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UNSTABLE IMAGES: GENERATIVE AI AND THE LIMINAL POLITICS OF SEEING

Abstract: This essay explores how generative AI has destabilized the visual image, not only as an object of perception but as a contested site of authorship, ownership, and meaning. In a post-Mitchell landscape where the image is no longer what it seems, nor made by whom it claims, the essay harks back to Walter Benjamin's concepts of aura and the dialectical image to position the visual under conditions of automation and opacity. Instead of asking what AI-generated images *are*, it asks what they are *for*. Drawing on the Viennese school's concept of *Kunstwollen* (the artistic will or purpose underlying image production) the chapter groups four key case studies around the intentions that animate them: Boris Eldagsen's *The Electrician* (to provoke and critique), Jason M. Allen's *Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial* (to showcase tool mastery), ING Bank's *The Next Rembrandt* (to bridge media legacies), and Obvious' *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy* (to generate economic value). Across these unstable images, aura is not absent but refracted: reshaped by algorithms, platforms, and publics. What emerges is a constellation of microtheories for understanding the visual not as a stable category, but as a shifting terrain of negotiations between human and machine, concept and code, value and visibility.

Keywords: aura, dialectical image, *Kunstwollen*, instability, liminality

The Visual is Unsettled

This essay centres on one primary question: *what happens to the established, accepted picture theory of W.J.T. Mitchell when pictures are themselves no longer made or even seen by humans in traditional ways?* As a simple (and provocative) illustration of the point, we need only look to the social media stir of April 2023, when the image in Figure 1, of the Pope in a Balenciaga puffer jacket starting making its

rounds. While it soon became apparent that this was a Midjourney generation,¹ the initial impression – and actual hope among many viewers – was that it was authentic. The point is: the image was not *perceived* as being false; it was *believed* as authentic until proven otherwise, raising the question of what it means to trust, own or author a digital image today.

The question highlights a deeper instability underlying the defining condition of the image today, more so even than Mitchell's² inability to unequivocally define 'image' as an autonomous entity. Mitchell preferred to read 'image' as an enacted interpretation, and thus more deserving of his label, 'imagetext,' a convergence of content and idea. Three clear areas where this instability is made manifest are *ontological*, *legal* and *cultural*.



Figure 1. Pablo Xavier, 2023. *Pope Francis in a Puffer Jacket*, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/aiartuniverse/> (accessed: 21.11.2025)³

¹ Ch. Stokel-Walker, *We Spoke to the Guy Who Created the Viral AI Image of the Pope That Fooled the World*, BuzzFeed News, 27.03.2023, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chrisstokelwalker/pope-puffy-jacket-ai-midjourney-image-creator-interview> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 1995.

³ While permission has been obtained for the image use in three of the four cases, there is still no clear legislation regarding copyright and AI-cocreated imagery; hence the inclusion of the images can be considered as 'Fair Use.'

The first, *ontological instability*, stems from recent examples of AI-generated imagery lacking a stable referent or identifiable original, as these are generated from datasets, not scenes.⁴ Furthermore, resulting images are likely probabilistic hallucinations, not a representation of anything more than a text prompt. This positions the art world in “the middle of transformative societal and cultural change,”⁵ predicting a possible state of referential collapse wherein even photorealism no longer guarantees indexable authenticity.

Second, *legal instability* becomes apparent in the many ongoing legal disputes over AI-generated content, from copyright denials and lawsuits, in a conceptual space where author and owner are no longer interchangeable terms. Tools, prompts and datasets blur the delineation of roles within the ecosystem. The image generated thus exists in a legal grey area or “moral crumple zone,”⁶ where it cannot be safely defined as either property or public domain. This is to the detriment of both platforms and practitioners,⁷ as seen in ongoing litigation and protest within the creator economy.⁸

Third, we have *cultural instability* to contend with, as virality and reach replace attribution when the circulation of imagery becomes divorced from both context and provenance.⁹ Viewers can no longer rely on the pictorial information and visual cues to interpret truth or intention within said imagery, even when explicitly informed as to an artwork’s non-human origins.¹⁰ Accepted theories within visual culture studies like aura are thus met with confusion, rupture or even aesthetic ambivalence.

Mitchell’s¹¹ assertion that images possess a motivating agency is thus invalidated, as images no longer ‘want,’ but *perform* for a machinic audience of prompts, platforms and algorithms.¹² As a result, when generation supersedes representation, the image’s meaning derives as much from platform architectures as it does from creator/viewer intent. This suggests that visual culture is entering an era where it can be defined as *platformed* (or produced and circulated within opaque technological

⁴ M. Coeckelbergh, *The Work of Art in the Age of AI Image Generation: Aesthetics and Human-Technology Relations as Process and Performance*, “Journal of Human-Technology Relations” 2023, vol. 1, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.59490/jhtr.2023.1.7025>.

⁵ A. Oksanen et al., *Artificial Intelligence in Fine Arts: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research*, “Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans” 2023, vol. 1 (2), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbah.2023.100004>.

⁶ Z. Epstein et al., *Who Gets Credit for AI-Generated Art?*, “iScience” 2020, vol. 23 (9), 101515, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2020.101515>.

⁷ K. Tatar et al., *A Shift in Artistic Practices through Artificial Intelligence*, “Leonardo” 2024, vol. 57 (3), pp. 293–297, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_02523.

⁸ H. Steyerl, *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat*, Verso, London 2025, pp. 14, 49–51.

⁹ K. Tatar et al., *A Shift in Artistic Practices...*, op. cit., p. 294.

¹⁰ A. Samo, S. Highhouse, *Artificial Intelligence and Art: Identifying the Aesthetic Judgment Factors That Distinguish Human- and Machine-Generated Artwork*, “Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts” 2023, vol. 19 (5), pp. 1084–1098, <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000570>.

