gesture lands, when another follows the point, the loop closes, reinforcing the sense of self as a being whose intentions can be recognized and shared.

Hofstadter describes such processes as *strange loops*: patterns that travel outward through the world only to return as part of the system that produced them.[82] A simple example can be found in childhood imitation. A child perceives a parent not merely as a person but as a recurring pattern of actions: a tone of a voice, a rhythm of speech, the way a hand moves while explaining something. Over time these patterns become internal models. The child begins to reproduce them, speaking with a similar cadence or adopting similar gestures. Yet the loop does not simply copy the original pattern. It transforms it. The pattern reappears in a new body, within a different context, carrying the trace of the original while altering it. The parent becomes part of the architecture through which the child understands and produces itself.

In this sense identity emerges not as a stable object but as a recursive circulation of patterns between self and world. The self recognizes patterns in others, incorporates them, and then

[82] Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, 186-187,

expresses them outward again.[83] What returns is never identical to what departed. Each loop modifies the pattern that circulates through it.

Pointing can be understood as a minimal version of this process. When one person points and another follows the gesture, attention leaves the body, passes through the world, and returns through the recognition of another mind. The person who points now perceives that their intention has been understood. The loop therefore stabilizes not only shared attention but the sense of self as a being capable of participating in shared structures.

This reconstruction of the loop is existential. If the self is built from recursive patterns, then disruptions to those patterns reverberate inward. A world in which gestures no longer land, a world without stable contexts, shared frames, or reliable referents, produces a strain on the very mechanisms through which the self is constituted. The conceptual artwork described earlier is a microcosm of a broader cultural condition: the increasing fragility of the loops that give coherence to experience. In this sense, Hofstadter provides not simply a theory of selfhood but a framework for understanding the cognitive labor demanded by contemporary art and contemporary life.

Placed alongside Tomasello and Merleau-Ponty, Hofstadter reveals the full stakes of pointing. It is not only a communicative gesture or a perceptual alignment; it is a recursive anchoring of the self within a shared world. When the structures that support this anchoring dissolve, the self must perform more and more of the work that the world once performed with it. Meaning becomes a negotiation rather than a given. Strange loops become strained.

[83] Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, 188.

2.4 Fragility of Recursive Meaning

The contemporary media environment introduces a new kind of interruption, one that neither Tomasello, Merleau-Ponty, nor Hofstadter anticipate: systems that direct attention without participating in the cooperative infrastructure that makes pointing meaningful. Algorithms recommend, flag, nudge, and highlight, but they do so without intention, without shared awareness, and without the recursive reciprocity that human communication presupposes. These machine-generated gestures circulate as if they were acts of joint attention, yet they lack the feature that Tomasello identifies as essential: the presumption of a partner. A recommendation engine does not look back. It does not register whether its signal has been understood. It does not participate in the loop through which recognition returns. What appears as coordination is therefore only a simulation of coordination.

This condition is reflected in the cultural fascination with the figure of the NPC, the non-player character. In video games NPCs populate the environment while lacking genuine agency. They repeat scripted gestures, walk predictable routes, and respond through preprogrammed dialogue. Recently the term has migrated into everyday language as an insult, describing someone perceived as merely repeating received opinions or behavioral scripts rather than acting as an independent agent. The insult reveals an anxiety about patterned behavior itself. To call someone an NPC is to suggest that their gestures do not originate from an interior loop of recognition and intention but from an externally programmed pattern.

In this sense the NPC functions as a metaphor for a broader transformation in the ecology of attention. A social environment saturated with algorithmically generated signals begins to resemble the background of a game world: figures pass by, gestures proliferate, but their origins

are increasingly opaque. Signals circulate without clear authors, without clear audiences, and without the recursive acknowledgment that stabilizes shared attention.

As attention scatters across proliferating signals, as the world offers fewer stable cues through which to orient ourselves socially and perceptually, the recursion that sustains subjectivity becomes strained. Contexts collapse. Meaning no longer returns automatically but must be assembled and negotiated. The self remains a strange loop, but the loops available for modeling that self have become noisier, thinner, and more diffuse.

Understanding this fragility reveals something crucial: the modern world has not replaced perspective with a new stable order. It has shifted the labor of constructing orientation from external frames to internal cognitive work. Conceptual art exposes the difficulty of this shift by placing viewers in deliberately underdetermined situations, making palpable the effort normally hidden beneath social interaction and perceptual familiarity. In doing so, it mirrors the broader experiential condition of contemporary life, in which individuals are continually asked to self-orient within environments that no longer guarantee shared meaning.

This fragility is not merely cognitive; it is affective. When the loops that sustain recognition weaken, individuals experience a diffuse strain — a low-level atmospheric pressure felt as disorientation, ambient anxiety, or what Lauren Berlant calls the "impasse"[84] of an environment that no longer supports one's footing. The failure of gestures to land generates a mood rather than a discrete perception: a sense that meaning wavers, that orientation must be reassembled

[84] the impasse "is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things"
Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

moment by moment. The fading of shared frames is therefore registered somatically, as a disruption in how one leans into the world, how one attunes to others, how one anticipates recognition. The erosion of joint attention is felt not as a single break but as a thickened atmosphere of uncertainty.

This recognition prepares the next chapter. If meaning is fragile because joint-attention structures have eroded, then the deep grammar of pointing, the cooperative infrastructure that Tomasello describes, remains essential but increasingly strained. The recursive self is still built through loops of recognition, but the loops no longer close with the ease they once did. The task of the next chapter is to understand how cultural, technological, and infrastructural transformations intensify this fragility, and how the erosion of symbolic efficiency complicates the possibility of shared orientation in a world saturated with competing signals.

What emerges from this cognitive account is a deeper continuity between the history of art and the structure of human communication. Tomasello's account shows that artistic frameworks are not merely conventions, they are extensions of a basic human capacity for shared intentionality. The ability to point, to follow another's gaze, and to inhabit a shared attentional frame is the infrastructure through which meaning becomes possible at all.

The contemporary media environment places unprecedented strain on this infrastructure. Digital platforms multiply gestures of attention while dissolving the contexts that once stabilized them. Signals circulate faster than shared frames can form, and algorithms increasingly simulate acts of orientation without participating in the cooperative structures that give those acts meaning. The gesture of pointing persists, but the world that once allowed it to land has begun to fragment. It is this condition that the next chapter examines.

3. How Did You Make This?



Pears, 18”x24” oil and hydrocal on board, hung on digital print

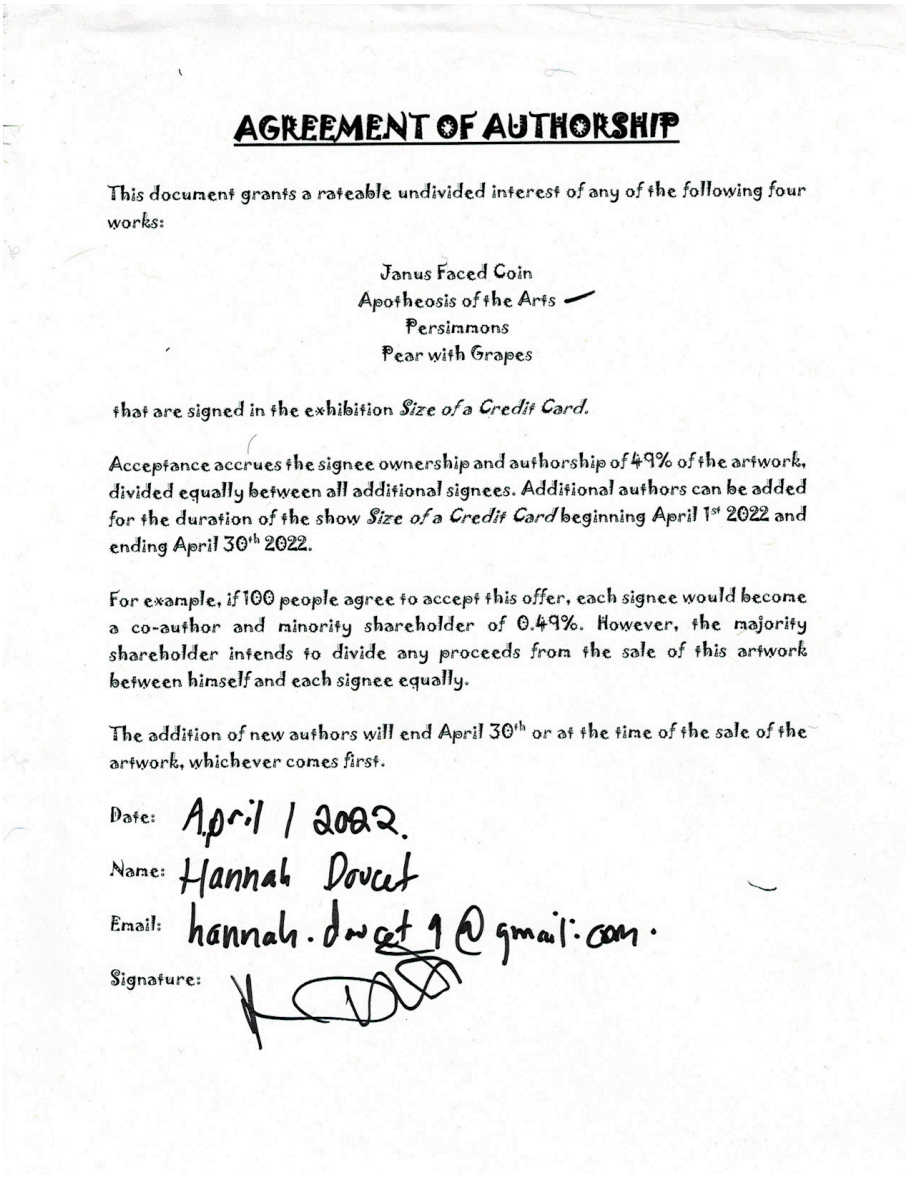
This work was produced for the group exhibition *The Size of a Credit Card* at The Plumb. The exhibition framed artistic production through the lens of financial relations, asking how debt, ownership, and exchange structure not only economies but forms of making. The work responds to this condition by treating authorship itself as a negotiable asset rather than a fixed origin.

The painting itself is made by monoprinting. An image is first painted in oil onto a sheet of plastic, and then pressed into a wet plaster ground. The result is an image that holds both immediacy and displacement: the gesture is preserved, but its support has been changed. This method introduces a separation between action and surface, echoing the broader conceptual separation between author and work that the project explores.

The image was drawn from a still-life composition by Luis Meléndez, an eighteenth-century Spanish painter who, despite his technical mastery, died in poverty. His work becomes a historical reference point for thinking about value and recognition, particularly the gap between artistic labor and economic reward. The appropriation foregrounds a familiar problem of authorship: the persistence of influence without compensation.

In contrast, the backgrounds are composed of repeating patterns derived from vernacular print cultures. These motifs circulate widely and anonymously, rarely tethered to a singular author. They function as shared visual infrastructures, stabilizing recognition without requiring attribution. If the still-life images intensify the question of authorship, the patterned grounds dissolve it, positioning the work between ownership and the unownable.

This tension is extended through the structure of the exhibition itself. During the run of the show, viewers were invited to sign a legal agreement that granted them partial authorship of the work. The contract, developed in consultation with a lawyer, assigned a share of 49 percent of the artwork to its signatories, divided equally among participants. This included rights to authorship, as well as a share in any potential sale. The remaining 51 percent was retained, preserving a minimal majority while opening the work to distributed ownership.



AGREEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

This document grants a rateable undivided interest of any of the following four works:

Janus Faced Coin
Apotheosis of the Arts
Persimmons
Pear with Grapes

that are signed in the exhibition *Size of a Credit Card.*

Acceptance accrues the signee ownership and authorship of 49% of the artwork, divided equally between all additional signees. Additional authors can be added for the duration of the show *Size of a Credit Card* beginning April 1st 2022 and ending April 30th 2022.

For example, if 100 people agree to accept this offer, each signee would become a co-author and minority shareholder of 0.49%. However, the majority shareholder intends to divide any proceeds from the sale of this artwork between himself and each signee equally.

The addition of new authors will end April 30th or at the time of the sale of the artwork, whichever comes first.

