The medium is the mimicry: Generative artificial intelligence and the amputation of creative friction

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenge generative artificial intelligence (gAI) poses to the understanding of art and experience, framing the issue through a hermeneutic and etymological excavation of the terms "artificial" and "intelligence". It traces the divergent histories of these words, contrasting the original meaning of artificial as skilful creation with its modern connotation of the fake, and the etymology of intelligence as an active, effortful process of "choosing between" (*inter-legere*). Grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, it interprets this linguistic tension not merely as semantic but as ontological: the fakeness of the modern artificial lies in its pursuit of a frictionless ideal that eliminates the resistance and effort constituting care. The article introduces simulacric retrieval, building on Jean Baudrillard's (1994) theory of simulacra, to describe the text-to-image gAI act, arguing it replaces *ex nihilo* embodied making with statistical navigation akin to a database query. While drawing parallels to photography's disruption of painting, it argues gAI does not merely reconfigure difficulty but amputates the tripartite structure of Care – thrownness, projection-toward-possibilities, and concernful dealing (*Besorgen*). It concludes that by engineering out the struggle central to making, gAI enacts an amputation of embodied discovery, replacing it with a hyperreal simulacrum of creation.

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Introduction

As a creative process, generative artificial intelligence (gAI) art relies on synthesising novel visual outputs by mathematically denoising representations within a compressed framework known as a latent space, rather than retrieving or assembling existing artworks (Rombach *et al* 2022). A user provides a text prompt to initiate this synthesis, a frictionless process that hides the immense labour of the system's creation. The result is a form of what Baudrillard (1994:6) called a simulacrum: a copy of an idea, severed from the caring, frictional act of making. But to truly grasp the tensions this technology creates, this article examines the very words used to describe it. Like all artefacts, language carries the sediment of its history, and the terms we choose or inherit shape our perceptions, expectations, and anxieties.

Methodology

Methodologically, this article employs a hermeneutic and etymological analysis to critique the ontology of gAI within the context of arts-based research. While situated within the domain of arts-based research, this study does not present empirical data derived from a specific studio practice. Rather, following Graeme Sullivan (2005:181), it treats the theoretical analysis of practice as a form of visual arts inquiry in its own right. It utilises a hermeneutic phenomenological framework (Van Manen 1990:30) to critique the conditions of art-making in the age of automation. This approach allows for an examination of the processual creative act not merely as a production method, but as a fundamental mode of being-in-the-world.

Specifically, this study examines text-to-image generation – the dominant mode of commercial gAI image creation in which a written prompt is the sole input – and evaluates it against the epistemological demands of arts-based research, where knowledge is generated through embodied making. This distinction is important: other gAI modalities, such as image-to-image prompting, involve visual input and iterative perceptual feedback that may retain a closer relationship to embodied engagement. The critique developed here addresses the mode in which linguistic specification entirely replaces visual and material interaction. The research utilises three analytical lenses: a linguistic excavation of the term "artificial intelligence" (Williams 1976), a phenomenological comparative analysis of creative friction (Heidegger 1962; Sennett 2008), and a historical comparison to photography (Benjamin 2008; Flusser 2000; Manovich 2001).

(Art)ificial intelligence: A linguistic excavation

Following the method of cultural historian Raymond Williams, who analysed keywords[1] to reveal how their changing meanings reflect deeper social and cultural shifts, this section excavates the linguistic bedrock on which the term "artificial intelligence" is built. The inherent tensions within gAI are not a product of the last decade but of the last several centuries, rooted in the divergent evolutionary paths of its two constituent words: artificial and intelligence.

The word "art" itself, before its modern specialisation, simply meant skill (Klein 1971:108). It described a human practice, a craft honed through application and effort. Similarly, the concept of being creative has shifted from a divine attribute to a generalised human capacity (Williams 1983:82). This secularisation of creativity has placed new value on human originality and the process of making. Similarly, the word "artificial" began as a term of praise. Its lineage traces back to the Latin *artificialis*, a compound of *ars*, meaning "art" or "skill", and *facere*, meaning "to make" (Klein 1971:108). In its original conception, to call something artificial was to compliment the craft involved in its creation. It signified a product of human ingenuity, something skilfully made and artfully constructed. When the term entered Middle English, it was used to describe creations like artificial writing or artificial constructions, which were understood as testaments to human skill, distinct from the products of nature, certainly, but not considered inferior or fake (Williams 1983). This original meaning establishes the first side of the word's dichotomy: artifice as masterful, value-adding creation.