¹¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005.

¹² L. Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, Bloomsbury, New York 2013.

ecosystems), *procedural* (or defined by codes and prompts) and *post-authentic* (as its originality is no longer a default value against which subsequent value is measured).

We can nevertheless still analyse, read and interpret images within this unstable space using extant theory; starting with Alois Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen*, or 'artistic volition.' A surface reading of the term suggests little difference from Mitchell's¹³ thought experiment asking what images want, but the engagement goes beyond projecting an anthropomorphised 'desire' or interpretative "language of images"¹⁴ onto any pictorial surface. Instead, the agency explored lies in the actual conceptualisation, production and distribution of said image. This remains valid even in the context of generative AI, where the mode of creation is inseparable from the picture itself.¹⁵ In Walter Benjamin's¹⁶ words, the process is one used less to examine the superficial qualities of an artwork than "to draw conclusions about the organization of perception at the time the art was produced."

It follows that other concepts from Walter Benjamin's corpus – *aura* and the *dialectical image* – arguably maintain rigour, even in this unstable era. In the case of the former, the perceptual experience of aura can be identified, not through its loss or diminishment, but through its *transformation*: whether displaced, commodified or even reassembled via technological catalysts. As for the latter, the dialectical image is less a concept than a treatment. Dialectical imagery becomes an interpretative methodology for unstable visual products in moments of contradiction and collision. By employing this approach to interrogate examples of AI-generated imagery in the public eye in terms of their aura and *Kunstwollen*, it will be revealed how the instability of the space is not actually a flaw, but a generative condition vital to the decentralised, shared and collective nature of the space itself. As such, a new vocabulary of visual culture to be employed in negotiating the AI-generated imagery space can be proposed.

Theoretical Framework: Benjamin Revisited

When re-evaluating traditional image theory in the light of generative AI, concerns of *originality*, *reproduction* and *meaning* are all highlighted. As such, Walter Benjamin's 1936 *The Work of Art in its Age of Technological Reproducibility* remains uniquely appropriate. Herein he framed the subversion of the mimetic faculty in the form of reproduction as a rupture in the face of art's cultural history. The viewer's relationship with the technologically mediated images of modernity holds a tempo-

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 28–31.

¹⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Language of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980.

¹⁵ M. Jerrentrup, *Imagine Art: The Status of Works Generated by Artificial Intelligence*, "International Journal of Culture Studies" 2024, vol. 27 (6), pp. 814–830, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779241252664>.

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3: 1935–1938, H. Eiland, M.W. Jennings (eds.), Belknap Press, Harvard [1936] 2006, p. 104.

ral mirror to the new phase of mechanical reproduction we now enter alongside AI generation. The greatest difference is simply that the mechanism itself is no longer an industrial one, but an invisible, networked assemblage of nodes. This is itself an echo of Benjamin's own writing style being described as a 'constellation' of ideas.¹⁷ Visually, this translates as a shimmering, scattered panoply; seemingly random at first glance, however, these individual nodes create coherence via connection, echoing the organic growth model shown in Deleuze and Guattari's¹⁸ interconnected rhizome model.

The first of Benjamin's core concepts to expand upon is *aura*: "the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be."¹⁹ This nebulous characterisation is predicated on the authenticity of an artwork, as inferred by its position in time and place – and interpreted by a viewer's perception in terms of the apparent distance they thus recognise between themselves and the artwork object. Benjamin's assertion is that a technological catalyst reproducing an artwork erodes an aura once founded in ritual by enabling an infinite number of copies to be made, thereby fragmenting the originality of the artwork and displacing its context. Benjamin's definition of 'artwork,' like Mitchell's consideration of 'image,' is vague. He cites examples from the classical and fine arts, as well as film and photography, but recent critics suggest aura is present in all creative endeavours, from music²⁰ to print²¹ to educational materials²² and even the products of generative AI.²³ Berret²⁴ suggests that any and all 'artworks' created for cult or ritual purposes rather than wider observation be dubbed "preauratic." Only once they enter public view do they acquire auratic characteristics as per Benjamin, not due to their decorative or mimetic qualities but because they "project[ed] a specific way of understanding the world."²⁵ This suggests that aura exists *in potentia* for all creative expressions, only manifesting once perceived, en-

¹⁷ S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1989; H. Eiland, M.W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Belknap Press, Harvard 2014; N. Ross, *Walter Benjamin's First Philosophy*, Routledge, New York 2021.

¹⁸ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987.

¹⁹ W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, op. cit., pp. 104–105.

²⁰ R.S. Patke, *Benjamin on Art and Reproducibility: The Case of Music* [in:] A. Benjamin (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Continuum, New York 2005, pp. 185–208; L. Chinn, *The Aporia of the Veil: The Influence of Walter Benjamin's Aura in Contemporary Sound Studies*, "Sound Studies" 2020, vol. 6 (1), pp. 2–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2019.1709015>.

²¹ Ch. Berret, *Walter Benjamin and the Question of Print in Media History*, "Journal of Communication Inquiry" 2017, vol. 41 (4), pp. 349–367.

²² N. Peim, *Walter Benjamin in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Aura in Education: A Rereading of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'*, "Journal of Philosophy of Education" 2008, vol. 41 (3), pp. 363–380, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00579.x>.

²³ S.J. Frank, *The Work of art in an Age of Mechanical Generation*, "Leonardo" 2022, vol. 55 (4), pp. 378–381, https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_02095.

