The Negotiated Image:
AI, Art, and the Unsettling of Photography

Sean Sytsma

Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Communication

Department of Communication
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

© Sean Sytsma, Ottawa, Canada, 2026

Abstract

This thesis examines how relevant social groups negotiate the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery within contemporary photographic practice. Guided by the central research question, *How do the intersecting views of artists, photographers, curators, and critics contribute to legitimating photorealistic AI-generated imagery as an authentic art form?,* the study employed a qualitative design consisting of eleven semi-structured interviews with traditional photographers, producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, curators, and a critic. Interpreted through a Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) lens, the findings suggest that artistic legitimacy is negotiated through overlapping understandings of photography, authorship, artistic labour, intentionality, institutional recognition, and broader ethical concerns, rather than any singular technical, aesthetic, or ontological criterion. By focusing on photorealistic AI-generated imagery, this study advances ongoing debates concerning the place of such imagery within photography and contemporary artistic practice by demonstrating how these images complicate conventional distinctions between photography, digital image-making, and computational media.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who agreed to participate in this study and generously shared their time, perspectives, and experiences. I am especially grateful to Stephanie, B., and W. for their constant support and encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor, Daniel J. Paré, for his guidance and feedback throughout this project. Without the contributions of these individuals, this thesis would not have be possible.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction 1
1.2 Creativity and Artistic Legitimacy 5
1.3 Presentation of the Central Research Question 7
1.4 Structure of the Thesis 9
Chapter 2: Literature Review 11
2.1 The Emergence of Photography as an Art Form 11
2.2 Theorizing Artistic Legitimacy 15
2.3 AI-Generated Imagery: Contemporary Perspectives 19
2.4 The Unsettling of Photography in the Age of AI 32
2.5 Research Question 40
2.6 Conclusion 41
Chapter 3: Methodology 42
3.1 SCOT as a Conceptual Framework 42
3.2 Research Design 48
3.3 Methods 53
3.4 Conclusion 59
Chapter 4: Observations on the Ontology and Authorship of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery 60
4.1 Negotiating AI and Photographic Ontology 60
4.2 Authorship and Creative Agency 71
4.3 Conclusion 83
Chapter 5: Observations on the Artistic Legitimacy of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery 84
5.1 Skepticism toward versus Acceptance of AI-Generated Images 84
5.2 Artistic Legitimacy of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery 93
5.3 Conclusion 102
Chapter 6: Conclusion 104
6.1 Revisiting the Research Questions 105
6.1.1 Defining and Evaluating Photorealistic AI-generated Imagery 105
6.1.2 Negotiating Authorship and Creative Agency 107
6.1.3 Polarization, Skepticism, and Reception 108

6.1.4 The Interpretive Flexibility of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery 109
6.2 Key Contribution of the Findings 111
6.3 Limitations 113
6.4 Directions for Future Research 114
6.5 Concluding Remarks 115
References 117
Appendix 1: uOttawa Ethics Certificate 135
Appendix 2: Interview Questions 137

List of Images

Image 1.1 Théâtre D'opéra Spatial 4
Image 2.1 The Two Ways of Life 13
Image 2.2 Three Studies for a Portrait of Henrietta Moraes 24
Image 2.3 The Electrician 33
Image 2.4 Two Sisters in Love 34
Image 2.5 FLAMINGONE 35

List of Tables

Table 3.1 Rationales for Inclusion 51
Table 3.2 Conceptual Categories and Codes 58

Chapter 1: Introduction

From the industrial revolution to the digital age, new technologies have continually reshaped artistic production, sparking resistance and provoking anxieties about authenticity, creativity, and authorship (Juma, 2016). Such anxieties extend beyond technological change, encompassing broader economic, political, and social considerations. Mumford (1964), for example, argued that modern technological systems prioritize efficiency and control over human autonomy, transforming individuals into mere components of a mechanized system. He suggested this shift reflected a broader reorganization of society—one that eliminated human personality from work and which prioritized abstract intelligence and mechanized production over craftsmanship and historical artistic traditions. Thompson (1967/2017) extended this argument by showing how the rise of industrial capitalism, particularly during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, enforced new forms of time-discipline, restructuring the working day, and reorganizing social life. Drawing on such examples as the installation of pneumatic molding machines at the McCormick reaper works in Chicago during the 1880s, the design and implementation of mechanical tomato harvesters in southern California in the 1950s, and the low-clearance overpasses along the Robert Moses Parkway to Jones Beach in Long Island, Winner (1980) likewise argued that technologies are not passive tools and that they, in fact, reflect societal power structures.

Similar concerns about the impact of mechanization on creative labour can be found in the writings of 19th-century art critics such as John Ruskin[1] and William Morris,[2] who warned that industrialization and mass production threatened the integrity of artistic craftsmanship. Ruskin

[1] John Ruskin (1819-1900) was an influential Victorian art critic and social theorist whose writings, including *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), and *Unto This Last* (1860), advanced a moral critique of industrialization and defended craftsmanship against mechanized production.

[2] William Morris (1834-1896) was a British textile designer, writer, and socialist activist associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, whose writings and design practice opposed the effects of industrial capitalism on art and labour as well as advocating for recognizing the social and artistic importance of handcrafted production.

(1853), for example, lamented that mechanized production stripped artisans of their creative agency, reducing them to mere operators of machines. As he put it,

> you must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both (Ruskin, 1853, p. 162).

Morris (1901) likewise argued that industrial capitalism had transformed art into a commodity, severing the connection between the artist and the creative process. For him, "the mechanical workman, who does not note the difference between bright and dull in his colours, but only knows them by numbers, is, while he is at work, no man, but a machine" (Morris, 1901, p. 209). These and similar critiques formed part of a broader resistance to the notion that technology could replace the skill, labour, and intent of human artisans (see, for example, Arnold, 1869; Carlyle, 1843; Yanagi, 1972).

The invention of photography in the early nineteenth century further intensified anxieties among 19th-century cultural critics and institutional decision makers about the encroachment of mechanization into artistic production.[3] For example, in 1857, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, one of the earliest writers to analyze the cultural implications of photography, observed that

> [photography] is made for the present age, in which the desire for art resides in a small minority, but the craving, or rather necessity for cheap, prompt, and correct facts in the public at large. Photography is the purveyor of such knowledge to the world. She is the sworn witness of everything presented to her view... her business is to give evidence of facts, as minutely and as impartially as, to our shame, only an unreasoning machine can give (Eastlake, 1857/1980, p. 93).

For Eastlake, photography prioritized precision and factual representation over creative interpretation. In her view, despite photography excelling as a means of documentation, its very precision in capturing detail deprived it of the "artistic feeling" inherent in true art (Eastlake,

[3] Photography emerged gradually during the early nineteenth century through experiments with light-sensitive materials by inventors including Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot. With the public announcement of the daguerreotype in 1839, photography had emerged as a practical visual medium, laying the foundations for its widespread adoption throughout the nineteenth century (Newhall, 1949).

1857/1980, p. 93; see also Di Bello, 2013).

In 1859, the Salon at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, a premiere 19th-century art exhibition, welcomed photographs for the first time in its history (Shawcross, 2013).[4] In his review of the exhibition, the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1859/2018; see also Raser (2015)), condemned photography as a symptom of cultural decline, dismissing it as "the refuge of every would-be painter, every painter too ill-endowed or too lazy to complete his studies," and declaring it to be "art's most mortal enemy" (p. 20). Echoing Eastlake, he too maintained that, by its very nature, photography lacked the imaginative interpretation and manual skill required of true art, reducing the act of creation to mere technical replication. He feared that photography's rising popularity would corrupt artistic sensibilities, and warned that "if photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon supplant or corrupt it all together" (Baudelaire, 1859/2018, p. 20). For him, photography was to be considered a mechanical process rather than be recognized as a legitimate artistic practice.

Seventy-five years later, in 1935, Walter Benjamin (1935/2010) argued that photography was a symptom of a broader shift in cultural production, and that its capacity for infinite reproducibility altered the perception of art—shifting its cultural, symbolic, and functional significance from ritual-based authenticity toward mass accessibility and exhibition. Describing this process as "the shelling of the object from its hull," (1935/2010, pp. 15–16) Benjamin contended that mechanical reproduction detaches an artwork from its historical and cultural specificity, leading to "the destruction of the aura"—its unique presence in time and space. Nonetheless, at the time Benjamin was writing, photography had come to be more and more

[4] Despite having existed for several decades, photography's appearance within the Salon was marred in controversy about its status as an art form. Consequently, rather than being displayed alongside paintings and sculpture, the photographs were placed in a separate antechamber with its own entrance (Shawcross, 2013).

recognized by photographers, critics, curators, galleries, and museums as a legitimate artistic medium (Newhall, 1949). From its opening in 1929, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, for example, began incorporating photography into its collections and exhibitions (Bull, 2010). However, this process of institutional acceptance was gradual and uneven. London's National Gallery, for example, did not stage its first major photography exhibition until 2012, more than 190 years after the gallery's founding (The National Gallery, 2012).

Image 1.1 Théâtre D'opéra Spatial

Source: Allen, J. (2022) *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial*, AI-generated digital image, https://www.jasonmallen.com/space-opera-theater

More than a century and a half after the Salon of 1859, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) systems capable of generating visually compelling images through automated processes (e.g., ChatGPT, Midjourney, and Adobe Firefly) is eliciting reactions strikingly reminiscent of Baudelaire's criticism of photography. One such example is the reaction

to the decision of judges in the digital art category at the 2022 Colorado State Fair's annual art competition to award first prize to Jason Allen's AI-generated image, *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial* (see Image 1.1) (Roose, 2022). The decision sparked a fierce backlash online, with one Twitter user claiming, "we're watching the death of artistry unfold right before our eyes," and another stating, "this is so gross, I can see how A.I. art can be beneficial, but claiming you're an artist by generating one? Absolutely not" (Roose, 2022, paras. 18–19).

At the centre of this and similar controversies are broader debates concerning the extent to which AI systems can meaningfully participate in creative practice (Carnovalini & Rodà, 2020; Cheng, 2022), who or what should be regarded as the author of AI-generated works (Audry & Ippolito, 2019), and the conditions under which such works may be recognized as artistically legitimate (Mazzone & Elgammal, 2019). Underlying these debates are longstanding assumptions about the relationship between creativity, human intention, and artistic production.

1.2 Creativity and Artistic Legitimacy

Creativity has long occupied a privileged position within Western understandings of artistic production and cultural value, often serving as a means through which artistic contributions are evaluated and recognized (Sawyer & Henriksen, 2023). Consequently, debates surrounding AI-generated imagery frequently centre on whether AI systems can be considered genuinely creative. Some commentators maintain that creativity is a fundamentally human capacity rooted in intentionality, lived experience, and self-reflection (Gangadharbatla, 2022; Hertzmann, 2018). Others contend that AI systems are capable of satisfying at least certain dimensions of creativity, particularly when understood through frameworks emphasizing novelty, value, and the generation of new aesthetic possibilities (Boden, 2004; Cheng, 2022). These competing interpretations have important implications when it comes to matters of authorship. Specifically, if AI systems can

meaningfully contribute to the creation of artistic works, then who or what should be recognized as the author of such works? Hence, the issue of whether AI systems are best understood as collaborators, participants, or tools in the creative process is highly contentious (Cheng, 2022; H. Cohen, 2010; Hertzmann, 2018).

The understanding of authorship also shapes how AI-generated imagery is received and evaluated by audiences. Gangadharbatla (2022), Horton Jr. et al., (2023), Millet et al., (2023), and Grassini and Koivisto (2024) have all shown that audiences frequently evaluate identical images differently depending upon whether they believe the image was created by a human artist or generated using AI. Horton Jr. et al. (2023), for example, report that AI-labelled works are often evaluated less favourably across artistic, economic, and perceptual dimensions than identical works attributed to human creators. Hong and Curran (2019) and Millet et al. (2023) have likewise observed that viewers' evaluations tend to be largely shaped by their pre-existing beliefs about whether AI is capable of creating art. Collectively, the findings emerging from these studies suggest that artistic legitimacy cannot be understood as residing exclusively within the image itself. Rather, evaluations appear to be mediated by viewers assumptions regarding authorship and the interpretive frameworks through which they encounter and make sense of artistic works.

Although debates concerning creativity, authorship, and artistic legitimacy apply to AI-generated imagery writ large, photorealistic AI-generated imagery presents additional complexity because of its contested ontological status. Unlike many forms of AI-generated output, photorealistic AI-generated images convincingly emulate the visual appearance of photography, often making them difficult to distinguish from traditional photographs (Wasielewski, 2024). As a result, viewers may interpret the same image in fundamentally different ways: as a photograph, a form of digital art, a computational image, or an entirely distinct medium.

At the heart of these differing interpretations are two fundamental questions:

1. *What makes a photograph a photograph?*
2. *Is photography defined primarily by appearance and cultural use, or by the material and technical processes through which images are produced?*

In other words, is a photograph defined by what it is, or by how it comes into being?[5] The answers to these unresolved questions have important implications for how photorealistic AI-generated imagery is understood, interpreted, and ultimately situated within contemporary artistic practice.

1.3 Presentation of the Central Research Question

Questions surrounding photorealistic AI-generated imagery extend well beyond its visual appearance, encompassing broader issues pertaining to authorship, artistic legitimacy, cultural meaning, ontology, and the conditions under which emerging visual media come to be recognized as authentic forms of artistic practice. Research focusing on computer-generated and, more recently, AI-assisted art has a long history, dating back to the early 1950s (see, for example, Boden, 1994; Cohen, 1981; Laposky, 1969; Nake, 1971). However, research devoted to the ontological and artistic implications of photorealistic AI-generated imagery has, to date, received comparatively limited attention. As Wasielewski (2024) observes, existing scholarship has tended to predominantly focus on such issues as deepfakes, misinformation, and algorithmic manipulation. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how questions of how artistic value and artistic legitimacy are negotiated among the artists, photographers, curators, critics, and other cultural actors who collectively shape the production, exhibition, interpretation, and legitimation of photographic and visual art.

[5] As Bolton (1989) notes, "the intrinsic and universal properties of the photograph have never been established with complete satisfaction" (p. xi). For example, whereas Flusser (1983) emphasizes the role of technological apparatuses in shaping photographic images, describing the camera as a "black box" that structures the possibilities of photographic production, Tagg (1988) rejects the notion that photography possesses a singular essence, arguing instead that "photography as such has no identity" (p. 63).

Understanding these processes of social negotiation helps illuminate how the classification of photorealistic AI-generated imagery as photography, digital art, or a distinctive visual medium in its own right may influence how artists and photographers engage with the technology, as well as how galleries, museums, competitions, educational institutions, and other cultural organizations evaluate and legitimize such work.

In this thesis, I investigate these negotiation processes using Pinch and Bijker's (1984) Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) framework as a lens for investigating how photorealistic AI-generated imagery is acquiring meaning among a small sample of artists, photographers, curators, and critics. The SCOT framework is a suitable tool for this undertaking precisely because it is anchored in the notion that technologies are characterized by interpretive flexibility, with different social groups assigning different meanings, purposes, or values to the same technological artefact. Over time, some interpretations gain wider acceptance than others as stakeholders negotiate the meaning, purpose, and significance of the technology which, in turn, contributes to a gradual narrowing of interpretive flexibility and the stabilizing of particular understandings and uses.

Although originally developed to examine the social shaping of technological artifacts such as the bicycle (Pinch & Bijker, 1984), missile systems (MacKenzie, 1989), and medical imaging (Yoxen, 1989), Bijker (1995) emphasizes the flexibility and adaptability of the SCOT framework for new uses. More recently, the SCOT framework has been used to examine how meaning is negotiated around media technologies and cultural practices. For example, Vasudevan (2019)

combined the SCOT framework with Bourdieu's (1984) field theory[6] to investigate how video journalists reinterpreted the digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera as a legitimate tool for news production. Kwok and Koh (2021) likewise used SCOT as a lens to examine how the adversarial purposes of deepfakes might be redressed, and Gupta et al. (2024) used SCOT to investigate management educators' perspectives about the adoption of generative AI in education.

Heeding Bijker's (1995) assertion about the adaptability of the SCOT framework for new uses, the central research question guiding this thesis is: *How do the intersecting views of artists, photographers, curators, and critics contribute to legitimating photorealistic AI-generated imagery as an authentic art form?*

In seeking to investigate this question, the study is informed by three sub-questions:

1. *How do different stakeholders define or describe photorealistic AI-generated images, and what criteria do they use to evaluate its artistic legitimacy?*
2. *In what ways do different stakeholders perceive AI tools as enhancing or undermining creative authorship?*
3. *What forms of skepticism or acceptance have stakeholders encountered within their professional or artistic communities when engaging with such images—whether by creating, exhibiting, curating, or evaluating such work?*

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In this first introductory chapter, I have outlined the broader context within which the discussion in subsequent chapters is situated as well as the research questions guiding my investigation.

In Chapter 2, I trace the historical legitimation of photography from a contested mechanical medium to an accepted artistic practice and then examine the social and theoretical foundations of

[6] Field theory conceptualizes cultural production as occurring within relatively autonomous social fields in which artists, curators, critics, audiences, and other social actors compete to define legitimate forms of artistic practice. Within this framework, legitimacy is understood as the product of ongoing social negotiation rather than an intrinsic quality of the artwork itself (see Section 2.2).

authorship and artistic legitimacy. From there, I outline contemporary debates surrounding AI-generated imagery, with particular attention given to how perceptions of creativity and agency shape evaluations of AI-generated images, the contested ontological status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, and its relationship to traditional photography.

Building on this historical and theoretical foundation, the discussion in Chapter 3 sets out the conceptual framework and methodological approach guiding the empirical components of my study. Here, the discussion centres on the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) framework and its relevance for examining how the meaning and artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery are socially negotiated among relevant social groups. The second part the discussion sets out details about the strategy used to recruit participants and the development of my interview protocol.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I present the findings from the semi-structured interviews I conducted with artists, photographers, curators, and a critic. In Chapter 4 I present the participants' understandings of the ontological status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery and the implications of these understandings for authorship. Chapter 5 reports on the participants' perceptions of AI-generated imagery.

In the sixth and concluding chapter, I respond to the research questions that guided the study, discuss the broader theoretical and scholarly contributions of the findings emerging from my project, and reflect upon the study's limitations and implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The discussion in this chapter sets out the conceptual and theoretical foundations for this thesis. The chapter is divided into six sections. The first section examines the historical legitimation of photography, tracing its emergence from a contested mechanical medium to an accepted artistic practice. In the second section, I examine the social and theoretical foundations of authorship and artistic legitimacy. Section three centres on contemporary debates surrounding AI-generated imagery, with particular attention given to how perceptions of artistic creativity and agency shape viewer's evaluations of the merit and value of such images. In section four, I discuss the issue of photographic manipulation in relation to current disputes over the ontological status of photorealistic AI-generated images and their relationship to traditional photography. In section five I provide a synthesis of the preceding discussion and present the central research question guiding this thesis. The sixth section concludes the discussion.

2.1 The Emergence of Photography as an Art Form

In his account of the history of photography, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) argues that photography's artistic legitimacy has varied since its invention. He suggests that it initially occupied an ambiguous space between *fully consecrated arts*, such as painting and sculpture, and lower cultural forms, such as casual snapshots; a position he labels, 'middle-brow art.' Whereas critics like Eastlake (1857/1980) viewed photography's evidentiary power as intrinsic to the medium, Bourdieu (1990) posits that its reputation for truthfulness merely stemmed from the role society had ascribed to it. Bull (2013) aptly summarizes this view in stating, "photography is seen to provide convincing evidence because it has always been used to do so" (p. 53).

