Exhibition Review

Ernst Wagner

Independent researcher.

ernst@wagner-mchn.de (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0939-8153)

(A) Eye – AI ... and the future of Visual Culture: An exhibition of young artists from Africa and Europe

ABSTRACT

This review reflects on the exhibition '(A) Eye – AI ... and the future of Visual Culture', which brought together student artists and designers from Africa and Europe to explore the impact of generative artificial intelligence on creative practice. Drawing on selected works, the text examines how emerging practitioners navigate human-machine collaboration. The analysis highlights how simple text prompts often reproduce hegemonic stereotypes, Eurocentric visual tropes, and algorithmic biases embedded in training data largely derived from the Global North. In contrast, complex, iterative prompting demonstrates AI's potential as a conceptual dialogue partner and creative catalyst, "liberating" artists from manual execution while shifting emphasis toward conceptual framing. Furthermore, several projects model hybrid workflows that bridge generative AI with traditional craft, manual iteration, and critical visual reflection. Ultimately, the review argues that AI fosters an intellectualisation of artistic practice, underscoring the urgent need for critical prompt literacy and cultural awareness in contemporary art and design education.

Published: 2026-11-06

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, visual culture, prompt literacy, human-machine collaboration, cultural bias, art education.

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

© 2026. The Author(s).

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2026/n40a21
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

How the exhibition came about

In November 2023, the EVC Expert Panel selected 'Artificial Intelligence and Visual Culture' as its theme for 2024. This decision established the organisational framework for a broader project: a student exhibition, an international conference, and a publication. The exhibition (Figure 1), curated by national curators, was organised by Jane Otieno in Nairobi. A virtual version is available online. In November 2024, Mary Claire Kidenda from the Technical University of Kenya (TUK) hosted the conference in Nairobi. This special section of *Image and Text* serves as the accompanying publication.

To start the entire process, an EVC working group developed a call for the exhibition – appropriately, with the assistance of ChatGPT. The title and theme, '(A) Eye – AI … and the future of Visual Culture', were deliberately open-ended, inviting participants to explore a largely unfamiliar field. National curators determined how contributions would be developed locally. Some universities offered dedicated courses, while others simply distributed the call to their students. This diversity created fertile ground for a variety of approaches and designs.

My discussion of some contributions to the exhibition below refers to the virtual exhibition, which is still accessible online. There, each national contribution occupies its own space, presenting individual works alongside artists' statements. Within that, reflection on the prompting process plays an important role. However, not all participants documented this aspect thoroughly, perhaps because prompting, as the true creative act, is complex and difficult to reconstruct retrospectively.



FIGURE Nº 1

The analogue exhibition at TUK in Nairobi. Photographed by the author.

Hegemonic stereotypes

Visiting the online exhibition, one is struck by the diversity of approaches. Some works reveal how even very simple prompts can produce interesting results. Consider, for example, Hannah Awukubea *Akotuah's Seascape 2 (seaside serenity)* (Figure 2), created using the single-sentence instruction: 'Create a painting of a beach scene using thick brush strokes as a painting technique.' It is obvious how AI (Bing Image Creator) generates a "statistical average" from its training data in this case.



FIGURE **Nº 2**

Hannah Awukubea *Akotuah, Seascape 2 (seaside serenity)*, 2024. Courtesy of Hannah Awukubea Akotuah.



FIGURE **Nº 3**

Auguste Bouvard, *Landscape with a church and river.* Oil on canvas, 50.5 cm x 65.5 cm. (artnet.com).

‘Statistical average’ here means that the architecture of the houses with the church reflects the ideals associated with Central European villages (Figure 3). Also, the visual language is similarly European: the composition, with its foreground, middle ground, and background, follows harmonious proportions, while the colour fields evoke the artistic language of, e.g. Cézanne.

Such images highlight patterns (and biases) embedded in AI. Their value lies in demonstrating how AI can reproduce Western clichés (as it is trained primarily on data produced in the Global North) and disseminate them across global visual culture. Similar stereotypical imagery, such as depictions of African villages (in this case shaped by Hollywood stereotypes), appears elsewhere in the exhibition. These examples suggest that AI often perpetuates hegemonic cultural patterns.