²⁴ Ch. Berret, *Walter Benjamin and the Question of Print...*, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁵ Ibidem.

forcing the requisite distance between viewer and viewed in the “here and now of the work of art.”²⁶

However, when examining AI generated imagery, the images displayed are neither authentic originals nor copies, but statistical predictions of what they *might* be: works-in-progress, if you will, rather than complete representations. Given this, it can be inferred that aura does not reduce or even disappear, but mutates, becoming ‘post-auratic.’ Benjamin himself allowed that the cult value of historical art was transformed into exhibition value once public viewing was invited, so it follows that *artificial aura* may be generated through novelty, hype or viral traction as a by-product of platformed activities such as sharing, commenting and remixing. It can also be supposed that a *displaced aura* is at work when the prerequisite distance required for the two-way reciprocity of recognition upon which auratic perception devolves²⁷ is attributed to the prompt engineer or platform, rather than the image itself. The same is true when we consider that the digital domain invalidates physical concerns of spatial distance,²⁸ replacing these with a perceived distance between users in terms of separation through the digital interface.²⁹ It can even happen, such as in the case of the Balenciaga Pope, that a *residual aura* is at work via deliberate misrecognition: taken all together, this suggests that aura is now a synthetic construction. Horst Wenzel’s³⁰ suggestion that “aura is no longer sought in the artwork, but rather in the meaning-making frame” supports this in that aura is no longer an intrinsic condition of the artwork, but an extrinsically influenced symptom of its context, contingent on its audience.

Once the audience comes into play, the *dialectical image* must be addressed. Just as aura, as explained above, is informed by a reciprocity of recognition, so too is the dialectical image an interruptive moment of cognition and recognition at work where fleeting perception gives way to active reception and the subsequent ‘reading’ of an image. This is easily likened to Roland Barthes’³¹ *studium/punctum* transition, a point of conflict between superficial impression and cognitive interpretation. The same concept is echoed by, for example, Flusser’s³² twofold scanning process of denotative and connotative meanings in images. The prevailing message is that a dialectical image is not inherently visual; rather, any manifest expression that the sensorium can decode – or ‘recognize’ – can be treated as such. Susan Buck-Morss’³³ positioning of Paris’ Arcades (in Benjamin’s magnum opus of the same name) as dialectical illus-

²⁶ W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, op. cit., p. 103.

²⁷ T. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Verso, London 1981.

²⁸ J. Feinstein, *If It Were Only for Real* [in:] H.U. Gumbrecht, M. Marrinan (eds.), *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 278.

²⁹ B.-Ch. Han, *In The Swarm: Digital Prospects*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 48; S. Sæther, S.T. Bull (eds.), *Screen Space Reconfigured*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2020.

³⁰ H. Wenzel, *The Reverent Gaze: Toward the Cultic Function of the Artwork in the Premodern and the Postmodern Age* [in:] H.U. Gumbrecht, M. Marrinan (eds.), *Mapping Benjamin...*, op. cit., p. 218.

³¹ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Macmillan, London 1981.

³² V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, London 2000, p. 8.

³³ S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing...*, op. cit.

trates this by suggesting that the physical manifestations are more than just architecture, but windows into social, political and economic tensions at work.

In the light of generative AI, multiple dialectical points of conflict can be identified: human versus machine creativity, the tool versus the artist, tradition versus innovation and even physical labour versus automation are all examples of dialectical contexts to be explored. In the case studies to come, each AI generated image can be read not as a stable product, but a dialectical moment: an immediacy where historical, technological and cultural tensions are simultaneously condensed.

The third theoretical consideration is that of *Kunstwollen*, as introduced by Alois Riegl in his 1893 *Problems of Style*.³⁴ Artistic volition, as Riegl suggests, transcends the individual will or desire of the artwork and instead explores epochal informants and collective impulses underlying the production of the artwork in question. Its relevance can therefore be seen in how images from a specified stratum of history or society (in this case, AI generated imagery) can be grouped together by cultural intention. Each case explored in this chapter can be read as expressing a distinct *Kunstwollen* that arises from a larger system or discourse than merely the artist, but from a distributed gestalt of human, machine and economic aspirations. In a post-Mitchell era, analysis transitions from representation to wider questions of intent, function and worldview. Riegl's theory aligns with Benjamin's,³⁵ as both are more concerned with the social and historical conditions surrounding image production than with the resulting product.

In summary: *aura* will allow for the perceived value of the image to be traced, *dialectical images* offer a reading strategy for exploring the tension at play, while *Kunstwollen* can be employed as a rubric for organising intent across disparate image forms.

Liminal Categories: Owner, Author, Artist, Medium

Traditional roles in creative and artistic practice have become irretrievably blurred in the age of AI generation.³⁶ Roles recognised in recent visual culture studies are easily distinguished: the *artist* as expressive agent; the *author* as the name underwriting the intent; the *owner* as holder of legal and economic rights; and *medium*, or technical substrate carrying the work itself. These have, however been algorithmically entangled and exist in a state of instability, begging several questions: is the prompt engineer the artist? Does the model encode authorship? Who, if anyone, owns the copyright? And is the medium the image, the algorithm or the viewing interface? This section will explore each role within the context of generative AI.

³⁴ A. Riegl, E. Kain, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992.

³⁵ W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, op. cit., p. 104.

³⁶ M. Coeckelbergh, *The Work of Art...*, op. cit., p. 2.