Date: April 1 2022.
Name: Hannah Doucet
Email: hannah.doucet1@gmail.com.
Signature:

The act of signing functioned as both a legal and performative gesture. Early participants included artists, curators, and visitors, but the visibility of signatures produced a secondary effect. As more names accumulated, the work began to solicit further participation. Authorship became contagious, not through aesthetic persuasion but through social coordination. The decision to sign was less about evaluating the object and more about entering into a shared structure of relation.

If the work were sold, contributors would be offered a choice between financial compensation or a print derived from the work itself, extending the circulation of value beyond monetary terms. In this way, the project stages authorship as a form of exchange that exceeds the object, involving contracts, conversations, and collective decisions.

Chapter 3:

3.0 When Pointing No Longer Lands: Slop Machines

Chapter 2 showed what is at stake in the failure of shared attention, not simply a communicative breakdown, but a cognitive and existential one. The self emerges through loops of coordination with others, through structures that allow gestures to be recognized and taken up. But these frameworks describe what happens between people. They do not account for what happens when the systems mediating attention are no longer human.

The contemporary media environment intensifies this condition to a degree that earlier aesthetic forms could not anticipate. Gestures do not simply struggle to land; they circulate without landing. They drift and accumulate within channels whose logic is modulation rather than meaning.

The term "digital" itself derives from the Latin *digitus*, meaning finger—a reminder that counting and calculation were once grounded in embodied gesture. What now appears as abstract computation emerges historically from the same body that makes pointing possible. In contemporary systems, however, this lineage is inverted: gestures are produced without bodies, and coordinate without shared orientation.

McLuhan anticipated aspects of this transformation when he argued that electronic media replace the linear sequence of print culture with environments of simultaneity. "Electric circuitry," he writes, "profoundly involves men with one another… information pours upon us instantaneously

and continuously."[85] In such environments, meaning no longer unfolds through ordered narrative but through patterns of circulation and resonance. The contemporary feed radicalizes this condition, placing signals side by side without the temporal or contextual scaffolding that once stabilized interpretation.

We now inhabit an environment defined less by shared vantage points than by overlapping, unstable feeds. What is commonly referred to as "slop" emerges in this environment. Posts, images, clips, and comments travel through algorithmically sorted streams in which context is provisional and constantly shifting. The gesture of pointing, which once depended on the existence of a shared world or coherent public, now unfolds in infrastructures designed not to stabilize attention but to fragment it. Jodi Dean describes this transformation as the decline of "symbolic efficiency": the erosion of the shared structures of coordination that once grounded meaning, replaced by a compulsive circulation that transforms communication into drive.[86] In such an environment, the gesture's ability to orient becomes compromised. The pointing still says, "look here," but is quickly overtaken by another gesture "and here, and here, and here".

The contemporary media environment often presents itself as a neutral infrastructure. Recommendation engines, ranking algorithms, and generative systems appear to offer objective access to information, images, and ideas. Yet this apparent neutrality reproduces an older epistemological fantasy. Platforms claim to organize attention without occupying a situated position within the world they shape.

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[85] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 63.
[86] Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 22–35.

Contemporary platforms and generative systems extend this logic in a new direction. If perspective produced a situated viewpoint that masqueraded as universal, algorithmic systems produce outputs that appear to come from no viewpoint at all. The "god trick" is distributed across infrastructures that generate and organize signals without occupying a recognizable standpoint.[87] What emerges is a form of vision that retains the authority of objectivity while evacuating the conditions of situated knowledge that once grounded it.

The feed of social media, of the news, of google results appear to present the world as it is, selecting what is relevant and discarding what is not. Yet the system's operations remain largely opaque. Users encounter an environment that seems to know what matters without revealing how those judgments are made.

This concealment has important consequences for the gesture of pointing. When a signal appears in a feed it carries the implicit directive "look here." But the origin of that directive is no longer attached to a recognizable subject. The gesture emerges from a system whose operations are distributed across code, data, and corporate infrastructure. The result is a form of vision that appears objective while remaining fundamentally unlocatable.

This shift is not merely technological; it is cognitive and cultural. Where linear perspective offered a stable structure of coordination and conceptual art exposed the need for one, contemporary platforms of social media dissolve the possibility of shared frames altogether. Gestures become free-floating signals—indexed, recombined, and recirculated without reference to an originating intention. What remains is not communication in the traditional sense but the continuous production of stimuli designed to capture, redirect, and monetize attention. The result

[87] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 581.

is a media ecology in which pointing becomes ambient noise rather than a cooperative act. Meaning is no longer co-constructed but algorithmically distributed.

Within this environment, the burden of orientation intensifies. If conceptual art forced viewers to supply missing context, platforms remove the very idea of context as a coherent element. Instead of reconstructing a frame, the viewer must navigate a stream. Instead of inferring a sender's intention, the viewer encounters signals generated, selected, or amplified by systems whose logic is neither human nor transparent. The recursive loops that once sustained subjectivity—self, world, other—become saturated with externally generated cues. Attention disperses, and the self must continually recalibrate its place within a field that offers no stable vantage.

This chapter examines the implications of this transformation. It begins with political theorist Jodi Dean's account of symbolic collapse and contextlessness, turns to the logic of platform-based pointing and memetic drift, and explores the rise of performative attention and branding as new modes of aesthetic labor. From there, it considers the role of algorithmic systems as recursive loops without subjects—systems that simulate orientation while evacuating intentionality. The final section examines AI as a generator of contextless pointers, producing images and utterances untethered from shared intentionality. Together, these dynamics reveal a world in which the historical structures of coordination that supported pointing have eroded.

The chapter closes by showing how this collapse prepares the ground for process-based accounts of creativity and meaning-making. If pointing can no longer rely on external frames, then meaning must be understood as emergent: a distributed, relational, and constantly renegotiated process. Gen AI, in this sense, does not simply challenge traditional authorship; it exposes the disappearance of the vantage point itself.

3.1 Jodi Dean: Symbolic Efficiency → Context Collapse

Jodi Dean's account of late-capitalist communication provides a clear framework for understanding why pointing has become so cognitively and socially unstable in the contemporary media environment. In Dean's formulation, symbolic efficiency describes the condition in which shared codes, linguistic, cultural, and institutional once anchored meaning. Under symbolic efficiency, communication presupposed a horizon of mutual orientation: to speak, gesture, or point was to rely on an underlying structure of recognition, a set of norms or conventions capable of holding meaning still long enough for it to be understood. Even when contested, these structures provided a common ground.[88] They allowed communication to operate as a medium for understanding.

Dean argues that digital platforms have eroded this condition. The collapse of symbolic efficiency does not stop communication, but communication is overwhelmed by its own technical means. Messages recirculate as inputs into endlessly refreshing feeds, where significance is measured not by shared comprehension but by metrics of speed, volume, and engagement. In this condition, Dean writes, communication becomes Lacanian"drive"—a compulsive repetition that substitutes circulation for understanding. Messages no longer orient; they move. The function of the gesture shifts from anchoring attention to generating more signals.[89]

This shift is psychological but also infrastructural. Platforms are designed to maximize flow, extraction, and engagement. They privilege circulation over interpretation, making the success of

[88] Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 22–35.
[89] Dean, *Blog Theory,* 30.

a message dependent on its capacity to propagate rather than what it means. Under these conditions, context disintegrates. A post is severed from the communicative situation in which it was produced, pulled into new contexts in which its meaning becomes provisional, unstable, or irrelevant. This is what Dean calls communicative capitalism: an economy in which the profusion of signals undermines the very possibility of a coherent public discourse.[90]

Under symbolic efficiency, pointing presupposed a shared world. Under communicative capitalism, pointing becomes contextless. The gesture floats. Audiences are fragmented, temporally desynchronized, algorithmically partitioned. Irony and intentional destabilization become tools to partition audiences, between those who "get it" and those who don't. What a gesture means at one moment, for one cluster of viewers, may be irrelevant to what it means minutes later for another. Dog whistles proliferate and meanings transform.

Context collapse, in this sense, is not merely a sociological phenomenon but a structural feature of platform architecture. The feed produces simultaneity without cohesion; it provides visibility without orientation. The user is exposed to a ceaseless procession of signals detached from the conditions that once shaped their interpretation. In such an environment, the gesture of pointing becomes diminished. It no longer directs attention toward an agreed-upon referent; it becomes one more unit of circulation in a system whose logic is aggregation and repetition.[91]

Dean's account thus provides a crucial lens for interpreting the broader argument of this dissertation. The collapse of symbolic efficiency marks the moment when the historical supports for pointing—perspectival, conceptual, and cognitive—begin to falter. The result is a media

[90] Dean, *Blog Theory,* 28-32.
[91] Dean, *Blog Theory,* 114.

ecology in which the gesture persists but cannot ground itself. Pointing becomes a performance of attention rather than an act of orientation, a signal in a system that no longer distinguishes between intentions, contexts, or audiences.

3.2 Performative Attention

If the feed transforms pointing into circulation without orientation, the contemporary economy turns attention itself into a form of labour. Under these conditions, pointing becomes performative. It is less an act of directing attention toward something in the world than a strategy for remaining visible within systems that reward continuous participation.

Artist and theorist Dena Yago describes the contemporary creative worker—especially the artist navigating social platforms—as caught in a regime where identity and labour collapse into one another. The artist becomes a brand-body whose gestures must continuously reproduce a coherent and marketable persona. To post, to forward, to add an image to the ongoing cascade is to demonstrate activity.[92] Communication functions as evidence of ongoing presence, a proof of life for the algorithm.

Sianne Ngai's theorization of contemporary aesthetic categories helps specify the affective grammar through which that presence is managed. In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai argues that the dominant aesthetic forms of contemporary culture are no longer the grand categories inherited from the Enlightenment. We no longer have Edmund Burke's Beautiful, Sublime, and

[92] Dena Yago, "On Ketamine and Added Value," *e-flux Journal*, no. 82 (June 2017), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/82/133913/on-ketamine-and-added-value.

Picturesque, instead we have "minor" styles: the cute, the zany, and the interesting.[93] These new categories do not elevate the viewer into a stable contemplative position, nor do they promise a unified subject experiencing a unified world. Instead, they describe affects shaped by circulation, labor, and attention: conditions in which orientation is unstable and meaning is distributed.

In her account, the "interesting," the "zany," and the "cute" dominate not because they produce exalted aesthetic experiences but because they modulate attention in systems saturated with information.[2] The interesting marks something as worth noticing without demanding deep engagement; it is a placeholder, a bookmark, a way of saying "keep this in play." The zany, with its frenetic energetics and emphasis on overextension, mirrors the conditions of precarious creative labour that must appear endlessly flexible and enthusiastic. The cute secures a low-level, disarming attachment that can be monetized through repetition and spread. On platforms, much pointing takes the shape of "look, this is interesting," "look, this is wild," "look, this is cute"—weak imperatives that keep gestures circulating without obligating sustained attention.

These aesthetic categories are not just descriptors; they are techniques. They show how affect becomes the currency of visibility. Tiziana Terranova's analysis of "free labor" situates this currency within a wider political economy. In her formulation, digital cultures rely on unpaid user activity—the production of posts, likes, and clicks—as the work that keeps platforms running.[94] Under this regime, every gesture, every instance of pointing, contributes to data flows

[93] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 18-22.
[94] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33–58, 33-34.

from which value is extracted. Labour becomes affective and involuntary; participation becomes the condition for remaining socially legible.

To understand how these affective dynamics operate at the level of communication itself, qualitative research scholar Jacqueline Fendt helps clarify that the crucial unit of platform communication is not the message but the mood it carries. Online gestures circulate through what she describes as affective intensities—small surges of feeling that bind users into momentary publics.[95]

Outrage, thrill, camaraderie, or contempt, bind users into momentary, volatile publics. Fendt describes how Donald Trump's posts exemplify this dynamic: the all-caps declarations, the nicknames, the generated images of Trump as a super hero, are not attempts to persuade so much as attempts to *key* an emotional register. Their force lies not in what they assert but in the atmosphere they summon: a quick spike of indignation or nationalist pride that others can adopt and amplify. [96] In this sense, the feed does not merely fragment attention; it calibrates feeling. Gestures acquire traction when they heighten a shared sense of grievance, glee, or embattlement, regardless of whether the content points to anything true in the world.