Complex prompting

In contrast, other works in the online exhibition present AI as a design partner rather than merely an executor. Elvin Manwa Ogetii’s *Beyond boundaries* (Figure 4), from the Kenyan section, exemplifies this approach. Unlike the single-sentence prompt discussed earlier, the documented prompt spans 168 words summarising multiple iterative steps. It provides visitors with insight into the complexity of the design process.

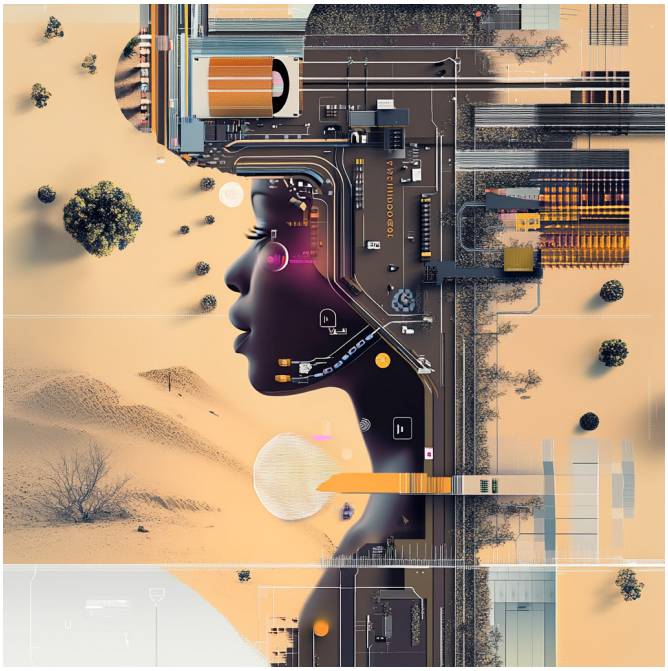


FIGURE Nº 4

Elvin Manwa Ogetii, *Beyond boundaries*, 2024. Courtesy of Elvin Manwa Ogetii.

In this case we can observe, how the discrepancy between the artist's vision and the AI's often unexpected output drives the creative process, based on a tension that can be inspiring (but also frustrating) for the designer. Ogetii's work presents a hybrid human-machine landscape in which side, top, and standard viewpoints merge. This avant-garde approach, which contrasts with conventional compositions based on the golden ratio, warm colours, and vivid contrasts within the same image, is likely influenced by the 'poster style' specified in the prompt. The fusion of spaces and motifs – landscape and people, technology and nature, conventional ideals of beauty alongside everyday Nairobi street life impressions – produces a surprising and engaging result. Obviously, the image emerged through a dialogue between human and machine, with prompts designed to move the AI beyond its learned clichés.

Liberation from craftsmanship

Michelle Bettina Etobe's work, *ANOV 2 (Animals love)* (Figure 5), demonstrates a different approach. Her brief prompt – arguably too brief to be entirely credible – reads: 'Generate me a dark gala dress inspired by a pangolin, rhinoceros, and bloody elephant, viewed from the front, side, and back.' It illustrates how the artist establishes a productive relationship between two visual worlds, which she characterises in her accompanying text as one inspiring the other.



FIGURE **Nº 5**

Michelle Bettina Etobe, *ANOV 2 (Animals love)*, 2024. Courtesy of Michelle Bettina Etobe.



FIGURE Nº 6

Ernst Wagner. Stuck and Brenner meet the tattoo studio. 2026. Courtesy of the author.

This results in what is, at first glance, an impressive image: a surreal combination of animals and clothing. More specifically, of repulsive pangolins and dangerous elephants on the one hand, and a seductive gala dress on the other. The AI's visual language plays with this contradiction, reducing the female body while simultaneously staging it as powerful. Here, too, the AI Copilot draws on visual clichés, producing an idealised human body. The request for a dark gala dress appears to have prompted the AI to draw on – again – familiar Western imagery (Figure 6).

Etobe, the artist, explains in her comment that participating in this exhibition was her first encounter with AI. She describes the process as a 'collaboration', selectively incorporating AI-generated suggestions while retaining conceptual control. The outcome reflects experimentation that is liberated from labour-intensive manual work, with AI assuming much of the execution.