Bourdieu (1990) further contends that photography has long been burdened by the misconception that it requires little artistic skill. The enduring myth, he argues, is that photography

requires little more than mechanical operation—that the photographer need only point the camera and press the shutter to achieve the desired results. Quoting Hegel's (1821/1949) lament about people judging philosophy without studying it, Bourdieu (1990) writes of photography, "'no other art or science is subjected to this last degree of scorn, to the supposition that we are masters of it without ado'" (p. 5). Historical evidence, however, suggests that this perception was increasingly challenged during the nineteenth century. As early as 1854, a distinction between photography as a mechanical process and photography as a cultivated artistic practice had already begun to emerge. In *The Illustrated Magazine of Art* (1854), for example, one contributor distinguished between "the mechanical photographer" and "the artistic photographer," arguing:

> the artistic photographer will select the hour for taking his view when the building is most picturesque; the mechanical photographer will take his view at any hour indifferently; but the resulting photograph will loudly proclaim by which of the two it was taken (p. 1).

By the 1860s, others were also seeking to redefine photography as something other than mere documentation. For instance, in 1861, Cornelius Jabez Hughes, a renowned portrait photographer and writer in Victorian England asked:

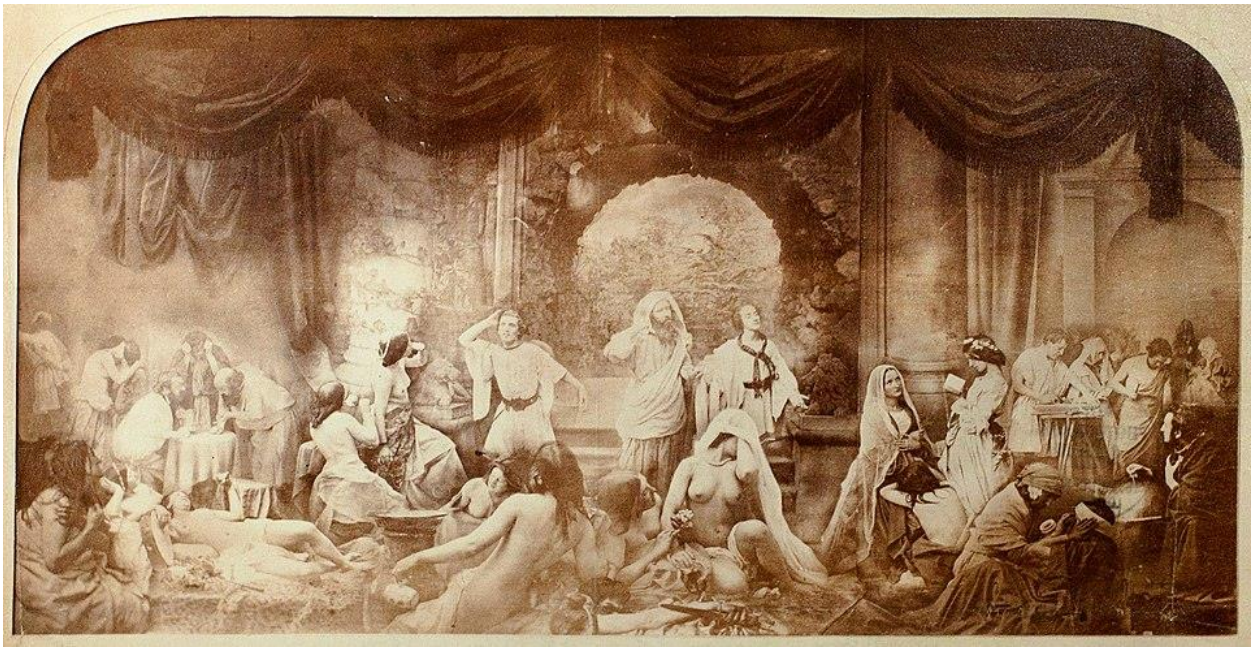
> hitherto photography has been principally content with representing Truth. Can its sphere not be enlarged? And may it not aspire to delineate Beauty, too? (Cornelius Jabez Hughs cited in Newhall, 1949, p. 71).

Over the next three decades, efforts to establish photography as an artistic medium became increasingly organized and by the 1890s, these efforts had found expression in the Pictorialist movement, whose practitioners sought to elevate photography's status as an art form through elaborately staged tableaux inspired by Academic painting,[7] and creating allegorical scenes (Bull,

[7] The term 'academic painting' refers to artistic production shaped by European art academies from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. It is characterized by strict formal conventions and an emphasis on technical mastery of colour, composition, and the controlled use of light and shadow. See, Kari (2025).

2010). To this end, Pictorialist compositions were meticulously arranged to echo the narrative and symbolic traditions of the fine arts, with models posed as if sitting for a painter, and often imbued with dramatic or sentimental narratives. The images were frequently produced through elaborate darkroom techniques, including masking and the combination of multiple negatives into a single print. A notable example is Swedish photographer Oscar G. Rejlander's *The Two Ways of Life* (1857) (see Image 2.1) which was constructed from thirty separate negatives and exhibited in 1857 at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition. Queen Victoria, herself an amateur photographer, subsequently purchased the image (Newhall, 1949).

Image 2.1 The Two Ways of Life



Source: Rejlander, O. G. (1857). *Two Ways of Life* [Photograph]. The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Media Museum, Bradford, United Kingdom. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oscar-gustave-rejlander_two_ways_of_life_(HR,_sepia).jpg

Another prominent photographer of this period was Adam Salomon, a sculptor-turned-photographer who sought to elevate photography to the level of painting by using strong side lighting and often draping his sitters in fabric to create a deliberately painterly effect (Museum of Modern Art, 1937). In response to Salomon's work, and only one year after dismissing

photography as “that chance invention which will never be an art—only a plagiarism of nature,” critic Alphonse de Lamartine reversed his position, writing:

After admiring the marvelous portraits caught in a burst of sunlight by Adam Salomon, the sentimental sculptor who has given up painting, we no longer claim that photography is a trade—it is an art, it is more than an art, it is a solar phenomenon, where the artist collaborates with the sun (as cited in Museum of Modern Art, 1937, p. 53). As Sontag (1977) observes, photography’s early relationship with painting was characterized by both imitation and competition, as photographers initially adopted established artistic conventions while seeking recognition for the medium’s distinctive expressive possibilities. Over time, however, photography developed its own aesthetic practices that challenged traditional understandings of artistic representation. Indeed, Sontag describes photographic seeing as an ability to discover beauty in subjects previously overlooked or considered too ordinary for artistic attention.

By the turn of the 20th century, Pictorialism gave way to modernist ‘straight’ photography, which emphasized the inherent technological qualities of the camera such as sharp focus and precise detail rather than painterly imitation. Led by figures such as Alfred Stieglitz, this avant-garde movement was promoted through glossy photo magazines and art galleries such as the 291, a gallery in Midtown Manhattan (1905-1917), where photographs were exhibited alongside paintings and drawings by established artists such as Picasso (Bull, 2010). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, figures such as László Moholy-Nagy, Alexander Rodchenko, and Man Ray further experimented with techniques such as photograms, photomontage, and unconventional perspectives to challenge inherited visual habits (Phillips, 1989).

This experimental period reached its apex with the 1929 *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart, Germany, which brought together leading international photographers from Europe, the

United States, and the Soviet Union (Phillips, 1989). That same year, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) opened in New York and, from its inception, collected photography. According to Bull (2010), guided by the influence of its founding director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., the curatorial work of Beaumont Newhall, and the modernist vision of Alfred Stieglitz, the MoMa played a decisive role in securing photography's place within modern art.

This necessarily brief, selective history points to photography's artistic legitimacy having been shaped over time by the shifting critical discourses of photographers, artists, curators, and critics, who continually redefined the boundaries of the medium and secured its place within the cultural hierarchy of the arts. What began in the mid-19th century as disputes over whether photography was capable of artistic expression, culminated, by the 1930s, in its recognition within major art institutions in Europe and North America as an accepted and celebrated component of modern art.

2.2 Theorizing Artistic Legitimacy

The historical debates over the status of photography as 'art' prompt deeper reflection about how artistic legitimacy is constructed, particularly in terms of who or what is recognized as an artist and the conditions under which their work gains cultural acceptance as art. Underlying these debates are broader questions concerning the nature of authorship and the relationship between creators, creative works, and their interpretation. It is within this context that Roland Barthes (1967/1977) famously claimed that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (p. 148). In rejecting the primacy of authorial intention, Barthes sought to dispel the myth of the lone writer/genius and shift the burden of interpretation to the reader. Meaning, he argued, does not reside in the mind of the author, but emerges through the reader's encounter with the text (Barthes, 1967/1977; Mills & Barlow, 2009).

Stuart Hall (1973/2021) likewise maintained that meaning is constructed through a social process of encoding and decoding, wherein both the production and interpretation of texts are shaped by cultural norms, values, and experiences. In Hall's view, audiences do not passively absorb these texts but instead produce dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings based on their unique socio-cultural positions. For him the meaning and cultural value of creative works are not fixed by their creators, they emerge through ongoing processes of social negotiation.

Michel Foucault (1979) similarly argued that authorship functions as a discursive construct that shapes the ways in which "works"[8] are classified, attributed, and evaluated. The author-function, as he termed it, regulates both the recognition of individuals as authors and the classification of texts as meaningful, thereby shaping which cultural expressions are deemed legitimate. He illustrated this argument using the example of Nietzsche's notebooks, asking whether margin notations, personal reminders, or even a laundry bill should be included in the philosopher's 'complete works.' Foucault (1979) argued that because the boundaries of a work are often unclear, the distinctions between legitimate works and drafts or fragments depend upon interpretive frameworks shaped by historical, theological, and scholarly traditions. Without such frameworks, he averred, the status of a work remains uncertain, and the idea of authorship loses its ability to classify discourse. It is in this sense that artistic authorship functions as a symbolic position that structures how a work's meaning and value are understood. Artistic legitimacy can likewise be understood as the social process through which authorship comes to be recognized and valued.

Like Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) also argued that artistic legitimacy is shaped by social judgement and institutional endorsement. Through practices of curation, critical discourse,

[8] While Foucault (1979) focuses primarily on works of discourse such as books and texts, subsequent scholarship has extended the author-function to visual practices, including photography. See, for example, Eckel (2018).

and the selection of works for institutional collections, networks of cultural authorities operating within what Bourdieu calls 'fields of cultural production' shape what is seen as art, as well as how it is interpreted, evaluated, and historically situated. As he sees it, each autonomous field, such as literary, academic, or visual art, is shaped by its own internal hierarchy of power, structured through the distribution of symbolic capital. These historically contingent arrangements determine what is valued, who holds authority, and how legitimacy is produced within each field (Bourdieu, 1984; Symonds, 2020).

Bourdieu (1995) also acknowledges artists themselves as active, though structurally constrained, agents who occupy positions that are meaningful only in relation to the internal logic and historical configuration of their respective fields. Artists' ability to shape artistic value, as Bourdieu sees it, depends on originality or innovation, the artist's position within the field, and the field's readiness to recognize their contribution as legitimate. Bourdieu likens this structure to a loosely codified game in which artists make strategic moves amid ongoing struggles over the rules that define the game. Success, then, often depends on one's command of the game's implicit codes, which include the forms of knowledge, taste, and aesthetic sensibility acquired through education and socialization. These dispositions, he continues, enable certain individuals and groups to recognize and engage with what is defined as 'legitimate' art.

At the same time, cultural dispositions are not merely tools for navigating the field. They also serve to naturalize and reinforce broader social hierarchies. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (p. 7). In other words, aesthetic preferences serve to reproduce class divisions by presenting socially conditioned tastes as natural or universal. Within the field of cultural production then, artistic legitimacy becomes a form of symbolic power. Agents

compete over the authority to classify artistic practices, asserting the ability to define, elevate, and naturalize certain artistic expressions while excluding or devaluing others (Symonds, 2020).

Becker (1982), on the other hand, offers a more collaborative and process-oriented account of artistic legitimation that focuses on the ways in which certain practices come to be treated within specific social contexts as art. Like Barthes, he too argues that art is not the result of solitary genius, but the outcome of collective activity involving networks of artists, curators, critics, audiences, and others in what he calls 'art worlds.' In Becker's (1982) framing, art worlds "consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art" (p. 34). These worlds, he opines, may consist of as few as one person to as many contributors as are needed to bring a work into being.

Yet, not all participants exert equal influence. As Becker (1982) notes, "some people are commonly seen by many or most interested parties as more entitled to speak on behalf of the art world than others," with this entitlement coming from being "recognized by the other participants […] as the people entitled to do that" (p. 151). Building on this idea, he describes the process of legitimation as the "activity of response and appreciation" and suggests that a work becomes art both through its creation and through its reception. As he puts it, someone must "have an intellectual reaction to it, 'see something in it,' appreciate it" for it to be socially acknowledged as art (Becker, 1982, p. 4). Seen from this perspective, artists are not isolated visionaries but participants in a broader ecology of meaning-making and, as such, each contributor helps shape the conditions under which works are produced, interpreted, and valued.[9]

Becker's perspective both contrasts with and compliments Bourdieu's more structurally

[9] van Maanen (2009) contends that the circularity in Becker's framework—that art is what art worlds produce, and art worlds are those that produce art—is deliberate. That is, instead of defining art philosophically, Becker opts to direct attention to how communities practically determine what counts as art through cooperative activity and shared conventions.

oriented account of how artistic legitimacy is produced. Whereas Bourdieu theorizes artistic legitimacy as emerging from the distribution of symbolic capital and the hierarchal dynamics of the field of cultural production, Becker adopts a symbolic interactionist (SI) lens, emphasizing cooperation and the collective nature of artistic production (van Maanen, 2009). Within Becker's SI model, artists may appear to exert greater influence over artistic norms than Bourdieu's fields of cultural production framework suggests. However, and as van Maanen (2009) notes, the levels of influence exerted by artists is contingent upon their work being taken up and sustained by the broader network of collaborators.

In sum, and for the purposes of this thesis, whether shaped by the accumulation of symbolic capital, institutional endorsement, or collective practices of recognition and appreciation, artistic legitimacy is understood as the contingent outcome of ongoing social interactions through which communities negotiate what counts as art, who is recognised as an artist, and under what conditions this recognition is granted. It is through these ongoing social negotiations that meaning and value come to be recognized and conferred across shifting cultural, historical, and technological contexts.

2.3 AI-Generated Imagery: Contemporary Perspectives

Today, debates about the artistic legitimacy of imagery created wholly or in part by artificial intelligence are unfolding across scholarly and public discourses (Hong & Curran, 2019; Marburger, 2024). Machine learning[10] systems, including Generative Adversarial Networks

[10] Machine learning models are computer systems that learn patterns from data and use them to make predictions or generate outputs, without being explicitly programmed for specific tasks See, Kulkarni et al., (2023).

(GANs)[11] and diffusion models,[12] have enabled the creation of highly sophisticated AI-generated images, ranging from digital illustration to conceptual design (Manu, 2024). As these tools become increasingly accessible and their outputs ever more convincing, they, like early photography, challenge long-standing assumptions about authorship, intention, and originality. These tensions can be seen in such controversies as the Brisbane Portrait Prize's 2024 decision to accept AI-assisted entries, which provoked criticism from traditional artists and media scholars concerned about copyright, the unclear threshold for human authorship, and whether AI-generated works can fairly compete with traditional art forms (Bledsoe, 2024; Taylor, 2024). Likewise, recent media coverage, including in *The Washington Post, The New York Times,* and *The Globe and Mail,* has highlighted growing concerns that generative AI may undermine both the economic and cultural value of creative work, prompting renewed debate about the nature and value of artistic practice (Burnett & Taplin, 2023; Roose, 2022; Vu, 2025). Underlying these apprehensions are broader questions concerning the role of creativity and human intention in artistic practice.

Creativity occupies one of the highest levels of human performance, serving as a driving force behind individual expression, social progress, and cultural innovation (Sawyer & Henriksen, 2023). As Gangadharbatla (2022) puts it, "creativity is a quintessential human endeavor… [and] how we humans set ourselves apart from machines that largely work on algorithms and patterns" (p. 126). The concept of creativity as a uniquely human enterprise is central to debates in the field of Computational Creativity (CC), an interdisciplinary domain at the intersection of artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology, philosophy, and the arts that is concerned with the theory of

[11] A Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) is a type of machine learning model composed of two neural networks: a generator that creates synthetic images and a discriminator that learns to detect fakes, enabling the system to produce highly realistic visuals. See, Mao & Li (2021).

[12] A diffusion model is a form of generative AI that produces realistic images by reversing a step-by-step noising process, gradually transforming random noise into coherent visual content See, Kulkarni et al., (2023).

creativity and evaluating how machines perform in implementing creative ideas (Sundararajan, 2014). One of the pioneering figures in this domain was Harold Cohen, an artist and computer scientist who began developing AI-based art systems in the late 1960s (Audry & Ippolito, 2019). Cohen went on to create AARON, a computer program capable of autonomously generating paintings and drawings, which he continued to refine over several decades—well before the concept of AI-generated imagery became part of mainstream cultural discourse (Audry & Ippolito, 2019).

A central theme in Cohen's work with AARON was the role of unpredictability in the creative process (Cohen, 1981).[13] As he saw it, unpredictability is an essential creative resource that introduces variation and 'counter-purposive' elements that can extend an artist's conceptual domain and enable new forms of expression. He further maintained that computer systems like AARON were capable of displaying unpredictable behaviour by drawing on variation within their computational systems and recombining elements in novel and unexpected ways. He recognised, however, that such unpredictability is ultimately constrained by the parameters of human design and lacks purposive intent on the part of the machine (Cohen, 1981).[14]

For example, AARON's code included specific rules, such as prohibiting the colouring of faces green or purple, from which the system could not deviate (Buchanan, 2001). These hard-coded limits highlight the gap between AARON's pre-programmed variations and genuine creative freedom. In line with this view, Marburger (2024) argues that while unpredictability is essential to artistic creativity, AI systems can only imitate it through "calculated randomness" (p.

[13] According to Margaret Boden (2004), a leading researcher in the field of CC, creativity is inherently unpredictable, involving the generation of ideas that are "new, surprising, and valuable" (p. 16) in ways that defy straightforward prediction or pre-planning.

[14] Despite his acknowledging that AARON was capable of producing surprising and varied artistic outputs, Cohen (2002) remained cautious about calling such outputs truly creative given the system's lack of reflective awareness.

4). What distinguishes human creativity, he contends, is the ability to recognize and respond to surprising results within one's own process. By contrast, he notes,

> the programs are not surprised by themselves. And they will never be surprised by something unexpected, simply because they lack the ability to critically reflect themselves consciously (Marburger, 2024, p. 5).

He suggests that this limitation marks the divide between artificial intelligence and what he calls, 'artistic intelligence,' or the self-awareness that allows human creators to transform unexpected artistic outputs into meaningful expression.

This position echoes earlier claims by Hertzmann (2018) who argued, "[t]here is no plausible sense in which current systems reflect 'true' artificial intelligence: there is always a human behind the artwork" (p. 13). As he put it, "computers do not create art, people using computers create art" (Hertzmann, 2018, p. 2). From this perspective, the artist's contribution lies not merely in initiating the creative process, but in interpreting, responding to, and even being surprised by the unpredictable possibilities that arise through it.

In traditional artforms, unpredictability is often associated with aleatoricism (Marburger, 2024), a term first introduced by Meyer-Eppler (1957) to describe controlled randomness in experimental music. As Marburger (2024) points out, from Leonardo da Vinci's imaginative interpretations of stains and cloud formations to the Dadaists' experiments with chance, artists have long employed aleatoric methods to generate unforeseen outcomes and stimulate creative insights. In these instances, randomness functions as a source of surprise and inspiration, spurring the artist through creative friction and intuitive response. By contrast, when machines behave randomly, it often stems from programming errors or hardware malfunctions rather than a deliberate attempt to originate new ideas (Bringsjord et al., 2001). In the context of generative AI, such unintended and often strange outputs are commonly described as 'hallucinations,' a term that

has gained such cultural prominence that the *Cambridge Dictionary* named it its Word of the Year for 2023 (Cambridge, 2023). What might seem like surprise and coincidence in AI outputs, then, is merely the appearance of randomness. As Marburger (2024) puts it,

> these coincidences are not real coincidences. On an ontological level, they are simulations of coincidences (p. 5).