Seen in this light, pointing on platforms becomes a way of tuning oneself to an ambient emotional frequency. A gesture succeeds when it intensifies a mood that others can inhabit and extend. This is what Trump's style so effectively models: the post as affective prompt. It does not orient a viewer toward an object; it invites them to *feel along*, to join the rhythm of indignation or triumph. The pointing finger becomes an emotional cue rather than a

[95] Jacqueline Fendt, "Beyond Wicked: Vibocratic Problems in the Post-Truth Era," *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 2025): 44–56, http://ijsss.redfame.com
[96] Fendt, "Beyond Wicked", 47.

communicative act, offering a feeling that can be taken up, repeated, and circulated by others. This affective relay adds something missing from the art as pointing genealogy: not just the instability of context, but the directive presence of atmosphere. Platforms scatter observers; but they also envelop them in shifting emotional weather.

What increasingly circulates in such environments is not fully articulated meaning but something more compressed. What is often called a "vibe" names a weak but portable structure of orientation: a way of grouping feelings, styles, gestures, and postures into a recognizable pattern before they are stabilized as concepts. Vibe extends what Raymond Williams described as a "structure of feeling": a diffuse but real pattern of lived experience that precedes formal articulation.[97] What changes in the contemporary moment is not the existence of such structures, but their compression, acceleration, and circulation across technical systems.

A vibe does not anchor interpretation in the strong sense once provided by shared symbolic worlds, but it does offer a provisional map of similarity and difference. It tells users how things hang together at a low resolution.[98] In this sense, vibe belongs to the history traced throughout this dissertation. If perspective coordinated vision through a shared spatial order, and conceptual art exposed the act of pointing itself, platform culture increasingly coordinates through atmosphere: not "look at this" so much as "feel your way through this." Orientation persists, but in weakened form.

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[97] Kimberly Mair, "The Sofa's Objection: Troublesome Things and Affective Emplacements," in *Feelings of Structure: Explorations in Affect*, ed. Karen Engle and Yoke-Sum Wong (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 140–[specific page].
[98] Peli Grietzer, *A Theory of Vibe* (Glass Bead, Site 1, 2017), https://www.glass-bead.org/wp-content/uploads/GB_Site-1_Peli-Grietzer_Eng.pdf

A useful analogy for this kind of compression can be found in machine learning. In "A Theory of Vibe" Peli Grietzer describes how AI autoencoders function to create an aesthetic unity, or vibe. An autoencoder is a system that takes a complex image or signal, compresses it into a small set of values and then reconstructs it, preserving structure while discarding detail. In doing so, it learns which differences matter and which can be discarded. What it produces is not a perfect copy, but a structured approximation.[99]

The appeal of this concept becomes clearer when placed alongside the computational logics that increasingly shape digital culture. What circulates is not a fully articulated meaning but a compact way of sensing how things hang together. Contemporary mediation increasingly favors such compressed aesthetic schemas over explicit interpretation. The moodboard, the "same energy"[100] meme, and the branded persona all function in this way. They do not argue so much as compress. They present a small cluster of signals from which a larger pattern can be inferred. Yet precisely because such schemas are reductive, they are also prone to drift, stereotype, and misrecognition. The vibe becomes a low-resolution form of social knowledge, powerful enough to orient attention, but too thin to ground understanding.

[99] Grietzer, *A Theory of Vibe.*

1. [100] 

The artist, once positioned as an interpreter of the world or a maker of new forms, is increasingly conscripted into the role of vibe generator. Their gestures—studio snapshots, process reels, installation views, political statements, personal disclosures—must continually demonstrate that work is happening, that the brand remains active. The artwork becomes only one node in a network of performative signals. Pointing acquires a double valence: it is simultaneously an attempt to communicate and a declaration that one is still present in the feed.

For viewers, attention becomes a fragmented and managed resource. Habituated to endless streams of gestures, they learn to process signals quickly and superficially, guided by the affective cues Ngai describes. The artwork competes within an environment optimized not for interpretive labour but for the monetization of reaction. Under these conditions, the gesture is no longer contextualized by a shared world; it is monetized by a technical and economic system. As a result, we face what art critic Ben Davis has called "an interminable feed of fascinations".[101] Pointing becomes a tactic for maintaining visibility within infrastructures calibrated for circulation. The gesture loses its anchoring power not because artists have abandoned meaning, but because meaning itself becomes secondary to the metrics that determine a gesture's survival. Yago's branded subject, Ngai's minor aesthetics, and Terranova's free labor converge to reveal a new orientation: one in which pointing says less about what matters and more about who is still performing within the system.

3.3 Platform Algorithms as Recursive Loops Without Subjects

[101] *New Models*, "NM Reads: Excerpts from *What Is Contemporary Art for Today?* + Conversation with Editors Dean Kissick, Eleonore Hugendubel, and Matt Moravec," August 13, 2025, Podcast audio. https://newmodels.substack.com/p/nm-reads-excerpts-from-what-is-contemporary

The preceding section described how platforms transform human gestures into performative signals, this section turns to the systems that govern that transformation. Recommendation engines, ranking models, and personalization algorithms now structure the visibility of nearly all digital communication. They do so by producing a form of recursion that resembles, in structural outline, the loops described by Hofstadter, but crucially lacks the subjective interiority that makes human recursion meaningful. The algorithm recurses, but the loop does not return from the world; it returns from a model. Pointing lands because two subjects can coordinate their loops. In contrast, algorithmic recursion is purely functional. A recommendation system takes user behavior as input, transforms it into predictions, and outputs a curated stream that shapes subsequent behavior.[1] The loop closes not to reinforce a self, but to refine a model of behavior that is legible within the system itself.

This distinction is subtle but critical. The algorithmic loop resembles the form of intentionality—anticipating preferences, predicting responses—but lacks its substance. It processes signals without attributing meaning to them, correlates behaviors without understanding them, and generates outputs without possessing goals in the human sense. The recursive sequence of human input, machine prediction, and determined output operates as a feedback machine.

The loop returns with a response that has no subjecthood. From the user's perspective, however, the result can feel eerily personal. The stream seems to "know" them because it has been trained on their patterns. But this intimacy is hollow: it is the statistical proximity of behavior, not the recognition of intention.

This creates a new kind of orientation problem. In human communication, pointing presupposes a shared world. In human–algorithm interaction, the algorithm creates the world in which the

gesture circulates. The user points into a field already shaped by the system's predictions. Their gesture is interpreted not through shared intentionality but through behavioral inference. The algorithm does not follow the gesture; it categorizes and incorporates it. This incorporation contributes to a recursive narrowing in which the system's model becomes the dominant lens through which the user encounters signals. Rather than aligning two subjects, with all that entails in terms of risk and reward, the loop aligns the subject to a model.

Media theorist Friedrich Kittler sharpens this distinction by insisting that technical media do not mediate human intention so much as operate independently of it. In *Optical Media*, Kittler demonstrates that once signals enter technical channels, they become subject to logics grounded in transmission, storage, and processing rather than interpretation. Media, in his formulation, determine our situation, not because they shape what we mean, but because they organize the conditions under which anything like meaning can appear. Optical devices register light intensities, not images; phonographs record vibrations, not voices.[102] Following Kittler, contemporary algorithms can be understood as extending this regime: they process signals rather than meanings.

This reframes algorithmic recursion in stark terms. The recommendation engine is not a degraded form of shared intentionality but a system that was never oriented toward meaning in the first place. Its loops are not failed recognition but successful execution of a non-interpretive logic. In this sense, platform recursion is not simply miscommunication but a form of communication in which communicants are no longer primary.

[102] Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) pp. 1–5.

Kittler's media-theoretical severity reveals why attempts to reclaim intentionality within platform systems often falter. When the system aligns the subject to the model, it is not because the system "misunderstands" human meaning but because it does not operate in the domain of meaning at all. The subject is interpolated into a signal-processing regime whose operations are extraneous to the human cognitive loops described in Chapter 2. From a Kittlerian perspective, platform recursion is not a broken form of communication, it is communication without communicants.

Moreover, the recursive structure of algorithmic filtering fragments the informational environment. As philosopher C. Thi Nguyen argues, such environments do not simply filter information but create echo chambers in which outside sources are systematically distrusted and insider voices amplified. Personalization ensures that no two users inhabit the same world. Even when they encounter the same content, they encounter it at different times, surrounded by different adjacent signals, and within different algorithmically constructed contexts. [103]

The possibility of joint-attention frames—so fundamental to Tomasello's account of communication—erodes under these conditions. The gesture of pointing cannot land if every viewer inhabits a different informational horizon.

This fragmentation is epistemic; it reshapes the affective and cognitive conditions of digital life. When the algorithm filters content to maximize engagement, it implicitly trains users to create signals that fit the model's predictions. Over time, the user internalizes the logic of the feed, learning to generate gestures that the system will surface. Pointing becomes anticipatory: a

[103] C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141–61

performance attuned to algorithmic reward rather than human recognition. The recursive loop begins to shape the subject from the outside.

To speak of algorithmic recursion as "subjectless" is not only to say that algorithms lack consciousness. It is to say that they lack the relational capacity that makes communication meaningful: the ability to recognize others, to engage in shared intentionality, to sustain the loops of selfhood through reciprocal attention. The algorithm's loop is parasitic. It feeds on gestures without ever participating in the world those gestures attempt to create. It is a recursion without recognition.

This distinction becomes essential when we turn to generative AI. If platforms automate circulation, generative AI automates the production of content itself. The next section takes up this shift directly, showing how AI produces pointers that lack not only subjects but contexts, referents, and orientations—signals that circulate as pure pattern, detached from the cooperative foundations that once grounded meaning.

3.4 AI as Contextless Pointer

Platform algorithms circulate signals without shared intention, and generative AI goes further by producing the signals themselves. Generative AI systems operate by identifying patterns across immense training corpora and recombining them into novel outputs. They do not point at anything in the human sense. Instead, they produce configurations that resemble pointing, gestures generated through statistical patterning rather than subjective perspective.

Under these conditions, AI participates fully in the broader media ecology of context collapse. Where platforms automate circulation, AI automates production. The combination exacerbates the erosion of shared intentionality. A gesture cannot land if no one intended it. A signal cannot orient if it was generated without reference to a world in which orientation matters. The recursive loops that once belonged to subjects now become autonomous, drifting through systems designed not for meaning but for efficiency, speed, and responsiveness.

The cultural effects are already visible. In visual culture, AI-generated aesthetic styles circulate disconnected from artistic lineage or lived experience. A prompt produces an "Impressionist" landscape not because the system grasps Monet's perceptual experiments but because it can reproduce pixel correlations statistically associated with "Impressionism." This is not appropriation in the conceptual-art sense—where the artist points to an image to interrogate authorship—but vibe without orientation.

Vilém Flusser's theory of the apparatus and the technical image makes this condition legible. In *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser argues that technical images are not straightforward representations of a world nor simple expressions of a subject. They are outputs of programs—computations executed by apparatuses whose operations remain opaque to their functionaries. The photographer does not create an image so much as select from the possibilities the apparatus makes available. Artistic gesture becomes a negotiation with a program rather than an act of intentional expression. The apparatus incorporates human gestures into a feedback loop that reinforces its own operational logic. As Flusser writes, technical images "feed on history,"

and once this circuit closes, “images will then always show the same thing, and people will always want to see the same thing.”[104]

Generative AI is the logical endpoint of Flusser’s apparatus. Where the camera automated the gathering of appearances, AI automates the production of appearances themselves. The resulting images resemble gestures—they are styled, oriented, affectively suggestive—but they arise from within the program, not from any intentional act. Flusser wrote that technical images “have an unprecedented meaning: they don’t signify anything; they indicate a direction.”[105] There is a disappearance of the referential world that is compensated for in speed and focus. AI images and text are the latest and most refined form of this flattening. They are technical images that do not point beyond themselves and yet have the ability to direct us forward.

This reading reveals why AI outputs so often feel simultaneously coherent and hollow. They possess the formal syntax of pointing, without the semantic or relational depth that allows gestures to land. Flusser helps articulate what earlier chapters diagnosed as the contextless pointer: an image that has the surface structure of communication but whose meaning has been evacuated by the apparatus that generates it. AI renders Flusser’s prediction literal: images become pure computation, circulating across networks that no longer require subjects to produce or interpret them.