First, the roles of *artist* and *author*. In 1967 Roland Barthes laid the theoretical groundwork for a system of distributed authorship. His phrase, “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author”³⁷ suggests that art and artist must be separated and that the reader plays as important a role as the original writer in establishing intent. In the context of AI, the birth of the *reader* is replaced by the birth of the *system*, effectively destabilising the artist-first hierarchy.³⁸ Prompts are often minimal and indirect, suggesting a curatorial mandate at work on the part of the prompter, not a creative one. In cases like these, the ‘author’ intent is often applied retroactively: ‘I meant it to look weird/spooky/cartoonish/etc.’, suggesting *post hoc* authorship at work. The image generated in case such as this are usually only partially intentional or exploratory platform play,³⁹ making the artistic process procedural, not an expressive activity. Suggesting a shift from the roles of artist and author to more experimental ones like maker and mediator validates this dispersed agency at work.

Next, *ownership* is called into question. John Berger⁴⁰ notes how the art market developed as a form of possession. Wealthy patrons used paintings as a way of displaying wealth, either through accruing extensive private collections or by commissioning paintings that showcased them and their material possessions, from land to livestock to mistresses. As such, the modern tradition of art ownership has come to be conflated with cultural prestige and financial success as much as it is with aesthetic value. In the AI sphere, legal ownership is ambiguous, especially with open models.⁴¹ The data on which models are trained, and the ownership of said data is also contentious, as evidenced by ongoing landmark lawsuits against several AI platforms and their unethical treatment of artists’ intellectual property.⁴² In this light, platform ownership becomes the central concern: even dedicated users do not own the tools in the case of industry leaders like Midjourney and OpenAI – they simply lease access. Overall, ownership in the age of AI becomes detached from creation, because you can never own something that has algorithmically entangled, distributed origins and is, theoretically, infinitely reproducible.

And while ownership in the digital domain is being addressed, it is also worth noting the NFT and cryptart phenomenon: ownership and exhibition are entirely unstable concepts, where all value is generated through the exchange of non-tangible, immaterial assets. Which leads directly to the question of medium, especially where the post-materialist turn in art is concerned. In this regard, Raivo Kelomees⁴³ raises

³⁷ R. Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, Hill and Wang, New York 1977, p. 148.

³⁸ M. Coeckelbergh, *The Work of Art...*, op. cit., pp. 9–10.

³⁹ M. Jerrentrup, *Imagine Art...*, op. cit., p. 820.

⁴⁰ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC/Penguin, London 1972, pp. 83–87.

⁴¹ K. Tatar et al., *A Shift in Artistic Practices...*, op. cit., p. 296.

⁴² C. Franzen, *The Copyright Case Against AI Art Generators Just Got Stronger with More Artists and Evidence*, VentureBeat, 2.12.2023, <https://venturebeat.com/ai/the-copyright-case-against-ai-art-generators-just-got-stronger-with-more-artists-and-evidence/> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

⁴³ R. Kelomees, *Discussing Five Issues of Post-material Art*, “Technoetic Arts” 2016, vol. 14 (3), pp. 251–262, http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/tear.14.3.251_1.

five concerns when discussing immateriality or even purposeful dematerialisation: two are most pertinent. First, *uniqueness*; in the digital realm, few (if any barriers) exist regarding the copying, editing, sharing and exhibition of digital art once it has been publicly published. This fluidity, an inherent trait of the digital domain, lends itself to new forms of distribution, including performative, implicit or even accidental distribution. This suggests a metamedium at work: a general purpose set of alternative media that is also simultaneously a system for generating new forms of media.⁴⁴ Despite this, the perceived artwork itself remains a celebrated feature, even as the *absence of an art object* is addressed. This is not a new concept within the art world: performance art and installation rely on the act itself and the affective impressions received at the reception site rather than any artefact to speak of. Art as both action and idea has consequently been canonised within art studies since the late 1960s. Consider, for instance, Lippard and Chandler's⁴⁵ assertion that art as an object could well become obsolete in the future. Digital artworks do not require any physical manifestation to validate their existence and may be discussed in similar terms to more 'established' forms of immaterial art.

In terms of the 'traditions' of visual culture studies, the notion that a medium is a discrete channel or substrate⁴⁶ is also challenged by the AI's inherent instability. The AI model or platform in use is essentially a black box: a system or protocol "whose internal mechanisms are not fully open to inspection."⁴⁷ As such, only certain states of this system or protocol are ever available or accessible to investigation or manipulation, meaning that underlying connections within the system are contingent on deduction. This recalls Benjamin's views on perception and experience, in that our knowledge of an experience – or reception thereof – hinges on a deductive process that is separate from the experience in much the same way that a painter's 'copy' of a landscape is merely a representation, not the landscape itself.⁴⁸ In other words, the traditional concept of 'medium' within visual culture (oil on canvas or bronze casting, for example) is replaced by the digital space within which exhibition, consumption and eventual monetisation occurs. Consequently, where AI generated art is concerned, medium goes beyond the platform interface where viewing occurs, and includes training datasets, the prompt (and its language), the GPU computation... a techno-social assemblage. Perhaps, in light of these provocative terms and their socioeconomic impact, 'medium' is not a strong enough descriptor. Deleuze and Guattari⁴⁹ regularly use the term *milieu* when discussing social constructs, relation-

⁴⁴ L. Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, op. cit.

⁴⁵ L.R. Lippard, J. Chandler, *The Dematerialization of Art* [in:] L.R. Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, Dutton, New York 1968.

⁴⁶ M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1964; F. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999.

⁴⁷ W.R. Ashby, *An Introduction to Cybernetics*, Chapman & Hall, London 1957, p. 86.

⁴⁸ W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913–1926, M.P. Bullock, M.W. Jennings (eds.), Belknap Press, Harvard 2004.

