

AI AND ART: A PROVISIONAL TAXONOMY

Linda Fabbri

Università degli Studi di Torino (048tbm396)

Contacts: linda.fabbri@edu.unito.it

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need for greater terminological clarity in the still-fluid field of AI-mediated artistic practices. It proposes a provisional taxonomy intended not as a definitive classification, but as an orienting analytical framework that stabilizes key terms while discarding others that generate conceptual confusion. The discussion contributes to a broader effort to move beyond attributive accounts of artificial intelligence – particularly those that seek to assess whether AI is creative or an artificial author – and instead situates it within the relational dynamics and concrete contexts of its use. Against the widespread notion of “art made by AI,” I argue that this conception is perpetuated by the use of certain terms commonly employed to describe AI-mediated art, which are instead always the result of complex forms of human–machine interaction. To begin with, the concept of “artificial art” is problematized, as it misleadingly suggests a form of non-human authorship in light of an ill-defined and unstable natural/artificial dichotomy. The paper instead adopts “AI art” as an umbrella term, understood not as art produced by artificial intelligence, but as a set of artistic practices in which AI systems play a constitutive role both in the production process and in determining the salient features of the artwork. Particular attention is given to generative AI art, understood here as a specific artistic genre based on artistic production assisted by generative systems, conceived neither as mere tools nor as creative collaborators, but as exhibiting a form of functional autonomy within the production process.

Keywords: Provisional taxonomy, human–machine interactions, generative AI art

ARTE E IA: UNA TASSONOMIA PROVVISORIA

Il presente articolo affronta la necessità di una maggiore chiarezza terminologica nel campo, ancora in evoluzione, delle pratiche artistiche mediate dall'intelligenza artificiale. Propone una tassonomia provvisoria intesa non come classificazione definitiva, ma come quadro analitico di orientamento che stabilizzi i termini chiave, scartando al contempo quelli che generano confusione concettuale. La discussione contribuisce a uno sforzo più ampio volto ad andare oltre le descrizioni attributive dell'intelligenza artificiale – in particolare quelle che cercano di valutare se l'IA sia creativa o se possa essere considerata un autore artificiale – e la colloca invece all'interno delle dinamiche relazionali e dei contesti concreti del suo utilizzo. Contro la nozione diffusa di «arte realizzata dall'IA», sostengo che



tale concezione sia perpetuata dall'uso di determinati termini comunemente impiegati per descrivere l'arte mediata dall'IA, che sono invece sempre il risultato di complesse forme di interazione uomo-macchina. Innanzitutto, viene messo in discussione il concetto di «arte artificiale», poiché suggerisce in modo fuorviante una forma di paternità non umana alla luce di una dicotomia naturale/artificiale mal definita e instabile. Il saggio adotta invece «arte dell'IA» come termine generico, inteso non come arte prodotta dall'intelligenza artificiale, ma come un insieme di pratiche artistiche in cui i sistemi di IA svolgono un ruolo costitutivo sia nel processo di produzione sia nella determinazione delle caratteristiche salienti dell'opera d'arte. Particolare attenzione viene dedicata all'arte generativa basata sull'intelligenza artificiale, intesa in questo contesto come un genere artistico specifico fondato sulla produzione artistica assistita da sistemi generativi, concepiti non come semplici strumenti né come collaboratori creativi, ma come entità che manifestano una forma di autonomia funzionale all'interno del processo produttivo.

Parole chiave: Tassonomia provvisoria, interazioni uomo-macchina, arte generativa basata sull'intelligenza artificiale

Today, the media frequently expose us to the concept of art created *by* artificial intelligence, as if the path toward a General Artificial Intelligence were now paved, on the assumption that what is considered the highest stronghold of our humanity has already been reached: creativity. But is this really the case? Is AI truly creative, and ultimately an “artificial author”? I have strong reasons to believe that these questions, although central to contemporary debate, are ultimately misleading and biased by the idea of AI as a human replica. I claim instead that AI is a new and peculiar kind of entity that must be understood according to its own operational logic and functional architecture, interpreted by situating it within the concrete relational contexts of its use. The artistic domain is one such privileged context, where we can observe different types of interaction with AI that often exceed traditional models. *AI art*, far from being art made solely *by* AI, is today often the result of a complex interaction¹.