However, a semantic shift occurred with the intellectual and cultural currents of the Enlightenment and, more forcefully, with the rise of Romanticism[2] (Williams 1983:40-41,219-220). This period fostered a new reverence for the natural, which began to cast a long shadow over the artificial (Williams 1983). What was once a celebration of human craft slowly began to acquire a negative connotation. The artificial came to be seen not as a skilful counterpart to nature, but as a poor imitation of it. It implied something fake, less real, or even deceptive. This pejorative sense has persisted into the modern era and has been directly inherited by the term artificial intelligence (Williams 1983). The very name implies that this form of intelligence is a product of human design, not of biology, and is therefore a copy rather than the genuine article. This historical degradation is critical; it preloaded the concept of AI with a cultural and linguistic suspicion of inauthenticity long before the first lines of code were written.

This dichotomy often frames contemporary discourse surrounding artificial intelligence and its relationship to the arts: the embodied, skilful, effortful labour of art-making – embodied engagement – versus the seemingly disembodied, frictionless processing of

gAI – disembodied abstraction. This etymological tension is central to the argument: the artificial in gAI is not artificial in the original sense of a work of art or skilful construction (Williams 1983:41), but in the modern sense of being a simulation or a copy of something natural or real.

While the meaning of "artificial" devolved from positive to negative, the original meaning of "intelligence" reveals an active and effortful concept. The word derives from the Latin *intelligere*, which means to understand or perceive (Oxford English Dictionary 2023). This verb is itself a composite of two parts: *inter*, meaning between, and *legere*, meaning to choose or to gather. At its very origin, then, intelligence was not about the passive possession of knowledge or the instantaneous retrieval of facts. It was defined by the active, discerning capacity to choose between things. Within the context of arts-based research,[3] this etymology suggests that intelligence can be viewed as an embodied and experiential process of making sense of the world. It is about weighing options, making distinctions, and gathering insights through interaction. This concept aligns perfectly with what philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) and artists describe as knowing with the body or what arts-based researchers call the research of doing, where the very act of making and interacting is the process of thinking and discovering. An artist thinking through the act of drawing is a direct manifestation of *inter-legere*; the process of choosing lines, textures, and compositions is not merely an expression of a preformed idea but is the very mechanism through which the idea is constructed and understood.

The historical trajectories of these two words were set on a collision course. The duality of artificial, meaning both fake and manmade, and the original definition of intelligence as an effortful process of choosing, were destined to create a philosophical tension. When combined into "artificial intelligence", the cultural baggage of artificial as a manmade inauthentic copy is automatically, if subconsciously, applied to the noun it modifies. This creates an oxymoronic phrase, pitting the idea of a fake intelligence against the very definition of what makes intelligence real. Consequently, many of our contemporary anxieties about gAI – that its creations are soulless, that its answers are mere mimicry, that its interactions lack genuine understanding – are not new. They are the logical continuation of a linguistic and cultural schism that began centuries ago, embedded in the very words we are forced to use.

This collision reveals something even more fundamental about the nature of our digital experiences. If intelligence is *inter-legere* – the active process of choosing between – then the act of choosing inherently involves what user experience designers call friction.[4] A choice requires cognitive effort, the weighing of options, discernment, and the acceptance of trade-offs. It is not a smooth or instantaneous process. Therefore, the pursuit of a frictionless state is a direct assault on the conditions necessary for authentic intelligence

to manifest. A system that makes all the choices for the user, that removes the cognitive load of discernment, is not an intelligent partner in a task; it is an intelligence-amputating device. This establishes the central argument of this article: the fakeness of the modern artificial experience, epitomised by the frictionless ideal, lies in its systematic elimination of the friction that makes an experience genuinely intelligent, memorable, and meaningful.

However, this elimination of friction is not merely a linguistic or cognitive loss; it constitutes a fundamental shift in our way of being. If we accept that intelligence is the active struggle of choosing between (*inter-legere*), then removing this struggle does more than just simplify a task; it detaches the creator from the material reality of the world. To understand the gravity of this detachment, we move beyond the etymological roots of the words and look to the ontological roots of the experience itself. We must examine how the friction of choice manifests physically as "Care" (*Sorge*), transforming the artist from a passive user of tools into an embodied participant in the flesh of the world.