[104] Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 55-59.
[105] Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 50.

Interlude — The Legal Blur of the Morph

In 2009 I opened my mail to find a promotional flyer for a new condominium development in Toronto called *Art Condos*. Reproduced on the flyer was an image of one of my paintings. What unsettled me was not simply that the image had been used without permission, but that it had been enlisted in a visual narrative I had no desire to support. The development presented itself as culturally progressive, and the presence of my work made it appear as though I had lent my name, or at least my sensibility, to a project of gentrification in which I had played no part.

When I consulted a copyright lawyer, the response was pragmatic. Even if a claim could be made, the cost of pursuing it would likely exceed anything I might recover. In practical terms, the work was mine, but not in a way that could be meaningfully enforced. I did nothing. The flyer circulated, the development was built, and the image became another minor artifact in the visual economy of the city.

That experience has stayed with me because it exposes something basic about copyright that is often obscured by its rhetoric. Even where a work has a clear edge, a traceable author, and an identifiable misuse, the law may offer only nominal protection. Copyright promises ownership, attribution, and control, but for many working artists those promises are thin, expensive, and unevenly accessible.[106] This matters here because generative AI does not simply create new challenges for copyright. It exposes and intensifies weaknesses that were already present in the system. If systems of copyright already struggle to protect works whose authors and boundaries

[106] Julie E. Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 1-3.

are relatively clear, the problem becomes far more severe when the work itself no longer possesses a stable edge.

A generative output is best understood as as a momentary crystallization of distributed conditions: scraped archives, low-paid annotation, model design, computational infrastructure, interface decisions, prompting and refinement.[107] The output is a small coherence event inside a larger field. A "work," in the classical sense, is what law needs. The generative AI output, however, is closer to an event of resemblance: a plausible condensation drawn from a distribution of cultural proximities.

Law's edge problem

Copyright cannot function without edges. Its grammar presumes discrete subjects, discrete objects, and identifiable origins.[108] Generative AI begins elsewhere. It has no stable origin-point, no reliable terminus, and no natural boundary where "the work" can be isolated without distortion.

This mismatch is not merely philosophical. It is infrastructural. AI generation operates through many-to-many relations: countless images feeding a single model; countless users drawing from it; outputs returning to circulation and becoming further training material. Copyright, by contrast, is built to assign exclusive rights through one-to-one relations. When forced to govern a system

[107] Cohen, *Between Truth and Power,* 3-5.
[108] Canadian Intellectual Property Office, "Copyright: Learn the Basics – Protect Your Original Works, Learn Why Copyright Matters," Government of Canada, last modified May 23, 2023, access page.

that produces proximity rather than discrete authorship, law does what it always does under pressure: it invents a stabilizing fiction.

The legal fictions: user, company, orphan

Faced with AI production, copyright systems attempt to restore their metaphysics after the fact. They assign authorship to the prompter ("the user made it"), even when the output bears no legible trace of their gesture. They assign it to the corporation ("the model made it"), even when the corporation contributed infrastructure rather than expression. And when neither fiction can be sustained, outputs drift into a limbo: unprotected, unowned, yet still fully monetizable in practice. The key point is not which solution prevails in a given policy moment, but that each solution is a retrofit—an attempt to force a many-to-many production process into a one-to-one rights framework.[109]

This pressure buckles familiar categories. Fixation becomes a snapshot extracted from an ongoing generative flow. Causality collapses when outputs are composites that cannot be disaggregated into sources. Copying ceases to be exceptional and becomes the baseline operation, and infringement doctrine struggles to distinguish identity from adjacency. This is a process can you feel it?

The morph is similarity without stable identity: a resemblance engine that turns culture into usable proximities. Law, trained to police the boundary between influence and duplication, has no vocabulary for the middle zone where AI resides.

[109] Katherine Lee, A. Feder Cooper, and James Grimmelmann, "*Talkin' 'Bout AI Generation: Copyright and the Generative-AI Supply Chain*," *Journal of the Copyright Society* 72 (2025): 251–260.

Pipeline enclosure

As the image becomes too fluid to anchor itself securely as property, ownership migrates away from the output and into the infrastructure. Control shifts upward: the model, the dataset, the interface, the platform. Terms-of-service agreements begin to do what copyright cannot: regulate access, reuse, liability, scale, and competition. Copyright may remain as a rhetorical veneer, but the decisive enclosure increasingly occurs at the infrastructural layer.

This displacement reveals the political logic at work. When edges dissolve at the level of the work, capital secures edges at the level of the system. If the output is porous; the pipeline must be fortified. A system built through the distributed labour of countless cultural producers becomes proprietary not because its images are ownable in a classical sense, but because the conditions under which images can be generated are ownable: access tiers, licenses, platform governance, and contractual permissions.

Why the "style theft" frame misleads

This is also why disputes over "style theft" so often stall. In a latent-space regime, proximity is the point: every output resembles many things without being reducible to one. The conflict is real, but it is not well-described by the old vocabulary of direct copying. What people experience—often correctly—is a structural injury: cultural labour captured and reissued as frictionless supply. When legal doctrine cannot name this injury, cultural policing intensifies at the level of resemblance. Similarity becomes a battleground because origin cannot be cleanly established. The result is an unstable moral economy in which "too close" becomes a permanent accusation that can never be decisively settled.

From ownership to responsibility

The failure of copyright to grasp AI production does not mean authorship evaporates; it means authorship is revealed as something the law had always simplified. AI makes unavoidable what was previously backgrounded: creation emerges from infrastructures of relation—technical, social, historical, embodied. The question cannot remain "who owns the output?" because the output is no longer the best unit of analysis. The more serious question becomes**:** who is responsible for the conditions of production?

Here the problem comes into view. Ownership presumes separable edges. Responsibility presumes relation. If the AI morph refuses discrete boundaries, then authorship must be rethought as a practice of shaping conditions rather than claiming isolated objects. This does not abolish claims; it re-specifies them. It directs attention to the layers that actually structure the contemporary image: dataset formation (inclusion, erasure, extraction) model design (aesthetic defaults, optimization targets, suppression of deviation), institutional framing (how credit and accountability are assigned).

To describe authorship as a dispersed infrastructure is not to romanticize collectivity. It is an acknowledgement of how images are now made—and of where power is increasingly exercised. The legal system reveals something crucial about the transformation this dissertation has been tracing. Copyright was designed to govern a world in which creative acts produced discrete objects traceable to identifiable authors. It assumes that a work has an edge, that the edge leads back to a subject, and that responsibility can be assigned through that chain. Generative AI destabilizes each of these assumptions at once. Outputs emerge from distributed infrastructures rather than singular origins and production unfolds across systems. In such conditions the legal

grammar of ownership begins to falter. The problem is not simply that copyright struggles to govern AI; it is that AI exposes the deeper inadequacy of thinking authorship primarily in terms of objects. If the work no longer provides a stable edge, then authorship must be understood elsewhere—in the processes through which forms emerge, relations are gathered, and responsibility becomes possible. The next chapter develops this alternative framework.

4. How Did You Make This?



Ordinary Perception, 2024, 42”x42”x10” - wax, resin, hydrocal and oil paint.

The work *Ordinary Perception* begins from reuse. The underlying structure is an earlier sculpture from the *Tool Shed* series, originally composed of grids and clay sculptures that were vacuum-formed to create a solid base. Rather than producing a new object from scratch, the existing form was reworked, covered in foundry wax, and recontextualized. The black wax,

typically used as a material in mold-making, is left in its provisional state. It suggests a process that has not yet resolved into a final object, holding the work in a condition of suspension.

Mounted onto this surface are a series of small paintings depicting candles. Each painting is generated through a prompt-based process, asking for the image to be rendered “in the style of” a different artist. These outputs are then translated back into a drawing, painted onto glass, and then monoprinted into plaster.

The candle becomes a structuring motif across these operations. As a symbol, it relates to duration, transformation, and consumption. As a repeated subject, it allows variation to emerge through style rather than content. Each painting holds the same basic form, but its appearance shifts. In this way, style is treated less as expression and more as a transferable procedure.

The work stages a tension between persistence and transformation. The reused sculpture carries forward a previous set of decisions, while the wax coating suspends it. The candle paintings repeat a stable motif but continuously alter appearance through stylistic modulation. Together, these elements produce a structure in which identity is neither fixed nor entirely fluid, but distributed across processes.

Authorship in this work is similarly unstable. The prompts invoke named artists, but what returns is not their work, only a statistical approximation of stylistic features. These approximations are then filtered again through manual painting. The final images cannot be attributed to any single source. They emerge instead from a chain of transformations in which authorship is repeatedly displaced.

In this sense, *Ordinary Perception* operates as a study of how images persist through change. It treats perception not as a direct encounter with stable objects, but as a process shaped by layers of mediation, repetition, and reinterpretation. What appears ordinary is, in fact, the result of multiple overlapping systems that structure how something comes to be seen.

Chapter 4:

"The many become one, and are increased by one."

— *Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality,*

"Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

Cameron, William Bruce. *Informal Sociology: A Casual Introduction to Sociological Thinking.* New York: Random House, 1963.

4.0 Introduction — The Crisis After Slop

The preceding chapters have been a sustained diagnosis. Perspective in art oriented the viewer, but later collapsed and turned inwards. The cognitive loops that depended on shared attention became strained and platforms replaced symbolic efficiency with compulsive circulation. Generative AI automated the production of gestures that point at nothing. What is needed now is an account of what remains possible. That account begins with a question the previous chapters could not answer: if authorship can no longer be grounded in stable objects or singular origins, what grounds it instead? The answer this chapter proposes is not a new theory of the author but a recovery of what authorship has always actually been — a process of understanding the world.

The coin, the candle, and the morph were introduced earlier as figures for understanding how images function within different structures of coordination. Here, they are reintroduced in a

different register. They do not describe authorship directly, but the conditions under which identity persists over time, and from which authorship emerges.

Coin

The coin models the identity of persistence through repetition. Each instance functions as equivalent to every other, and identity is secured through sameness. What something is can be recognized without reference to its history, because it appears unchanged across contexts.

When authorship is organized within this framework, it appears as stable and transferable. Signature, origin, and style function as guarantees that allow a work to be recognized as belonging to the same author over time.

Candle

The candle models a different form of persistence. Its identity is inseparable from its transformation. The flame exists only by consuming the wax that sustains it, and each moment alters the next. Here, identity is not secured through sameness, but through continuity of change. What something is depends on the process it undergoes.

When authorship is understood within this model, it is no longer a fixed property but an event. A work emerges from a specific configuration of materials, influences, and conditions, and cannot be separated from the process of its becoming.

Morph

Generative AI introduces a third figure that unsettles both models. The morph produces variation without the conditions that give transformation its weight. Unlike the candle, its changes do not depend on duration, material constraint, or accumulated relations. Instead, it interpolates between existing patterns, generating surfaces that appear to transform without undergoing a process.

Identity in this model is neither secured through sameness nor sustained through history, but distributed across variation. When authorship is organized within this framework, it no longer anchors interpretation as origin or process, but becomes a variable that can be simulated and recombined.

	COIN	CANDLE	MORPH
Ontology:	Being	Becoming	Simulation
Identity:	Fixed	Continuous	Distributed
Authorship :	Signature	Situated process	Absent

When images are encountered through streams, feeds, and algorithmic sequencing, the coordination between artist, image, and viewer is no longer stabilized by shared frames, but this is also a change in a form of identity. What appears instead is a field of continuous variation in which identity no longer holds in the same way.

If authorship is no longer anchored in stable objects or singular origins, the question becomes how responsibility for creative acts can still be articulated. One response is to abandon authorship altogether and treat images as products of impersonal systems. Yet such a move risks repeating the fantasy of disembodied knowledge that Haraway criticizes in her account of objectivity. The disappearance of the author can become another version of the god trick: a claim that cultural production occurs without identifiable positions or responsibilities.