I argue that this way of understanding AI as an autonomous creative agent and author is also reinforced by the language used to classify this kind of art. There are still many competing terms in circulation, and a stable terminology has not yet been established. Today, terms such as artificial art, AI art, AI-generated art, generative art, computer art and many others are often used interchangeably. In this paper, I will fix the use of certain terms while abandoning others, in order to avoid recurring misinterpretations. In a field that is still evolving and fluid, this is not an exhaustive or definitive taxonomy; rather, it functions as an orienting and analytical tool, which allows us to establish terminologically some interpretive directions.

In the literature, terms such as *AI art* and *artificial art* are used as synonyms. However, the main problem with the term *artificial art*, as employed for example by Gianmaria Ajani¹, is that it is used without ever being defined, already presupposing the very thesis of AI as a non-human author – a philosophically problematic notion that is almost taken for granted, without any real analysis of the concrete dynamics that led to the creation of works labeled as AI-generated. The term “artificial art” turns out to be synonymous with “artificially created,” but this notion is far from self-evident, and it is worth asking what, precisely, it could mean.

On an instrumental reading, “artificially created” would mean “created by means of an artificial instrument,” itself produced by humans. But this cannot be the intended sense: photography would then count as artificial art, and, more broadly, so would any form of art whatsoever, insofar as all art belongs to the

¹ Authors such as Alice Barale and Claire Anscomb share this position. Barale, A. *The Art of Artificial Intelligence: Philosophical Keywords*. Milan: Jaca Book, 2024. Anscomb, C. “AI: Artistic Collaborator?” *AI & Society* 40, 2025: 3419–3429.

class of *artificialia*. This is clearly not the sense in which the term is used by Ajani – and this is itself telling: beneath a term laden with implications, a philosophically weighty thesis is being smuggled in, that of *artificial authorship*. There is, in fact, a second sense of “artificially created”: namely “not created by a human,” where “human” is tacitly equated with “natural” – in keeping with the Romantic notion of the artist as an extension of nature. This is the sense on which Ajani, along with many others, implicitly relies: if a work is not created by a human, and is therefore not created “naturally,” then it must be created by something artificial – by an AI, which is at once non-natural and non-human. In conclusion, the use of the term *artificial art* is philosophically loaded and, as an umbrella term, effectively excludes a whole range of works that cannot simply be described as AI-generated.

Moreover, beyond its primary meaning of “artificially created,” *artificial* may also be understood as denoting an aesthetic trait or formal quality. On the one hand, the “natural” evokes imperfection, temporality, and finiteness: error, death, but also life and spirit. On the other hand, the “artificial” refers to what is constructed, designed, and potentially optimizable and perfectible. This opposition fuels a dual aesthetic imaginary in which the artificial appears as something lifeless, but also error-free, uniform, and polished. Within this framework, referring to art as *artificial* already situates it within the Romantic dialectic between the natural and the artificial, implicitly attributing to it an aesthetic of cleanliness, smoothness, and homogeneity.

When the term *artificial art* is used, one tends to assume that it possesses an “artificial aesthetic” in this sense – an expression that is also the title of the work published by Arielli and Manovich.² Yet it is Manovich himself, in a recent post, who clarifies this possible misunderstanding. He clarifies that «there is no such thing as ‘AI aesthetics’». There are only different users who have different tastes, and different degrees of visual competence.»³ According to him, the very idea of a single AI aesthetics is an illusion, because generative systems «simulate all media – all ‘styles’ (Midjourney), all ‘minds’ (ChatGPT), all ‘taste’...».⁴