⁴⁹ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus...*, op. cit.

ships of power, and expressions of human experience. At its most basic, *milieu* can be described as an individual's social environment, but for Deleuze and Guattari the meaning inferred goes beyond contextual surroundings. The direct translation from the original French can also refer to 'medium,' as in materiality and composition, but also to a carefully balanced median point between these. The tension inherent in this term could arguably be a better substitute for artistic medium when discussing emergent processes – and outcomes – within digital imaging. The societal aspect echoes Benjamin's consideration of Riegl's *Kunstwollen*; his interpretation of 'behind the scenes' artistic volition, coupled with his observance of changes in societal perception, support a *milieu-over-medium* argument.

The implications herein are as follows: first, the image itself is not a product, but a symptom of an invisible medium. And second, this further dissolves visual aesthetics into infrastructural equivalents in a transition from representation to execution. As a result, any AI generated output is a liminal image: ambiguous in its authorship, distributed in its production, non-transparent in medium and, lastly, unstable in its ownership. Outdated models of thinking in visual culture, such as stable categorisations of meaning, labour and value, are thus summarily challenged. The embodied tensions between automation versus intention, meaning versus entropy and artist versus system within this conceptual space can thus be read as constellations (*à la* Benjamin) of invisible labour, data history, economic logic and machine aesthetics.

Case Studies: *Kunstwollen* in the Age of AI

The theoretical grounding for this investigation has been established, as has the liminal conceptual space wherein AI generation happens. In order to validate the arguments put forward thus far, the next section will apply the concepts already defined to several examples drawn from AI generated art that has recently been in the public eye. With each case, to establish a valid *Kunstwollen* that transcends the Mitchelian 'desire' of the image, why the image was generated as well as how that purpose shapes reception, authorship and aura will be explored.

One: *The Electrician*, Boris Eldagsen

The Electrician is one of a series of images produced by Eldagsen over 2022 and 2023, co-created with AI image generators. He even challenges the notion of authorship in this light, calling himself a *promptographer*, not photographer, and suggests that artistic value lies in the audience reception to the entire event, not the digital file. Eldagsen's own (or authored) intention is made clear in his project manifesto and in the very name of the series, *Pseudomnesia*, which translates from classical Greek as a fake memory: not an inaccurate recall, but the remembering of events that never occurred. This provocation alone suggests the potential for deeper dialectical

engagement beyond the image itself, echoing Friedlander's⁵⁰ assertion that any manifest expression decoded by the sensorium can be treated as a dialectical image. However, the wider *Kunstwollen* behind the image is its exposure of the fragile boundaries separating truth and image, in Barthes'⁵¹ tradition of the great lie of photography, which "mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." This exposure is taken even further, by Eldagsen submitting to – and summarily winning – the Open Competition in the Creativity category of the 2023 World Photography Organization's Sony World Photography Awards.⁵² Furthermore, Eldagsen then publicly rejected the prize to underscore the inadequacies of the judging process and refused the commodification of the artwork usually associated with ownership in a grand artistic gesture. *The Electrician's* intent exposes how unprepared institutions are for generative AI by cleverly managing perception through remediation, setting the stage for AI's future: "when a new medium is invented it first imitates already existing media, before discovering its own language and aesthetics."⁵³



Figure 2. Boris Eldagsen, 2022, *The Electrician*, <https://www.eldagsen.com/pseudomnesia/> (accessed: 21.11.2025)

⁵⁰ E. Friedlander, *The Measure of the Contingent: Walter Benjamin's Dialectical Image*, "Boundary 2" 2008, vol. 35 (3), pp. 9–10, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2008-010>.

⁵¹ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*..., op. cit., p. 4.

⁵² A. Greenberger, *Artist Wins Photography Contest After Submitting AI-Generated Image, Then Forfeits Prize*, ARTnews.com, 17.04.2023, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/ai-generated-image-world-photography-organization-contest-artist-declines-award-1234664549/> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

⁵³ L. Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, op. cit.

Two: *Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial*, Jason M. Allen

As with Eldagsen's work, Allen also publicly shares authorship with a machine interface, stating that the image is "born from the innovative synergy of AI technology and human vision."⁵⁴ The image, which visually recalls Gustave Moreau's symbolist fantasies, presents a more painterly face to its audience than the over-polished veneer typical of digital art, while still making its digital origins clear. The image, controversially, took top honours at the Colorado State Art Fair in 2022, but Allen was chastised for what essentially amounted to high-tech plagiarism by the art world,⁵⁵ all for daring to employ words and prompts to make his images, rather than manipulating pixels and running complex renders through dedicated software. This hypocrisy stands in opposition to the novel modes of creation and exhibition that the art market call for, suggesting that artists, institutions and creators "need to continuously produce new, ground-breaking and cutting-edge works"⁵⁶ to remain relevant.



Figure 3. Jason M. Allen, 2022, *Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial*, <https://www.jasonmallen.com/space-opera-theater> (accessed: 21.11.2025)

⁵⁴ J.M. Allen, *Space Opera Theater*, 2022, <https://www.jasonmallen.com/space-opera-theater> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

⁵⁵ Ö. Erdine, *AI Artwork Wins Art Competition: Are Imputing Text Prompts Enough to Become an Artist?*, Dataconom, 26.09.2022, <https://dataconomy.com/2022/09/26/ai-artwork-wins-art-competition/> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

⁵⁶ B. Kunst, *The Paradox of the New Institution* [in:] T. Lijster (ed.), *The Future of the New: Artistic Innovation in Times of Social Acceleration*, Valiz, Amsterdam 2019, pp. 167–179.