This perspective reflects the views of Ada Lovelace, an early computer theorist and programmer who, in the 1840s, argued that creativity is fundamentally tied to originality and that computers lack the capacity to originate ideas (Bringsjord et al., 2001; Lovelace & Menabrea, 1843/2015). In her commentary about Babbage's Analytical Engine—a conceptual design for a general-purpose mechanical computer—she wrote,

> the Analytical Engine has no pretensions whatever to originate anything. It can do whatever we know how to order it to perform. It can follow analysis; but it has no power of anticipating any analytical relations or truths (Lovelace & Menabrea, 1843/2015, p. 94).

This limitation is further illustrated by John Searle's (1980) Chinese Room argument, which Carnovalini and Rodà (2020) paraphrase as follows:

> [Searle] imagines [a monolingual English speaker] to be locked inside a closed room, that can accept questions and give answers written on paper, either in English or in Chinese. For the English questions, he would answer normally using his own intelligence, while for the Chinese ones he would use a special script telling him, for any combination of Chinese symbols that he sees, what symbols to write as answer. Supposedly, the English answers would be as good as the Chinese ones to the eyes of the people outside the room (if the Chinese script is good enough), but the person inside would not gain any knowledge of Chinese in this way. (p. 5)

The critiques advanced by Lovelace and Searle centre on the distinction between the ability to generate outputs without understanding or original thought and the capacity for genuine intentional expression. Just as Searle's Chinese Room produces appropriate responses without any understanding of the Chinese language, AI systems may generate outputs that resemble artistic expression without engaging the experiential and reflexive dimensions often regarded as essential

to genuine acts of creativity. As Hertzmann (2018) puts it, "they [AI systems] are like tourists in a foreign country that can repeat and combine phrases from the phrasebook, but not truly understand the foreign language or culture" (p. 25).

Mazzone and Elgammal (2019) further advance this line of critique by emphasizing the role of human intentionality in producing artworks with interpretive depth and meaning. These authors used a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) trained on historical portraiture to generate original images. They found the resulting images to be visually compelling but often distorted and grotesque, prompting comparisons with Francis Bacon's (1963) *Three Studies for a Portrait of Henrietta Moraes* (see Image 2.2).

Image 2.2 Three Studies for a Portrait of Henrietta Moraes

Source: Bacon, F. (1963) *Three Studies for a Portrait of Henrietta Moraes*. The Estate of Francis Bacon, https://www.francis-bacon.com/artworks/paintings/three-studies-portrait-henrietta-moraes

Describing the AI-generated portraits as "novel, surprising, and puzzling," they stress that the distortions were not deliberate expressions, but artefacts from the model's computational limitations (Mazzone & Elgammal, 2019, p. 2).[15] By contrast, Bacon's grotesque forms can be

[15] In their account of why the unintended distortions in the AI-generated portraits hold aesthetic appeal, Mazzone and Elgammal draw on Berlyne's (1971) foundational research in the psychology of aesthetics, which identified "novelty, surprisingness, complexity, ambiguity, and puzzlingness" (p. 2) as key properties of aesthetically engaging stimuli.

interpreted as intentional, symbolically rich commentaries about the human condition (Pickstone, 1998). For Mazzone and Elgammal, the absence of intent in the AI-generated portraits disqualifies the portraits from achieving the same interpretive depth as Bacon's work, further underscoring the centrality of human agency and intentionality in artistic creation.

In seeking to conceptualize creativity in AI-generated works, Carnovalini and Rodà (2020) and Cheng (2022), draw on Margaret Boden's (1994, 2004) creativity framework which emphasizes novelty (i.e., originality or deviation from existing forms) and value (i.e., usefulness, coherence, or contextual appropriateness) as core dimensions of creativity. Carnovalini and Rodà (2020) opine that novelty alone is insufficient for a work to be considered genuinely creative. In their view, being genuinely creative requires that a work contribute meaningful value to its domain. In illustrating this point, they assert that although a fifteen-wheeled car would be novel, it lacks the value necessary to be considered truly creative because it offers little practical benefit over existing designs.

What constitutes value is itself shaped by the expectations of a particular community. In the context of art worlds, Becker (1982) describes these as 'conventions,' or the shared expectations, practices, and interpretive frameworks that shape how artworks are produced, interpreted, and evaluated within a given context. It is these taken-for-granted agreements about materials, methods, forms, styles, and expectations that allow artists and their collaborators to coordinate their actions smoothly and efficiently without having to negotiate everything anew each time. For example, Becker (1982) points out that the notes of a musical scale are themselves conventional; while alternative systems are possible, a shared tonal framework enables composers, performers, and audiences to communicate and make sense of musical works.

In addition to identifying novelty and value as core dimensions of creativity, Boden (1994,

2004) further distinguishes between three modes of creativity:

1. combinational (novel combinations of familiar ideas);
2. exploratory (generation of new ideas within an existing style or conceptual space); and
3. transformational (changes to the rules or constraints that define the space itself).

Contrary to suggestions that combinational creativity is the easiest for machines (e.g., assuming AI-generated outputs are based on recombining images from its training data), Boden (2009) argues that combinational creativity is the most difficult for AI to produce precisely because of the challenges associated with "getting the computer to generate and prune these combinations in such a way that most, or even many, of them are interesting—that is, valuable" (p. 25).

Cheng (2022) maintains that AI systems exhibit aspects of all three forms of Boden's (2004) framework—combinational, exploratory,[16] and transformational creativity. He suggests that combinational creativity emerges when AI systems blend existing motifs or stylistic elements from their training data into new and unfamiliar combinations, noting that these combinations should be "value added and new" (Cheng, 2022, p. 4). He likewise maintains that exploratory creativity emerges when AI systems modify existing styles to produce novel variations within the constraints of the existing style. Cheng (2022) further suggests that AI may approach transformational creativity when it changes the rules of an existing style, producing images that depart from established patterns and introduce possibilities that were previously unimaginable. In line with this view, Liu (2023) suggests that in surfacing unexpected combinations and possibilities, AI systems mirror aspects of human creative intuition and offer new material for artists to interpret, refine, or redirect within their own aesthetic frameworks, ultimately allowing for the possibility of forms of creativity that may, in certain contexts, exceed what human artists

[16] Cheng (2022) uses the term 'explanatory' rather than Boden's (2009) 'exploratory,' without offering clarification. Nonetheless, his description aligns with Boden's definition.

alone can achieve.

Taken together, the above perspectives suggest a relational and inclusive model of creative agency that recognizes AI systems as capable of contributing meaningfully to creative practice. As Carnovalini and Rodà (2020) observe, creativity is inherently multi-faceted, context-dependent, and resistant to strict formalization; attempts to define it through static criteria therefore risk overlooking the interpretive, social, and experiential dimensions through which creative works acquire meaning. Accordingly, rather than asking whether AI systems are themselves creative, they emphasize the ways in which computational systems can augment and extend human creativity. In their view, artists may be less concerned with whether AI and other computer systems are themselves creative than with how these systems can support creative practice by generating ideas, facilitating experimentation, and expanding the range of aesthetic possibilities available to the artist. From this perspective, AI is better understood as a creative aid with the potential to broaden opportunities for exploration while leaving human intention, judgement, and artistic direction at the centre of the creative process. Seen in this light, AI systems are tools for what Cohen (2000, p. 54) describes as "imagination amplification."

Both Liu (2023) and Marburger (2024) echo this position in pointing out that AI/artist interactions enable artists to both engage with AI systems as generative partners that expand the scope of creative exploration and to embrace the affordances of these systems to experiment, innovate, and challenge conventional creative boundaries. This perspective also resonates with that of Cohen (2010), who, near the end of his life and reflecting upon his decades-long collaboration with AARON, described creative agency as

> lay[ing] in neither the programmer alone nor in the program alone, but in the dialog between program and programmer; a dialog resting upon the special and particularly intimate relationship that had grown up between us over the years (p. 9).

Despite computational creativity research demonstrating ways in which AI systems can engage in combinational, exploratory, or even transformational forms of creativity, audiences often continue to judge AI generated outputs through frameworks that privilege human intentionality and authorship. According to Millet et al. (2023), the persistence of this disconnect reflects anthropocentric assumptions that frame creativity as both a uniquely human trait and a defining feature of human identity. These authors contend that the anthropocentric worldview is so deeply embedded in how individuals understand themselves and their place in the world that it both fosters motivated reasoning about artificial intelligence and its outputs, and reinforces skepticism toward recognizing AI-generated works as legitimate art.[17] Mazzone and Elgammal (2019) describe this state of affairs as one in which, "many artists and art historians resist seeing work created with AI as art because their definition of art is based on the modern artist figure as the sole locus of art creation and creativity" (p. 7).

Building on Hong and Curran's (2019) observations that skepticism toward AI-generated art stems from pre-existing schemas[18] associating creativity with uniquely human traits, Cheng (2022) notes that, once they learn the creator is a machine, people often rate AI-produced works lower than visually similar human-made works, "because of their innate conviction that art is that which that [sic] emanates from humanly observations and efforts" (p. 2). In his reflection on the origins and possibilities of AI art, Liu (2023) likewise notes,

> those who question the creativity of AI art are mainly sceptical about the ability of AI to 'conceive'. It has been argued that AI is better at imitating existing artistic

[17] Cha et al. (2020) conceptualize these reactions as a distinctiveness threat that arises when machines are perceived as encroaching on abilities once regarded as uniquely human. Rather than competing directly in the threatened domain, people respond by reasserting symbolic boundaries and emphasizing alternative human qualities, such as emotional responsiveness, that remain beyond machine capacity.

[18] Hong and Curran (2019) situate biases against AI-generated art in Schema Theory. A schema is a mental framework built from prior experiences and cultural knowledge, which guides how people interpret new information (Norman & Rumelhart, 1981). When applied to art, schemata include expectations about what art is, how it should be made, and who qualifies as an artist.

styles or structures than creating new ones (p. 815).

In a study conducted by Horton Jr. et al. (2023), 2965 participants with no formal experience in art or AI were presented with visual artwork labelled as either AI-generated or human-made, with identical images used in each labelling condition. Participants evaluated the artworks across artistic, economic, and perceptual dimensions, with authorship attribution (AI or human) as the key independent variable. Art labelled as AI-made was consistently rated as less skillful, less valuable, and less likely to be considered 'art,' despite participants often being unable to visually distinguish between AI- and human-made works.

Hong and Curran (2019) found a similar pattern in a sample of 288 participants who were presented with artworks labelled as either AI- or human-made. Participants in their study were asked to evaluate the images based on originality, composition, and aesthetic value. Artworks labelled as AI-generated were consistently rated lower across multiple evaluation criteria, even if they had actually been created by a human.[19] This effect was even more pronounced among participants who, when asked about their prior beliefs, asserted that AI cannot create art. These participants consistently rated AI-labelled works more negatively across criteria such as composition, expression, and aesthetic value, even when the works were in fact human-made. Hong and Curran (2019) contend that their observations illustrate how entrenched cognitive frameworks can filter evaluation and reinforce skepticism toward AI on the basis of preconceptions activated by the label of AI authorship.

In line with these findings, Grassini and Koivisto (2024) argue that such negative

[19] Horton Jr. et al. (2023) also observed that the comparison between human and AI-made art may enhance perceptions of human creativity. When the same artwork was labelled as human-made and evaluated alongside AI-labelled works, it was judged to be more creative than when it was labelled as human-made and compared with other human-made works. They posit this counterintuitive result suggests that, rather than eroding human artistic value, the presence of AI can sharpen the contrast that highlights human distinctiveness, encouraging audiences to view human creativity in a renewed light—"if used carefully" (p. 9).

evaluations are shaped, in part, by personality traits, prior experience with technology, and broader attitudes towards AI. To examine these factors, they surveyed 206 participants tasked with evaluating 20 AI-generated images and 20 human-created images spanning five artistic styles. Participants rated each image according to its likeability, the positive emotions it evoked, and whether they believed it had been created by a human or by AI, before completing questionnaires measuring personality, empathy, creative identity, and attitudes toward technology and art. The findings revealed a consistent negative bias toward works perceived to be AI-generated. Participants evaluated images they believed to be AI-generated less favourably and reported less positive emotional responses toward them, regardless of the images' actual source.[20] Grassini and Koivisto (2024) conclude that the findings suggest that broad dispositional and attitudinal factors mediate audience responses to AI-generated art.

In another study, Gangadharbatla (2022) conducted two experiments designed to assess if participants could accurately identify artwork created by AI and the role attribution knowledge (AI or human) plays in the reception of artwork. In the first experiment, 211 participants were shown five AI-generated images and two human created images. Of the five AI-generated images, only one was correctly identified as computer-made by a majority (82.5%) of participants. By contrast, a majority of participants correctly identified the two human-made images (83.4% and 84.4% respectively).

Building on the findings from the first experiment, Gangadharbtla (2022) conducted a second experiment involving 530 participants to examine how attribution knowledge and artwork type jointly influence the evaluation of AI-generated and human created artwork. Participants evaluated four artworks selected from the first experiment—two abstract images (one AI-made

[20] Notably, when the works were evaluated without information about their source, participants preferred, on average, the AI-generated images.

and one human-made) and two representational images (one AI-made and one human-made).[21] These images were chosen based on how participants in the first experiment had attributed them. The findings indicated that the influence of attribution knowledge depended on the type of artwork being evaluated. When abstract works were correctly attributed to AI, they received more favourable evaluations and purchase intentions than when incorrectly attributed to human creators. Conversely, representational works received more favourable evaluations and purchase intentions when attributed to humans, even when they had in fact been generated by AI.[22] Based on these findings, Gangadharbtla suggests that audience responses to AI-generated art may be influenced by both attribution knowledge and viewers' expectations concerning different artistic styles. This, he claims, suggests that any generalized bias against AI-generated representational works may be moderated, or even neutralized, when AI-generated representational works are mistaken for human creations.

This outcome mirrored that of an earlier study by Mazzone and Elgammal (2019), who conducted a "visual Turing test" by mixing AI-generated images with works from Art Basel 2016, as well as with pieces by master abstract expressionists,[23] and asked participants to judge whether each artwork had been created by a human artist or by a machine. In this study, participants mistakenly identified the AI-generated images as human-created in 75% of cases, compared to 85% for the abstract expressionist works. These findings suggest that the perceptual distinction between AI-generated and human-made art is relatively narrow and, in some instances, difficult

[21] It merits noting that the researcher's reliance on only four artworks constrains the generalizability of their findings and leaves open questions about their replicability.

[22] Unlike the first experiment, the second experiment employed a factorial design and reported multiple interaction effects across several evaluative dimensions rather than participant counts or percentages. The present discussion summarizes the study's principle findings. For a detailed account of the statistical analyses and interaction effects, see Gangdharbatla (2022, pp. 134–137).

[23] The authors do not specify which abstract expressionists were included in the sample.

for audiences to make reliably.

The evaluative biases outlined above resonate with two broader critiques relating to the impact of AI on artistic legitimacy in general. The first, is illustrated in Gross' (2024) assertion that "art has become trivial" (p. 66) due to the ease with which anyone can now create it using AI tools. He further contends that the widespread accessibility of generative systems, driven by a cultural "fear of missing out" (p. 66), has lowered barriers to entry and risks diluting artistic depth and merit. For him, the efforts of earlier pioneers of computer art such as Frieder Nake (2010) who sought to approach algorithmic creation with critical intent by recognizing its limits in an evolving artistic process, have given way to the mass adoption of AI and the prioritizing of speed and novelty over sustained conceptual development.

The second is rooted in the arguments advanced by Becker (1982) and Bourdieu (1984) about the classification of something as 'art' ultimately depending upon subjective evaluation.[24] From this perspective, artistic legitimacy is not an inherent quality of an image but is shaped by socially learned ways of interpreting and valuing art. Hence, AI-generated imagery may be understood as disrupting familiar expectations that link artistic legitimacy to visible effort and intentional expression—conventions not readily attributable to nonhuman agents. When such cues are perceived to be absent or merely simulated, some audience members are likely to discount the work's value, producing systematic bias against AI-labelled images even when their visual qualities are indistinguishable from human-made ones.

2.4 The Unsettling of Photography in the Age of AI

Echoing past controversies surrounding the artistic legitimacy of photography, photorealistic AI-generated images are today provoking debate over whether they should be considered 'art,' while

[24] As Hong and Curran (2019) observe, this raises a distinction between asking whether AI can produce art and whether it can produce art that is considered to be "good and worthy" (p. 58).

simultaneously unsettling long-standing assumptions about what constitutes a photograph and where the boundaries of this new medium lie.

Image 2.3 The Electrician

Source: Eldagsen, B. (2022) *The Electrician*. AI-generated digital image https://www.eldagsen.com/sony-world-photography-awards-2023/

In April 2023, German artist Boris Eldagsen was awarded first prize at the Sony World Photography Awards (SWPA) for his image, *The Electrician* (see Image 2.3), which he later revealed to have been generated using artificial intelligence (Williams, 2023; Zhang, 2023). In

refusing the award, Eldagsen argued that AI images and photography should not compete within the same category, and emphasized that his submission was intended both as a provocation to expose how unprepared the art world remains for the challenges posed by these new technologies and as a means of accelerating an open discussion about whether AI-generated images should fall under the umbrella of photography or be treated as a distinct category of visual production (Williams, 2023; Zhang, 2023).

Image 2.4 Two Sisters in Love

Source: Nordenskiöld, A. (2023). *Twin Sisters in Love* AI-generated digital image https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artificial-intelligence-photo-wins-biennale-award-2374927

A few months after Eldagsen's refusal of the SWPA prize, the prestigious Ballarat International Foto Biennale provoked further controversy by staging what it called the world's first AI image awards, granting $2000 to a "promptographer," Swedish artist Annika Nordenskiöld, for her surreal depiction of two sisters embracing an octopus (see Image 2.4) (Growcoot, 2023). The

contest elicited outrage from traditional photographers who claimed “associating AI with a ‘photography’ festival is incredibly disrespectful to photography and photographers” and likened it to “allowing a cheap counterfeit fashion label a stage at Paris Fashion Week” (Growcoot, 2023, paras. 4–5).

More controversy followed in 2024 when photographer Miles Astray submitted a real photograph to the AI category at the 1839 Photography Awards (see Image 2.5) and won third place in the People’s Vote Award (Greenberger, 2024). After revealing that his submission was not AI-generated, Astray was disqualified, though he defended the submission as a protest to “prove that human-made content has not lost its relevance” (Astray, 2024, para. 4).

Image 2.5 FLAMINGONE

Source: Astray, M. (2024). *FLAMINGONE* https://artreview.com/real-photograph-wins-ai-photography-award-gets-disqualified/

The controversies surrounding these contests is illustrative of a crisis of photographic trust. As Hassan (2025) observes, the rise in artificially altered and AI-generated imagery has blurred the boundary between truth and representation, reshaping how audiences perceive reality. Photographs have long been felt to be ‘real’ because their mechanical process was understood as

a direct imprint of the world, lending them an "authoritative status" as truthful records (Hassan, 2025, p. 11). This reflects Sontag's (1977) assertion that "photographs furnish evidence" (p. 5). Yet, this perceptual trust has been rendered unstable in a media environment where authenticity can no longer be reliably inferred from appearance. Petrea (2025), for instance, argues that the proliferation of synthetic and manipulated images has collapsed the traditional distinction between the photograph as representation and the photograph as a physical trace of something that once existed before the camera, thereby eroding the viewer's ability to recognize an image's indexical link to reality. This collapse underlies the confusion that allows AI-generated works to win photography prizes and real photographs to be mistaken for AI-generated works.