Haraway proposes an alternative grounded in situated knowledge. Rather than seeking a universal vantage point, she argues that knowledge becomes trustworthy precisely when its location is acknowledged. Vision is always partial, always mediated by the bodies and technologies through which it occurs. As she puts it, objectivity is not about escaping perspective but about "becoming answerable for what we learn how to see."[110]

This insight provides an important framework for rethinking authorship after AI. Generative systems produce images or texts without occupying a position within the worlds those images evoke. Their outputs resemble acts of expression but are detached from the processes of valuation and responsibility that historically grounded artistic practice. Human authorship, by contrast, remains embedded in relations of accountability. The artist works within a network of materials, influences, collaborators, and viewers whose responses shape the trajectory of the work. As Haraway says "situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals."

Processual authorship is the term I will use to describe a form of authorship situated within tools and communities. It does not restore the myth of the solitary creator. Instead, it emphasizes the

[110] Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*, 583.

conditions under which creative decisions take place. The artist becomes responsible not because they originate form ex nihilo, but because they participate in shaping the relations through which form emerges. Authorship is thus relocated from the surface of the finished work to the processes through which the work becomes answerable to the world it inhabits.

Contemporary debates around AI-generated images often begin at the level of output: the slickness of diffusion, the ease of rendering, the eerie fluency with which a prompt produces a finished image. But the more fundamental question is not aesthetic resemblance or technical capacity—it is what kind of creativity remains thinkable in the wake of such fluency.

Whitehead's epigraph becomes the gravitational center for this question. Creation, for him, is not the act of a sovereign origin or the expression of a genius-subject. Creativity is not owned by any individual agent but operates as a general condition of reality itself. It is the process whereby "the many become one, and are increased by one," a formulation that dismantles the idea of pure substance and of authorship as a discrete, proprietary act. In its place, Whitehead proposes concrescence: a process in which multiple feelings are gathered, selected, and evaluated into a unified becoming. In the present moment, AI outputs are not the result of a concrescence that integrates relations, but of a distributed process that selects a coherent surface from a field of possibilities. If the unity of the image is not internally achieved but externally resolved, it becomes urgent to articulate what creation requires— in its ontological, cognitive, embodied dimensions.

To do this, the chapter brings together thinkers who, at first glance, seem to belong to different domains: Whitehead's process ontology, Tomasello's social-cognitive anthropology and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. What unites them is not disciplinary proximity

but a shared insistence on creation as something more than the production of form. Creation is relational, temporal, embodied, infrastructural, resistant to reduction. It is a matter of orientation and becoming, not simply output.

Authorship has never belonged to an isolated human subject. Artistic creation has always emerged from entanglements among tools, materials, histories, and institutions. Painters are already cyborgs in this sense: their gestures are mediated by brushes, pigments, optical devices, studios, archives, and inherited conventions.

What distinguishes authorship is not purity from technology but responsibility within relation. Creation occurs when heterogeneous elements are gathered into a situated act of decision, one that unfolds through time, indecision, and response to a world. Generative AI reorganizes these relations in a particular way. It does not eliminate creativity, but it redistributes its conditions. Images are produced through infrastructures that compress archives into statistical manifolds and generate variation through interpolation rather than through situated encounters with materials, bodies, and shared attention.

The problem is therefore not whether machines participate in creation. The problem is that contemporary generative systems tend to detach the appearance of authorship from the processes through which responsibility and relation emerge**.** I am here with you, I take responsibility for the writing that is happening. It is an experiment in the capacity for writing to become a variable surface, to see how far I can push a tool while still remaining the author.

What follows, then, is not merely a defense of human creativity against AI, nor a lament about lost artistic authority. It is a reconstruction of authorship as a processual, embodied, relational

event, and a demonstration that AI morphing without a human to interface and work with it, cannot inhabit the conditions that make such events possible.

4.1 From Signature to Morph — How Authorship Became Surface

The anxiety surrounding AI-generated images is often described as a crisis of style: the fear that one's painterly gesture, sculptural idiom, or conceptual vocabulary can be mimicked by a prompt. But this crisis did not begin with AI. It is the culmination of a long historical drift in which authorship slowly migrated from interiority to surface, from the idea of genius to the legibility of a recognizable look.

To put it bluntly: before AI could morph your style, the artworld had already reduced much of what counted as authorship to stylometric surface. The machine only exploits what the market, the museum, and the academy had already elevated as the essential residue of the artist.

Modernism initiated this shift with perverse clarity. Greenbergian formalism invited the viewer to treat a painting as the visible trace of an artist's decision making: the flatness, the facture, the tension of edges, the handling of paint.[111] Even when modernists claimed to reject subjectivity (Malevich, Mondrian), the fantasy of *pure form* produced a paradoxical new aura: that the style of the work was an index of the artist's formal intelligence, their exclusive claim over a certain combination of moves. Style became evidence of authorship.

The word "style" itself derives from the *stylus*, the tool used to inscribe marks into a surface.[112] What we now treat as an abstract signature of authorship was once inseparable from a material

[111] Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational, and So Forth," 136.
[112] Douglas Harper, "style," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/word/style

procedure. In the contemporary moment, this relation reverses: style after AI appears as a detachable surface effect, no longer anchored to the gestures or tools that produced it.

In this sense, modernist style functioned like a coin: a stable imprint whose authority depended on recognizability and repetition. A signature style circulates through exhibitions, reproductions, and markets in much the same way that a coin circulates through exchange, maintaining identity through the persistence of its stamped surface.

Rosalind Krauss argues that modernist abstraction replaces the discovery of meaning in the world with the production of difference within a self-contained system. Reference to nature or narrative is abolished, making originality a matter of formal position—an act of staking territory inside an already established field.[113] Artistic identity became something like a brand, even before the term became ubiquitous: a cluster of formal signatures recognizable at a glance. The market loved this. Galleries could sell consistency, museums could narrativize it, and collectors could display it.

The irony is that artists, in their desire to escape this trap, often intensified it. The postmodern turn—appropriation, simulationism, institutional critique—did not break the link between style and authorship. It merely made authorship reflexive. Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* announced the collapse of originality by turning signature into quotation; Jeff Koons elevated the shiny affect of pop surfaces into a trademark; and conceptual artists developed unmistakable

[113] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1st MIT Press paperback ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 157-158.

idioms. You do not need always need a label to identify a Weiner, a Kosuth, or a Gonzalez-Torres. Their conceptual gestures became formal patterns.

In this environment, authorship slowly ceased to signify sovereign interiority and came to signify statistical regularity. Style became a familiar cluster of affordances, learned through repeated exposure. The author became a probability distribution.

George Kubler offers a useful historical language for this transformation. In *The Shape of Time*, Kubler describes artistic history not as a succession of masterpieces but as sequences of problem-solving in which forms are repeated, varied, and eventually exhausted. Late works in such sequences no longer invent new structures but produce ever finer variations within an already stabilized field.[114] Seen from this perspective, the morphic logic of generative AI appears less like a rupture than the terminal stage of an exhausted sequence: endless variation within problems that have already been solved. As Flusser writes "there always have to be new images because all images have long since begun to get boring. The interaction between image and person is marked by entropy tending toward death."[115]

What AI does is simply automate the recognition and reproduction of this distribution. Diffusion models ingest thousands of images in a given artist's style and produce new samples that approximate the cluster. A user can type "*a painting in the style of x*" and the model will interpolate between the learned patterns. This seems like a radical technological event, but it is,

[114] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962; repr., 2008) 6-8.
[115] Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images,* 59

in a deeper sense, the logical endpoint of the long reduction of authorship to stylometric surface. But a surface is not a self.

The danger is not that AI "steals" an artist's essence. It is that we have come to treat essence as a *collection of visible habits.* When authorship is defined as a look, the artist becomes infinitely replaceable by any machine capable of producing that look. When the market values coherence over risk, repetition over transformation, and recognizability over struggle, the morph easily wins.

Yet, and this is the pivot of the chapter, authorship was never only a matter of surface. Even the most legible signature was once the result of decisions, hesitations, refusals, embodied responses, and attentional attunements. Style, at its origin, is not a statistical cluster; it is a residue of *concrescence*. Concrescence is Whitehead's term for the process through which many forces, decisions, and environments cohere into a single moment of experience.[116]

The task of the next sections is to excavate that deeper ground. Whitehead gives us the ontology: creation as the becoming-one of many influences. Tomasello gives us the social cognition: creativity as shaped by shared intentionality and joint attention. Merleau-Ponty gives us the embodiment: the gesture as reversible relation.

In short, the crisis of authorship under AI is only a crisis if we accept authorship as surface. Once we recover authorship as process, the comparison collapses: AI morphs surfaces, while human authorship persists through the labor of situated transformation

[116] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 211-215.

4.2 Whitehead — Creativity as Concrescence

Whitehead's philosophy does not begin with objects, subjects, or artworks. It begins with events. What we take to be stable things are, for him, the outcome of processes of becoming. The world is not composed of substances that endure unchanged, but of occasions that come into being, achieve a form, and pass away. Each occasion is a moment in which the world gathers itself into a new configuration. *Concrescence* is his name for this process: the event in which disparate sensations, memories, inheritances, constraints, and relations are gathered into a new unity. This unity is not a fusion into sameness but a synthesis that adds something to the world. Each act increases the field of possibility for what follows. It is a creativity that is cumulative, relational, and recursive.[117]

This model can be used to reframe authorship. If creativity for Whitehead, is the becoming-one of the many, then the artist is not an isolated origin but a nexus of relations. Within the event of becoming, or concrescence, Whitehead describes a process of *prehension*, the act of feeling, or of taking account of the world: selecting, weighting, and integrating its elements into a new event. The term "prehension" derives from the Latin *prehendere*, to grasp or take hold of. For Whitehead, experience is not passive perception but an active handling of the world, a selective grasping of relations that are taken up and transformed.[118]

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[117] Michel Weber and Will Desmond, "Alfred North Whitehead," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified November 10, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/whitehead/
Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21-23
[118] Donald Wayne Viney, "Process Theism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/
Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 23–25.

When an artist paints, they do not begin from nothing. They gather: the feel of materials, the memory of gestures, the thickness of perception, the pressure of history, the constraints of the studio, the presence of others. These are the many that become one. The brushstroke appears singular but gathers innumerable relations.

Authorship, in this view, is the moment of that decision. Whitehead calls it "subjective aim": the tendency of a becoming-entity to orient itself toward a particular resolution.[119] The artist does not impose form onto inert matter but leans toward a satisfaction that emerges through the work itself. A painting is not the execution of a prior idea but the emergence of a form that could not be fully known in advance. In artistic making, this integration is stretched across time as hesitation, revision, and risk.

This account destabilizes authorship as surface, or as a style that it holds. Style, in this framework, is the sediment of past concrescences—a visible trace of how one gathered the world. But the locus of authorship is not in the surface; it is the becoming: the selective intensity that shapes each decision.

AI models operate differently. They produce images through statistical inference rather than concrescence. The many do not become one; they remain distributed, averaged across probability fields. No act of prehension occurs because the system does not inherit, feel, or wrestle. Its "decisions" are optimizations within a distribution. This is why AI outputs feel both coherent and hollow. They display the appearance of having been made—composition, tone, gesture—without undergoing the process of becoming. They offer resemblance without inheritance.

[119] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 108.
Weber and Desmond, "Alfred North Whitehead."

The distinction is not that machines cannot combine elements. They do so very effectively. The distinction is that they cannot prehend. They cannot take responsibility for what they inherit. They cannot transform relations into decisions.

For Whitehead, creativity is the production of novelty, but not as arbitrary variation. Novelty emerges through attunement: the capacity to register the world and transform it through selective intensity. The many are not raw materials but demands that must be taken up and resolved. In a morph, however, the many do not become one. They slide across one another. Morphing operates through adjacency rather than concrescence, treating differences as points in a space to be traversed smoothly. The result is a form that remains suspended, never fully resolved.

Concrescence, by contrast, requires commitment. It resolves tension into a determinate act. That act is authorship. This yields a crucial distinction. A process is a lived becoming: situated, resistant, and accountable. A procedure is an algorithm: iterative, calculable, and indifferent. AI operates procedurally. Artists operate processually, even when following procedures.