The prevailing dialectic at work is thus one of novelty versus tradition: Boris Groys⁵⁷ describes this ongoing pursuit as “newness,” a primarily modernist reading of art where novelty is its defining characteristic and a conceptual space wherein something previously insignificant suddenly acquires new cultural, financial or exhibition value without historical antecedent. Not that novelty is in itself a goal worth pursuing, as this is an inherently unsustainable practice which “implies separation, even hierarchy, a privileging of one position over another, thereby perpetuating a narrative of fragmentation.”⁵⁸

Allen’s intent, to showcase his personal mastery of the Midjourney platform, as well as its aesthetic and technical potential, is a clear-cut *Kunstwollen* at work: although, once again, no real-world referent exists so any aura the image possesses is founded on *spectacle*, not on origin. In terms of dialectic at work, the tension felt and summary interpretations made lie in the reception more than the image content or aesthetic appearance. Like with Eldagsen, Allen’s winning of a competition where AI generated imagery was never even considered as a medium is a statement of intent all in itself, but contrarily, Allen has gone as far as trying to copyright the artwork in his own name. This despite repeated refusal by the United States Copyright Office to do so based on the outdated language that states that only works of original human authorship can be protected. The ongoing legislative battle is, in Allen’s⁵⁹ words, “a fight for the future of digital creativity and the rightful recognition of innovative works within the current legal framework.”

Over and above this utilitarian statement, founded in “art as activism and activism as art,”⁶⁰ Allen’s undeniable mastery of the iterative process involved in the generation of unique visual products becomes a display of AI as a skill-based instrument. This echoes Coeckelbergh’s⁶¹ consideration of enhancement through technology in the AI space, defined by knowing how to use the system in the same way as other artists use paint, collage, clay or any other additive medium to realise their creative visions.

Three: *The Next Rembrandt*, ING Bank

Under the leadership (and sponsorship) of the ING Bank, advised by the Rijksmuseum, The Mauritshuis and Het Rembrandthuis, supported by the J. Walter Thompson agency and in partnership with Microsoft and the Delft University of Technology, *The Next Rembrandt* is an entirely ‘new’ painting by Rembrandt van Rijn. The

⁵⁷ B. Groys, *On the New*, Verso, Brooklyn 2014.

⁵⁸ C.F. Strauss, *All in Good Time* [in:] T. Lijster (ed.), *The Future of the New...*, op. cit., p. 57.

⁵⁹ J.M. Allen, *Space Opera Theater*, op. cit.

⁶⁰ P. O’Neill, *Tania Bruguera*, “Bomb Magazine” 2014, no. 128, <https://bombmagazine.org/magazine/128/> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

⁶¹ M. Coeckelbergh, *The Work of Art...*, op. cit., p. 7.

portrait, of a fictitious subject, combines the efforts of art historians and AI technicians using data and facial recognition techniques drawn from a data sample of 436 of Rembrandt's paintings in an eighteen month project resulting in a 148-billion pixel graphic file, printed using bespoke 3D printers to recreate oil paint on canvas.⁶²



Figure 4. ING Bank, 2016. *The Next Rembrandt*, <https://www.ing.com/Newsroom/News/Rembrandt-goes-digital-.htm> (accessed: 21.11.2025)

The resulting image, which arguably diminishes the auratic value of extant Rembrandt works by allowing for 'new' works to be artificially forged, is nevertheless an interesting experiment that fuses tradition with innovation, all the while extending canonical visual language into a digital era. However, the entire project is an exercise in tension, reinforcing its dialectical nature: for example, the corporate sponsorship of the project blurs the line between artistic intent and brand strategy, making the artwork a marketing object. Aura is thus transformed from exhibition value to promotional value, despite purporting to revive and reinforce the aura of Rembrandt's corpus through mimesis. The aura, the unique positioning of the artwork, is entirely founded in the collective effort underlying the production wherein credit must be attributed across all actors in the ecosystem: Rembrandt as inspiration, the curators that manage the process, the technologists overseeing its execution and indeed the audience perceiving the result.⁶³ As a result, it occupies a tense position between homage and simulation: the creative urge is no longer the mandate of the artist, but of a collective apparatus that disperses authorship across this ecosystem; effectively removing any notion of authorship from practicing artists. In Benjaminian terms, the

⁶² ING Bank, *Rembrandt Goes Digital*, ING News, 6.04.2016, <https://www.ing.com/Newsroom/News/Rembrandt-goes-digital-.htm> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

⁶³ Z. Epstein et al., *Who Gets Credit...*, op. cit., p. 5.

result is not even a forgery – it is a simulacrum thereof, as its perceived value has no equivalent beyond its stylistic inferences or technological achievement. *The Next Rembrandt* is thus a “mean image”: a likeness replacing a likeness, a semantically impoverished outcome that is (linguistically and visually) both nasty and mediocre.⁶⁴

Four: *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*, Obvious

The Paris-based artistic collective, Obvious (Hugo Caselles-Dupré, Pierre Fautrel, and Gauthier Vernier) made history first, by being the first AI artwork to be featured in the ‘Prints & Multiples’ sale at Christie’s, and second, that it sold at auction for 4320% more than its reserve price, a total of \$432,500.⁶⁵ The carefully curated elevation of the piece (it was showcased next to a Roy Lichtenstein bronze in the auction catalogue) and subsequent auction spectacle imposes a residual sense of aura imparted by the 15,000 classical oil portraits in the dataset its generative algorithm was trained on. The *Kunstwollen* of the piece, then, is to test the market logic of AI generated art, provoking the question: what is the value of something explicitly created by algorithm? The very phrase, ‘explicitly created by algorithm’ suggests a loaded media narrative and a larger dialectic at hand. An emphasis on the autonomy and agency of the algorithm, more than on Obvious or their training data, surrounding reporting on the *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*⁶⁶ implies a media-led intention to prepare the viewing public for wider acceptance of AI as an agent rather than just a tool.