According to Wasielewski (2024), such confusion reflects a deeper tension between reality and representation in photography. Drawing from Barthes (1964/1977), she argues that the "myth of photographic naturalness" (p. 44) has always masked the medium's constructed and mediated nature; a quality that AI-generated images extend and expose. Sontag (1977) similarly acknowledges that photographs are interpretations of the world rather than transparent reproductions of reality, complicating the assumption that mechanical capture *necessarily* produces an objective representation. Indeed, photographic manipulation is hardly a new phenomenon. From its inception, the medium has been subject to staging, retouching, and alteration (Fineman, 2012). For example, in 1845—just four years after the patent for the first photo negative capable of generating an unlimited number of prints was granted—Calvert Richard Jones was already using India ink to remove unwanted details from his negatives before printing them (Fineman, 2012). From such early experiments, techniques of photographic manipulation have grown ever more sophisticated, evolving from darkroom composites to digital retouching, and now, AI-driven image generating and editing.

It is equally important to recognize that the use of artificial intelligence in photography is neither new nor confined to generative systems. Often overlooked is the fact that, since the late 2010s digital cameras have been employing machine learning to automate exposure settings, optimize image quality, and perform object recognition for such tasks as face and eye tracking (Hassan, 2025; Sony AI, 2025), and editing platforms such as Adobe Photoshop incorporate AI functions to remove unwanted elements, replace skies, upscale resolution, or even generate new regions of an image through text prompts (Adobe, 2025). However, the use of AI in this manner seemingly continues to operate within a photographic framework, relying on captured light and an external referent.

By contrast, generative AI systems dispense with both the camera and the real-world referent altogether. This break, Wasielewski (2024) argues, provokes ontological confusion by challenging the long-standing assumption that photography entails an indexical relationship to reality. Even the term photography itself, meaning light writing, does not accurately describe computer generated imagery (Dahl, 2023).

Echoing Bolton's (1989) claim that the properties of photography have never been sufficiently defined and that it possesses no essential characteristics beyond its adaptability, Wasielewski (2024) contends that photographic identity cannot be reduced to production methods alone, and must encompass form, use, and reception. She defines photographic form as "the visual qualities of two-dimensional images that were originally produced by photographic techniques and technology and are therefore associated with them" (Wasielewski, 2024, p. 7). This definition excludes any physical or material dimensions because, as she claims, "the main arena for use, dissemination, and reception of AI-generated photography (and other types of photography today) is digital" (Wasielewski, 2024, p. 7). Consequently, if photorealistic AI-generated images are

engaged with and interpreted as photographs, then they function culturally as photographs, despite their departure from the light-based capturing of images. Wasielewski's stance offers a means of reframing how one approaches the classification of photography itself and opens discussion to consideration of whether AI-generated imagery should be situated within the photographic tradition or be treated as a distinct visual category.

Belisle (2025) counters Wasielewski's (2024) assertion that photorealistic AI-generated images should be considered photographs, arguing that such a view neglects photography's rich history and material qualities. For Belisle, defining photographs only by how they look ignores important social, technical, and ethical issues, thereby reducing photography to simple visual patterns at the expense of overlooking its complex meanings. She criticizes Wasielewski's position as tautological, contending that it mirrors the logic of machine learning by sampling, flattening, and simplifying culture without questioning its assumptions. She further contends that, rather than asking whether photorealistic AI-generated images are photographs, we should consider what it means to see them as such, and how such definitions shape visibility, authorship, and ethical responsibility. In an interview with the online photography news site, *PetaPixel*,[25] Boris Eldagsen echoed this view by refusing to label his AI works as photographs and instead calling them 'images' that are "synthetically produced, using 'the photographic' as a visual language" (Zhang, 2023, para. 12). Gross (2024) similarly describes such works as "photographs (improperly so-called)" that nonetheless "pass the critical radar of the viewer as genuine photographs" (p. 65).

Reflecting these competing understandings, several terms have been proposed to distinguish such images from photography. Belisle (2025) links this naming dilemma to the popular internet meme, "is a hotdog a sandwich?" in which "photography would be the familiar

[25] See, https://petapixel.com/2023/04/14/artist-refuses-prize-after-his-ai-image-wins-at-top-photo-contest/

sandwich and AI-generated images the hotdogs that beg classification" (p. 397–398). Eldagsen (2023) adopted the term 'promptography', which had been coined by Peruvian artist Christian Vinces during an online exchange between the two (Charr, 2025). This term has since gained traction, appearing in exhibitions such as *Photography VS. Promptography* at the European Month of Photography in Berlin (EMOP, 2025).

However, Thornton (2023) is critical of the term promptography, arguing that it is too closely aligned with photography to effectively delineate between the two types of images. She further posits that the label misattributes creative agency to the human prompter, when, in her view, it is the computer that executes the act of image-making. According to her, prompters are at best curators of algorithmically generated images rather than authors in the traditional photographic sense. In response to the term, she offers, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, alternatives such as fauxtography, fakeography, and the Latin inspired computatrumography.

Reinhuber (2022) proposed the term synthography to describe both photorealistic AI-generated images and images rendered by 3D software. Likewise, Dahl (2023) suggests the similar but less concise term synthetic photography. Advancing a claim against competing labels such as photorealistic, AI photography, and post-photography, he argues the term photorealistic—long used in art criticism to describe paintings with a photographic appearance—is inadequate, because no one would claim that a photorealistic painting qualifies as a photograph. He rejects the term AI photography on the grounds that it blurs the distinction between algorithmically generated imagery and conventional photographs that are already being enhanced by AI-enabled camera functions, and critiques the concept of post-photography for implying that photorealistic AI-generated images are themselves photographs or a progressive stage beyond photography. For Dahl, the term synthetic photography avoids the latter ambiguities by clearly signaling that such images are

constructed rather than captured, while remaining flexible enough to describe hybrid practices in which artists combine AI with other digital tools.

The proliferation of competing terms reflects a broader instability in how photography itself is understood in the age of AI. Summarizing this state of affairs, Palmer and Sluis (2024) argue that "the medium of photography has become a style, and the term style is itself elastic—a synonym for 'the look of something'" (p. 160). Because AI systems can generate images in virtually any visual style—from watercolour and impressionism to photorealism—the photographic image itself becomes one style among many. In this way, within what they describe as the contemporary "prompt economy," traditional photography becomes a repertoire of imitable aesthetics.

2.5 Research Question

The proliferation of competing terms, from promptography to synthography and synthetic photography, reflects the unsettled status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery and its ambiguous relationship to photography. These competing classifications raise broader questions about how emerging technologies acquire cultural meaning and legitimacy. The examination of contemporary debates presented in the preceding sections has demonstrated that the meaning of photorealistic AI-generated imagery is neither fixed nor universally accepted and instead varies across stakeholders. In many respects, these contemporary debates appear to parallel those that accompanied the emergence of photography during the mid-to-late 1800s.

Within the growing body of literature examining public perceptions of AI-generated images, comparatively little academic research has focused exclusively on photorealistic AI-generated imagery. The work that does exist has tended to focus on its political and ethical dimensions (e.g., Filimowicz, 2022; Łabuz, 2024), rather than questions about its implications for

authorship, creativity, and artistic legitimacy. This absence underscores the need for at least an exploratory analysis of how producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery and cultural intermediaries make sense of this emerging medium within the institutional and discursive contexts of fine art photography.

With this in mind, the central research question guiding this thesis is: *How do the intersecting views of artists, photographers, curators, and critics contribute to legitimating photorealistic AI-generated imagery as an authentic art form?*

In seeking to investigate this question, the study is informed by three sub-questions:

1. *How do different stakeholders define or describe photorealistic AI-generated images, and what criteria do they use to evaluate its artistic legitimacy?*
2. *In what ways do different stakeholders perceive AI tools as enhancing or undermining creative authorship?*
3. *What forms of skepticism or acceptance have stakeholders encountered within their professional or artistic communities when engaging with such images—whether by creating, exhibiting, curating, or evaluating such work?*

2.6 Conclusion

Controversies surrounding the relationship between technology and artistic practice have deep historical roots. This is evidenced in the debates prompted by the invention of photography, which many nineteenth-century critics regarded as a mechanical imitation of art that threatened creativity and challenged the integrity of artistic practice. Today, similar anxieties exist in relation to AI-generated imagery, prompting renewed debates about creativity, authorship, artistic legitimacy and the extent to which technological systems can meaningfully participate in creative expression. In the next chapter our attention turns to the methodological approach used to examine how relevant social actors define, contest, and negotiate the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The discussion in this chapter sets out the research design and methodology used to answer the central research question. The discussion is divided into four sections. The first outlines the conceptual framework guiding this project: the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). Here, the discussion focuses on the relevance of SCOT for examining how the meaning and artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery are negotiated among relevant social actors. The discussion in the second section describes the research design used to conduct the empirical component of my project and explains the rationale for adopting a qualitative, interpretivist approach. Section three details the methods used to recruit participants, the interview protocol, and the procedures used to analyze the interview transcripts. The fourth section concludes.

3.1 SCOT as a Conceptual Framework

Contrary to the propensity of mainstream (see, for example, Moore, 1965/2006; Rostow, 1959; White, 1962/1970) and technologically determinist (see, for example, Ayres, 1935; Ellul, 1965; Ogburn & Nimkoff, 1955) accounts of technological change to present technological and scientific evolution as proceeding along a linear path of development, the SCOT perspective posits that technologies evolve through processes of social negotiation. Specifically, Pinch and Bijker (1984), argue that technological artefacts do not have inherent or fixed meanings and, as a consequence, technological development proceeds in multiple directions simultaneously, with different stakeholders pursuing their own vision and version of what the artefact should be and do. To this end, rather than viewing the adoption and stabilization of specifical technological artefacts as *the* only possible outcome, they maintain that artefacts are adopted and stabilized through processes of social negotiation and collective acceptance among stakeholders (Basu, 2023; Pinch & Bijker, 1984).

Pinch and Bijker (1984) first set out their perspective using the example of the bicycle's development in the late nineteenth century. Their analysis was later elaborated upon in greater historical and analytical detail by Bijker (1995). As he recounts, high-wheeled 'ordinary' bicycles (i.e., penny-farthings) and low-wheeled 'safety' bicycles were competing technologies, each with different designs and associated social meanings. For young, athletic men, the ordinary bicycle represented speed and excitement, whereas for less daring riders and women, it signified danger and impracticality. The safety bicycle, on the other hand, signified greater stability and accessibility, but appeared to athletic men as lacking the speed and excitement of its counterpart. Manufacturers, meanwhile, viewed these competing bicycle designs in terms of market potential and commercial viability. The safety bicycle ultimately gained prominence, not because it was necessarily technically superior, but because it resolved the interpretive conflicts among these groups by accommodating a broader range of users. That is, its design aligned with prevailing social values of respectability and safety, allowing it to achieve acceptance across diverse constituencies.

The differing visions represented by the ordinary and safety bicycles are illustrative of what Pinch and Bijker (1984) refer to as the interpretative flexibility of technological artefacts. As Bijker (1995) explains,

> relevant social groups do not simply see different aspects of one artifact. The meanings given by a relevant social group actually constitute the artifact… there are as many artifacts as there are relevant social groups; there is no artifact not constituted by a relevant social group (p. 77).

He describes this phenomenon as the pluralism of artefacts. It is illustrated through the example of the ordinary bicycle, which simultaneously existed as a "Macho Bicycle" and an "Unsafe Bicycle," depending upon the social group doing the interpreting.

According to the SCOT lens, as artefacts are modified over time to suit the needs of various

stakeholders, consensus begins to form around a vision and version of the artefact that most effectively addresses the concerns or solves the problems they identify.[26] Coinciding with this process of stabilization is a hypothesized narrowing of the interpretive flexibility associated with the artefact. Sticking with Pinch and Bijker's (1984) bicycle example, the introduction of pneumatic rubber tires allowed low-wheeled safety bicycles to reach and even surpass speeds that were previously attainable only on high-wheeled ordinary bicycles, while also reducing the vibration and discomfort felt by riders of the hard-wheeled "boneshakers" (Bijker, 1995). This modification satisfied bicycle racers' desire for speed and the general public's preference for comfort and practicality while simultaneously diminishing the sense of risk and daring that had appealed to young, athletic men.

Nevertheless, because low-wheeled bicycles with air tires appealed to a far wider range of social groups, the ordinary bicycle gradually faded from relevance; a process Pinch and Bijker label as closure. They identify two primary mechanisms through which closure occurs: rhetorical closure, in which the perception of a problem is resolved through discourse rather than technological change, and closure by redefinition of problem, in which the original issue is reframed to accommodate a new understanding of the artefact.[27]

Despite, or perhaps because of, its status as a foundational approach to understanding the sociology and history of technological change, SCOT has been the subject of a range of criticism. For example, Edgerton (1993) questioned SCOT's claim to novelty, arguing that historians of

[26] This perspective contrasts with mainstream economic accounts of technological change which tend to explain technological development in terms of efficiency gains or market selection. For an economics-based critique of the mainstream view see, Nelson and Winter (1982).

[27] Pinch and Bijker (1984) emphasize that other forms of closure are also possible. For example, Hård (1994) describes local closure as the stabilization of an artefact within a specific context of use or geographic or organizational setting. Siles (2012) likewise describes closure by co-optation as the stabilization of an artefact through the absorption and neutralization of competing sociotechnical actors or artefacts by dominant institutional or governance structures.

technology—particularly those associated with the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT)—have long acknowledged the social aspect of technological development. He suggests that SCOT fails to meaningfully distinguish itself from earlier social constructivist approaches, thereby raising doubts about whether it offered anything substantively new. In response to this "so what?" argument, Pinch (1996) counters that SCOT's novelty stems from its notion of interpretive flexibility, which he argues was absent from earlier methods of analysis. He further maintains that SCOT emerged from sustained collaboration between historians and sociologists which, in turn, deepened analytic focus on how technologies are socially constituted rather than treating their social embeddedness as merely contextual.

Another criticism of SCOT is that it risks becoming overly formulaic. Woolgar (1991), for instance, suggests that when social constructivism[28] is applied as a ready-made methodological formula rather than as a reflexive theoretical stance, it risks reifying the framework itself and blunting its significance by failing to advance epistemological inquiry in a substantive way. Winner (1993), likewise, argues that the framework's clearly articulated concepts and analytical steps can encourage a mechanical application that produces predictable case studies that add little beyond descriptive narrative.

Addressing these critiques, Pinch (1993) argues that Woolgar's claims against SCOT rely themselves on a reflexive template, suggesting that accusations of formulaicity often reveal more about the critic's analytic strategy than about the empirical richness of the work under examination. Further, while Pinch (1996) acknowledges that mechanistic applications of SCOT can indeed lead to disappointing results, he contends that this reflects misuse rather than an inherent flaw in the approach. He counters that a degree of uniformity in analytical method can often be useful in

[28] Woolgar's (1991) critique is directed at the use of social constructivism within the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) and the Social Study of Technology (SST), rather than at SCOT explicitly.

building insight across case studies, and that accusations of becoming formulaic are common to most widely adopted methodological frameworks.

Beyond concerns about novelty and methodological rigidity, a more substantial critique of SCOT centres on its limited engagement with power and politics. Critics argue that while SCOT highlights how different stakeholders interpret and negotiate technologies, its analytic focus insufficiently accounts for structural inequalities and power relations. For example, Russell (1986) argued that SCOT inadequately accounts for the historical formation and social positioning of relevant social groups in relation to technology, while also failing to address how unequal distributions of economic, political, and ideological power shape their capacity to influence technological outcomes. He contends that the analytical focus on relevant social groups risks an appearance of pluralistic inclusivity that obscures underlying inequalities.

Winner (1993) likewise contends that social constructivist approaches such as SCOT, by virtue of their methodological commitments, systematically avoid engaging with broader moral or political implications once technologies are stabilized. He criticizes such frameworks for remaining largely descriptive, arguing that they often stop short of moving from explaining what technologies are, to considering what they ought to be. In his view, this descriptive emphasis leads social constructivist analyses to privilege the origins of technological development while paying comparatively limited attention to the social consequences that follow once a technology is established.

In addressing such concerns, Pinch (1996) responds that SCOT is not intended as a normative framework for evaluating which technological outcomes are better or worse, nor as an approach that takes positions for or against particular technologies. As he sees it, SCOT's analytical contribution lies in revealing the contingency of technical development and the

existence of alternative pathways, thereby exposing the scope within which political and social questions about technology can be, and are, debated. He further argues that there is nothing inherent in SCOT that precludes attention to power structures and social relations.[29] In this regard, Pinch and Bijker (1986) recognize that while many social groups have stakes in the direction of a technology, certain groups play a more dominant role than others in shaping consensus around it. As they observe, this is because social groups and structures are embedded within broader and overlapping networks of relations. They also emphasize that, given the impossibility of examining all contexts surrounding a technology, it would be beneficial for analyses to focus on micro-studies that trace how particular social groups, interpretations, and power relations become decisive in specific technological settings.

A key strength of the SCOT perspective is its openness to theoretical refinement, underscoring its character as a flexible and evolving framework. As Bijker (1995) notes, SCOT is not a "set of narrowly defined concepts to be employed indiscriminately in empirical research," but rather "a heuristic device, a set of sensitizing concepts that allow us to scope out relevant points, but one that will require adaptation and reformulation for use in new instances" (p. 17). This heuristic function allows the SCOT framework to extend beyond its original focus on technological design and engineering into cultural domains such as art, where meaning and value are similarly negotiated among interconnected social groups.

To account more fully for how artistic merit and legitimacy are produced and recognized within these contexts, I modified the SCOT framework somewhat, complementing it with the use of Becker's (1982) notion of "art worlds" and Bourdieu's (1984) theory of the field of cultural production. Becker's model highlights how art is produced through networks of cooperation

[29] Cockburn and Ormrod (1993), Kline and Pinch (1996), Paré (2003), and Siles (2012) have all employed the SCOT framework in a manner that pays particular attention to power structure and social relations.

among artists, curators, critics, audiences, and other participants within various art worlds, emphasizing that legitimacy is sustained through collective conventions. Bourdieu, by contrast, foregrounds the role of symbolic capital in the form of prestige, authority, reputation, and institutional endorsement in shaping what counts as legitimate art. Together, these two additions offer tools for extending SCOT's emphasis on the interpretive flexibility of technological artefacts into the sociocultural realm of art and aesthetics. Specifically, the notion of art worlds and the theory of the field of cultural production provide a lens for examining how artistic value and legitimacy are negotiated and constructed among relevant social groups, and how these processes are structured by symbolic capital, power relations, and institutional hierarchies. In turn, this modification offers a means of addressing Russell (1986) and Winner (1993)'s critiques that SCOT pays insufficient attention to deeper structural forces, such as class, ideology, and cultural hierarchies, in shaping which interpretations of an artefact prevail and which are marginalized.

This combined approach aligns with prior socio-technical analyses of photographic practice that have integrated SCOT with broader sociocultural perspectives. For example, Vasudevan (2019) used SCOT alongside Bourdieu's field theory to examine how video journalists reinterpret the DSLR camera as a viable tool for news production, emphasizing its aesthetic affordances and the role of these affordances in shaping professional practice and visual style. Similarly, Meyer (2007) investigated the adoption of digital photography within scientific image-making contexts, drawing selectively on SCOT as one of several heuristic lenses for understanding technological change as a socially situated process.

3.2 Research Design

As a practicing photographer active in the Ottawa arts community, I approached this research with an existing familiarity with the field of fine art photography, as well as personal and professional

connections with individuals working within it. Drawing on this familiarity, I sought to examine how members of different social groups involved in photography, visual arts, and AI-generated image production interpret and evaluate photorealistic AI-generated imagery and how its artistic legitimacy is negotiated within contemporary photographic practice. To this end, I employed a qualitative, interpretivist research design that incorporated the use of information gathered from semi-structured interviews with actors situated within these fields.