A simple counterexample to this aesthetics of homogeneity is what Hertzmann calls «visual indeterminacy»⁵ which he considers to be «the key feature of most GAN art.» However, while the paper successfully highlights this aspect – vintage by now – it also presents a problems that should be brought to light. I argue that there is a problematic shift in Hertzmann’s argument, one that I take to reflect a broader tendency in the discourse on AI-based art. In his paper, he moves from identifying a stylistic or visual property of *GAN art* to attributing a predisposition to the GAN systems themselves, rather than to their artistic use. Hertzmann correctly acknowledges that visual indeterminacy «works as a description for typical GAN artwork» but then goes on to assert that «GANs seem predisposed to indeterminate, intriguing imagery.»⁶

As a result, his analysis shifts attention onto the system itself and its supposed predispositions and capabilities, abstracting it from the concrete and situated context in which it is used. This contributes to a distorted view of GANs as possessing intrinsic predispositions or a distinctive style of their own, thereby reinforcing the idea of AI as an autonomous creative agent. In doing so, it obscures a far more interesting point: the *predisposition* does not reside in the system itself, but in the artistic choices and creative practices

² L. Manovich & E. Arielli, *Artificial Aesthetics: Generative AI, Art and Visual Media*, 2024, <https://manovich.net/index.php/projects/artificial-aesthetics>

³ L. Manovich, “A new note on AI Aesthetics”, 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/levmanovich_a-new-note-on-ai-aesthetics-5252024-activity-7200136041213665280-MVkg

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ A. Hertzmann, “Visual Indeterminacy in GAN Art.” *Leonardo* 53, no. 4: 424–428. 2020.

⁶ Ibid. p. 425

that guide its use. What emerges is an artistic tendency – or “predisposition” – towards indeterminacy, as well as a fascination with spatial misinterpretations, errors, machine hallucinations, etc. Thus, extending Manovich’s clarification to GAN systems, one may argue that there is no such thing as a «GAN aesthetics»⁷ grounded in indeterminacy as an intrinsic predisposition of the system. Rather, what comes first are the users’ tastes, preferences, and artistic inclinations.

To summarize, for all the reasons outlined above, I believe that the term *artificial art* is too vague and rests on an ill-defined concept that is too historically and conceptually layered to function as a straightforward and neutral category. For this reason, it is more appropriate to adopt *AI art* as an umbrella term. This should be understood not as art created *by* artificial intelligence, but rather as art produced through the *integration* of AI systems; moving beyond the idea – or the narrative – of artificial intelligence as General Artificial Intelligence (GAI). *AI art* refers to artistic practices in which artificial intelligence plays a constitutive role in the artmaking process and in determining the identity of the artwork.

AI systems may assume different forms and play distinct roles in relation to the artwork. In some cases, AI is employed as a *generative system*, in which its generative contributions may play a minor or major role in the artmaking process and in determining some of the essential features of the work. In other cases, AI functions as an *interactive system*. Here – as in interactive art more generally – the interaction itself plays a determining role in shaping the identity of the work. However, this is not a form of interaction in the conventional sense, but rather an interaction mediated by artificial intelligence systems – such as facial recognition, motion capture, virtual reality, etc. In other cases, AI systems may be embedded in robotic agents, giving rise to practices often described as *robot art*. They may also operate as *evolutionary systems*, producing artworks whose identity is continuously transformed over time. These represent only some of the possible configurations among many others, and they depend on the multiple and multifaceted ways in which AI is evolving. I argue that AI-based art has the potential to reveal new possible models of relating to AI, contributing to the imagination of future forms of human–AI interoperation, and also to the development of AI systems.

The systems that currently attract the most attention are generative ones, especially since GANs were brought into the spotlight with the case of the Obvious collective. This type of art is referred to as *generative art*. However, the term has a longer historical background. As Boden highlights «the terms “generative art” and “computer art” have been used in tandem, and more or less interchangeably, since the very earliest days.»⁸ The term *generative* was originally used to refer to art produced through a computer program. However, as Boden observes, not all generative art is produced by a computer. Also, not all computer art is generative. She defines the latter as artworks «generated, at least in part, by some process that is not under the artist’s direct control.»⁹