The ontology of making: Care, embodiment, and material dialogue

The epistemology of embodied engagement finds its expansion in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, which transforms it from a way of knowing into a fundamental way of being. Heidegger's distinction between the ready-to-hand (Zuhanden) and the present-at-hand (Vorhanden) is key (Heidegger 1962:98). The present-at-hand refers to objects we observe with detached, theoretical scrutiny, analysing their properties (Heidegger 1962:98). The ready-to-hand, in contrast, describes our engagement with tools and materials that are seamlessly integrated into a context of purposeful activity; they become extensions of our being, withdrawing from our conscious attention as we use them (Heidegger 1962:98).

In the embodied act of making, the artist encounters the medium as *Zuhanden*, where the tool is not an object of distinct theoretical observation but an extension of the body engaged in coping with the environment (Heidegger 1962:98-99). This engagement is defined by what Richard Sennett (2008:9-10) refers to as material consciousness: a dialogue between the maker and the material that generates sustaining habits and a rhythm between problem-solving and problem-finding. For Sennett (2008:10), the development of skill is contingent upon resistance; the material must talk back, offering ambiguity and difficulty that the craftsman must negotiate.

However, gAI fundamentally alters this ontology by removing the resistance of the medium. By replacing the durational struggle of material manipulation with instantaneous retrieval,

the gAI interface epitomises what Byung-Chul Han (2018) defines as the smooth. In the latent space of the model, there is no material pushback, only the positivity of the like button and the friction-free surface of digital delivery (Han 2018:8,13). The result is an aestheticisation that functions as "anaestheticisation", sedating the perception of the maker by removing the negativity of the other, the shock or injury required for a genuine encounter with the world.

Art-making, the embodied struggle with resistant materials, is an exemplary mode of engagement with a ready-to-hand world. This mode of engagement is a manifestation of what Heidegger identifies as the fundamental ontological structure of human existence (*Dasein*): Care (*Sorge*) (Heidegger 1962:225-227). For Heidegger, our being-in-the-world is defined by a deep practical concern (*Besorgen*) for the world and the entities we engage with. The act of making art can therefore be understood not just as a technical process but as a primary expression of this Care (Heidegger 1962:235). The physical effort, the durational struggle, and the embodied engagement are the tangible signs of a caring engagement with the world. In this framework, the body is not just an instrument for shaping material. This provides an ontological foundation for the entire arts-based research pole, grounding the epistemology of making in a fundamental, caring mode of existence (Heidegger 1962:235).

This ontological foundation is further supported by Merleau-Ponty's (1968:139) concept of the flesh of the world, which positions the artist's body as the primary vehicle for understanding; a body-object geared toward the world where knowledge emerges from direct, sensory dialogue (Merleau-Ponty 1968:130-155).

The removal of friction via gAI constitutes an amputation of what Hubert Dreyfus refers to as the fringe consciousness essential to human intelligence (Dreyfus 1972:14-16,24). For the human artist, the fringe of consciousness allows for a global awareness in which cues draw attention to certain sectors, making them appear promising without ever being explicitly calculated. Because it is restricted to processing explicit features, gAI lacks this embodied orientation. It operates via a brute-force counting out of statistical probabilities rather than an existential orientation toward a project. Consequently, the gAI hallucination[5] is not a creative leap but a probabilistic error. The machine has no body to ground the essential/inessential discrimination that guides human care (Dreyfus 1972:14-16,24).

While phenomenology centres the artist's experience, a complete epistemology of embodied engagement must also account for the active role of the material world, precisely because it is this material responsiveness that gAI amputates. Karen Barad's (2007:33,39) concept of intra-action captures this precisely: the artist and the material are co-constituted

in the act of making. The unpredictable crack in a glaze is the material disclosing possibilities, forcing the artist to negotiate, adapt, and choose. This active capacity of materials to surprise and redirect the maker is what Jane Bennett (2010:2-4) calls thing-power: a vitality intrinsic to matter that resists reduction to passive, inert stuff awaiting human will. Knowledge is not imposed upon the material but emerges from this dialogical encounter (Barad 2007:136,185,379). It is this intra-active dialogue that the frictionless interface of the gAI model silences, replacing the agential responsiveness of the physical world with the compliant, smooth delivery of the simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994:6).