Guided by the premise that, "technological development should be viewed as a social process, not an autonomous process" (p. 48), Bijker (1995) contends that the identification of relevant social groups should be grounded in the social world surrounding the artefact being studied rather than being imposed through predetermined analytical categories. With this in mind, the approach I adopted for considering which social groups to include in my research sample was informed by two principal considerations. First, to adhere to Humpherys' (2005) recommendations about starting with broad meta-categories, such as producers, advocates, users, and bystanders, in order to reduce the risk of the analyst's own biases guiding the selection process.[30] Hence, my initial effort at identifying groups of actors within the context of fine art photography and the production of photorealistic AI-generated imagery was also informed by Becker's (1982) notion of art worlds. Specifically, the emphasis Becker places on artistic production and legitimacy emerging through processes of cooperation among networks of artists, institutional intermediaries such as critics and curators, and others involved in the creation, evaluation, and circulation of art.

The second, and related, consideration focused on adhering to Bijker's (1995) suggestion that analysts focus on those for whom the artefact in question is most meaningful or problematic,

[30] Humphreys (2005) and Basu (2023) note that pre-determining the relevance of social groups risks having the analyst's own biases guide the selection of groups for inclusion in the analysis as well as potentially neglecting and obscuring the role of less powerful actors (e.g., bystanders) whose perspectives nonetheless shape an artefact's development.

rather than attempting to identify and include every possible stakeholder.[31] With this in mind, I aimed to ensure that my research sample included a limited number of actors occupying distinct positions within the production, interpretation, and circulation of photorealistic AI-generated imagery. Given my professional engagement and familiarity with this field, for me, this process was akin to purposive sampling, or the intentional selecting of participants who are especially knowledgeable about, or experienced with, the phenomenon under study (see, Tracy (2013)).

For the purposes of this study, I ultimately opted to proceed by including four groups of actors in my research sample: producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery; traditional photographers; art gallery curators working in photography, visual arts, and media-arts contexts; and critics active in photography, visual arts, and technology-focused cultural commentary. These categories were based on the participants' principal artistic or professional practices and were not intended to represent mutually exclusive identities or necessarily uniform perspectives. Rather, they served as a means of identifying and comparing actors occupying different positions within the production, interpretation, and evaluation of photorealistic AI-generated imagery. The inclusion in my sample of members of each of these groups was essential for examining the interpretive flexibility, controversies, and emerging processes of contestation or stabilization that are currently shaping how photorealistic AI-generated imagery is understood and situated within the field of fine art photography and what these processes mean for its artistic legitimation. The rationales for the inclusion of each group within my research sample are set out in Table 3.1. Collectively, these actors represent a limited sample drawn from relevant social groups through which the legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery is negotiated.

[31] Further, within the practical constraints of a Master's-level project, it is neither feasible nor necessary to examine *every* relevant group. Bystanders, in this instance, may be affected by or aware of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, but occupy a peripheral position in relation to the negotiation of its artistic legitimacy.

Table 3.1 Rationales for Inclusion

Social Group	Rationale for inclusion
Producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery	➢ In the course of their creative work engage directly with various AI systems and are uniquely positioned to articulate how the medium reshapes authorship, creativity, and workflow. ➢ Equally well positioned to comment on the perceived artistic merit, limitations, and aesthetic implications of photorealistic AI-generated imagery through the lens of situated, practice-based experience.

Traditional photographers	➢ Bring insight into existing photographic conventions and the technical skill involved in photography.
	➢ Illuminate how photorealistic AI-generated imagery is viewed in relation to:
	  ➢ existing definitions of photography, and
	  ➢ how established norms surrounding craft, indexicality, and professional identity shape responses to AI within the field.

Curators	➢ Offer institutional perspectives about acceptance, framing, and debates regarding the use of AI (and other new technologies and mediums) within artistic practice.
	➢ Act as institutional mediators who shape how artworks are classified, displayed, and legitimized within gallery and museum contexts.
	➢ Their insights:
	  ➢ help bridge the gap between artistic practice and its public and institutional reception; and
	  ➢ providing important knowledge about market and collector values.

Critics	➢ Serve as cultural intermediaries who act as gatekeepers, shaping public perception and critical discourse by interpreting, contextualizing, and legitimizing artworks and emerging artistic practices (Maguire & Matthews, 2012; Whipple, 2022).

Consistent with this orientation, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) characterize qualitative research as a situated, interpretive practice concerned with the meanings people bring to phenomena. Accordingly, this thesis examined how participants interpret and evaluate the medium of photorealistic AI-generated imagery and position it within existing artistic and institutional frameworks, with particular attention given to questions of artistic legitimacy, authorship, ontology, and technological mediation.

As Tracy (2013) observes, qualitative research techniques are particularly useful when investigating topics that require depth of insight, contextual sensitivity, and attention to nuance. Accordingly, the research design adopted for my investigation prioritized analyzing the social and cultural contexts in which the participants' interpretive processes unfold. This approach aligns

with assumptions guiding the SCOT framework insofar as I hypothesize photography-related artistic legitimacy as being constructed through discourse, institutional practice, and cultural recognition rather than an inherent property of images or technologies.

In distinguishing interpretive inquiry from positivist traditions, Lin (1998) contends that the goal of the former is to uncover the mechanisms through which meaning and action are produced, rather than identifying causal relationships. Such a distinction was central to my aim of understanding how and why definitions of authorship, creativity, and legitimacy emerge and evolve within the cultural and institutional contexts of fine art photography as it relates to AI. To be clear, in this thesis I was not seeking to reduce these meanings to universal or quantitative measurable variables. Rather, my project is better understood as being situated within the symbolic-interactionist tradition which emphasizes that meaning is a product formed through social interaction (see, for example, Berg and Lune (2017)). From this perspective, interviews acted as interpretive exchanges of information through which the participants and I collaboratively constructed understandings of social reality.

Consistent with this interpretivist orientation, semi-structured exploratory interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. Tracy (2013) characterizes interviews as "conversations with a purpose" (p. 138), noting that their structure should be determined by the aims of the research. In the present study, semi-structured exploratory interviews considered appropriate because, as Oppenheim (1992) notes, they are designed to develop ideas and elicit participants' opinions, views, and reactions regarding specific subject matter. Semi-structured interviews provide sufficient structure to enable comparison across themes while remaining flexible enough to pursue unanticipated lines of inquiry. As such, this interview format afforded the participants the opportunity to articulate how they understood and evaluated photorealistic AI-

generated imagery.

The decision to proceed using semi-structured interviews was consistent with methodological practice in related research areas. For example, Vasudevan (2019) used semi-structured interviews with video journalists to examine how they reimagined DSLR cameras as video cameras and how this reimagining informed their professional routines, aesthetic decisions, and visual style. Likewise, Boscaino (2021) used semi-structured interviews alongside an analysis of digital conversations to examine how street artists, curators, bloggers, photographers, and other participants contribute to the meaning and value of street art, showing that legitimacy emerges through the varied ways different groups interpret artworks within their own unique contexts.

3.3 Methods

As a photographer who is active in the Ottawa arts community, I have many personal connections with other photographers and artists, as well as acquaintances in the curatorial departments at the Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG) and the National Gallery of Canada (NGC). These relationships allowed me to recruit participants who are part of my personal network through purposive and convenience sampling. This said, participation in my study was entirely voluntary, and no individuals were placed under any obligation to participate. Three participants within my personal network suggested seven additional individuals whom they believed could offer perspectives relevant to this study. I subsequently contacted each of these individuals using publicly available contact information obtained through their professional websites, institutional profiles, or other publicly accessible platforms promoting their artistic, curatorial, or critical practice. Five participants were ultimately recruited in this manner.

To be eligible for inclusion in the research sample, participants had to meet criteria specific to their respective social groups and be over 18 years of age. Producers were required to have

experience creating photorealistic AI-generated imagery using generative-AI models, such as ChatGPT, Stable Diffusion, Adobe Firefly, or Nano Banana, and to have incorporated such imagery into their artistic or professional practice. Traditional photographers needed to have an active photographic practice, either professional or artistic, and possess sufficient experience to speak to established photographic norms and conventions. For the purposes of this thesis, 'sufficient experience' refers to photographers who had maintained an active photographic practice for approximately five or more years and who had exhibited or otherwise presented their work in professional, artistic, or public contexts such as galleries, exhibitions, publications, or client-based work. This threshold was selected on the assumption that photographers with at least five years of experience would have developed a familiarity with photographic practices, conventions, and terminology sufficient to offer informed perspectives on the subject under investigation.

Curators were eligible for inclusion if they had experience in selecting, evaluating, organising, or otherwise facilitating the presentation and development of photographic or digital artworks within gallery, museum, exhibition, or media-arts contexts, including environments that support artists working with emerging media technologies such as artist run centres and workshops. Critics were required to have published writing, reviews, or cultural commentary on photography, digital art, or the artistic use of generative AI, as well as on emerging artistic practices or visual culture, in professional, journalistic, or academic outlets.

These criteria ensured that all participants had direct experience with or evaluative perspectives on contemporary developments in photographic and AI-mediated image-making and were positioned to comment on how such developments are interpreted and legitimised within the institutional and cultural contexts of fine art photography.

Prior to conducting the formal interviews, I conducted three pilot interviews with acquaintances in three of the four relevant social groups (one curator, one photographer, and one producer of photorealistic AI-generated imagery). The objective here was to refine the interview guide and to ensure the protocol elicited clear, relevant, and sufficiently detailed responses. Feedback from these pilot interviews identified several questions in the original interview guides for which clearer wording and greater openness were needed to encourage participants to elaborate on their personal perspectives and experiences.

As a result, a number of draft questions were streamlined and adjusted to prompt better open-ended responses. Because these revisions were minor and did not alter the substantive focus of the interview schedule, a second round of pilot interviews was not undertaken. None of the information gathered from the responses elicited during the pilot interviews was included in the final analysis. However, two individuals who participated in piloting the original interview guide were subsequently recruited into the final study. Although these participants were more familiar with the interview format than other participants, both individuals met the study's inclusion criteria and represented perspectives considered important to the purposive sampling strategy, including one participant with specialized curatorial expertise. I therefore deemed that excluding them would have unnecessarily reduced the diversity of perspectives represented within the purposive sample. Furthermore, all participants were given the opportunity to review and amend their interview transcripts following our conversations, thereby reducing any procedural distinction between these two individuals and the remainder of the sample. Only the data from the second interviews with these two individuals were included in the dataset.

I conducted eleven (11) semi-structured interviews with members of the four relevant social groups: producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery (n = 4), traditional photographers

(n = 2), curators (n = 4), and critics (n = 1).[32] It merits noting that seven (7) participants occupied positions that overlapped across social groups. For example, all four participating producers, along with three curators and the critic, had prior backgrounds in photography, although their current involvement in photographic practice varied at the time the interviews were conducted. One curator also contributed essays to art publications, thereby occupying a position that overlaps with the category of critic. All participants reported having experimented with AI image generation, albeit to varying degrees. Nine (9) participants were located in the Ottawa region, with one based in the United Kingdom and one based in Germany. The sample included nine men and two women.

Prior to commencing participant recruitment and data collection, the proposed study underwent ethical review through the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board (see Appendix 1). The interviews took place between January 7 and March 17, 2026, with each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes in duration. Prior to the start of each interview, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the procedures for recording and data storage. Nine (9) interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom. Two (2) were conducted in person.

With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded to aid in transcription. The remote interviews were recorded using Zoom's built-in cloud recording function, which automatically generated an audio/video file, an audio-only file, and an audio transcript. The in-person interviews were recorded using the recording function on a mobile phone and the audio files were uploaded to Otter.ai to generate transcriptions. Participants were informed that, if they wished, they would be provided with a copy of the interview transcript and an opportunity to

[32] All interviews were conducted in English. Ideally, my sample would have included both English and French speakers. However, my limited French language proficiency, prevented me from doing so. A copy of the ethics certificate is provided in Appendix 1.

update, clarify, or retract any portion of their contributions, and were offered two weeks (14 days) to do so. Three (3) participants availed themselves of this opportunity, primarily softening language or clarifying the names of artworks or artists that had been misremembered during the interview. In addition to the automated transcripts, I also took hand-written notes during each interview to capture contextual details (e.g., pauses, tone, emphasis, and notable reactions), as well as to note potential follow-up questions and unexpected issues or topics that emerged during the conversation.

Each transcript was then reviewed for accuracy by comparing it against the original audio recording. This process involved correcting transcription errors, including misidentified words, technical terminology, and references to artists or artworks, as well as clarifying passages where the automated transcription had vailed to accurately capture participants' statements. During my review of the transcripts, all identifying information, including names, workplaces, exhibition histories, and any references to identifiable individuals or distinctive artworks, was redacted, and participants were assigned pseudonyms. The pseudonyms used specified the social group to which each participant belonged: producers of AI-generated imagery (PR1–PR4), traditional photographers (PH1–PH2), curators (CU1–CU4), and critics (CR1).

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of thirteen primary questions (see Appendix 2). Although the overall structure and thematic focus were consistent across all interviews, the wording and examples used in some questions were adapted to reflect the different professional roles of the individuals comprising the four social groups in the sample. In keeping with the semi-structured format, the interview guide served as a flexible framework rather than a rigid script; questions were adapted, expanded, or reordered in response to participants' answers, allowing for natural conversational flow and the exploration of

unanticipated themes. This approach ensured comparability across interviews while preserving depth and nuance.

Once finalized, the interview transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software used to organize and code data. The transcripts were organized into categories corresponding to the four social groups: producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, traditional photographers, curators, and critics. I then carefully reviewed each transcript undertaking an iterative analytical coding approach (Tracy, 2013) to analyze their contents. For this process, the study's research questions provided an initial set of broad conceptual categories—including artistic legitimacy, authorship, ontology, and reception—which served as sensitizing concepts during the coding process rather than as fixed analytical categories. I then carefully reviewed each transcript line by line, identifying passages in which participants discussed definitions of photography, artistic legitimacy, authorship, skepticism or acceptance, technological mediation, creative practice, and the perceived relationship between photorealistic AI-generated imagery and existing photographic conventions. For example, participants' discussion of photography's relationship to physical reality were coded through concepts such as indexicality, materiality, and photographic continuity.

Table 3.2 Conceptual Categories and Codes

Conceptual Category:	**Artistic Legitimacy**	**Authorship**	**Ontology**	**Reception**
Codes:	aesthetic quality emotional resonance conceptual depth context craft ethics originality human presence intentionality	ethics foundational dependence shortcuts simplicity tool collaborator creative inquiry making it easier use case intention frustration	aesthetic quality definitions terminology classification indexicality materiality photographic continuity distinct medium simulation misidentification	aesthetic primacy audience dependent cheated democratization emotion fear locations negative locations positive novelty optimism plurality

	labour/effort luck regression response	enjoyment authorship	photographic tradition AI as infrastructure	pushback stigma temporal reflexivity disclosure

As the analysis progressed, I re-read each transcript multiple times (on average, four times), refining the initial coding framework as more specific codes emerged from participants' responses (see Table 3.2). The resulting codes were then compared across interviews to identify recurring concepts and broader patterns relevant to the research questions. To facilitate comparison between stakeholder groups, I also recorded the frequency with which individual codes and themes were expressed within each group, allowing areas of convergence and divergence to be identified across producers, photographers, curators, and critics.

3.4 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has outlined the conceptual framework, research design, and methods used to investigate how photorealistic AI-generated imagery is interpreted and evaluated among a small sample of individuals who are directly involved in the production, interpretation, exhibition, and critical evaluation of photorealistic AI-generated imagery and fine art photography. In the next two chapters I present the findings that emerged from my analysis of the interview transcripts. Chapter 4 engages with the participants' understandings of the ontological status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery and the implications of these understandings for authorship. In Chapter 5, my attention turns to the participants' perceptions of AI-generated imagery.

Chapter 4: Observations on the Ontology and Authorship of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery

The discussion in this chapter presents the findings emerging from the first part of my analysis of the information gathered from the interviews with producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, traditional photographers, curators, and the critic. Here, my focus was on identifying recurring patterns and themes in how the participants reported interpreting and evaluating photorealistic AI-generated imagery. Two key themes emerged: (i) negotiating AI and photographic ontology; and (ii) authorship and creative agency. In section one, I focus on the participants' responses to questions regarding the ontological status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, with particular attention given to how they defined and classified such images in relation to photography and other visual media. In section two, I examine issues of authorship and creative agency in relation to how the participants understand AI software as tools, collaborators, or autonomous generators of imagery. Section three concludes the chapter.

4.1 Negotiating AI and Photographic Ontology

As was discussed in Section 2.4, the emergence of generative AI systems capable of producing photorealistic images has generated widespread debate over how such images are to be understood in relation to traditional photography. This, in turn, has raised broader questions concerning the boundaries of photography itself in the twenty-first century. The participants in my research sample likewise attributed this instability, at least in part, to the rapid development of generative AI technologies and a marked improvement in the image quality of their outputs over a relatively short period.

Nine participants across all four of the social groups comprising my research sample (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR4, CU1, CU3, CU4, CR1) noted that only a few years ago, AI-generated outputs were poor, uncanny, or easily identifiable, which made the technology easier to dismiss as a

novelty or technical experiment. As PH2 observed, the technology is "definitely getting better and better," with outputs approaching photographic realism. Echoing this view, CU4 noted that their perception of the technology was altered by seeing it used in practice, stating, "to be honest, I wasn't a huge fan of AI, but I've seen it used a few times in a really interesting way that has made me change my mind about it."

Five participants across three of the groups comprising my research sample (PR3, PR4, CU1, CU2, CR1) specifically described AI-generated images as becoming difficult to distinguish from conventional photographs. CR1, for instance, noted, "you could probably look at a photo and an AI image of the same thing side by side and not be able to tell the difference." CU1 elaborated on this type of perceptual difficulty describing a situation in which they found themselves having been fooled by images they had encountered online despite their having a background in researching AI-generated imagery:

> I remember going through Threads and there was a photographer who had posted these images of a wedding. I was like, oh, classic pictures of a wedding—happy bride and groom, a couple throwing a bouquet into a crowd… and I was like, okay, your standard wedding photography. And then he said, this is generated by AI, and I was like… damn, we've come a long way!

The ambiguity described above also extended in the opposite direction, shaping how traditional photographs are interpreted online. Three participants, each from a distinct social group (PH2, PR2, CR1), described instances in which images they encountered on social media were misidentified as AI-generated by viewers in the comment sections despite having been produced using conventional photographic methods. PH2 described a case in which a photograph taken with an analogue camera and shared on Instagram was flagged by the platform's AI detection system as AI-generated, suggesting that even automated systems struggle to reliably distinguish between photorealistic AI-generated images and traditional photographs.

Alluding to a broader shift in how visual media is being interpreted online, PR2 observed:

> Anything that seems slightly wrong is being called AI now. Even things that are camera artifacts are being called AI.

However, according to PR3, such perceptual ambiguity may not be experienced uniformly. Noting that younger viewers "have a visual literacy that my age and older may not have" and that members of older generations were more likely to interpret photorealistic AI-generated images as photographs, they suggested that the ability to distinguish between photorealistic AI-generated images and photographs may vary across age groups. In addition to highlighting age-based differences, PR3 went on to state, "I think the lay person doesn't really understand the difference between an analogue image, a digital image, and an AI-made image." The implication flowing from this individual's perspective is straightforward: differences in visual literacy shape the recognition and classification of images.

When asked directly whether they see photorealistic AI-generated images as part of the photographic tradition or as a distinct form of visual media production, the participants expressed a range of perspectives. Six participants (PH1, PH2, PR2, PR3, PR4, CR1) from three of the four social groups were categorical in their view that these images should not be conflated with photography, and five individuals (PR1, CU1, CU2, CU3, CU4), including all four participant curators were more ambivalent, framing AI-generated images as either an extension of photographic practice or as occupying a position between photography and other visual media.

Although these perspectives varied across the four groups comprising my research sample, certain patterns were nevertheless manifest. The two traditional photographers and the critic, for example, emphasized distinctions between photography and AI-generated imagery, whereas the four curators tended to discuss these distinctions in relation to medium instability, classification, and technological convergence. The producers of AI-generated imagery, likewise, tended to approach generative AI technology more pragmatically in relation to workflows, image

manipulation, and evolving image-making practices. These differences in perspective were not absolute however, with considerable overlap existing across the individuals comprising the groups in my research sample.