Figure 5. Obvious, 2018, *Portrait of Edmond de Belamy*, <https://obvious-art.com/portfolio/edmond-de-belamy/> (accessed: 21.11.2025)

⁶⁴ H. Steyerl, *Medium Hot...*, op. cit., p. 71.

⁶⁵ E. Kinsella, *The First AI-Generated Portrait Ever Sold at Auction Shatters Expectations, Fetching \$432,500—43 Times Its Estimate*, Artnet News, 14.04.2021, <https://news.artnet.com/market/first-ever-artificial-intelligence-portrait-painting-sells-at-christies-1379902> (accessed: 21.11.2025).

⁶⁶ Z. Epstein et al., *Who Gets Credit...*, op. cit., pp. 2–3.

This frames the author/owner dialectic, too: the ‘portrait’s’ signature reflects not the names of the Obvious collective, but the mathematical algorithm programmed by the collective to produce the artwork. This obviously (pun intended) clouds the inferred roles in the value chain and reinforces the fact that the medium is a combination of conceptual and computational logic at work. Overall, this highlights the value instability of AI generated art in the contemporary art market. Theodor Adorno’s⁶⁷ assertion that the value of any publicly displayed and sold artwork “is exclusively that of a commodity; its value is that determined by the market... [it] adjusts to the pressures of the exchange of abstract units” suggests that this instability is a historical phenomenon but remains valid in this case. The commercial success of the sale also serves as a precursor to the NFT art boom heralded by the sale of the NFT digital artwork *The First 5000 Days*, by Beeple for \$69,346,250 in March 2021, which positioned the artist in the top three most valuable living artists worldwide.⁶⁸

And what of its aura? The portrait’s elevated positioning in the Christies catalogue recalls a similar precedent set by Duchamp’s readymades. By virtue of their positioning inside respected institutions, these pedestrian objects “share[d] the aura of the originals”⁶⁹ housed nearby, suggesting that Obvious’ algorithmic generations likewise enjoyed an imparted, or reflected aura based on a perceptual experience that aligns an “object appropriated from the environment of the people”⁷⁰ with a higher degree of aesthetic reception.

Toward a New Vocabulary of the Visual

Based on the above, it becomes evident that a new vocabulary is needed to accurately define and describe AI generated images, as well as to identify what accepted terminology within visual culture may be obsolesced as a result.⁷¹ The purpose of the section goes beyond merely identifying new terms, however: it explores and concretises the very conditions under which we see, name and understand images.

In this changing semiotic landscape, it has already been made clear that many traditional visual culture terms are no longer adequate, and ‘stable’ terms such as representation, authenticity, mediation, and form specificity no longer suffice. To elaborate: representation, as per Mitchell⁷² is a referent either *of* something, *by* somebody or *intended for* someone, whereas AI generated artworks occupy a reverse ontology

⁶⁷ T. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2002, p. 391.

⁶⁸ L. Kugler, *Non-fungible Tokens and the Future of Art*, “Communications of the ACM” 2021, vol. 64 (9), pp. 19–20, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3474355>.

⁶⁹ A. Kamien-Kazhdan, *Remaking the Readymade: Duchamp, Man Ray, and the Conundrum of the Replica*, Routledge, New York 2018, p. 2.

⁷⁰ F.M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Harry N. Abrams, New York 1999, p. 381.

⁷¹ K. Tatar et al., *A Shift in Artistic Practice...*, op. cit., p. 293.

⁷² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987.

that fabricates the referent. The result is that nothing is represented, regardless of what is shown, thereby rendering authenticity invalid. The linear flow of traditional mediation via representation, of sender-medium-receiver is also disrupted by distributed computing and as such should more accurately be replaced with simulation or synthesis. Furthermore, this computing model, as discussed earlier, supersedes material constraints and AI generated images merely mimic spatiotemporal considerations and forms without really abiding by the logic or limits physical reality imposes.

Following this, emerging microtheories can be described, alongside new terminology to describe these. First, there is *Promptuality*: a process by which an image can be described as emerging from a textual prompt, not a visual composition. This not only links image to language, but also to platform-based search logics and curation. Language, or text, repeats its origins as hieroglyphic, representative images when rendering metacoded images built on text inputs.⁷³ It also recalls Sigrid Weigel's⁷⁴ discussion of Walter Benjamin's guiding episteme of *Bildendenken*, or 'thinking in images,' a visual first approach wherein language follows seeing. Importantly, a generated image should also not be reduced to merely the prompt: the entire process of becoming, from idea to perception must be considered.⁷⁵

Then, in a nod to John Berger, there is *Infrastructural Seeing*: a 'way of seeing' that moves beyond Mitchell's⁷⁶ dominant scopic regime that elevates (and thereby isolates) vision from the broader sensorium informing experience. Instead of aesthetic vision, this emphasises the systems behind the image – servers, datasets and computational power – thus shifting visual culture from surface interpretation to sub-surface critique. The question should not be if AI has creative agency, but what role it plays in a far larger system.⁷⁷

The next, *Synthetic Realism*, has already been illustrated in both the opening example of the Pope and in Eldagsen's work: it is not photorealistic rendering, but a portrayal of believability without referent. The image generated is only 'real' for a subjective value of 'real' shaped by style and statistical plausibility – not by the indexical trace upon which authenticity has traditionally devolved.⁷⁸

Where perception has always been aligned with aesthetics, as it stems from sensation before becoming experience,⁷⁹ a new model of *Platform Aesthetics* is necessary that describes not how the images are perceived, but how they are shaped by their respective platforms, models, training data and moderation filters. In short,

⁷³ V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy...*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁷⁴ S. Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, Routledge, New York 1996, pp. 48–51.