This aligns with Harun Farocki's concept of operational images; images made not for human contemplation but for machines to act upon (Farocki 2004:2,4,15). In these operative pictures, the battlefield is uninhabited; they represent a logic of pure execution where 'humanity has disappeared from the face of machines' (Farocki 2004). The prompt engineer does not inhabit the image as a painter inhabits the canvas; they operate on it from a distance, treating it as a statistical output rather than a phenomenological event. This confirms the transition from Care – the anxiety and concern of being-in-the-world – to the gamified logic of the phantom shot, where the struggle of creation is replaced by the frictionless victory of the command (Farocki 2004).

For Heidegger (1962:236-237), authentic existence involves a constant, anxious grappling with this entire structure. Arts-based research is a quintessential manifestation of Care, where the artist-researcher wrestles with the thrownness of their medium and tradition to project a new possibility into the world.

The reconfiguration of Care: Lessons from photography

But before we view this as a declaration of the end of art as we know it, it is worth looking back. This is not the first time a machine has threatened to automate the act of creation. In the nineteenth century, a different kind of box, the camera, sent a similar shockwave through the established order, and its story offers a lens through which to view our own turbulent moment.

Photography did not degrade artistic creation but introduced a new way of revealing the world that radically reconfigured artistic difficulty and the artist's engagement. The fundamental difference lies in their modes of creation. A painter engages in conscious inclusion; the canvas begins as a void, and every element is actively created and placed by the artist's hand. As Lev Manovich (2001:123) observes in his analysis of new media operations, embodied practice is defined by this act of creation from scratch. The painter synthesises a world.

A photographer, in contrast, practises conscious exclusion. The world already exists before the lens, and the primary act is to isolate a fragment of that reality by framing it and choosing the precise moment of capture. This aligns with what Vilém Flusser (2000:33) describes as the gesture of photography: a movement not of working *on* an object, but of phenomenological doubt and decision *about* the object. The photographer selects from a pre-existing world. In Manovich's (2001:123-124) terms, this shifts the logic of authorship from construction to selection, where the creative act is the choice of an element from a menu of infinite possibilities, in this case, the visual world itself. Through Heidegger's framework, the brush reveals the world through the slow, durational process of embodied cognition, a record of thousands of decisions. The camera, conversely, reveals the world as a field of instantly capturable, pre-existing visual facts. This is not a moral hierarchy but an ontological distinction in how the world is brought into unconcealment (*aletheia*). This reframing challenges the notion that photography is a lesser form of Care. While the painter's care is evident in labourious, time-intensive rendering, the photographer's care shifts to the patient and the discerning act of seeing. It is a care rooted in observation, in waiting for the right light, in anticipating the decisive moment.

Crucially, this historical shift highlights what is unique about the current moment: the camera does not amputate Care; it merely shifts its locus from a synthetic, durational process to an analytical, instantaneous one. The difficulty is similarly transformed, not eliminated. While the camera automates the difficulty of perspective – a form of automation that removes a level of human agency – it introduces new desirable difficulties: technical mastery of the instrument, the compositional challenge of organising a chaotic reality, and the conceptual difficulty of imbuing a taken image with artistic vision.

As Flusser (2000:26-27) argues, the photographer must struggle against the apparatus, playing against its rigid programme to discover the improbable image hidden within it. This struggle against the apparatus is precisely what distinguishes photography from the frictionless nature of simulacric retrieval in gAI. In photography, the programme resists the user, demanding a struggle for the improbable image; in gAI, the program is designed to compliantly yield the probable image, thereby removing the very struggle that constitutes Care.

The obvious objection presents itself: could not prompt engineering constitute a new locus of friction, just as the viewfinder did for the camera? The answer requires a precise ontological distinction. The photographer's friction is perceptual and embodied; it involves the physical negotiation of light, space, timing, and the resistance of an apparatus that must be struggled against to yield the improbable image. The prompt engineer's engagement, by contrast, is linguistic and speculative. It is a process of narrowing semantic coordinates within a precomputed statistical space, not of wrestling with the

resistance of a material or perceptual world. The camera reconfigured difficulty by shifting it from the hand to the eye; gAI does not shift difficulty to a new bodily faculty but relocates it from the body entirely into the domain of textual specification. The photographer still inhabits the world they capture; the prompt engineer issues instructions to a system that simulates a world they never enter. This is the categorical distinction: photography transforms the site of Care; gAI evacuates it. The critique, therefore, should not be directed at the tool, but at the mode of use it encourages; specifically, whether that mode transforms difficulty, as photography does, or amputates it entirely, as gAI threatens to do.