Notably, during my discussions with the individual participants, attempts to answer the questions of whether photorealistic AI-generated images should be seen as photographs inevitably became inseparable from broader issues concerning what constitutes a photograph in the first place. Among the six participants who rejected the classification of photorealistic AI-generated images as photographs (PH1, PH2, PR2, PR3, PR4, CR1), all emphasized distinctions relating to how such images are produced, framing photography as either a physical process grounded in a mechanical apparatus or as maintaining a direct relationship to a real-world referent; something generative AI lacks. Three of these participants (PR2, PR4, CR1) grounded their views in the etymological definition of photography as "writing with light." For example, PR4 responded:

> It's another medium. I mean, it's not a photograph. It's a mimic of a photograph. A photograph is a drawing of light, and it's a statement of reality. This is a copy of reality that looks very similar.

CR1 expressed a similar view:

> It's not part of the same lineage, because photography in ancient Greek means writing with the sun… It's about using light to fix an image permanently. AI is not that. AI is more in the lineage of computer graphics.

In contrast to PR4 and CR1, who relied on the "writing with light" definition to draw a firm boundary around photography, PR2 invoked this definition in a more flexible manner. Noting that "if it's using light to create images, etymologically speaking, it's a photograph," they argued that this definition may continue to evolve over time. As they further explained:

> We will probably see photography go from pixels on a screen that are taken by a camera to pixels on a screen that are partially generated by AI, to maybe someday pixels on a screen that are entirely generated by AI. So I think that the definition of photography probably has room to expand.

A similarly flexible interpretation of the writing with light definition was expressed by PR1, who pointed to the shared reliance on pixel-based systems across both cameras and digital displays, noting that "everything is light… we're painting with light pixels... technically it's still writing with light." Taken together, the views expressed by PR1 and PR2 appeared to be anchored in the notion that digital photographs and AI-generated imagery may not be as materially or technically distinct as some individuals may assume.

A related though somewhat different position was expressed by CU3, who treated light-based capture as only one of several possible criteria for defining photography, while simultaneously positioning AI-generated imagery as a distinct form of image production that operates beyond traditional photographic processes. Acknowledging that AI is trained on the history of photography and is therefore "not completely divorced" from it, they described such systems as "emulation" technologies that simulate photographic outputs without engaging light-based capture. As they put it, the distinction between photorealistic AI-generated imagery and photography is "sort of an apples and oranges kind of comparison."

This distinction was echoed by six participants (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR3, CU2, CR1) across the four social groups who positioned photography as a mechanical process of capturing images, grounded in an indexical relationship to a real-world referent. For example, PH1 explained "photography has always been three things… the photographer, the instrument, and the subject," while PR1 maintained "photography has an element of it's being taken." For these six participants, AI images, whether photorealistic or not, lack this fundamental structure. CU2 expounded on the latter view stating:

> I'm wondering if it's almost a category error—that they look the same, but it's almost like parallel evolution, right? They are seemingly similar, but they come from different lineages and move toward different things. Because even when a photograph is, let's say, post-produced in some way, it's still dealing with a second-

> or third-order representation of something that was observed. An AI-generated image observes nothing. There is no observer in the creation of it.

Similarly, PR3 noted:

> One thing that connects painting and photography is the idea of the image. The image is that ethereal layer, separate from the object. When we have something in our mind's eye, that's an image. But as soon as the artist decides to make it into an object—whether they use ink, oil paint, or a camera to make a darkroom print or digital print—that's the image becoming an object. I'm not sure about artificial intelligence yet, because where is the object?

The ambiguous relationship that exists between photography and reality was raised by eight participants (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU2, CR1), especially the traditional photographers and producers comprising my research sample. For example, PR2 stated, "photographers have been manipulating pictures for as long as there have been pictures, and this just, to me, sounds like another way of doing it." Echoing this view, PR3 asserted:

> This idea of photography being a pure, truth form of art making, it's never been part of our lineage. Collage was an early form of processing, this idea of bringing two negatives together to make something look more real… the surrealists were very much manipulating the image right from the beginning… manipulation, AI, it's just in this long lineage.

Likewise, PR4 noted:

> Fashion and advertisement photography are already quite touched in Photoshop… this question has been there for a long time… The photograph serves only as a base image.

At the same time, for five of these participants (PH1, PH2, PR1, CU2, CR1), recognition of photography's ambiguous relationship with reality did not fully displace its enduring association with reality. As CU2 observed, "Even though we know that traditional photographs can be manipulated, there's still this idea of a representation of reality."

The contending perspectives outlined above point toward a tension between the participants' awareness of the constructed nature of photography and its enduring cultural framing as an evidential medium. This tension appeared across the responses of the producers of AI-

generated imagery, traditional photographers, curators, and the critic. However, it seemed to manifest itself differently in accord with the participants' professional orientations and their relationship with photographic practice. For example, the producers of AI-generated imagery and the traditional photographers more frequently emphasized photography's longstanding history of manipulation and technological mediation, often drawing on practical experience with editing, retouching, and digital workflows. Reflecting this perspective, PR3 noted:

> There's this idea of photography being a mechanical process. We can't discount how mechanical the art form is.

The four curators and the critic, on the other hand, discussed these tensions in relation to broader questions surrounding the shifting cultural status of photography itself. These individuals tended to emphasize that AI-generated imagery operates through fundamentally different procedures than photography. For example, CR1 argued:

> It's its own art form in the way that, like, cooking is its own art form, you know? It's not the same as photography. The process is totally different.

In contrast with their counterparts in my research sample who treated AI-generated imagery as fundamentally distinct from photography, five participants across three social groups (PH2, PR1, PR2, CU1, CU3) situated AI as evolving in tandem with photography's broader trajectory of technological change over time. For example, in noting that photography has always been at the cutting edge of technological innovation, PR1 emphasized that photorealistic AI-generated images remain dependent on photography's prior material and technical foundations. They went on to describe the gradual reduction in the physical or mechanical aspects of the photographic process over time, identifying AI as a "pivot point or fork in the road." Identifying earlier transitions, such as the move from analogue to digital, as reducing the materiality of photography while retaining elements of physical capture, they posited that we are at a historical juncture during which image-making is "no longer a physically led creation." For them,

photorealistic AI-generated imagery is merely extending this trajectory further by removing the physical foundation altogether.

Extending this line of reasoning, CU3 questioned which elements of the photographic process remain essential in the context of generative AI, where image production is no longer tied to physical capture:

> What's the important part of it? Is it the lens? Is it the optical thing? Is it the capture of light?… [AI] is an emulation technology… all of the technological systems that go around the production of the photographic image are no longer there.

This line of questioning led them to suggest that the differences introduced by AI cannot be fully understood through existing photographic frameworks alone. They suggested that rather than treating AI-generated imagery as an extension of photography in isolation, there is a need to acknowledge that generative AI systems operate through the convergence of multiple media, of which photography is only one component within this broader system:

> I think that we need a different kind of analysis around the technological aspects of the system and its social, political, and aesthetic implications… It's the convergence of all of these different types of emulation—across language, numbers, and aesthetic objects like video and film—that is key… if we're only looking at one, we're missing this other part… we might think we're talking about language models, but we're also talking about all these other things.

From this perspective, process alone does not provide a sufficient basis for defining photography in relation to AI-generated imagery because generative systems do not rely solely upon the physical and mechanical processes associated with the medium. This limitation is echoed in Wasielewski's (2024) claim that "the process by which a photograph is made may determine its form, but it does not define it" (p. 15). Put simply, despite process continuing to inform distinctions between photography and AI-generated imagery, it cannot, on its own, determine the conceptual boundaries between the two mediums.

This uncertainty was reflected across participant accounts of photography's evolving

definition, regardless of whether they were a producer of AI-generated images, a traditional photographer, a curator, or a critic, and was especially pronounced in the participants' descriptions of photography as undergoing a transitional moment in which its boundaries are being actively renegotiated. In the words of PR1:

> I think there's a strong discussion that needs to happen to redefine the difference—or whether there is one—and maybe even new words need to be made, because there isn't a clear differentiation, and we didn't have to have one before.

CU1 likewise stated:

> I think photography right now will go through a crisis of identity… but that's only because AI, in its sense as an art form and its relationship to photography, is still new. We're still navigating that. I think once we find ways to define it, or locate it somewhere, photography will regain its sense of identity.

According to this line of reasoning, despite not being understood as photographs in the classic sense, photorealistic AI-generated images can plausibly be situated within photography's broader trajectory of technological development because, as CR1 put it, "photography is a broad church."

Taken together, the perspectives set out above suggest that, across the four social groups comprising my research sample, the classification of AI-generated imagery remains unsettled, shaped by competing efforts to position these images as both within and beyond photography. This uncertainty also is reflected in the ways in which AI-generated images are described in practice. The participants drew on a range of terms to refer to these images, situating them within existing visual and technological frameworks. These terms can be broadly grouped into three overlapping categories: those emphasising computational processes, those that align such images with digital or artistic media, and those that position AI-generated images in relation to photography. These conventions, however, did not appear to neatly map across the four social groups comprising my research sample. Indeed, the producers of AI-imagery, traditional photographers, curators, and the critic often drew upon multiple and sometimes conflicting terminologies simultaneously.

The three participants (PR4, CU1, CU3) whose responses I categorized as falling into the computational processes grouping foregrounded the technical and generative aspects of AI-generated images. Specifically, these individuals tended to refer to such images as "data-generated images" (CU1), "AI-generated imagery" (CU3), or simply "AI images" (PR4). Such terms focus attention on the role of computation and machine learning, framing the images as an output of data-driven processes rather than a product of photographic capture.

The four participants (PH2, PR3, PR4, CU4) whose responses I categorised as aligning AI-generated images with digital or artistic media tended to use terms that situated AI-generated images within the broader domain of digital art, distancing such imagery from photography and, instead, associating it with broader artistic practices that incorporate the use of digital tools or hybrid media. Three participants, each from a distinct social group (PH2, PR4, CU4), described such images as "digital art," with PR4 also referring to them as "digital compositions using AI-generated images." PR3 meanwhile used terms such as "new media" and "intermedia" to describe these types of images.

The three individuals (PH1, PR3, CU3) comprising the third group positioned AI-generated images in relation to photography, using terms such as "photorealistic AI-generated images" (PH1), "computational photography" (CU3), and "AI-photography" (PR3).[33] Each of the latter terms retains a connection to photographic conventions while simultaneously exposing the difficulty of establishing a stable or widely accepted classification.

Four participants (PR1, PR3, CU3, CR1) expressed reservations about fixed terminology or highlighted the limitations of existing classifications. PR1, for instance, emphasised the absence of a clear or adequate vocabulary by which to meaningfully refer to AI-generated images, and CU3

[33] In using this term, PR3 expressed that the term "still feels quite clunky."

described a "spectrum of messiness" in how such images are understood. CR1 explained that, even when applying labels such as "AI-generated," these terms can feel insufficient:

> At various points I've put labels on the pictures themselves. So, I will label it AI-generated, but that feels like, excuse my French, but like pissing in the wind a bit, you know?

This difficulty in labeling was contextualized by PR3, who drew parallels with earlier moments in art history:

> The same thing happened in the '60s and '70s with video art. We had the Fluxus movement[34] using camcorders to make video art that is non-narrative—so these are not cinema, they're very short video pieces that kind of document performance. And, so, they were called films, but actually they are video art. And that took some time. That took, you know, years and decades for there to be a term for this type of artwork. We're in the middle of that right now with AI… we still don't have the vernacular for it.

Such challenges were further reflected in the participants' reactions to the emerging label "promptography." When asked whether they were aware of the term, CU1 responded, "no, that's gross," while other participants (PH1, PR1, CU2) expressed tentative reactions to the term without necessarily endorsing it as a stable or widely accepted label. For example, PR1 described promptography as "kind of cool," noting "I don't know that I love it, but it gets the point across." CU2 likewise noted, "I like that as a new word, yeah."

Overall, the accounts offered by the eleven individuals comprising my research sample suggest that, for them at least, the naming of photorealistic AI-generated imagery remains an ongoing and contested practice. Equally noteworthy is the observation that the differing ways in which the participants situated such images within, alongside, or beyond existing visual categories, did not neatly map onto the four social groups represented in this study.

Despite this instability, the four curators each pointed to practical motivations for naming

[34] For a detailed account of this movement, see Smith (1998).

and classifying AI-generated imagery. CU1, for example, argued that terms such as "AI-generated" were important because they communicate the image's source, materiality, and method of production, particularly within institutional and curatorial contexts where disclosure and transparency matter. Similarly, CU4 observed that while AI-generated images might broadly be categorized as digital art, from a curatorial or collections perspective this label does not go far enough in terms of describing the material and technical characteristics of the work. They noted that large institutions such as galleries and museums often have collections spanning multiple media, requiring more precise forms of classification for purposes of acquisition, cataloguing, storage, display, and research. As they explained:

> From a collection's standpoint, when we acquire artwork, we ask artists to fill out an intake form, so we have all the pertinent information… If the work is listed as a photograph, our general rule is to expand on that. Is it a digital print? Is it a Polaroid?… Saying something is a photograph on paper doesn't really describe what it is. That's such a generic term. A Polaroid and a silver plate are two different materials… They would have different needs with storage and long-term preservation... If you're thinking from a collection's standpoint, you want to include these things. Say you have this huge collection, and you're doing research, and you want to pull everything that's digital, or everything that's a photograph, or say you want to do an AI show, you need to be able to tag them, so they easily come up.

Despite all four curators emphasizing the importance of clearly distinguishing AI-generated images in some capacity, CU4 was the only one to discuss these concerns explicitly in terms of archival and collections-management. This said, both CU1 and CU4 did point out that even if photorealistic AI-generated images were to eventually be classified as photographs, further specification would still be required to account for their material and technical properties.

4.2 Authorship and Creative Agency

The ontological uncertainty surrounding photorealistic AI-generated images also extends to questions of authorship and creative agency. In addition to questions of what these images are, all participants in my research sample, to some degree, raised questions concerning who or what can

be said to have produced them. In practice, AI systems are used in a variety of ways, including generating complete images from text prompts, iterating on visual ideas, and integrating outputs into broader creative workflows. The participants adopted various overlapping positions in relation to differing contexts. Eight individuals (PH1, PH2, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU1, CU3, CU4) framed AI as a tool or instrument under human control, three (CU1, PH2, PR4) described it as a form of collaboration or co-creation, and six (PR3, CU1, CU2, CU3, CU4, CR1) positioned it as a broader socio-technical system embedded within existing cultural, technical, and institutional conditions.

These differing conceptions were often tied to the contexts in which participants described using AI systems. For instance, the five participants who discussed AI primarily in relation to practical applications within existing creative workflows (PH1, PH2, PR2, PR3, CU4) seemed to advance tool-based understandings of AI, whereas the three who mostly engaged with generative AI systems in creative or exploratory contexts (CU1, PH2, PR4) more often raised questions concerning authorship, collaboration, and creative agency.

A dominant, though qualified, position among a majority of participants (n=8) was the framing of AI as a tool or instrument. Frequently, this framing was complemented by emphasizing the continuity between existing photographic and digital practices. This view was represented across all four social groups comprising my research sample, although it was particularly prominent among producers of AI-generated imagery (n=3) and traditional photographers (n=2). For example, PR2 noted that Adobe Photoshop has long incorporated algorithmic image-editing tools, such as Content-Aware Fill, which was first introduced in Photoshop CS5 in April 2010 (see, ePHOTOzine, (2010)). For this individual, AI-driven features are not entirely novel, but rather extensions of existing workflows. Describing Content-Aware Fill, they stated:

> That is a tool, and I don't think it's a tool that people question... It's basically just taking one pixel and drawing from it—to the point now where we're able to say,

> replace the clouds or replace the sky in this with more aesthetic clouds… in that respect, it's a tool… AI is a tool in that process as well.

This position was echoed by PR3, who stated:

> It is absolutely a tool. Is it more sophisticated than a pencil? Yes. But it is a pencil that is able to write after I give it instructions.

In a similar manner, PH1 described AI as an instrument. They likened generative AI to electronic music, noting that such work has been produced since the 1970s and that complete musical productions can now be made using just a laptop while still maintaining creative value. Extending this analogy, they distinguished between different modes of engagement:

> But for me, for now, it's an instrument in how I interact with it. I mean, I'll make the parallel the same with music, where I listen to vinyl, but sometimes I just open Spotify and ask Spotify to make me a playlist, right?

This instrument-based view was reflected in PH1's own creative practice insofar as they reported using AI to assist with retouching tasks in post-production. Specifically, removing wrinkles from a shirt, or removing dust in film scans, processes that otherwise take hours to complete. In this context, AI functions as a tool for streamlining labour-intensive aspects of image production while remaining under the photographer's control. Similar uses were described by other participants who employed AI for such tasks as facilitating pre-production processes like storyboarding (PR2), supporting image selection and editing workflows (PH2), and assisting with exhibition space layout (PR3). The common thread running through the latter examples is a demonstration of how tool-based understandings of AI tend to be tied to its role in optimizing existing creative processes, particularly the mundane or tedious aspects of image production.

In describing AI as a tool, or add-on to existing photographic workflows, PH2 noted its inclusion in photo editing software, such as Lightroom and Photoshop, and suggested that AI could function as a collaborator, allowing users to bounce ideas and receive feedback from it, and in some cases, even use it as a mentor. Vacillation between tool and collaborator was expressed by

three other participants (PH2, PR4, CU1), each of whom articulated uncertainty about how authorship and creative agency should be attributed in the context of AI-generated imagery. For example, PR4 stated:

> It can be both. It can be a tool; it can be a collaborator. I mean, I don't have all the answers to this, because I… I feel the subject is quite broad. But I think it depends on the project you are creating, and what meaning and intention you want to give to that project.

PR4 further noted that they understand their work as being created in collaboration with AI tools, describing a process in which they develop fictional characters and narratives, using AI to give them a visual form.

CU1 related that whether AI is understood as a tool or collaborator depends on how it is used and framed within the artist's creative process. They described an undergraduate studio course on art and technologies they had observed as a graduate student in which AI was explored as an artistic medium. Reflecting on how students engaged with these systems, they stated:

> I would think of it as developing your own visual language, but a lot of times—and they are young artists, they're, like… 20 and under… and they just kind of relied on, like, whatever AI spouted out to them, and they're like, okay, this is my work. So, you're not really investigating deeper into this… AI spelled something out to you, you said, that's good enough… that's just their relationship with AI. It was focused on as a tool. I don't know… I don't think any of them were focusing on it as a collaborator…

Upon reviewing the transcript of our discussion, CU1 subsequently clarified their position, emphasizing that AI should be understood primarily as a technology that serves specific functions, rather than being reducible to categories such as tool or collaborator:

> It's just a technology. It does not matter if you frame the AI as a tool, collaborator, autonomous artist, or technology, it is a product. It is serving a function and fulfilling a need (is there a need for AI in culture?) The general need is optimizing or speeding up productivity. For artists, I have found there is a desire to experiment with it. I prefer to focus on artists who are critical of AI, the companies who manufacture it, and how we interface with it... I found that the artists who were keen to legitimize AI as an autonomous artist didn't question AI's ability, actions, and pseudo-intelligence enough.

In a related critique of the collaborator framing, PR3 rejected the notion that AI could meaningfully participate in collaborative authorship, emphasizing the absence of autonomy in such systems. Expounding on this critique, they indicated:

> I think it's really dangerous to call it a collaborator. I think collaborating with something that doesn't have a voice is really dangerous… These large language models, AI technologies, do not have the freedom to voice their opinion. In fact, they don't have an opinion. Their opinion is based off of my engagement with them, and the algorithms that the tech overlords use.

The claims presented above also revealed a notable point of convergence among the four curators comprising my research sample, all of whom resisted reductive categorizations of AI as simply either a tool or collaborator. Instead, they emphasized the complexity of these systems and the need for more nuanced forms of analysis. For example, CU2 stated:

> I'm not in the camp of saying it's just a tool. It is definitely not the same as just a tool—just use it and don't think about it… It is something we need to critically interrogate... This is a type of tool or a type of technology where the ownership lies and where the power lies is really important to know.

