International Journal of Arts, Humanities, Tourism and Cultural Studies

Journal Home Page: https://ijahtcs.com/

Research Paper Open Access

Artificial Intelligence in Contemporary Art Practices

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is increasingly used by artists to analyze collections, produce visual or sonic material, build interactive installations and test new forms of collaboration. This narrative review examines how AI changes contemporary art practices without treating generation as a complete account of artistic creation. It distinguishes algorithmic and machine-learning processes, describes human decisions in selecting data and outputs, and considers examples from creative adversarial network research, an AI-associated auction work and Refik Anadol's museum installation. Two tables map methods to artistic choices and ethical concerns. A timeline image presents documented milestones; it is historical context, not a measure of adoption. The discussion addresses attribution, consent in training data, cultural representation, labor and the role of institutions. Current evidence supports viewing AI as a set of situated tools and materials whose artistic meaning depends on people, histories, audiences and exhibition settings [1–6].

Keywords: artificial intelligence; contemporary art; generative art; authorship; human–AI collaboration; datasets; cultural ethics

1 Introduction

Artistic practice has long incorporated new technologies, from photography and film to procedural animation and interactive media. AI extends this history by making learned patterns from data available for image, text, sound and other forms of generation. It can rapidly propose variations, help classify archival materials or respond to an audience in real time. Those capabilities change the pace and range of experimentation, but they do not settle questions of intention, authorship or meaning.

Hertzmann argues that claims about computer creativity must be placed within the longer history of technologies that automate parts of image-making [1]. Cetinic and She distinguish AI for understanding art from AI for creating it, an important distinction because classification, curation and generation involve different claims and errors [2]. An artist may use all three: retrieve images by visual features, make new outputs with a model, then organize the result as an installation. The artistic work lies partly in framing the system and interpreting what it produces.

2 Review approach

This article synthesizes selected research papers and institutional documentation. It is a conceptual narrative review, not a census of artists or a systematic estimate of AI adoption. The examples are chosen because their methods and public presentation are documented. The timeline in Figure 1 records selected events rather than a continuous history or a claim that any one event began AI art. Contemporary practices also include traditions outside large museums and auctions that are not fully represented by these examples.

A useful analytic unit is the entire creative workflow: source material, model selection or construction, prompts or parameters, iterative output selection, editing, material presentation and audience encounter. The same generated image can have different meaning in a gallery installation, an online archive or a commercial advertisement. Evaluation should therefore ask what the artist controlled, what the system generated and what the exhibition asks viewers to understand.

3 Forms of AI-assisted practice

Table 1. AI functions do not exhaust artistic practice. Specific works distribute decisions differently across these stages.

Practice	AI contribution	Human artistic decisions
Generative image or video	Produces variations from learned patterns	Concept, data, prompts, curation, editing
Collection analysis	Clusters or retrieves archival works	Question, classification critique, display
Interactive installation	Responds to sensors or audience input	Space, timing, response rules, interpretation
Sound and performance	Suggests sequences or live transformations	Composition, selection, embodiment

Creative Adversarial Networks, proposed by Elgammal and colleagues, were designed to learn from art styles while generating outputs that depart from learned stylistic norms [3]. Their work is a research example of a computational objective for novelty, not proof that an algorithm possesses human intention. An artist may accept, reject, retrain or juxtapose generated outputs to build a distinct proposition. Such selection is not merely a final cosmetic act; it shapes what becomes visible and what the work means.

Prompt-based generation makes iterations accessible to people without programming expertise. However, a text prompt is one element of a larger production chain involving model design, training data, interface constraints and post-processing. The language of a "single creator" can hide contributions from earlier artists and data annotators. Conversely, dismissing all AI-assisted work as automatic can overlook the research, editing and installation choices in a sustained artistic project.

4 Selected public examples

Christie's auctioned Portrait of Edmond Belamy in 2018 and described it as a work made with a generative adversarial network associated with the collective Obvious [4]. The widely reported sale brought questions of authorship and market valuation to a broad audience. An auction price is evidence of one transaction and its publicity, not a measure of artistic quality or a representative market trend. The case is useful because the apparatus of attribution—the collective, the algorithm, its training material and the auction house—became part of the debate around the work.

For Refik Anadol: Unsupervised, presented at the Museum of Modern Art from November 2022 to April 2023, the artist used AI to interpret and transform material from more than 200 years of art in the museum's collection [5]. This example foregrounds scale, institutional archives and the installation environment. The viewer experiences an evolving visual field in a physical setting; its significance cannot be reduced to a static image extracted from the display. At the same time, an institution's collection is a selective cultural archive, so the outputs reflect curatorial histories as well as model behavior.