Initially, photography sought legitimacy through Pictorialism; mimicking the aesthetics of painting to accrue cultural capital. However, the medium only matured when it abandoned this mimicry to embrace its own unique ontology: the decisive moment and the mechanical capture of light. Painting did not die; forced to relinquish its duty as the sole documentarian of reality, it exploded into a hundred new directions, from Impressionism to Cubism and beyond.

Simulacric retrieval

Currently, the same pattern is playing out with gAI. Much of the discourse is trapped in a pictorialist phase. AI art is frequently judged by its ability to mimic existing, human-led aesthetics. A prompt might ask for an image in the style of Van Gogh, or a photorealistic portrait, or a cinematic still from an epic film. However, this makes sense, given that the great promise of gAI is being able to do something more quickly and easily than before and in some industries, no longer having to do it at all. However, the difference and value between a painting and a gAI image lie not merely in the outcome and duration, but in the fundamental nature of their creation, in what they do and how they operate.

This is not positioned as a Luddite's rage against the machine nor a romantic's flight from modernity. Rather, it is a discerning and necessary evaluation of how different tools, artefacts, and systems shape not only what we do, but who we are. It is an inquiry into the ways technology configures our fundamental mode of being-in-the-world. This is a rejection of the impoverished, mechanistic worldview that the tool can sometimes impose. It asks that we remember there are ways of relating to the world other than domination and use, and that a world understood only through the lens of utility is a profoundly diminished one.

This position, however, must contend with a serious counterargument. Aaron Hertzmann (2018) argues that computers cannot create art precisely because creativity resides not in the tool but in the human agent who wields it. For Hertzmann, the gAI user remains

the artist: they exercise aesthetic judgement, make curatorial decisions, and invest intentionality into the selection and refinement of outputs. The creative act, in this view, migrates from the hand to the conceptual frame, a relocation, not an elimination. This argument is compelling in its defence of human agency, but it conflates the origin of intention with the process of discovery. The ontological framework of Care developed here reveals the limitation: Hertzmann's account preserves the artist's role as decision-maker but overlooks the epistemological function of material responsiveness; the intra-active dialogue outlined above, from which the artist's choices emerge rather than being merely applied. Hertzmann's model of creativity as curation accurately describes the selection of outputs but cannot account for the generation of knowledge that occurs only through embodied struggle. The artist who curates gAI outputs exercises taste; the artist who wrestles with material exercises Care. These are not equivalent modes of engagement, and the distinction matters precisely because arts-based research depends on the latter, on knowledge that is produced through, not merely expressed by, the act of making.

Now, this does not mean that the creation of gAI art is an inherently disembodied process. It can, in fact, be a human endeavour rooted in the embodied cognition and intentional curation of the artist, for whom the AI serves as a collaborative tool rather than a surrogate for experience. The creative process, in this view, begins not with the gAI, but within the artist. The initial prompt is presented as a direct extension of their lived, physical experience. The language used to guide the gAI is not a set of sterile commands but is drawn from sensory and emotional memories. When an artist types words like windswept, glowing, heavy, or melancholy, they are drawing upon a well of personal, embodied knowledge. They are translating the feeling of wind on their skin, the visual memory of light in a dusty room, or the visceral weight of sadness into a linguistic form. This act of translation is framed as the foundational moment of embodiment. The prompt becomes a compressed artefact of a human's unique history of seeing and feeling, making the very inception of the artwork an embodied act.

This shift in modality means that, while the machine mathematically synthesises an image, the human creative act in text-to-image gAI is not one of invention but of frictionless retrieval. The user does not create *ex nihilo;* they issue a command to navigate a pre-existing statistical landscape. The process is akin to a sophisticated database query that summons a precomputed potential, effectively amputating the durational, friction-filled struggle that defines embodied discovery. This reframing of the creative act as creation from nothing to a form of navigation or retrieval is fundamental. The latent space is a vast, high-dimensional, statistical landscape of all the patterns the model learned from its training data. A text prompt is converted into a mathematical vector pointing to a specific location within this landscape, and the model renders the image corresponding to that location.