CU3 extended this assertion by emphasizing that AI is "being used in so many different ways," and likening efforts to draw boundaries around it to "trying to draw lines in sand on the beach." As they put it, "for me, it's less about a line than thinking, okay, these systems are here, what is the effect of them on the public?" CU4 echoed this line of thinking, resisting the framing of AI in binary terms and redirecting the discussion toward questions of use, intention, and ethics. Pointing to concerns around copyright, appropriation, and the conditions under which AI systems are employed, they maintained that "it's not really a black and white question." As CU1 succinctly put it, the more pressing question may be "what happens between the prompts?"

Taken together, the latter perspectives suggest that the curators within my research sample tended to view AI as a broader socio-technical system embedded within existing cultural, technical, and institutional conditions, and less as a discrete component of the creative process.

For these individuals, the key aspects of AI rest in how these systems operate in practice, including the conditions of their use, the intentions guiding their application, the transparency of their sources, and the power structures and ownership models underpinning their development and deployment. Were this view generalizable beyond my research sample, it would suggest that consideration of AI-generated imagery must extend beyond questions of individual authorship toward broader concerns regarding how AI systems are integrated into creative workflows and embedded within contemporary practices of image production. In other words, such considerations are best approached by viewing AI and AI-generated imagery as a technological assemblage, rather than as an individual medium existing outside of social relations.

All participants in my study alluded, to varying degrees, to the increasingly computational nature of contemporary photography, noting the existing inclusion of myriad algorithmic and AI systems in modern cameras, smartphones, image editing software, and digital production workflows. It is within this context that the individuals comprising my research sample viewed generative AI as an extension of trends already shaping contemporary image production—trends they expected would become increasingly integrated into everyday creative workflows. For example, PH1 suggested that AI would eventually become an essential part of the photographic process:

> I think it's just going to be part of the process, just like electricity is. You know, there was a time we didn't use electricity, but now electricity powers the battery on my camera, even my film camera… It powers my phone I take notes on, it powers my computer, or my scanner, or the printer. I think AI is just going to touch everything.

Likewise, in claiming that the traditional understanding of photography as a singular captured moment had started to shift prior to the mainstreaming of generative AI, CU3 maintained that contemporary photography already relies heavily on "machine learning and composite imaging and algorithmic structures in order to create an image." Echoing this view, CU4 remarked,

"If you're already working in any digital medium, it's almost inevitable that it [AI] will creep into your practice."

With AI increasingly embedded within photographic workflows, the participants often described these systems in terms of their practical advantages and their implications for creative authorship. For example, nine participants across three social groups (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU1, CU3, CU4) described AI as expanding creative capacity by enabling experimentation, accelerating workflows, and supporting new forms of visual production.

A partially overlapping group of eight participants comprising all four social groups (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, CU1, CU2, CR1) likewise expressed concern about these same capacities potentially undermining creative authorship. In so doing, these individuals pointed to such issues as diminished effort, overreliance on automated outputs, and the opacity of the inner workings of AI systems, all of which can obscure authorship and complicate claims of originality and ownership. These concerns were often articulated through the idea that generative AI constitutes a shortcut within the creative process. Despite acknowledging the speed and ease of use of AI systems as technically advantageous, six participants (PH1, PH2, PR2, PR3, CU1, CR1) expressed misgivings about the ability to rapidly generate outputs potentially reducing the need for sustained engagement or reflective decision-making. In line with this view, four individuals, including both photographers in my research sample (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR3), suggested that the use of AI may be perceived as a form of cheating the artistic process and diminishing ownership over the work. In the words of PH1:

> It's easier to cheat. I think if you work hard for something, if you struggle to achieve something, I think you have more ownership over it.

PH1's comments suggest that authorship may be tied, at least in part, to perception of labour, struggle, and sustained effort within the creative process. PH2 extended this view beyond

individual artworks to the level of artistic identity, questioning whether the use of AI shortcuts undermines the sustained practice and skill traditionally associated with becoming an artist:

> You know, you're trying to make a living as an artist, there is that level of speed, but then it comes into question whether you're a real artist or not, in quotations. Using this new tool, you haven't maybe necessarily put in the hardship, the sweat, the 10,000 hours to become this amazing artist.

At the same time, eight participants, including all four curators (PH1, PR1, PR3, CU1, CU2, CU3, CU4, CR1), suggested that the ever-increasing automation of image production may increase the perceived value of technical labour and materially grounded forms of media production, contributing to renewed interest in analogue photography and other craft-based artistic processes. For example, CU1 observed:

> I think there will be a greater emphasis on film and technique. I already see a lot of people reverting back to film.

PR1 likewise noted:

> The last two years specifically, everybody wants to work with the darkroom. Everybody wants to work with physical objects.

The perceived renewed interest in analogue processes was reflected in participants' own practices. For example, CR1, whose writing often focuses on emerging photographic technologies and innovation, described plans to photograph a football game on film, despite the technical challenges and limitations associated with analogue sports photography. As he remarked "you know, 10 years ago I would never, it would never even cross my mind to do that."

Two individuals in my research sample, CU2 and PR2, expressed concern about the marked increase in the volume of visual content being produced and circulated online as a result of the ease with which images can now be created using widely accessible digital and AI tools. They both expressed reservations about this shift leading to an over-saturation of AI-generated imagery. CU2, for instance, speculated that there is likely going to be "a lot of mediocre stuff being

put out at a far faster rate than was previously possible," and worried about "the complete loss of anything meaningful just by the flood of AI-generated content." Both CU2 and PR2 were each particularly apprehensive about the proliferation of easily produced images challenging existing standards of evaluation. Specifically, that works which may once have once been considered impressive or technically skilled becoming increasingly commonplace. These concerns give rise to further questions about how authorship and artistic merit are established in an environment characterized by abundance rather than scarcity.

Taken together, the observations reported above suggest that participants across the four relevant social groups broadly recognized both the opportunities and challenges associated with the increasing integration of AI into photographic practice. Photographers, producers, curators, and the critic often emphasized different aspects of these developments but no clear divisions emerged along occupational lines. Instead, their respective perspectives frequently overlapped, with individual participants expressing both enthusiasm for the creative possibilities afforded by AI and reservations about its implications for authorship, labour, and artistic value.

With the production of images becoming ever more accessible, all eleven participants positioned intention as a key distinction between work grounded in artistic meaning and work created merely for the sake of creating work.[35] According to this line of reasoning, the use of AI without an *a priori* conceptual or artistic rationale is dubious. In the words of CU4:

> It's about the intention and the process… If it's AI for AI's sake, or if it's a professional artist who's trying to incorporate it in their practice, that might be two different things.

Likewise, PR3 noted, the issue is not with the technology itself, but rather, "AI for the fetishization of AI;" that is, using AI "just because it is something new, something fresh," and not because it

[35] The connection between intention and artistic legitimacy is examined in Section 5.2

adds any creative value to the work. As they put it:

> The technology needs to mirror the theme… It can't just be, look, this is interesting, new technology, and I made photographs of flowers without really having a reason for it.

Seen in this light, the value of an art work depends on the intention guiding its creation and how that intention is carried through the process. In the accounts of seven participants (PH1, PR1, PR2, PR3, CU2, CU3, CU4), connections between intention, effort, and artistic value were frequently discussed in relation to photographic practices more broadly, with four individuals (PH1, PR2, CU3, CU4) situating these concerns specifically in relation to the widespread adoption of cellphone photography. As PR2 observed, a poorly lit and composed selfie may still qualify as an image, but not necessarily as art because "the idea of intent of work, of purpose, I think is going to be the differentiator." PH1 similarly argued that the artistic significance of an image depends not on the technology itself, but on the intention behind its use:

> The technology or the source that you use is important with your intent. So, if I use an iPhone, a digital camera, AI, or a camera from the 1920s, there needs to be intent behind that, and I think that's where I see AI come into play. Am I using AI as a shortcut because I'm lazy, or do I have the intent to create something new?

Consistent with the above perspectives regarding intention, effort, and artistic value, five participants representing producers, curators, and the critic (PR4, CU1, CU2, CU4, CR1) noted that producing compelling results from AI often requires sustained engagement and iterative refinement. As CR1 explained:

> You still have to have skill to make a good AI picture… you see a lot of stuff online, and it's like, you can just type in a one-sentence prompt and something brilliant comes out. That's not true, right? You often need to spend a long time perfecting the prompt, iterating on the image.

This idea of iterative refinement was reflected in PR4's description of their own creative process, which they described as involving the combining of outputs from several different AI systems in post-production software such as Photoshop. For this individual, the production of compelling AI-

generated imagery entails a multi-step process of iteration, selection, and refinement, through which authorship is exercised over the final image, rather than a simple, singular act of generation. As they explained, different AI models excel at different tasks, requiring them to selectively integrate and refine specific elements to achieve a desired result. In this regard, they argued that capturing a visually compelling image is only part of the process, with meaningful photographic work also involving image selection, refinement, and the construction of narrative.

Five participants representing both producers and curators (PR1, PR4, CU1, CU2, CU3) expressed frustration with the limitations of AI systems, noting that outputs do not always align with their intended results. These individuals acknowledged that, over time, improvements in image quality had mitigated some concerns but that other constraints persist, not the least of which are the built-in guardrails and biases that shape what can and cannot be generated. For example, CU3 and PR4 highlighted existing constraints surrounding the depiction of queer identities and communities within generative AI systems.[36] In addition, PR4, who has a Latin American background, described the presence of a strong North American and European bias in visual outputs as making it difficult to produce culturally specific AI-generated imagery. In response, they described experimenting with alternative terminology to achieve desired results. Some examples they provided included, prompting "cantina" instead of "bar" and avoiding terms like "party," which tended to produce colourful images of birthdays and balloons rather than nightlife scenes. Similarly, CU1 argued that, despite recent advances in image quality, AI-generated imagery continues to exhibit a characteristic "seamlessness" and lack of texture, resulting in images that "don't feel real." As such, the views expressed by PR1, PR4, CU1, CU2, CU3 about the limitation of AI systems, suggest that producing intended outcomes requires both iterative

[36] Neither participant connected these concerns to any one specific AI platform or model.

refinement and ongoing negotiation with their underlying constraints. This observation alludes to the partial and mediated nature of authorship in AI-generated image production.

Building on this premise, five participants across all four social groups (PH2, PR1, PR4, CU4, CR1) pointed out that while anyone can use generative AI to create visually compelling images, it is photographers who are best positioned to create work that reflects established photographic principles, such as composition, lighting, and visual storytelling. For example, CR1 noted:

> Photographers do have a little advantage when it comes to AI, because they understand lighting, composition, framing, and all that kind of thing… Photographers will have a better idea of what it is they would like to see from an AI image.

Similarly, PH2 observed that photographers are often more familiar with the terminology required to achieve specific results through prompting, such as references to particular lenses or lighting conditions. This was echoed by PR4, who reported drawing upon their background in photography, particularly their understanding of composition and lighting, to achieve AI-generated images that align with their intended outcomes. Three of these five participants (PR1, PR4, CR1) also highlighted the role of aesthetic judgement in shaping outcomes. As PR1 stated:

> If you have good taste, immediately, I feel like you're better at using the tool. If someone doesn't know what a good photo looks like, they can't use the tool to make a good photo.

These accounts suggest that the production of photorealistic AI-generated imagery is made easier by an AI user's photographic expertise. Specifically, advanced levels of knowledge about technique and visual conventions enable them to direct, evaluate, and refine AI-generated outputs in ways that are more likely to align with intended artistic or visual outcomes.

In sum, the perspectives presented in this section suggest that authorship of AI-generated image production is contingent, negotiated, and context dependent. Notably, these perspectives

spanned across the four social groups represented in this study. Although participants sometimes emphasized different aspects of AI-generated image production, considerable overlap was observed across the groups. Rather than being understood as fixed or determined solely by the medium in question, authorship was frequently described in relation to the ways in which AI systems are used, interpreted, and integrated into creative practice. This said, when compared to the other social groups within my research sample, the curators more frequently challenged characterizations of AI as either a tool or collaborator, instead emphasizing that its role depends on the context in which it is used and the broader socio-technical conditions surrounding its development and deployment.

Across the range of views expressed by all participants, intention, effort, expertise, and sustained engagement emerged as recurring considerations in the production and evaluation of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, much as they have long been in traditional photography. Taken together, these observations suggest AI-generated image production was not perceived as contributing to a disappearance of authorship, rather they suggest that authorship is undergoing a process of reconfiguration through changing relationships between human agency, computational systems, and contemporary creative workflows.

4.3 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has presented the first part of the findings from the analysis of the participant interviews, focusing on the ontology and authorship of photorealistic AI-generated imagery. Collectively, the reported observations illustrate the complex and contested ways in which the individuals comprising my research sample understood such imagery in relation to photography, creative practice, and human agency. The remaining findings are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Observations on the Artistic Legitimacy of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery

The discussion in this chapter presents the findings emerging from the second part of my analysis of the information gathered from the interviews. Specifically, it focuses on participant observations regarding the assessment of the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery. The discussion in the first section examines participants' skepticism toward and/or their acceptance of generative-AI within artistic and creative practice. The discussion in the second section then examines participants' evaluations of the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery within the field of fine art photography. Section three concludes the discussion.

5.1 Skepticism toward versus Acceptance of AI-Generated Images

Despite recognizing the many potential benefits of AI for artistic practice, all eleven participants in my study described generative AI as deeply polarizing. This was reflected in the language they used including such terms and phrases as, "very black and white" (CU4), "polarizing" (CR1, PR2, PR4), "a lightning rod conversation" (CU3), and its framing in oppositional terms such as "with us or against us" (CU3). In remarking about the divisiveness of AI, CU2 described the reactions to an exhibition containing AI-generated works they had recently curated as spanning from, "this is amazing, I've never seen anything like it," to "dammit, I want to smash it to pieces!" When it came to their own personal views about AI, every participant seemed hesitant to articulate a definitive or fixed position. Indeed, in my discussions with these individuals, I sensed a certain sense of ambivalence and ongoing negotiation in their perspectives. PH1's statement that, "I don't want to be the person who gives a definite answer, because I could debate about it with myself for days" and PH2 assertion that , "I'm a little uncertain how I feel about it. I'm 50-50 so far" aptly reflect the views of their counterparts in my research sample.

In reflecting upon their positions seven participants across three social groups (PH1, PH2,

PR2, PR3, PR4, CU2, CU3) posited that artists tend to hold more negative views toward AI than members of the broader public, attributing this perception to the concerns outlined earlier in Section 4.2 (i.e., perceived reductions in artistic intent and effort, the ease with which images can be generated, anxieties surrounding originality and authorship).[37] Five of these individuals (PH2, PR2, PR3, CU2, CU3) along with two others (PR1, CR1) suggested that technology- or digital media-focused spaces, such as maker spaces, media labs, or incubators, tend to foster more openness toward AI technologies than analogue-oriented artistic communities, such as those centred around traditional darkroom photography, painting, or sculpture practices. These participants attributed such openness to the exploratory and education nature of these environments, where experimentation, discussion, and critical engagement with emerging technologies are often encouraged rather than discouraged.

This said, CU2 and CU3 maintained that openness toward AI was not consistent across all digital media centres, noting specific examples of video- and photography-oriented spaces where resistance to these technologies remained. CU3 also expressed concern about such openness becoming increasingly strained by broader cultural and institutional tensions surrounding AI. Drawing comparisons to the historical reception of media art and computer art in the late twentieth century,[38] they claimed that AI risks producing a similar schism within the cultural sector that separates practitioners working with these technologies from broader artistic communities; an issue they believed was amplified by social media. As they put it:

> That's what I think risks happening right now… It's either with us or against us, right? There is a purity test… The physics of social media lead to a world being built around that kind of thing… of having to take a stand and being for one side or another.

[37] It seems plausible that artists may be more attuned to these concerns than non-artists because these issues directly impact upon their professional and creative practices.

[38] For overviews of this history see, Youngblood (1970), Smith (1998), and Lovejoy (2004).

CU3 further expressed concern about divisions surrounding acceptable technological practices potentially weakening opportunities for constructive dialogue and knowledge sharing across artistic communities.

All four curators likewise described cultural spaces and galleries as environments typically open to experimentation with new technologies. CU1, for example, described art galleries as educational spaces that create opportunities for public discussion and critical engagement around emerging media and technologies such as AI and non-fungible tokens (NFTs).[39] CU4 similarly noted:

> My colleagues and I work in an art gallery, so we are used to seeing people experiment with different media… we're pretty accepting of it. But from an administrative side, in an office setting, people are either happy to use it or dead against it. There is a clear divide from an office culture side of things.

Taken together, the above findings suggest that, at least within my sample group, attitudes toward AI varied across artistic contexts rather than neatly along occupational lines. In this regard, skepticism toward generative AI was appeared to be shaped more so by the contexts in which these technologies were encountered and discussed than by a simple acceptance or rejection of AI-generated work.

This said, the ever increasing sophistication of AI systems coincides with growing uncertainties about their broader social, cultural, and economic implications (Crawford, 2021; Weidinger et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024). Such uncertainty was evident in the fear, anxiety, and unease about AI technologies articulated by nine participants (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU2, CU3, CR1) across the four social groups comprising my research sample. Notably, the sources of their concerns varied considerably. For some (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU3)

[39] An NFT is a blockchain-authenticated digital asset, often associated with digital artworks and collectibles, that is used to verify authenticity and ownership. See, Chohan (2024).

the fear centred around employment, artistic identity, and the potential displacement of creative labour. This was especially so for the photographers and producers in my research sample. For example, PH2 stated, “It’s a little nerve-wracking in the sense that I’m just like, man, am I going to have a photography career in the next five years?” Similarly, PR4 noted, “I have the same concerns about AI being this threat of you losing your job, not only in photography, but in everything, like in bureaucracies and lawyers and you know, it’s… it’s quite scary.”

Other participants (PR1, PR3, CU3, CR1) expressed discomfort with the uncanny realism of AI-generated imagery and video, and with the rapid pace with which these systems are advancing. In this regard, CU3 observed:

> The photo’s relationship to reality has been undermined slowly or quickly, depending on how you want to see it, for quite a while now with the advent of all kinds of digital technologies that allow for image manipulation, but this, I think for many, many people, because of the quickness that it’s crossing the uncanny valley, feels quite alarming.

Likewise, CR1 stated, “It’s just that kind of uncanniness… people don’t like how it’s an imitation of human life… I think people just don’t like it, you know, it kind of gives them the ick.” Five participants (PH1, PH2, PR2, CU2, CU3) suggested that fear surrounding AI was shaped, at least in part, by uncertainty and limited public understanding of how these technologies function.

Four participants, (PR2, PR4, CU3, CR1), suggested that beyond artistic communities, public reactions to AI-generated work appears to be trending in a negative direction. As CU3 explained, “there’s also a tide turning right now, in this sort of slop era… like feeling a visceral reaction against it.” In describing public reactions to their own work, PR4 stated:

> At the beginning it was pure curiosity, because I started in a moment when probably not many people were using it… But it has become more hostile… I think as people get more used to it, then I feel like the project doesn’t impress as much as before.

Reflecting on reader responses to AI-related reporting, CR1 summed up the situation as follows:

> AI is very unpopular. It’s become so obvious that if you write a story about AI, it’s

> predictable what a lot of the reaction will be… a lot of what the comments will be… They hate it… They've stolen people's work.

Seven participants, including three producers and three curators (PR2, PR3, PR4, CU1 CU2, CU3, CR1) noted that negative reactions are often expressed through anger or hostility, rather than reasoned or deliberate critique. According to CU2:

> It feels that the anger doesn't even come from whether it's aesthetically pleasing, but because they can see that there was AI-generation involved, and that instantly shuts everything, all other critical faculties down… It's not just people who are sort of laying out an argument against it in a rational way, it's a very emotionally charged conversation.