This is why a figure like Marcel Duchamp can help us clarify this idea. His work is often read as evidence that art can be purely procedural, it is generated by rules, constraints, or chance operations. But his procedure is not a replacement for process; it is a provocation of it. In his notes on *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913–14), Duchamp describes the work as "*canned chance*," an attempt, as he later put it, "to imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance—through my chance."[120] The procedure is meticulously staged: a meter-long thread dropped from a height of one meter, its contingent curve then fixed, traced, and templated. Here

[120] Dario Gamboni, "Stumbling Over/Upon Art," *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 19 (Fall 2005), https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/19/gamboni.php

chance is not abdication but constraint engineered to elicit contingency, a framework designed to force judgment, valuation, and ultimately concrescence. The rule initiates, but the artist gathers. The work demonstrates that creativity has always been both procedural and processual—but becomes creative only when procedure is taken up into a lived becoming. AI can simulate the procedural surface of such practices, but it cannot inhabit the process of creating a procedure. Its iterations never become an act, it is infrastructural authorship.

4.3 Minimum Viable Difference — The Aesthetic Logic of the Morph

If infrastructural authorship explains where many decisions now reside, minimum viable difference explains what kind of image those systems tend to produce. Generative models do not create in the manner that painters or dancers or writers do—through risked gestures, through accumulated decisions, through the thickening of attention over time. They generate by moving through mathematical manifolds: high-dimensional fields of correlation and adjacency. What emerges from this surface is neither invention nor expression but something like statistical drift. Minimum viable difference, or MVD, is the name for this drift when understood as an aesthetic logic.

The Interpolative Imperative

A diffusion model does not begin with nothing; it begins from the average. Its first orientation is always inward, toward the center of the distribution. As Hito Steyerl observes, machine-learning images "converge around the average… replacing likeness with likeliness."[121] This orientation gives the model a temperament: a disposition toward smoothness, plausibility, and stability.

[121] Hito Steyerl, "Mean Images," *New Left Review* 140/141 (March–June 2023): 82–97, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii140/articles/hito-steyerl-mean-images

Novelty arrives only by nudging away from the median, but never so far that the model risks disintegration. A generative model therefore does not draw a new line; it draws between lines that have already been drawn. It interpolates the world rather than encountering it, trafficking in adjacency rather than gesture.

To say the model interpolates is not merely technical but ontological. Everything that follows obeys this constraint. Interpolation is the model's philosophy: the world as a continuous sliding, the self as an averaged neighborhood, the image as the next likely step. The machine's "creativity," if the word can be used, is a creativity of minimum rather than maximal risk.

Style Without World

This interpolative imperative produces the strange phenomenon that AI images often "look like" everything and nothing at once—slightly anime, slightly editorial, slightly mid-century, slightly Alex Katz, slightly Studio Ghibli. These are not influences; they are residues. Here style appears as what remains after the model has averaged over thousands of surfaces. The result is not style as humans practice it, but a statistical afterimage unmoored from worlded activity.

The morph, in this sense, is style divorced from the conditions that once made style meaningful. It is not a trace of lived technique but the hallucinated memory of image-culture itself. Style becomes a probability distribution rather than a decision, grounded in recurrence rather than relation.

A useful distinction for clarifying this condition can be found in the Romantic aesthetics of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge separates what he calls "fancy" from "imagination". For Coleridge, fancy operates through recombination, assembling existing elements into novel

configurations that may surprise or delight but do not produce a coherent world. Imagination, by contrast, is generative: it synthesizes appearances into a structured whole capable of sustaining meaning over time. [122] In these terms, the morph belongs largely to the domain of fancy. It generates endless variation, stylistic novelty, and surface coherence, but without the deeper work of world-making that would anchor those forms in a shared horizon. What it produces is not a world, but a field of variations that resembles one.

The Disappearance of Gesture

Gesture evaporates inside this regime. For Merleau-Ponty, expression is not the externalization of an inner content but the visible articulation of a relation to the world. What appears in the mark is not a surface effect but the trace of a body engaged in the visible, what he describes as the relational intertwining of the seer and the seen.[123]

This does not mean that AI images lack relations. On the contrary, they emerge from vast networks of relations: archives of images, infrastructures of computation, hidden labor, and technical design. What they lack is the *visible process* through which those relations are gathered into accountable decisions. The system produces surfaces that resemble gestures while obscuring the distributed conditions that made them possible.

Form Suspended

When working with generative AI, I often try to push the model toward collapse. By overloading it with inputs, the aim is to force it beyond recognizable form and see whether something

[122] Ritu Rani, "Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Notion of Fancy and Imagination," *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (July–September 2013): 410–11.
[123] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* 135-136.

genuinely new can emerge. There are moments where this seems to occur, but they are rare. More often, the system pulls itself back toward coherence, producing images that are abstract yet still legible. What appears is not collapse, but a constant tendency toward re-stabilization.

This tendency can be contrasted with other cultural reading of formlessness. In *Formless: A Users Guide*, Rosalind Krauss's reads George Bataille's *informe* as a cultural and physical process. Krauss describes the *informe* not as a style, but as an operation: a practice that declassifies and prevents the stabilization of form. In Bataille's formulation, form is dragged downward into matter, degraded and undone, "like a spider or spit."[124] The operation of the *informe* is a collapse, a refusal of form's coherence.

AI morphing performs a different operation. Rather than collapsing form, it suspends it. Form stretches sideways, across a field of adjacent possibilities. The morph never fully resolves into a stable identity. It exists between states: between images, between styles, between subjects. Its ontology is one of suspension.

This distinction clarifies the role of interpolation. In the generated image, interpolation can never collapse; it holds form in a continuous state of variation. Minimum viable difference becomes the mechanism through which this suspension is maintained: a refusal of commitment that prevents identity from settling.

From this perspective, generative AI is not strictly generative. It may be more precise to describe it as degenerative. These systems ingest vast accumulations of cultural material, compress them into latent spaces, and operate by narrowing, progressively selecting outputs that satisfy

[124] Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) 18.

statistical plausibility. The apparent richness of the result masks a logic of reduction. AI cannot invent new paradigms; it interpolates within existing ones.

Its operations are directive rather than exploratory. Given a prompt, the system introduces calibrated randomness to produce variation, generating enough noise to resemble imagination without undergoing the risk of becoming.

Smoothness as Platform Aesthetic

Minimum viable difference is not simply the logic of the model; it is also the logic of the platforms into which these models are inserted. Smoothness, coherence, recognizability, and frictionless novelty are aesthetic values long cultivated by social media infrastructures. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube—all prefer the slightly new over the actually different, the familiar surprise over the disorienting event. Platforms amplify what art critic Carolina Busta calls "vibe stability"—the maintenance of an affective corridor narrow enough to prevent alienation, wide enough to permit endless circulation.[125]

4.4 Traversal, Hesitation, and the Ethics of Process

If minimum viable difference describes the aesthetic logic of the morph, then traversal names the counter-logic through which human authorship survives. Traversal is what the candle does that the morph cannot: a movement through a world rather than across a manifold. It proceeds by way of contact, resistance, and friction rather than interpolation. Traversal names the ontology of

[125] Caroline Busta and Lil Internet, "Transmit the Future," YouTube video, posted by Autotelic Foundation, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgEwXLt5xIE

practice itself: the condition under which gestures thicken, decisions matter, and meaning emerges from relation rather than resemblance.

Traversal and Interpolation

The distinction between traversal and interpolation clarifies the core conflict between human authorship and generative production. Interpolation, for the machine, is a calculative drift, a movement toward the next statistically permissible point inside a distribution. Traversal, by contrast, is a directional encounter with uncertainty. It involves moving through a thickness that cannot be anticipated in advance: the slow arrival of form, the discomfort of error, the shifting of orientation in response to what materials require.

Philosopher Bernard Stiegler offers a name for what is structurally at stake in this difference: the organization of time itself. For Stiegler, technics is never merely instrumental. Tools, images, and recording systems function as an externalization of memory, as such they do not simply store the past but actively shape how the present is lived and how the future can be anticipated. Human consciousness, on this account, is always already technical. [126] What matters, then, is not simply that technology intervenes in cognition, but how it organizes delay: whether it preserves the spacing necessary for individuation or collapses time into instant availability.

Stiegler further argues that individuation emerges through these temporal processes, as inherited memory is taken up, transformed, and integrated over time. Knowledge is not simply accessed but constituted through this process, and it is within this temporal unfolding that responsibility,

[126] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 17-21.

judgment, and care become possible.[127] Inherited memory must be metabolized through lived duration rather than simply accessed. In the context of generative AI, this distinction is acute. These systems do not inherit memory through experience; they ingest archives without delay, collapsing centuries of cultural production into a statistical present. The result is not collective memory but automated recall. Interpolation, in this sense, is not just an aesthetic operation but a temporal one: it short-circuits the spacing through which hesitation, reflection, and valuation ordinarily occur.

Traversal, by contrast, depends on exactly this spacing. To traverse is to remain inside time long enough for consequences to appear, for resistance to be felt, for orientation to be revised. Hesitation is therefore not an inefficiency to be optimized away but the ethical interval that allows a subject to take responsibility for what they are inheriting and transforming. Stiegler warns that when technical systems eliminate delay, when they replace learning with access and experience with instant synthesis, they do not merely accelerate culture; they proletarianize cognition, stripping subjects of the temporal conditions required for care, attention, and meaning-making.

Read through this lens, AI morphing does not simply produce images too quickly; it produces them outside the time of becoming. It generates forms without having endured their formation. Traversal insists on the opposite: that creativity remains bound to the slow labor of temporal individuation, to the obligation of staying with a process long enough for something to matter.

Hesitation as Ethical Technique

[127] Noel Fitzpatrick, Néill O'Dwyer, and Michael O'Hara, eds., *Aesthetics, Digital Studies and Bernard Stiegler* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 59-60.

If traversal has a tempo, it is hesitation. Hesitation is not the pause before action; it is action's condition of possibility. It is the refusal to resolve too quickly, the willingness to remain inside a moment where meaning has not yet stabilized. Hesitation creates room for valuation; it produces space for the world to appear on its own terms.

Merleau-Ponty gives us one version of this when he describes perception as a moment of unresolved tension: "I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change, that something was imminent in this tension, as the storm is imminent in the clouds."[128]

AI displaces that tension. Its default mode is fluency and closure. It produces answers where humans produce openings. The morph resolves too quickly; it forecloses meaning through immediacy. The human, by contrast, holds the question open long enough for value to emerge. In this sense, hesitation becomes an ethical technique: a mode of caring for the world by refusing to treat form as instantaneous or frictionless.

Traversal as Embodied Valuation

Whitehead helps illuminate why this distinction matters. In his account of concrescence, each act becomes itself by selectively intensifying certain feelings and not others—a process he names *valuation*.[129] To create is not to combine what already exists but to choose what matters enough to be carried forward. As George Kubler writes "native inertia is overcome only by desire, and nothing gets made unless it is desirable."[130] Traversal is the embodied version of valuation and

[128] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 18
[129] Donald W. Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 46.
[130] Kubler, *The Shape of Time,* 1.

desire. It is the slow work of deciding which potentials deserve to persist, which to let go. It is not a matter of statistical adjacency but of ethical orientation.

AI does not value or desire. It computes proximities. It performs neither intensification nor refusal. This gap cannot be closed by any increase in model complexity or scale because it is not a technical failure but an ontological difference: valuation requires a situated body, a world to respond to, a responsibility for consequences. Traversal is the form this valuation takes in practice.

Materials and the Friction of Becoming

In the studio, traversal appears in the smallest of movements: a brush catching unexpectedly on the texture of a surface, a line that demands correction, a gesture that must be abandoned, a shift in composition prompted by fatigue or surprise. These are not romanticized artisan tropes but phenomenological truths. Merleau-Ponty insists that perception is always a negotiation with surfaces, never a view from nowhere.[131] Haraway echoes this insistence by reminding us that becoming-with materials is not optional—it is the condition of all making.[132] Traversal is this becoming-with. It is the discovery that form arrives not through command but through co-articulation. Interpolation, by contrast, produces *becoming-as-similar*—an echo of prior forms.

This is why the difference between the candle and the morph cannot be reduced to a matter of preference or skill. It is a difference of ontology. The coin and the candle belong to worlds where surfaces resist; the morph belongs to a system in which surfaces glide.

[131] Marleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 69.
[132] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) 3.