The implosion of the caring interface

Returning to Heidegger's ontological framework provides a valuable lens for mapping generative practices onto a spectrum where the key differentiator is the locus of Care, the primary site of the artist's engagement. This reveals three distinct modes of engagement. The first is procedural art, where Care is invested in designing the system itself. In this mode, the artist painstakingly defines the rules, logic, and conceptual framework from scratch, making the system's code the core artwork, with visual outputs being merely manifestations of that deeper structure. Next on the spectrum is data-driven art, where Care shifts to data curation and the custom training of a model. Here, the artist performs the embodied labour of collecting and structuring a unique worldview for the machine, then engages in the technically demanding process of building a bespoke neural network to interpret it. The artistic friction lies in the dialogue between the world, the data, and the machine's emergent perception. Finally, there is simulacric retrieval, where Care is relocated to the refinement of prompts and the curation of outputs. In this mode, the system's architecture and its worldview (the training data) are pre-existing and opaque. Engagement is not architectural or curatorial, but operational: crafting linguistic commands to navigate a prebuilt system and selecting the most desirable result. Situated within this history of scopic regimes, gAI allows us to unpack the notion of the algorithmic gaze as the contemporary apotheosis of a long-running Cartesian[6] dream. Its lineage traces back to the rationalised, dispassionate eye of Renaissance linear perspective, migrating through the photographic lens to the digital screen. Yet, as I have already said, these technologies did not eliminate friction; they reconfigured it, changing the artist's structure of Care (Heidegger 1962:231-232,235-241). In contrast, gAI represents a radical departure. It is the ultimate, if perverse, fulfilment of this dream, introducing a scopic regime defined by the automation of vision and the collapse of critical distance. Its primary drive is the near-total elimination of friction itself.

The outputs of this frictionless process are themselves a new form of double, best understood through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's (1994:6) concept of simulacra.[7] They are more than mere copies. They are simulacra of the third order: images that mask the absence of a tangible reality, operating in a regime where the model precedes and generates the real rather than representing it (Baudrillard 1994:6). The AI-generated image does not copy a reality that exists independently of it; the statistical model from which it is retrieved constitutes the only reality the image has ever known. This is Baudrillard's precession of simulacra in its purest form: the map preceding and producing the territory. An AI-generated image in the style of a master is not a representation of that master's work; it is a model generated from data that precedes and supplants the original (Baudrillard 1994:1). It is a hyperreal mimic (Baudrillard 1994:2). This dynamic, where an act of retrieval

from a statistical model produces not a representation but a simulacrum, is the very essence of simulacric retrieval. This marks what David Marshall (2014:xxxiv) identifies as a definitive shift from a representational culture, which values the duration and labour embodied in an artefact, to a presentational culture. The AI image is purely presentational: it appears instantaneously, creating an illusion of liveness and presence that masks the fact that it is a simulacrum, a copy without an original (Benjamin 2008:6; Baudrillard 1994:6; Marshall 2014:xxxiv).

By leveraging the ontological framework of Care (Heidegger 1962:231-232,235-238), the critique of the gAI interface is sharpened significantly. The core danger of frictionless AI is not merely the loss of a reflective gap, but the systematic eradication of a caring mode of engagement with the world. The central technological phenomenon at issue is what Amanda Du Preez (2024) terms the imploding inter(face). Du Preez (2024:1) argues that a meaningful human-technology encounter depends on maintaining a mediating layer or gap, a necessary distance for interpretation, reflection, and the formation of a critical self. When technology strives to eliminate this gap, to create a seamless, instantaneous connection, the encounter implodes (Du Preez 2024:1). AI text-to-image generation, moving from prompt to image in seconds, exemplifies this implosion by erasing the durational, resistant, and mediating process of embodied creation (Du Preez 2024:1-2).

Thus, this imploding inter(face) (Du Preez 2024) can be philosophically diagnosed as an implosion of Care (Heidegger 1962:231-232). The gap that Du Preez (2024) identifies as essential for reflection is the very space in which a Heideggerian ready-to-hand relationship with the world is maintained (Du Preez 2024:1; Heidegger 1962:102-105). The friction, resistance, and duration of embodied making are what sustain this mode of being, a relationship defined by caring, solicitous engagement (Heidegger 1962:83-84,157-159). The frictionless gAI interface, by its very design, severs this relationship. It systematically transforms the world from a context of ready-to-hand equipment to be cared for into a collection of present-at-hand objects to be scrutinised and manipulated from a distance (Heidegger 1962:98-99,102-104). The world is no longer a collaborator in a process but a database of properties to be queried and a surface upon which to render an image. The gAI user does not engage with the material; they issue a command to a system that presents a result. This technological enforcement of a present-at-hand ontology severs the caring relationship that is essential for deep, embodied learning and research (Heidegger 1962:237-238). The deskilling effect of gAI is therefore not merely the loss of a craft like drawing, but an ontological deskilling, the atrophy of our very capacity for caring, ready-to-hand engagement with the world (Heidegger 1962:98-99,403-404).