Clear design intentions

Christopher Okai's *Shadows of compromise* (Figure 7), in turn, highlights the importance of documenting the prompting process. Re-entering the same prompt Okai presents on the website produces an image that differs considerably from the version exhibited (Figure 8). This suggests that the artist substantially revised the AI's initial output. (Unfortunately, this process was not documented.)



FIGURE Nº 7

Christopher Okai, *Shadows of compromise,* 2024. Courtesy of Christopher Okai.



FIGURE Nº 8

Result from the same prompt using the same AI, created by Copilot and the author, 2025.

His commentary, however, reveals a clear design intention. He explains that he wanted to ‘capture the texture of the dark world of politics, where shadows dance and secrets are whispered’. This suggests that he was aiming to establish a particular atmosphere and visual language from the outset since the AI alone was unlikely to achieve this in its initial output. A comparison of Figures 7 and 8 illustrates the extent of intervention required to move beyond the AI’s initial, clichéd output and develop a more focused visual statement.

Hybridity and critical reflection

The contributions from South Africa reflect a different approach. They were produced as a project in AI design, presented as part of the Information Design course at the University of Pretoria, in which the lecturer, Kyle Rath, set students a specific task: to design a corporate identity system for a fictional brand using AI and, in a second phase, to document, critically reflect on, and visualise the development of the project – this time without AI.

The assignment was informed by Rath’s critical perspective on AI. He acknowledges its implications for the job market, including job displacement, as well as broader societal concerns such as racial and gender bias, manipulative data sources, and AI-assisted warfare. Within this context, he also reflects on his own uncertainties and concerns regarding his teaching.

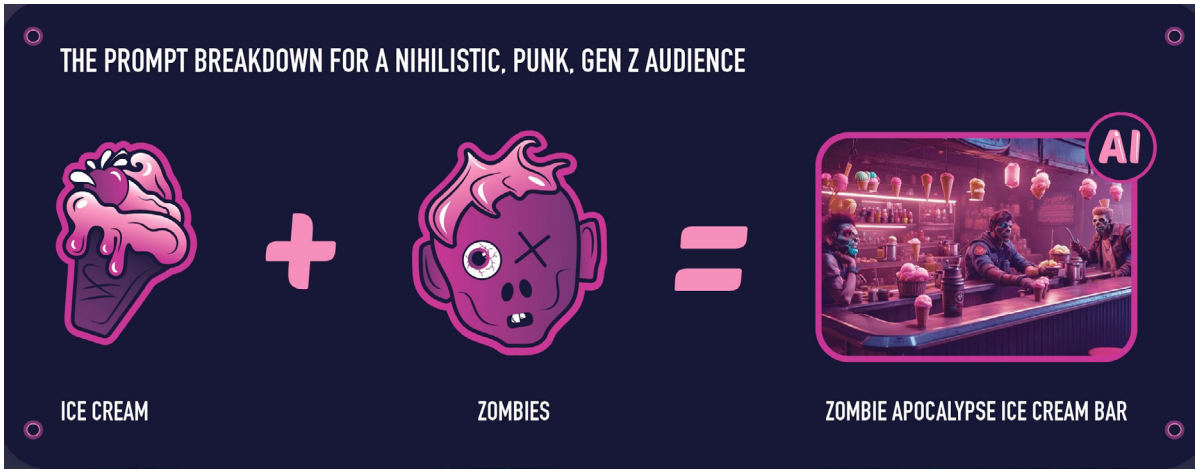


FIGURE **Nº 9a**

Bronwyn Sinclair. 2024. *Artificial invasion*. Generative AI. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.



FIGURE Nº 9b

Bronwyn Sinclair. 2024. *Artificial invasion*. Generative AI. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.