Traversal as Shared Orientation

Traversal is never solitary. Tomasello's account of shared intentionality demonstrates that humans align attention not just toward objects but toward each other's orientation toward objects. To make art is therefore to enter a network of co-attention—a collaborative traversal. Students don't learn by mirroring finished coherence to a high standard, they learn by witnessing each other hesitate, attempt, risk, fail, and adjust. A critique is a traversal of perception; a studio visit is a traversal of orientation. Teaching is traversal held in common.

This shared field is not automatable. A model can simulate gestures but cannot participate in the reciprocal attentiveness that constitutes traversal. It cannot enter a world; it can only produce images. Traversal is social in a way the morph cannot be.

Traversal as the Ground of Processual Authorship

What ultimately remains at the end of this chapter is neither nostalgia for pre-AI art nor a technophobic rejection of machine co-creation. What remains is a sharp conceptual distinction: AI generates minimum viable difference; humans enact maximum viable relation. In human interaction we are constantly pushed out of our own way of thinking to enter into another way of thinking. Even if we reject another person's vision, we have entered into a momentary alignment. Traversal is the operational mode of that relation. If the coin represents the stability of identity and the candle the traversal of identity, the morph holds a third condition entirely: variation without identity and difference without responsibility.

Authorship after AI is therefore not about safeguarding originality or asserting control. It is about how one moves—how one attends, values, hesitates, and co-orients within a shared world.

Traversal is what the candle does that the morph cannot. It is not an act; it is a way of being. It is the ethical ground of processual authorship. Authorship after AI therefore depends not on restoring a sovereign subject but on preserving what Haraway calls the possibility of becoming "answerable for what we learn how to see."[133]

[133] Haraway, *Situated Knowledges,* 583.

Conclusion:

This thesis has been its own strange traversal. A movement across disciplines and ideas that are sometimes incommensurable yet held together by metaphor and my own admittedly idiosyncratic reading and position as an artist. Hopefully, I have posed more questions than provided answers. Is this a dissertation or a conceptual project? Can text actually be thought of as an image, in which we can take it in as a gestalt? Does the pointing finger really structure all visual art? What should we think when I have used generative AI to write a thesis that is about how generative AI cannot write a thesis?

There is an affective play that the text traffics in that is not always pleasant. The loops that generative AI uses to connect ideas, have a logic that appear reasonable but don't have the experience of reason behind them. They are "if x then y". This is not always wrong per se, but it often creates sentence structures that are "not this, but this", semi-colons that give the appearance of structure, and lists of terms. The reader is sometimes lulled into a stupor of ideas, never anchored to a clear point, more like the feedback loops of a camera pointed at the screen it is playing from, an infinite regression of pictures and data.

The drift that this causes is not necessarily wrong, but it can have a hallucinatory affect. We are sometimes riding high on association, an apophenia of meaningful connections that are never fully resolved before we are taken down a new avenue. We can see this in the way generative AI users describe its outputs as hallucinations. Lacking a point of origin or a body to return to, it keeps adding and connecting, until the site from which it began slips out of view. This is also where research begins to interface with creation. The text both argues and assembles, moving

through proximity, association, and resonance. Meaning is additive and conjunctive, an ampersand that keeps repeating &+&+&+&+&.

The gesture that has organized this dissertation is pointing. Pointing is the minimal figure through which shared attention becomes possible, but in current conditions it is necessary to point to both the object in the world and the structures that condition the world. To gesture to the object and to the connective tissue that binds objects together, the object and the ampersand. The gesture expands, indicating both what is seen and how seeing is organized.

The argument of this dissertation has not been that authorship disappears. On the contrary, generative AI reveals that authorship was never sovereign origin in the first place. The older model, in which a unified subject expressed an interior vision through a stable medium, now appears as a historically specific fantasy supported by particular structures of coordination. If those structures are breaking down, then the task is not to nostalgically restore them, but to describe more precisely what authorship actually consists of once the illusion of self-sufficient origin has fallen away.

The answer proposed here is processual authorship. Authorship is not a property contained in the finished work; it is not a signature attached to a surface. It is a situated process of valuation, selection, hesitation, and response. It emerges when relations are taken up and made answerable through time.

What remains, then, is not a defense of human exceptionalism. Humans have always created with and through tools, conventions, infrastructures, and other people. Art has never been the expression of a self-enclosed individual. Creation happens through entangled responsibility. The

task after AI is not to preserve the myth of isolated genius, nor to surrender entirely to a model of impersonal generation. It is to articulate practices of making that remain accountable to the relations they gather and the worlds they help compose.

The distinction I have tried to preserve is a simple one. The morph moves across surfaces. The artist traverses a world. Traversal involves delay, friction, revision, and the possibility of being changed by what one encounters. It is because of this that artistic meaning can still exceed mere style. A mark matters not only because it resembles prior marks, but because it records a situated negotiation with materials, histories, and others. A work matters not only because it points, but because someone or some community has risked a way of seeing in making it point.

If this dissertation has one final claim, it is that authorship after AI should be understood less as ownership than as answerability. Not who made this as a matter of possession, but who stands within the relations this work gathers, who takes responsibility for how it sees, what it inherits, and what it asks others to see. In a culture increasingly saturated with signals that simulate intention while escaping position, this answerability becomes more important, not less.

Meaning does not disappear in the age of generative AI. But it becomes harder to stabilize, harder to trust, and harder to locate. That difficulty is the condition under which art now operates. To make images, and perhaps even to write, is no longer simply to produce forms. It is to build fragile structures of coordination within a world where shared attention can no longer be assumed.

How to create after AI? Not by claiming purity from mediation, and not by denying the reality of morphing systems, but by insisting that creativity is more than the production of plausible

surfaces. It is a relational act of making meaning hold, however provisionally, between bodies, tools, and worlds. The task is no longer to recover a lost stability. It is to learn how to remain answerable inside instability, and to understand authorship not as the guarantee of meaning, but as the difficult, ongoing practice of giving form to a shared world.

Addendum: Legibility and AI

"In the artist of all kinds I think one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found."[134]

Donald Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites" (1963)

In William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell he writes that "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."[135] However, I only recently realized that this is a William Blake quote. Where the quote is from, or where I remember it from, is the movie 54, starring Mike Myers as nightclub owner Steve Rubell. Actually, it is not even from the movie, which I have never seen. I know the quote from the trailer for the movie. In a world of fractured and refracted information, we often experience words and images as bits of information stored in unlikely places. But they still strike us; they lodge in our memory and echo through our lives. This is neither good nor bad. It is the technological reality we live in. I have been deeply moved by an Instagram post, by a tweet, by an advertisement. I have been formed by media and technology that are capitalist and extractive, and yet these forms still resonate with me and become part of the thing we might call the ego, the I, or the soul.

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[134] D. W. Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 185.

[135] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy A, "Proverbs of Hell," William Blake Archive, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.blakearchive.org/copy/mhh.a?descId=mhh.a.illbk.20.

This dissertation itself is an experiment in excess. I haven't used generative AI in a way that is particularly constrained or cautious. I have used it full throttle. I have worked back and forth between my writing and generated writing in such a way that I am not always sure which words I have written and which words it has chosen. This is not to say that the ideas are not mine. I feel I have retained what I want to say, as well as the thought and research I have sustained over the past six years. But I have given up a certain autonomy of construction. Who cares which words I use to say a thing if it is basically the same thing that I wanted to say? Who cares if I read William Blake or watch a movie trailer starring Mike Myers?

Of course, I do care. Blake is not interchangeable with a quotation extracted from Blake. The words belong to a poem, and the poem belongs to a larger imaginative world: a voice, a body of work, a life, a set of obsessions and contradictions through which those words acquire force. Although I love words and reading, I know that the way of thinking I have just described contains a basic disregard for the art of writing. Writing is not simply a container for ideas. It constructs ideas through metaphor, rhythm, association, and the soup of our unconscious. We really do care which words we use. For the reader, we connect the construction of words to a specific person. Writing is one way, like painting or any other art form, that we get to imagine another person's mind and body. Whether we enjoy the experience or not, we inhabit another's perspective, and that involvement helps us connect to a shared humanity.

And so.

There is something at stake when the particularities, the sound and feel, of language is exchanged for fluency. What is lost is not necessarily meaning, and certainly not some pure or unmediated access to an authentic self. Writing has always been mediated by genre, education,

convention, editing, and the expectations of an audience. The question is instead what kind of mediation generative AI introduces, and what it allows the writer to reveal or withhold.

We are brought back to the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter: "In the artist of all kinds I think one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found." Winnicott's article is not primarily about art or artists. It concerns the role of communication and non-communication in the development of the self. But his formulation describes something fundamental about the experience of artmaking: the desire to make oneself perceptible without becoming completely available to another person. This applies to artmaking in the traditional sense, but also to the kind of making available to everyone, the ongoing construction and presentation of the self. For Winnicott, even the healthy individual retains an aspect of the self that remains private and ultimately non-communicating. Communication does not eliminate this isolation, nor should it.[136]

This permanently unknown aspect of the self is related to what Winnicott describes elsewhere as the distinction between the "false" and "true" self. The False Self is not simply false in the everyday sense of fraudulent or dishonest, nor is the True Self an inner object waiting to be perfectly revealed. For Winnicott, the False and True selves are a part of the operations of daily life; as he contends "each person has a polite or socialized self, and also a personal private self that is not available except in intimacy."[137] Some degree of social adaptation is necessary to

[136] Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating," 187.
[137] D. W. Winnicott, "The Concept of the False Self," in *Home Is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 66.

ordinary life. The problem arises when the False Self becomes so dominant that spontaneity can no longer find a form through which it can be experienced as one's own.[138]

The paradox is therefore not between hiding and expression as simple opposites. It is between the desire to communicate and the need to preserve something that communication cannot exhaust. The artist seeks recognition without complete exposure. Winnicott describes this through the paradox of hide-and-seek: it can be a joy to be hidden, but a disaster *not* to be found.[139]

The use of tools and techniques, that is, the development of craft, is necessary to the creation of an artwork. But craft does not need to be understood as a transparent container through which a hidden True Self finally expresses itself. It can instead be understood as a mediating form, a means by which something private becomes communicable without requiring the person who made it to become completely knowable. If we are to take seriously that art is "expression," that is, "something that manifests, embodies, or symbolizes something else,"[140] then we must also recognize that the "something else" belongs to a person who is, on a fundamental level, permanently unknowable. Forms of expression are as possible in the coolest conceptual art as in the stormiest art brut. The form can change, but the problem remains. Art does not abolish the distance between one person and another. It gives that distance a form.

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[138] D. W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 140–52, esp. 148–50.
[139] Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating," 186.
[140] Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "expression," accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/expression.

Painting is one such form. Writing is another. Genre and academic language are others. None gives direct access to an unmediated self. Each establishes particular conditions under which something can be communicated while something else remains concealed.

And so.

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. The desire to be both hidden and known through the medium of art is impossible and, perhaps, the only possibility. When an artist, or more directly this artist, me, uses generative AI as a tool, the output is smoothed over, the distance is widened, and expression is translated into another kind of legibility.

Generative AI does not simply remove the author, nor does it necessarily empty language of expression. Instead, it alters the conditions under which expression becomes perceptible. It is exceptionally good at producing recognizable forms: the sentence that sounds like an academic sentence, the explanation that resembles an orderly logic, the argument that appears to proceed in a systematic fashion. It moves language toward probability, convention, and expectation. In Hito Steyerl's formulation, the products of generated AI are a "rendition of correlated averages."[141]

The result can be a peculiar exchange. Idiosyncrasy becomes fluency. Hesitation becomes coherence. Private association becomes public argument. The unfinished becomes apparently finished. The difficult-to-place becomes legible.

Why would I use this tool to hide my own expression?

[141] Hito Steyerl, "Mean Images," *New Left Review* 140/141 (March–June 2023): 84, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii140/articles/hito-steyerl-mean-images.

Because I do not believe the tool empties the work of expression. It manages exposure. It turns idiosyncratic ideas into institutional language, takes incomplete knowledge and transforms it into apparent fluency, and makes eccentric associations into publicly legible arguments. More precisely, it allows me to communicate while controlling the terms under which I can be found.