When viewed through this combined lens, the amputation enacted by gAI becomes starkly clear in the very act of art generation. The process itself, moment by moment,

dismantles the structure of Care (Heidegger 1962:231–232). First, gAI amputates thrownness. An artist is thrown into history; they learn by studying the masters, practising brushstrokes, and understanding the physical limitations of pigment and canvas. This is a slow, frictional dialogue (Heidegger 1962:174). The AI user bypasses this entirely. By typing a prompt like a landscape in the style of Van Gogh, they are not engaging with Van Gogh's history, struggle, or technique. Instead, they summon a hyperreal, amplified alter ego of Van Gogh's style from the simulation (Baudrillard 1994:2). The difficult dialogue with the past is replaced by a frictionless command.

Second, gAI amputates projection-toward-possibilities. In art, the final work is discovered through the process (Heidegger 1962:185,372-373). A drip of paint, an unexpected colour blend, the resistance of the medium; these accidents open up unforeseen creative paths. The journey is one of discovery. The gAI art process inverts this. The user starts with a preconceived mental image and refines a text prompt to converge on that specific outcome. The act becomes one of linguistic specification rather than material exploration. The happy accident is no longer a dialogue with the medium but a statistical anomaly in the generation, to be accepted or re-rolled. This amputates the terrifying, yet essential, freedom of the blank canvas, replacing a journey of becoming with an act of summoning.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, gAI amputates concernful dealing (*Besorgen*), the embodied, hands-on engagement with the material world through which arts-based research generates knowledge (Heidegger 1962:83-84,157-159). This is the smell of turpentine, the feel of clay, the fatigue in the arm. It is the mode of caring in which tools and materials are encountered as ready-to-hand, and in which the body thinks through resistance. The gAI creator's engagement is with a screen, a keyboard, and a mouse. The rich, frictional, and embodied engagement of representational culture is replaced by the frictionless interface of presentational culture (Marshall 2014:xxxiv). In Heidegger's terms, what is lost is not merely a technique but the very mode of being through which *Dasein* discloses its world through concerned making. In its place, the artist risks what Heidegger (1962:219-224,396-398) calls *Verfallenheit*; falling into the absorptive pull of the "they-self" (*das Man*), surrendering to the effortless, average, public mode of production that gAI's frictionless interface actively encourages. The danger is not that the artist struggles and fails, but that the system removes the conditions under which struggle – and therefore authentic care – can occur at all.

Limitations of the study

The scope of this critique must be precisely delimited, and these delimitations themselves strengthen the argument. The analysis is primarily focused on simulacric retrieval, specifically

commercial text-to-image generators – such as MidJourney, DALL·E 3, or Stable Diffusion – where user interaction is limited to prompting and selection. This critique does not extend to procedural art or data-driven art, where artists engage in the frictional, embodied labour of coding architectures or curating datasets. Nor does it extend to image-to-image modalities, where the visual input and iterative perceptual feedback may retain a closer relationship to embodied engagement, a relationship that warrants its own philosophical investigation. That these adjacent practices retain Care is not a weakness in the argument but evidence of its precision: it is the specific mode of frictionless text-to-image retrieval, not computation as such, that constitutes the amputation.

Second, this inquiry is methodological and philosophical in nature, grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology. It does not present empirical data regarding the subjective experiences of individual artists using these tools. Consequently, while it identifies ontological risks – the implosion of the interface – it cannot account for the varied, idiosyncratic ways specific practitioners might subvert these systems to reintroduce friction or resistance into their workflows.

Finally, given the rapid velocity of development in artificial intelligence, this phenomenological reading represents a snapshot of the technology's current ready-to-hand configuration. As interfaces evolve to potentially include haptic feedback or more granular controls, the specific nature of the friction and thus the nature of the Care required may shift, necessitating further philosophical excavation.