One of his students, Hendrik Smith, observes: 'AI shines in streamlining time-consuming tasks, providing the spark for creative ideas, and even works as a buddy for talking through an idea'. His reflection echoes several of the observations made throughout the exhibition. Bronwyn Sinclair's project illustrates this idea of AI as a 'buddy'. She developed a corporate identity for a 'zombie apocalypse ice cream bar' (Figure 9a-b), testing AI's ability to respond to humour and absurdity. As she explains, she 'decided to push the absurdity of the ideas to see if ChatGPT and its AI friends could keep up with human whimsy'. In this context, it is interesting that she ultimately rejected the AI's proposed logo in favour of developing an alternative design. Her final sketch nevertheless builds on the AI's initial concept while redirecting it towards her intended outcome (Figure 9c). The project provides a good example of a productive hybrid workflow, integrating traditional design processes with AI-supported stages.

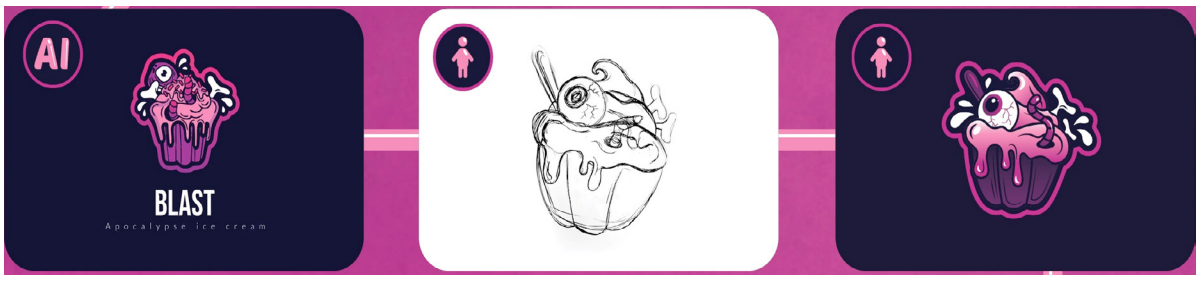


FIGURE Nº 9c

Bronwyn Sinclair. 2024. Detail, *Artificial invasion*. Generative AI. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.

New partnerships – new hybridisations

Anna Huttner's work, *The code of many hands* (Figure 10), demonstrates a close working collaboration between human intelligence and AI. Her online account documents an extensive dialogue with AI. Remarkably, she takes its suggestions seriously. She not only engages with them but also relies on AI in fundamental ways throughout the conceptual development of the project – in a surprising way. Without AI, this work would have been inconceivable.

One hopes, however, that the artist remained in control of the process throughout. In other words, that she accepted only those suggestions that aligned with her own ideas. (Fortunately, unlike a human collaborator, the machine does not take offence). It is interesting to observe how she adopts AI's suggestions at key stages of the design process, for example, in developing the underlying narrative and selecting materials and colours. Here, AI is genuinely consulted for advice, which is then incorporated into the work.

However, AI is involved only during the conceptual phase. The final work (Figure 10) is sewn and embroidered using traditional techniques. During the conception of the project, however, AI is deeply embedded in the creative process. This relationship extends well beyond the simple sequence of human – prompt – machine – result. It also reflects the interweaving of media – poetry, ornament and clothing – as well as the cultural connections between Kenya and Germany explored in the project.



FIGURE **Nº 10**

Anna Huttner. 2024. *The code of many hands*. Embroidered fabric. Courtesy of Anna Huttner.

Conclusion

Featuring 45 works, the exhibition offers a wide range of approaches and insights to incorporating AI as a multifaceted contributor to creative practice. What emerges clearly is that AI is reshaping artistic processes. Prompting encourages sustained intellectual engagement, and the continual process of articulating ideas in words, arguably contributes to a greater intellectualisation of creative practice. This will also change the self-conception of the artist.

At the same time, alleviation from labour-intensive execution encourages experimentation and iteration. The potentially unlimited number of variations that AI can generate and regenerate may, however, also encourage a degree of arbitrariness. Claims that AI "democratises" art production are, in my opinion, overstated. As this exhibition demonstrates, successful design remains a demanding process.

This means for art and design education, prompting is becoming an increasingly important skill and may warrant dedicated teaching. Comparative studies of different AI systems may also reveal distinct ideological biases. At the same time, audiences' expectations may shift, with admiration moving from human craftsmanship towards technological ingenuity. Ultimately, this exhibition highlights both the opportunities and challenges that AI presents for visual culture. It invites continued experimentation while encouraging critical reflection on the evolving relationship between human and machine.