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Evocative and Provocative Image-Making in the Age of Generative AI

Editorial for Part 1 of *AI and Possible Futures for the Arts*

By special issue editor [Julian Kilker](#), UNLV School of Journalism and Media Studies

Welcome to the first part of the AI-focused special issue of *Tradition-Innovations in Arts, Design, and Media Higher Education*, published under the auspices of the *Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities (a2ru)*. I'm pleased to introduce part one of this special edition, three articles by five authors accepted in response to a call to discuss "how recent innovations in Artificial Intelligence (AI)—ones that change art processes and appear to produce creative works—are transforming the creation of art and knowledge."

These projects were rigorously double-blind reviewed by arts and media scholars and selected from the many submissions to the call. We appreciate the creativity and rigor with which both the contributors and the multiple reviewers approached this challenging and controversial topic.

The challenge the reviewers faced, and that the guest editors of this special issue—Sarah O'Connell, Leah Howd, Fen Kennedy and myself—intentionally posed, was to try to make sense of the interactions between the AI tsunami and the arts at this early stage. Yvonne Houy, the founding editor of *Tradition-Innovation in Art, Design, and Media Higher Education*, encouraged us to explore how interlinking creative practice, teaching and research could be potentially empowering in the face of this disruptive technology, a welcome and nuanced pivot from the opportunism and fear feverishly represented in popular coverage of AI. Nevertheless, this issue's intent is not to diminish the impacts, some disturbing, that generative AI is having across fields and for many people's livelihoods. Rather, our goal is to focus on how the deep well of creative expertise and process experience found in the arts, design, and media fields can empower scholars and practitioners inside and outside our fields as we face the consequences of these rapidly changing technologies.

Author Ted Chiang, whose writing explores technology, philosophy, and speculative futures, has incisively noted that the concerns about AI held by many people are not due to the output of generative AI systems themselves, but to concerns about how business practices and capital are using them already and are tempted to use them further to disempower workers. (I recommend reading his *Will A.I. Become the New McKinsey?* article through the lenses of your own scholarly and professional experiences.¹)

¹See: Chiang, T. (2023, May 4). Will A.I. Become the New McKinsey? *The New Yorker*.

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What, then, are concerns that might emerge from our fields? Several key questions were repeatedly raised as the special issue guest editors and the *Tradition-Innovations in Art, Design, and Media Higher Education* editorial board members responded to the submissions in the summer of 2023, both via individual review comments and in periodic collaborative videoconferences:

What does “innovation” mean when talking about generative AI-supported teaching and creating? How can we talk about “creativity” when working with AI?

How can artists, designers, and media practitioners respond productively and ethically? Are they shaping—and can they shape—this rapidly evolving technology?

These discussions did not remain only in Zoom rooms and review documents; they contributed themes to the “AI Provocateurs” panel for the a2ru community in early October 2023, and informed plans for the “Generative AI and Speculative Futures for the Arts: Pushback and Possibilities” panel (co-organized by Aaron Knochel and Yvonne Houy) at the 2023 a2ru conference at Pennsylvania State University.

Our hope is that the discussions generated by the contributions that launched this peer-reviewed journal will continue to showcase how artists and educators in higher education contribute to the wider cultural, social and economic debate in response to innovations, whether they are technological or in other domains..

The three inaugural articles push the boundaries of what it means to “collaborate” in the age of generative AI, and explore contemporary responses by artists and designers.

In *Choreographing Shadows: Interdisciplinary collaboration to orchestrate ethical image-making*, Mark Burchick and Diana Pasulka remind us of the importance of historical knowledge and domain expertise for contextualizing creative artifacts generated by Stable Diffusion by introducing the redaction process and historical artwork from religious studies. The question that arises is whether AI generated art is, with limited human intervention, ahistorical and contextually ambiguous? Their intriguing proposition is that generative religious icons can help illuminate “AI’s shadow: the foundations upon which future iterations of artificial intelligence may be built.”

In *Giving Up Control: Hybrid AI-augmented workflows for image-making*, Joshua Vermillion builds on his extensive experience with Midjourney and his expertise in architecture to discuss the creative quasi-partnership that can occur while generating images for design inspiration. This process is more nuanced than prior experiences using technologies to augment tasks, and as his title suggests he argues that generative AI supports a surprisingly collaborative process between person and machine. He notes that “working with AI diffusion models is a lot like working with a large creative team ready to visualize a varied spectrum of idea responses—from the obvious to the bizarre—almost as quickly as you can write

<https://www.newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/will-ai-become-the-new-mckinsey>.

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down ideas.” He makes a strong case for the productive and creative benefits of engaging intimately with generative systems; a view that must be reconciled with Ted Chiang’s ambivalence about consequences for workers at the larger institutional levels.

Hands are Hard: Unlearning how we talk about machine learning in the arts delighted the reviewers with its creative approach to the scholarly challenge of unpacking the black box of generative systems, reminiscent of the Fluxus focus on creative experimentation and process. In their “instructional art object,” Adam Hyland and Oscar Keyes use visuals in ways that we’d like to see explored even further in future submissions and issues to this journal. Their deep dive into the problems representing hands is an example of both exploring (and exploiting?) a specific current flaw in generative AI, and also, paradoxically, of the types of processes that help improve these systems by probing the flaw’s boundaries and contexts. *Hands are Hard* returns our attention to the important topic of how generative systems are trained, and to their ethical implications. In 2023, commercial providers of generative systems are beginning to promote “safe” (in a commercially litigious sense) systems trained using open access or appropriately licensed images and text. But this solution does not address training biases, nor the fact that just by engaging with these systems we users are contributing our labor to improve them. Even if unnatural hands are a rapidly corrected AI phenomenon, they will likely be replaced by other subtle flaws that become markers for AI assessment and play.

The projects in these papers purposely reflect a moment in our early understanding of a collection of newly accessible generative AI technologies, and the responses to them by a group of courageous creative scholars. Both reflection and creation are processes that benefit from time and calm spaces. It is notoriously difficult to do either, let alone both, during the turmoil of rapid technological change and frenzied popular reactions recently experienced with generative AI. These scholars have risen to the challenge. As AI technologies continue to be shaped by commercial and research needs, and by interactions with the general public, these papers make it clear that our creative and media communities are critically important in engaging with and shaping them as well.