This is one of the attractions of the technology. Generative AI can create distance between an uncertain thought and the person who has thought it. The strange, embarrassing, obsessive, half-formed, repetitive, or overly personal qualities of thinking can be translated into language that already knows how an argument is supposed to sound. This does not necessarily make the thought false, but it changes its appearance. It gives the thought a socially and institutionally recognizable form.

Legibility, in this sense, should not be confused with clarity. Clarity emerges from sustained attention to a problem. Legibility is relational. It describes the degree to which something can be recognized within an existing system of interpretation. What counts as a persuasive dissertation, an academic argument, a professional statement, or even a coherent self is already governed by conventions. AI is unusually capable of reproducing those conventions.

This creates a paradox. The tool allows me to communicate more efficiently, but in doing so it can make the conditions of that communication less visible. The writing becomes easier to recognize as academic writing at precisely the moment that the writer becomes harder to locate within it.

But of course, that leaves a gap.

And in the PhD defence this gap was pointed out.

The examination committee asked that I assert my positionality more explicitly, both through my classed and gendered standpoint and through my position as a painter. They argued that the dissertation needed to emphasize situated authorship rather than reproduce the universalized neutrality associated with some of the white male theorists of the 1960s “death of the author.” They asked me to situate myself in relation to family history, cultural inheritance, land and place, artistic and institutional formation, theoretical provenance, class, market participation, technological access, and the biases of lived experience.

At first glance, this can sound like a request for biography. In one sense it is. It asks me to say where I came from, how I was educated, which institutions I have moved through, how I make money, what traditions have formed me, and what relationships I have to particular places and communities. But positionality is not simply biography. Biography tells us what happened to a person. Positionality asks how those conditions shape what that person can see, what they take for granted, what they are authorized to say, and what remains difficult for them to perceive.

The critique of the dissertation therefore met the problem of AI in a way I had not anticipated. I had used generative AI partly to make my thinking legible. The defence committee, in effect, responded: the argument is legible, but where are you?

The process that helped me organize an unruly set of associations into recognizable academic language had also made it possible for the particular person making those associations to recede. Generative AI had not removed me from the dissertation. The questions, examples, obsessions, paintings, sources, and decisions remained mine. But it had helped produce a surface in which the situated conditions of those decisions were less immediately perceptible.

If situated knowledge is taken seriously, those conditions are not contextual details surrounding the research. They are among the things that made this particular account of authorship and AI possible.

Positionality

I was born in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. My parents had also grown up in the North, brought there by their respective families: on my mother's side through the Hudson's Bay Company, and on my father's through parks and conservation, where my grandfather worked as a superintendent. These histories place my family within institutions of Canadian settlement and resource administration. I grew up as a white settler minority in a northern community with a large Indigenous population. This gave me an early awareness that different histories, relationships to land, and forms of community existed alongside one another, but it did not give me access to Indigenous knowledge. If anything, my later education has made me increasingly aware of how little I understood as a child about the colonial structures underlying the world in which I grew up.

My childhood was also marked by movement. Our family moved every three or four years and I lived in Fort Smith, St. Albert AB, Fort Smith again, Port Alberni B.C., and finally Nelson B.C. before leaving for art school in Toronto. My father worked first as an electrician, later in adult education, and eventually returned to electrical work. My mother was something of an autodidact, extremely intelligent and well read, but employed primarily in service jobs. I therefore grew up with an uneven relationship to education and class. Intellectual life was valued in my home, but it was not necessarily connected to professional or institutional security.

I witnessed poverty, addiction, and violence around me in Fort Smith, although as a child I understood very little about the colonial and economic conditions that shaped the community in which I was living. My own family had its own share of dysfunction, but much of it felt relatively ordinary when compared with some of the circumstances around me. When we moved to Port Alberni in the late 1990s, I encountered a different version of instability. Port Alberni had been a prosperous forestry and mill town during the middle decades of the twentieth century, but by the time I moved there it was well into a period of industrial contraction. It was a town in decline after manufacturing had been emptied out. The physical infrastructure of the resource economy remained while much of the highly paid industrial employment that had supported it was disappearing. Coming from the North, its roughness did not initially strike me as unusual. In retrospect, I was living among the remains of a particular Canadian resource economy after its period of prosperity.[142]

Port Alberni was followed by Nelson, British Columbia, where I spent my high-school years and first developed a serious relationship to art. Nelson was also created through settler mining, forestry, and resource extraction, but it had been reshaped by a different history. American draft dodgers, back-to-the-land movements, artists, craftspeople, environmentalists, and other countercultural communities had transformed the region from the 1960s onward. As traditional resource industries declined, an underground cannabis economy grew alongside tourism, arts, music, restaurants, independent businesses, and outdoor recreation. The result was a peculiar cultural ecosystem: a relatively small mountain town capable of sustaining an unusual density of

[142] Hugh Gordon, Philip Halkett, George Macauley, and Howard Saunders, *Review of the Port Alberni Forest Industry* (British Columbia Ministry of Forests and Range, Operations Division, April 30, 2007), 2, 7.

artists, musicians, cafés, craftspeople, and alternative institutions.[143] After high school, I had a number of friends whose summer job was trimming weed for underground grow-ops.

When I was seventeen, I was required to complete a 30 hour work placement as part of a Career and Personal Planning class. I liked school, but remember particularly hating this course, where we read Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul and learned about filing taxes. I had no particular career ambitions and initially thought I had found a loophole when I asked to be placed with a local artist, Judy Wapp. I had seen her collage work in a café and liked it, and she agreed to take me on. Once a week I drove to her farm, where we made collages, listened to records, and read comic books. She owned every issue of *RAW*, the comics magazine edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, as well as an extensive collection of underground comics. She was the first working artist I knew personally and perhaps my first encounter with art not simply as something one made, but as a way of organizing a life: a way of reading, listening, looking, working, and paying attention to the world.

Around the same time, I asked my high-school art teacher whether she thought I was good enough to get into art school. I was surprised when she said yes, and the following year I applied to school in Toronto. I attended OCAD University from 2001 to 2007. I drifted through much of my undergraduate degree without a particularly coherent idea of what kind of artist I wanted to become, but in my final year I arrived at a style that had a particular energy and also fit comfortably within the large-scale figurative abstraction circulating in contemporary painting at the time. I was taken on by a commercial gallery soon after graduating and, for several years, was able to support myself primarily through the sale of paintings. This early participation in the

[143] City of Nelson, *Community Heritage Register Update*, 7, 28–30.

art market shaped how I understood artistic authorship. Style, recognizability, novelty, consistency, and the attachment of an artwork to an individual name were not abstract theoretical questions. They were the conditions through which my work acquired economic and professional value.

My work at this time played with ideas of Canadian landscape and Abstract Expressionism, two traditions organized, in different ways, around strongly masculine and white artistic archetypes. I was interested in the exaggerated forms of identity that had accumulated around these traditions, and in the ways artistic identity became entangled with particular fantasies of the male artist. My two most obvious reference points were Jackson Pollock and Tom Thomson. Pollock represented an exaggerated version of the postwar male artist: physically expressive, self-destructive, excessive, and surrounded by a mythology of artistic genius. Thomson offered a distinctly Canadian version of a masculine artistic mythology. He was less the self-destructive genius than the solitary outdoorsman, moving through an invented landscape of terra nullius. He represented Canadian painting as wilderness even when that representation depended upon the displacement or erasure of Indigenous presence.

I both admired these traditions and found them ridiculous. My first solo exhibition was titled *Mighty Magnificence*, a phrase borrowed from a song by my roommate at the time, the musician Alex Snukal. The title had what seemed to me the perfect combination of blowhard and tryhard. It captured something about my relationship to this masculine tradition: I wanted its scale, confidence, physicality, and grandiosity while simultaneously wanting to make fun of it.

The paintings sold well. I remember overhearing my dealer describe me to a potential buyer, without irony, as a devotee of the Group of Seven. The experience was instructive. What I

understood as a parody of masculine and nationalist artistic mythology could become, within the market, evidence of my participation in precisely that tradition. I began to understand that the meanings with which artworks were made, were not the same with which they were sold or recognized.

My position as a male painter is therefore not incidental to the questions of authorship developed in this dissertation. I was artistically formed within traditions in which masculine individuality, originality, physicality, and artistic authority carried considerable cultural value, and my early career benefited from being legible within those traditions even when I imagined myself to be caricaturing them. My later skepticism toward the autonomous artistic subject emerges partly from recognizing that I had inhabited a model different from the one I thought I was inhabiting. Winnicott's distinction between the True and False Self is useful here, although not as a direct analogy for artistic identity. What interests me is a related discrepancy at another level: between my own understanding of what I was doing as an artist and the coherent artistic persona through which that work became recognizable, marketable, and attached to my name.

I eventually became dissatisfied with both my work and the commercial art world and returned to graduate school at Concordia University with scholarship support. After several years in Montreal, I returned to Toronto without a commercial gallery or significant institutional support. I worked as a bartender and waiter while maintaining a studio in a deteriorating industrial building in Mimico. I grew depressed. I continued to make paintings, but I was increasingly disconnected from a community where the work had a social life.

A residency at the Banff Centre in 2017 altered this trajectory. I found myself within a temporary community of artists who worked together, socialized, and paid close attention to one another's

work. The experience reminded me that artistic practice is never as solitary as its romantic image suggests. One of the artists I met there, Ella Dawn McGeough, later encouraged me to apply to the PhD program at York University. I entered that program as the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Graduate study gave me sustained intellectual work at a moment when I had spent years working largely alone. I became increasingly interested in questions of relationality, authorship, and the social formation of the subject. Fred Moten's writing on debt was particularly important to me. Part of its initial resonance was inevitably biographical. After years of precarious work and significant student and credit card debt, the language of indebtedness had an immediate material meaning. But Moten's account of debt emerges from a Black radical intellectual tradition and from historical and political conditions that are not mine. My encounter with this work therefore also forced a distinction that has become increasingly important to the dissertation: concepts such as relationality, indebtedness, opacity, collaboration, and distributed subjectivity cannot simply be detached from the histories that produced them and absorbed into a generalized theory of interconnected creativity.

My theoretical formation has involved writers and traditions to which I stand in very different relationships. Part of situating this dissertation is distinguishing between intellectual traditions I have inherited through Western art and academic institutions and those I encounter from positions of historical and cultural exteriority. Relationality cannot mean exactly the same thing in every context, and an argument against autonomous authorship cannot erase the unequal histories through which autonomy, ownership, and recognition have been distributed.

These experiences shape the account of authorship developed in this dissertation. I approach generative AI first as a painter, not as a computer scientist or engineer. My questions about AI

emerge from practices of copying, influence, gesture, style, translation, material mediation, recognition, and attribution that were already central to painting before generative systems appeared. I also approach those questions as someone who has participated in commercial galleries, art schools, universities, grant-funded research, service work, and periods of artistic and economic precarity. My ability to experiment extensively with generative AI is itself dependent upon forms of technological and institutional access that cannot be treated as universal.

For this reason, I do not offer relational authorship as a universal description of creativity. My account emerges from a particular formation: a white settler family connected historically to northern settlement and resource administration; childhood spent in northern and western Canadian communities shaped by extraction and its aftermath; an artistic education in Canadian art schools; early participation in a commercial painting market; later experiences of economic and institutional precarity; and theoretical formation within the contemporary university. These conditions do not exhaust who I am, but they delimit the perspective from which I write.

The purpose of situating myself here is therefore not to make myself completely legible. Winnicott's distinction remains important: something of the person necessarily remains unfound.[144] Positionality instead makes visible enough of the conditions of authorship that a partial and historically situated position does not disguise itself as a view from nowhere.

This returns us to the problem with which I began. Generative AI complicates authorship not because mediation destroys expression. Art has always depended upon mediation. What changes are the forms through which expression becomes recognizable and the conditions those forms

[144] Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating," 187.

make visible or allow to disappear. AI can help an uncertain thought travel from private association into public language. It can make the difficult-to-place legible. But in doing so it can also conceal some of the historical, material, and personal conditions from which that thought emerged.

Perhaps this is why Winnicott's paradox continues to matter. Generative AI offers a new technical response to an old human problem: how to communicate without being completely found. It gives us another form through which to hide and show ourselves at the same time.

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