Conclusion

When a generative AI system is instructed to generate a drawing, the output is not, in the truest sense, a drawing. No actual drawing takes place. It does not draw; it assembles a finished image from a statistical model, presenting a hyperreal mimic of a drawing that is devoid of the very struggle that defines the act itself (Baudrillard 1994:2). Therefore, the problem is not simply that the AI is a tool for creating images. The problem is that it presents itself as a substitute for the entire artistic process, creating a presentational culture that values the instantaneous image over the durational, embodied labour of the artefact (Marshall 2014:xxxiv). It offers a drawing without drawing, a painting without paint. This makes the AI-generated image a unique form of simulacrum: not a copy of a specific drawing, but a copy of the idea of a drawing, severed from the authentic, frictional, and caring act of creation that gives it life (Baudrillard 1994:6; Heidegger 1962).

This is not to argue that gAI processes cannot be sites for worthwhile engagement and visual research. Indeed, some of the most compelling artistic work involving AI emerges

from a direct investigation of the technology's limits, biases, and failures. Artists and researchers can, and do, introduce their own friction by probing the uncanny valley, deconstructing the training data, and exposing the hollow nature of the simulacra produced (Baudrillard 1994:5). This creates a necessary and critical loop, a kind of technological Ouroboros where the snake eats its own tail. This self-referential stage is vital; it is the artist-researcher reintroducing friction and care into a frictionless system, using their embodied intelligence to wrestle with the new artifice.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond theoretical debate into the immediate concerns of arts pedagogy and research methodology. For arts-based research, the finding is direct: if the methodology's epistemological claim rests on knowledge generated through embodied making, then substituting simulacric retrieval for studio practice does not merely change the tool; it voids the method. The research of doing cannot be conducted by a system that eliminates the doing. For arts education more broadly, the concern is not that students will use gAI – they will, and should understand it – but that frictionless image generation may atrophy the very capacities that arts training exists to develop: the patience of sustained observation, the discipline of material negotiation, and the tolerance for productive failure that constitutes creative growth. Institutions face a design problem: how to integrate gAI literacy without allowing frictionless tools to displace the frictional practices through which artistic intelligence is formed. The answer this framework suggests is that gAI belongs in the curriculum as an object of critical inquiry – something to be interrogated, deconstructed, and understood – rather than as a substitute for the embodied processes through which art generates knowledge.

However, the central issue remains: this necessary, frictional engagement stands in stark contrast to the frictionless ideal the systems themselves are built to pursue. The technology is engineered to bypass struggle, not to foreground it. Therefore, while a critical practice is possible, it exists despite the system's primary logic, not because of it. For those who use the tool as intended – as a seamless, efficient image generator – the threat of amputation remains potent. The hyperreal models of simulation replace the qualitative friction of embodied struggle, and the result is an art of simulacric retrieval, a creation without care, and a form of inquiry that has been severed from the entangled human condition itself (Baudrillard 1994:2; Heidegger 1962).

Notes

1. Williams's seminal work, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (1976), provides a 'record of an inquiry into a vocabulary' of words central to discussions of culture and society, tracing their historical and semantic shifts to reveal underlying social and political tensions.

2. The Romantic movement, arising in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as a reaction against the Industrial Revolution and the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment, placed a new emphasis on emotion, individualism, and the sublime power of the untamed natural world. This contributed to the modern valorisation of the natural over the artificial.

3. Art-based research is 'the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies' (McNiff 2007:29).

4. In the field of user experience (UX) design, friction refers to any element that prevents a user from accomplishing a goal easily and intuitively (Cox *et al* 2016:1-2). While often seen as something to be eliminated to create a seamless experience (Cox *et al* 2016:1-2), some designers argue for good friction, deliberate obstacles that encourage mindfulness, prevent errors, or increase engagement (Cox *et al* 2016:1-3).

5. Generative AI hallucinations refer to generated outputs that are unfaithful to the provided source content or ungrounded in verifiable, real-world facts, despite appearing coherent (Ji *et al* 2023).

6. The Cartesian dream alludes to the philosophical ideas of René Descartes, who famously established a separation between the mind (as a rational, thinking thing) and the body (as a physical object). This is interpreted as the desire for a disembodied, mastering eye, a viewpoint of pure, detached observation, free from the limitations and friction of the physical body.

7. In *Simulacra and simulatio*n (1994), Baudrillard outlines four successive phases of the image: (1) a faithful copy that reflects a reality; (2) a copy that masks and perverts that reality; (3) a copy that masks the *absence* of a reality (the order of sorcery); and (4) the pure simulacrum, which has no relation to any reality whatsoever and is its own referent.

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