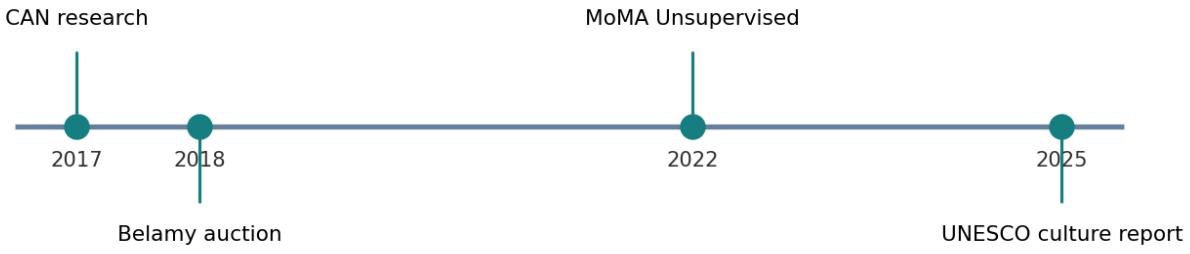


Figure 1. Selected documented milestones: Creative Adversarial Networks research (2017), the Edmond Belamy auction (2018), the opening of MoMA's Unsupervised installation (2022), and a UNESCO expert report on AI and culture (2025) [3–6]. This timeline is illustrative and does not depict adoption rates.

5 Authorship and human agency

Authorship is not a binary choice between "the artist" and "the machine." The artist may specify a conceptual aim and curate outputs; researchers design model architectures; dataset contributors produce source works; institutions frame the display; audiences complete interpretations. These roles are not identical and should not be collapsed into one credit. A clear description of process can make the work more legible: what data were used, who selected them, how the model was tuned, how many outputs were reviewed and what the artist altered afterward.

Hertzmann's historical comparison helps distinguish automation of a step from responsibility for an artwork [1]. A camera automates optical registration but does not decide every creative element of photography. Similarly, a generative model may produce an image while the artist determines a system, a question and a context. This analogy has limits because modern models draw on large collections of human-produced material and can reproduce recognizable conventions. The degree of transformation and the circumstances of training therefore deserve attention.

6 Ethics, culture and working conditions

Training data can include works whose makers did not expect their images to be used for model development. Artists and institutions should ask how datasets were assembled, whether permissions or restrictions apply, and how source communities are credited. These questions differ across jurisdictions and systems; the article does not make a universal legal claim. The practical scholarly expectation is to disclose meaningful provenance and avoid presenting uncertain rights as settled facts.

Representation is another concern. A model trained mainly on well-digitized collections may reproduce the tastes and exclusions of those archives. Labels for style or culture can flatten traditions into surface motifs. UNESCO's expert report on AI and culture identifies opportunities for creative extension alongside concerns about cultural diversity, rights and livelihoods [6]. Responsible work can involve collaboration with affected communities, careful selection of source materials, documentation of omissions and opportunities for artists to contest how their work is represented.

Table 2. Practical review questions. Responses depend on the project and the applicable agreements.

Issue	Question for an art project	Possible response
Dataset provenance	Where did source material originate?	Document sources and permissions
Attribution	Whose contribution is visible?	Credit artists, collaborators and tools
Cultural representation	Which traditions or groups are omitted?	Review corpus and context with communities
Labor	Who labels, moderates or maintains systems?	Make labor and compensation visible
Audience transparency	What part is generated or edited?	Explain process without overclaiming

AI systems also require computational infrastructure, skilled maintenance and access to platforms. These resources are unevenly distributed. A work presented as frictionless creation can obscure costs to workers and institutions. More inclusive practice requires access to tools and training, while preserving space for techniques that do not depend on large proprietary models. Artistic freedom includes both the ability to use AI and the choice to refuse it.

7 Methods for critical evaluation

An evaluation of AI art should consider process and reception rather than asking only whether a viewer can tell generated from human-made images. Relevant questions include whether the method serves the work's theme, what curatorial decisions transformed raw outputs, whether the dataset is appropriate, how the public is informed and how audiences interpret the installation. A technically surprising image may be an effective artwork in one context and an empty demonstration in another.

Researchers can compare iterations, document artist interviews and examine exhibition records. Where a work changes in real time, static reproductions should be supplemented by observations of timing, interaction and spatial design. The ethical assessment should be proportionate: a private sketching aid, a

commercial image system and an installation trained on a cultural archive raise different attribution and consent questions. Evaluation also benefits from dialogue with artists whose works entered a training dataset and from audiences outside the institution presenting the work.

8 Conclusion

AI has become an important material and method within contemporary art, especially in generation, collection analysis and interactive installation. Its significance lies in the relationships it creates among source archives, technical systems, artistic decisions and viewers. The selected cases show different modes of public presentation, from a market event to a museum-scale environment; none represents the full field. Treating AI as an autonomous author obscures the many human choices and contributions on which a work depends. A rigorous practice makes its process intelligible, considers provenance and cultural representation, and judges technical novelty alongside artistic purpose. Future research should attend to artists and communities outside prominent institutions, as well as the long-term conditions under which creative labor is recognized and sustained.

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Article type: narrative review; no original artist survey or quantitative adoption dataset is claimed.