In short, the term *generative art* refers to artistic practices in which a rule-driven system or impersonal processes take over partially in the art-making process. This process may be physical, biological, psychological, or otherwise non-digital. The artist does not know in advance what the process will result in; in this sense, it is *autonomous*. Therefore, this prerequisite of autonomy is always assessed in relation to the artist’s personal sensibility and is thus inherently intuitive. Instead, computer art refers simply to artworks

⁷ Ibid. p. 424

⁸ M. Boden and E. A. Edmonds, “What Is Generative Art?” *Digital Creativity* 20, no. 1–2 (2009). p. 23

⁹ Ibid. p. 10

produced with computers, intended as simple aids or tools in the artmaking process.¹⁰ Also, the term refers to art that can be produced using *step-by-step* programming or algorithms, which does not introduce intuitively any autonomy on the part of the computer: the final work is fully programmed.

Philip Galanter defines *generative art* more extensively in similar terms:

Generative art refers to any art practice where the artist uses a system, such as a set of natural language rules, a computer program, a machine, or other procedural invention, which is set into motion with some degree of autonomy contributing to or resulting in a completed work of art.¹¹

Both authors define generative art in broad terms, including non-digital practices, provided that the production process involves a degree of system *autonomy*. However, given the vagueness of this prerequisite, the classification of this type of art presents borderline cases.

With the advent of GANs, deep learning, and contemporary generative AI, generative systems exhibit a less clear-cut degree of autonomy than rule-based systems or earlier forms of AI such as Cohen's AARON. This is primarily because the input–output relationship is non-deterministic: a single prompt may yield different outputs, while similar outputs may result from different prompts. As a result, perceived autonomy is stronger.

Therefore, it is not strange that today, the term “generative” has increasingly been used in current discourse to refer specifically to media production based on generative AI systems – such as text-to-image or image-to-image models. It is with an awareness of the standard definition of the term that Lev Manovich states: «I am using *generative* in a more restrictive way to designate AI models and GenAI apps for media generation and editing that use these methods.»¹²

Some authors attempt to narrow the field by using the expression *AI-generated art* to refer exclusively to artworks produced using AI systems. Nevertheless, as in the case of *artificial art*, this formulation intuitively perpetuates the idea that the artwork is generated by the system itself. For this reason, I prefer the term *generative AI art* as a subcategory of both generative art and AI art. In this context, an impersonal and relatively autonomous generative process takes place: that of an AI system producing outputs that contribute to determining some of the salient features of the artwork, or even the work as a whole. These outputs are generated in response to the artist's requests. The artist can then choose whether to edit these outputs or not. Contemporary art has long acknowledged that «authorship in art can be as much about choosing not to make changes to features as it is about choosing these in the first place.»¹³

Speaking of generative AI art, following Claire Anscomb, we must bear in mind that the system's contributions are not creative. Indeed, Anscomb argues:

we ought to frame their contributions to the production of visual artworks in terms of a “generative” contribution and describe the interactions between humans and generative AI systems as “AI-assisted production”.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 29

¹¹ P. Galanter, *What Is Generative Art? Comp. exity Theory as a Context for Art Theory*. New York: Interactive Telecommunications Program, New York University, 2003.

¹² L. Manovich & E. Arielli, *Artificial Aesthetics: Generative AI, Art and Visual Media*. 2024. <http://manovich.net/index.p.p.objects/artificial-aesthetics>, p. 72

¹³ C. Anscomb, “AI: Artistic Collaborator?” *AI & Society* 40: 3419–3429, 2025. p. 3425

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 3420

Generative AI art is therefore a kind of art resulting from forms of *GenAI-mediated fabrication*, which require the presence of a digital interface that enables interaction between the artist and the system. However, to state this does not necessarily mean that generative AI art should be equated with digital art. To clarify this distinction, it is useful to refer to J. J. López. Although his definition of computer art differs from Boden's, it remains relevant for deepening our understanding of these categories.