⁷⁵ M. Coeckelbergh, *The Work of Art...*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁷⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture*, "Journal of Visual Culture" 2002, vol. 1 (2), p. 66, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/147041290200100202>.

⁷⁷ A. Oksanen et al., *Artificial Intelligence in Fine Arts...*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁷⁸ H. Steyerl, *Medium Hot...*, op. cit., p. 29.

⁷⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London 2005.

Midjourney is not Dall-E is not Stable Diffusion, and so forth: each has its own visual accent or bias, a signature embedded in its metadata. The accepted logic of *perceive-judge-evaluate* when empirically evaluating aesthetics is still built on objective, personal and contextual informants,⁸⁰ but the platform itself must be factored into this context.

Furthermore, AI images are not stored as objects or products: the iterative nature of prompt engineering implies that they are stored in the platform itself as potentiality, making *Visual Latency* the next concept to be classified. Any image exists in potential, as a set of latent probabilities until rendered, making visual considerations secondary to temporal or procedural ones.

Given the contested nature of authorship within the AI space, a new descriptor is also needed here: authorship is now distributed across human input, model bias, training datasets and the underlying platform logic, all suggesting that *Meta-authorship* makes more sense. The prefix, ‘meta,’ not only implies change, succession or ascendance, but it can also be viewed in the light of its meaning as a stand-alone adjective – in that it is self-aware and self-referential. A sliding scale of credit and attribution, based on levels of responsibility during the process, can be applied to all actors within the ecosystem.⁸¹

Based on all the above, we may also need a reinvigorated interpretation of the *Dialectical Image*: AI images, as illustrated through the investigation into the *Kunstwollen* of each of the cases explored above, are already sites of contradiction and opposition, lending Benjamin’s concept new power. For example, when visibility enters the post-truth era, images can be generated that look convincingly real, but depict historical impossibilities, “rupture[s] in the liberal system of political communication.”⁸² With a few keystrokes, any platform or model could generate an image of Donald Trump being led away from the Oval Office in handcuffs. This may be a distinct impossibility, but the believability of the pseudo-event⁸³ scenario would resonate compellingly with such a large audience that the dialectic it would provoke could conceivably outweigh any other ‘real’ journalistic imagery of the day.

The microtheories outlined above should not, however, be read as a universal framework or set of constraints. Given the instability of the AI generated image space, a more agile approach is needed, making these theoretical concepts less a system than a constellation (again, echoing Benjamin’s episteme). Despite the shift away from iconological thinking, lessons can nevertheless be learned from Mitchell’s⁸⁴ pictorial turn, which redirected critical focus from interpreting images as ‘texts’ towards a deeper understanding of what images accomplish within visual culture. This

⁸⁰ A. Samo, S. Highhouse, *Artificial Intelligence and Art...*, op. cit., p. 1.

⁸¹ Z. Epstein et al., *Who Gets Credit...*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁸² T. Harjunieni, *Post-truth, Fake News and the Liberal ‘Regime of Truth’*, “European Journal of Political Communication” 2021, vol. 37 (3), p. 270, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211046784>.

⁸³ D. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Random House, New York 1987.

⁸⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory...*, op. cit.

systems-based approach also recalls Bruno Latour's⁸⁵ treatment of image objects not as passive representations but as actants, or entities with their own agency (*Kunstwollen*, once again) to shape technological and social networks while simultaneously being shaped thereby.

In summation, this shapes a new episteme within visual culture, not just supplementary content; interpretive reading must transition towards infrastructural sensing. This implies that it is imperative that scholars track what images *do*, not just what they mean, in new roles as events, symptoms, protocols and signals; not mere representational signs.

Reinventing Visual Culture through Instability

In establishing the unstable nature of AI generated images, this essay has proposed a shift in our understanding of the visual field. Generative AI does not merely disrupt traditional image-making and artistic expression, it completely reframes what it means for something to be an image, summarily moving away from fixed categories like author, owner and medium in the process. By analysing several examples of AI generated art making recent media waves, it has become clear that generative images are no longer anchored by material or authorial intentions that defined historical modes of visual production. Instead, these visual aggregates are formed at an intersection of prompt engineering, computational inference, aesthetic/statistical probability and platform logic.

While several concepts within visual culture studies may have become obsolete in the process, Walter Benjamin's concepts of aura and the dialectical image still offer critical tools with which this shift can be confronted. Aura, traditionally associated with recognising the unique presence of an object within time and space, is now redefined and transformed by AI-generated images that challenge the notions of uniqueness and authenticity by creating it algorithmically and on a large scale. Additionally, the dialectical image, which holds contradictions in balance and requires critical thought, remains highly relevant. Given that AI generated images often exist in a state of conflict, the tension inspired by this instability should not be read as a flaw, but as a motivating characteristic that encourages more profound dialectical engagement with images as both occurrences and frameworks at once.

As for traditional notions regarding medium and media, McLuhan argued that media reshaped our senses, while Kittler posited that they controlled what could be expressed and perceived based on technical limitations. AI-generated images, however, function through hidden layers such as training data, model parameters, and prompts, making it challenging to provide a straightforward analysis of medium

⁸⁵ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

specificity. This truly is an era of flexible media, with porous boundaries, recursive characteristics, and a deep infrastructure.

To navigate this changing landscape, it is essential that a new set of visual terms is adopted. Concepts like *promptuality*, *synthetic realism*, *visual latency*, and *meta-authorship* provide responses to the uncertainties outlined above by both acknowledging and monitoring them. This approach, based on a plurality of viewpoints and constellations, resonates with the goal of visual culture studies: not to restore fixed categories but to create more adaptable and creative ones. In a time of uncertain and unstable images, the critical mission is not solely to interpret appearances but to uncover the rationales, efforts, and aspirations that shape them.

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