To begin, López defines digital art as follows: an item is a work of digital art when «(1) it is art, (2) made by a computer, or (3) made for display by a computer, (4) using a common digital code.»¹⁵ Furthermore, he argues that digital art is not a new art form, since works classified as digital typically belong to traditional artistic genres. In other words, «digital art media afford new ways of making works in old art forms – they put old wine in new bottles;»¹⁶ whereas computer art, by contrast, does constitute a new art form.

A way to show that digital art is not a distinct artistic kind is to appeal to the notion of an *appreciative art kind*¹⁷: an art form whose works share a common ontological feature and whose appreciation involves comparison with other works of the same kind. Since digital works belong to many different traditional genres, digital art cannot be considered as an appreciative art kind. By contrast, computer art does constitute a new art form, insofar as all works of this kind exhibit a shared family characteristic: interactivity¹⁸. However, as Sherry Irvin notes in *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*¹⁹, contemporary artworks often rely on sanctioned rules of participation – together with display and conservation rules – that form part of their medium and help determine their identity. Many contemporary artworks, in other words, incorporate interaction as an essential component of their structure. This is precisely why López specifies that the relevant kind of interaction is «computer-based»²⁰ – an interaction mediated by computational systems, and therefore of a particular kind.

If we follow López, we can also draw a clear boundary between computer art and generative AI art. This is because generative AI art does not necessarily require viewer-based interactivity as an essential feature. However, even if we consider López's definition too narrow and adopt Boden's definition of computer art instead, the analysis remains useful for distinguishing generative AI art from digital art. This is because generative AI art, too, typically depends on digital supports, since AI systems generate their visual outputs by computational means, and the resulting artwork is therefore, in most cases, itself a digital object.

To clarify this latter distinction, following López, it is useful to show that generative AI art constitutes an appreciative art kind by identifying one of its characteristic properties. This property is “interactivity” – yet an interactivity located on the side of the artist. I take this to be consistent with the now widely acknowledged view that appreciation in contemporary art is not limited to the work's perceptible surface, but also involves knowledge of its process of production, by conceiving the artwork as an event or performance. Irvin herself argues that, in order to understand a work, we must know which rules are sanctioned by artists. If we do not know that a work was produced in a specific way – for example, in the case of Sigalit Landau's *Barbed Salt Lamps*, if we did not know that it was created by immersing barbed wire in the Dead Sea – the work could not convey the meanings of suffering, conflict, and confinement that it embodies.

¹⁵ D. Lopez, *A Philosop. y of Comp. ter Art*. London; New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 3

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 17

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 35

¹⁹ I. Sherri, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemp. rary Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

²⁰ D. Lopez, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. London; New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 28

I argue that the distinctive characteristic of generative AI art is a form of interaction that cannot be compared either to the engagement an artist has with a simple tool, such as a camera, or to collaboration with another human. Unlike a simple instrument, which is fully subordinated to the artist's intentional control and used in a purely instrumental manner, an AI system is not entirely subject to complete instrumentalization: rather, the artist enters into a new kind of dialogue that has the potential to open up new horizons of meaning²¹. At the same time, as Anscomb argues, AI cannot be reduced to a collaborator, since it lacks the essential features typically identified in the literature, such as the possession of mental states, intentional autonomy, commitment, and the reciprocal exchange of ideas²². The artist is called upon to engage in an exchange with a new kind of entity that is neither a tool nor a collaborator, but must be understood according to its own distinctive operational logic, without being reduced to human faculties or measured against the human as a normative standard, and therefore as a form of *technical alterity*²³.

To conclude, in this paper I have sought to fix certain terminological usages while rejecting others, and to propose an interpretive framework that avoids reducing AI to an isolated entity and instead re-situates it within the relational practices of its use. This framework does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to provide a structured conceptual orientation for understanding the heterogeneous landscape of AI-related artistic practices.

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²¹ A. Barale, *The Art of Artificial Intelligence: Philosophical Keywords*. Milan: Jaca Book, 2024, p. 20

²² C. Anscomb, "AI: Artistic Collaborator?" *AI & Society* 40, 2025: 3419–3429.

²³ J. F. M. Schick, (2022). *On Technical Alterity. Foundations of Science* 27 (2):515-520.