PR2 likewise observed that:

> Anything that involves AI is automatically evil. As soon as the word AI is attached to it, it becomes evil, and that does seem to be the dominant opinion.

This language was echoed almost verbatim by PR3 who stated, "It's part of the overall judgmental skew of AI, that it's automatically an evil tool."

A detailed account of how these tensions play out in practice was provided by CU3, who teaches studio courses in fine art. They described a marked shift in their students' attitudes toward AI over a relatively short period. Specifically, whereas earlier cohorts were open to experimentation, more recent students were more likely to refuse to engage with AI tools altogether.[40] As CU3 explained, AI has become increasingly taboo in the classroom, making it difficult to introduce in a casual or exploratory way. They reported that part of this hostility appeared to stem from the real or perceived ethical issues surrounding AI. Reflecting on this classroom experience, CU3 noted a disconnect between the arguments students articulate and the emotional intensity underlying them:

> I think what I'm hearing and what they say, and the emotional quality underneath

[40] During the process of drafting this chapter, my thesis supervisor informed me that he has observed a similar trend in two graduate-level communication and media studies seminars he teaches for which he had been including a component involving experimenting with AI.

> it, are not quite the same… For instance, in the classes, the young people are bringing up environmental issues a lot. I literally had one of the discussions finish with a student, who is very passionate, stand up and yell at another student for killing people with AI. Like, that's never happened in all of my years of teaching.

They went on to express concern that a lack of meaningful discussion around the technology may produce a chilling effect on open engagement and knowledge exchange:

> It's just fascinating… this is really quite an important transformation that's going on in the world, and it's affecting the future of culture. We're in a university. Shouldn't we be, like, deeply engaging with this and figuring out what it means?... We will continue to want to play in these spaces, but we won't be able to have constructive conversations. They will be either demonized or ostracized a little bit, so all of that knowledge which could be shared more widely won't really flow in the same ways.

A key area of concern raised by all eleven participants centered on related ethical considerations. Across the interviews, participants raised concerns spanning from environmental impacts to the violating of intellectual property rights to biases in outputs to the black-box nature of algorithms to job loss to deepfakes to the erosion of human connection to non-consensual sexual depictions to child exploitation to the concentration of power and wealth. For example, CU2 described the practices of large AI corporations in relation to the use of copyrighted material as involving "straight up theft in many cases." CR1 suggested that, within their own reporting and readership, debate surrounding the violating of intellectual property in the gathering of data to train AI systems had largely shifted from where it was a few years ago, with such practices increasingly treated as an established fact rather than an open question. As they explained:

> When I cover an AI model, I don't really talk about the training anymore. The issue of training data doesn't feel as relevant as it was because I think everyone knows—and this is why AI is so unpopular—everyone knows that they have ridden roughshod over copyright.

A similar concern was expressed by PR3, who emphasized the difficulty artists face in protecting their work online:

> There's no way to protect our images. Our websites are controlled by companies

> that may opt in on our behalf… The internet itself was always pro-democratic and non-hierarchical, meaning it was supposed to be everyone's feeding ground. But I think AI has unfairly used published work, both written and image based, without the consent of its authors.

Concerns surrounding consent and compensation were particularly prominent among the producers of AI-generated imagery and traditional photographers in my research sample. PR2, for instance, suggested that artists should have the ability to opt-in or opt-out of training datasets, while also receiving compensation when their work is used:

> If I could opt-in to having my pictures in a dataset, even if I'm getting a fraction of a penny for every 10,000 images that get generated, to have some sense of compensation for my work being used in training, I think that's something that absolutely should be there.

Similarly, PR3 stated, "number one, I wish there was a way that we could either opt-in or opt-out, because of the way the government has failed to regulate fair use on the internet."

Five participants (PH2, PR3, CU1, CU3, CR1) expressed concerns relating to the concentration of corporate power and financial influence surrounding AI technologies. Comparing the contemporary AI industry to earlier periods of digital imaging, CU3 argued that companies such as Meta, Google, and OpenAI represent "some of the largest concentrations of wealth the world has ever seen." Paralleling this concern, CR1 noted:

> The amount of money that's being spent on it, and the way it's being shoved down everyone's throat via advertising and sponsors… and you know, the frankly obscene amount of money that is being invested into it… I think that rubs people the wrong way.

In response to the ethical concerns raised during our discussions, the participants in my study outlined a range of measures they believed could help mitigate some of the risks associated with AI technologies. These included calls for stronger regulation around the use of copyrighted material and personal data, opt-in or opt-out systems for training datasets, compensation for artists whose work is used in training algorithmic and AI systems, improved transparency and metadata

systems, greater accountability for technology companies, and increased public and artistic engagement with how these systems function and are governed.

CU2 rejected the notion that regulation necessarily inhibits innovation, stating, "there definitely needs to be legislation," while also asserting that artists and cultural workers should play a role in shaping these policies. They noted that their organization is already participating in a broader arts and culture consortium engaged in discussions surrounding AI, explaining that:

> Arts and culture people [should be] at the table for these discussions on policies and legislation, not just to advocate for how to protect our field, but also as a mode of thinking about these technologies that is not about financialization, but about the social and human aspects of the technologies.

However, not all participants were optimistic about the likelihood of meaningful regulation. Reflecting on the scale and economic influence of the AI industry, CR1 remained skeptical, stating:

> I guess I'm a bit of a realist. I don't think they are ever going to regulate the AI industry because it's huge… its propping up the American economy right now, and you know, there's too much money invested into the AI industry for any sort of regulation.

Likewise, CU3 stated:

> It's really difficult to imagine any regulatory system that would be able to capture and figure it out… do we need, like ingredients lists and metadata? You know, like food and drug regulation-style things for images that would put things into the metadata, that would help us all… but, I mean, it's such a fluid system.

Meanwhile, CU4 argued that it should be up to artists and galleries to police themselves, stating:

> Like I said, I'm concerned about the copyright infringement, where the reference images are coming from, but I think it's up to the artists and the gallery to ensure that they're not copying someone else's work or intellectual property… Other than that, I can't see there being any restrictions put on it. We don't put restrictions on other mediums, so it would be weird to put restrictions on AI art.

Three participants (PR1, CU3, CR1) pointed to issues of transparency, provenance, and the ability to distinguish AI-generated imagery from other forms of visual media. PR1, for instance,

suggested metadata or verification systems "almost like how you would do an NFT back in the day, or a blockchain," and in spite of being skeptical of their effectiveness, CR1 pointed to existing initiatives such as C2PA[41] and Google SynthID.[42]

Finally, both CU2 and CU3 emphasized that meaningful critique of AI technologies requires active engagement with how these systems function in practice, arguing for greater technical literacy and experimentation alongside broader public discussion surrounding their use.

Overall, what emerged from the interviews is a sense that debates surrounding AI-generated imagery reflect broader social tensions pertaining to technological change, labour, authorship, trust, and the growing role of AI within everyday life. Despite most participants (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU1, CU3, CU4) emphasized the creative potential and inevitability of AI technologies, all participants expressed concern regarding the artistic, cultural, economic, and ethical, implications flowing from them. Such concerns were described as being particularly acute among artists and creative practitioners writ large. At the same time, the perspectives shared by the participants suggest that tensions involving copyright, consent, artistic labour, and the future of creative work are not static and continue to evolve alongside the rapid development and increasing visibility of AI technologies within everyday cultural and professional contexts. As such, debates surrounding AI-generated imagery frequently extend beyond the images themselves toward broader concerns about how AI technologies are integrated into contemporary society. It also merits noting that, despite my not asking the participants about specific ethical concerns, the issues mentioned above repeatedly emerged organically across the interviews, often

[41] Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA) is an industry initiative focused on developing open technical standards intended to help establish the provenance, authenticity, and editing history of digital media content. See, C2PA (2026).

[42] SynthID is a digital watermarking and content identification system developed by Google DeepMind that is designed to help identify and track AI-generated media content. See, *SynthID* (2026).

spontaneously. This points to the saliency, at least among the individuals comprising my research sample, of ethical considerations in shaping how AI technologies are understood and evaluated.

5.2 Artistic Legitimacy of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery

In our discussions, the participants spoke of evaluating the legitimacy of art works using multiple overlapping criteria simultaneously, including the visibility of human involvement within the work itself, whether through technical skill, material labour, artistic restraint, or evidence of sustained creative engagement. Intentionality, likewise, emerged as one of the most consistent lenses through which artistic legitimacy was evaluated, with all eleven participants explicitly referencing concepts such as intent, purpose, meaning, or conceptual direction when describing what makes an image worthy of being taken seriously. Regardless of which social group they were a part of, the participants in my research sample frequently reported evaluating the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery through similar criteria. Two principal considerations emerged from these discussions:

1. Whether, and to what extent, photorealistic AI-generated imagery could satisfy these evaluative criteria in ways that were commensurate with traditional artistic media; and
2. Whether something essential was perceived as absent from AI-generated images.

With respect to the first consideration, the individuals comprising my research sample broadly agreed that photorealistic AI-generated imagery can satisfy these evaluative criteria to a level comparable with traditional artistic media. To this end, five participants (PR3, PR4, CU1, CU2, CU4) pointed to examples of AI-generated images, photorealistic and otherwise, being accepted into prominent exhibitions, competitions, and institutional collections as evidence that such images are already capable of satisfying many existing artistic criteria. CU2, for example, pointed to instances in which AI-generated images had won photography competitions, suggesting that audiences must have found something meaningful or compelling in those images before

learning how they were produced. Similarly, PR4 reflected on the inclusion of their own photorealistic AI-generated work within a prominent international exhibition focused on photography, noting that the exhibition itself functioned as a form of institutional recognition, even as the response to the work remained polarized. As they put it, "it's like a stamp of legitimacy." Notably, when viewed through Bourdieu's (1984) account of cultural production, this observation illustrates how recognition by established artistic institutions may confer symbolic capital upon works whose legitimacy remains contested.

In spite of acknowledging the potential of photorealistic AI-generated imagery to be evaluated as artistically legitimate, nine participants across all social groups (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR3, PR4, CU2, CU3, CU4, CR1) suggested that once viewers become aware of how images are produced, AI-generated imagery is subjected to a different level of scrutiny than traditional artistic media. This, they claimed, often leads to audiences placing greater emphasis on questions of intentionality, labour, and emotional connection than they do for traditional media. Drawing comparisons to earlier debates surrounding digital art, CU4 explained that AI-generated work often requires additional justification or defence in ways that more established artistic media do not:

> Whereas, I think, depending on the AI art, you would still have to defend it, because I can see a lot of people in the public just being like, oh, well, that's not art, it's just AI. They will think how easy it is for them to use it.

Elaborating on this phenomenon, PR4 noted that audiences approach AI-generated imagery through a distinct interpretive framework:

> Every medium you see, you judge it from the space that—you know it's a painting, you know it's a photograph, and you know it's AI. So, from that position, you also create certain value and a certain type of reading the image.

Similarly, PH2 observed that audiences do not typically place the same emphasis on production methods when evaluating more traditional artistic media as they do when evaluating AI-generated images:

> Generally speaking, when it comes to art, you're not fully like, oh well, this person used… you may ask, was it film? Was it digital? Was it acrylic? You know, that sort of stuff. You're not really concerned about how they created it.

Echoing the perspectives about authorship discussed in Section 4.2, concerns surrounding ease of use, automation, and accelerated production reappeared in our discussions of artistic legitimacy. All eleven participants referenced AI's speed, accessibility, or efficiency in some form, with eight participants across all social groups (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, CU1, CU2, CR1) connecting these qualities to concerns about labour, effort, creative discipline, or the perceived value of AI-generated work. In line with approaches oriented toward other forms of art, these participants associated the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery with sustained effort, technical discipline, or prolonged creative engagement, and viewed automation as potentially undermining these qualities. As PH2 explained, "You have to work hard to create something amazing, whereas AI kind of debunks that."

At the same time, CR1 cautioned against reducing AI-generated imagery to the simplistic notion of "typing a sentence" and instantly producing finished artwork. As they put it:

> I think it's even worse than that, because people are just like, 'oh, you just put one sentence into it, and it popped out…' There was a Coca-Cola ad that appeared this Christmas, and you know, the artists who made the ad put out a statement saying, 'oh, you know we worked really hard on this and that got left out of the room,' and it was like, 'oh, I wrote a sentence, it was so hard!' And it's like, they probably did work really hard on it, you know? In fact, I'm sure they did.

Within this line of reasoning, all eleven participants framed intention and conceptual engagement as key differentiators between generic AI-generated outputs and more meaningful AI-generated artwork. As CU2 stated:

> It's totally possible to have, with a few prompts, maybe a few tweaks, to have a perfectly serviceable image that you can put on top of your blog posts… but to create an image that potentially has the same emotional resonance as, for instance, a painting, takes a lot of work.

To this end, CU3 described encouraging their students to think about art less in terms of "good" and "bad," and to, instead, ask, "what is it [the art work] trying to do, and how successful does it get in trying to do that?" In elaborating on this perspective, they drew connections to conceptual art traditions of the twentieth century, stating:

> It's not necessarily about craft. Going all the way back to [Duchamp's] urinal, it's about the artist's intent. (CU3)

Similarly, CU2 framed artistic evaluation through intentionality and communicative purpose, explaining that artistic legitimacy involves the ability "to discern some sort of intentionality in the image making." Here, they asked:

> What is it trying to do? What does it actually do? How does it resonate, either on an intellectual or on an emotional level? Often, we believe, or I believe, it's possible to appreciate and respect work even without necessarily liking it, but purely because you can understand what an artist was trying to do and how they wanted to connect with an audience.

Likewise, CU4 emphasized the importance of intentionality, contextual framing, and conceptual engagement in deciding whether to select work for exhibition or acquisition into their gallery's permanent collection. They explained that rather than assessing art works solely through technical execution or aesthetic appearance, curatorial evaluation involves considering the artist's broader motivations, themes and process:

> We would look at the artist's intent and the execution of the work, the quality, and we'll read their bio and artist statement… The artist statement is there to support the work, so it would give us some context and background information of the work. It would tell us more about their process, and their intent, or the thematic of the series…

Beyond intentionality, eight participants (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU4, CR1) associated artistic legitimacy with process, labour, originality, and visible forms of human engagement in the creation of the work. This perspective was particularly prominent among the traditional photographers and producers in my research sample. These individuals tended to reference

concepts such as effort, technical decision-making, material labour, or artistic control when describing what they considered to be meaningful artistic practice. For example, PR1 emphasized the importance of the artistic process itself, arguing:

> The process is really important. If you watch Jackson Pollock build a painting, you understand why it is unique and interesting.

PR2 also referenced Pollock when discussing the relationship between artistic value and perceived technical simplicity, remarking, "You look at something like a Kandinsky or a Pollock, I could do what Jackson Pollock does, but yet, some people pay millions of dollars for it." While expressed colloquially, PR2's comment offers an apt synopsis of the views participants shared with me about the relationship between artistic value, visible labour, technical difficulty, and public perception of skill.

Two participants (PR3, CU4) referenced Barnett Newman's (1967) Voice of Fire as another example of how artistic labour and significance are not always immediately visible to viewers. Reflecting on their experience encountering this piece at the National Gallery of Canada, PR3 explained:

> It looks ridiculous on the screen, but then you get to experience it in a real space, and you go, oh shit, like someone physically made this object that, yes, perhaps a 5-year old could have printed or painted, because it's really just two colours, three bands, but its scale, its size, it's labour…

This point was further expounded upon in the context of photography by CU4, who explained that audiences often underestimate the level of skill involved in creating gallery-worthy photographs. Reflecting on their experience working in a commercial gallery, they stated:

> I found that a lot of people felt like painting was more valuable because they assumed it took more skill, and they would see photography as something they can do easily. They wouldn't see the skill in taking a successful photograph. They would never be able to take some of these photographs, it's a shame they couldn't see that… They have cameras and phones, so they think, why would I pay this much for a photograph. It was so frustrating. I don't think people realize the difficulty of

> taking a beautiful photograph with light and composition and an interesting subject matter.

Another factor informing assessments of artistic legitimacy was storytelling and communicative engagement. Seven participants across all social groups (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR4, CU2, CU3, CR1) explicitly referenced concepts such as stories, messages, narratives, or conceptual angles when describing meaningful artistic practice. As CR1 stated, "art is about human stories." Echoing this view, PR4 stated, "There's something that makes one photograph standout, or one story stand out, or one concept standout, and that's the person behind it." In discussing how they evaluate photographs, PH2 explained:

> I'm looking at the significance of the story that's trying to be told by the person that took the image… I mean, just kind of looking at how they're trying to tell that story, whatever that story is, which will either resonate with me or not resonate with me.

Emotional resonance was also frequently emphasized as a key criterion for assessing artistic legitimacy, with ten participants describing meaningful artworks as those capable of provoking emotional responses, intellectual reflection, discomfort, curiosity, or a sense of human connection. For example, CU3 stated:

> for me, it's something that makes you feel something… that kicks off a cycle of interrogation into thought… Something can be just, so one dimensional that, it's not bad necessarily, but it doesn't endure… But stuff that keeps this cycle between an emotive response and an aesthetic experience and a sort of reflective one, that's where, to me, the most successful works are. Things I've seen decades ago, I still think about…

For PR4, emotional resonance was associated with ambiguity, tension, or discomfort. They explained that in taking successful photographic portraits:

> What makes it interesting is when [the subject] starts being a little bit uncomfortable with you, and then suddenly they might show an insecurity. It's not clearly visible, but it's an edge and a combination between a certain happiness and an uncomfortably that you cannot stop looking at.

According to CR1, an image is worth writing about "if it pops, if it stops you in your tracks."

Notably, no participant described artistic legitimacy as residing solely within the image itself. Rather, they all emphasized the importance and role of context, presentation, institutional framing, and interpretive environments in shaping how artworks are understood and evaluated. Indeed, seven participants across photographers, producers, and curators (PH1, PH2, PR3, PR4, CU1, CU2, CU4) specifically referenced galleries, museums, exhibition spaces, or curators when discussing how artistic legitimacy is established. In the words of PH2:

> It all depends on context, right? Like, if it's in the context of a gallery, and it's an exhibition, that's what I'm looking at. If it's social media, or on the internet, or on somebody's website, I'm looking at it totally different, you know what I mean?

To this end, galleries and museums were frequently described as institutions that shape audience expectations and confer legitimacy onto artworks. Reflecting on the authority associated with major art institutions, CU4 explained:

> If you went to the National Gallery and saw a painting, I feel like it would hold some importance… you would have a little bit, maybe, more respect for it, because you're like, oh, they have all this knowledge and expertise in this space, and they've told me this is important.

CU1 agreed with this observation, stating:

> People who especially don't understand art look to institutions to make those decisions… it does legitimize and normalize it for the greater public… It's an institution, that's kind of what it's meant to do.

PR3 further reflected on the role of curators and curated exhibitions in shaping artistic legitimacy, emphasizing the importance of contextual and historical interpretation and distinguishing these forms of institutional validation from more public-facing exhibitions such as photography competitions. As they explained:

> I think that's why we have curators. A curators' role is to look at work holistically and to understand its place within the lineage of history. Competitions do shape public perception, but I think they do so bluntly and not with much nuance… I'm always going to look at the curated shows as like, this has a bit more depth to it.

Ultimately, no participant reduced artistic legitimacy to any single or universal framework, or as PH2 put it, "obviously art is subjective." Taken together, however, these observations further align with Bourdieu's (1984) account of cultural production, in which artistic legitimacy is shaped through struggles over symbolic capital and the authority to define what constitutes legitimate art. In this context, galleries, museums, and curators were understood by participants as possessing particular authority to confer recognition and influence how artworks are evaluated, despite the subjective and contested nature of artistic legitimacy itself.

Reflecting on the acceptance of their own photorealistic AI-generated work within the broader art community, PR4 suggested that the significance of the work stemmed from the broader conceptual questions it engaged with, particularly those surrounding representation and visibility of marginalized communities. Discussing the curatorial framing surrounding their AI-generated work appearing in a photography exhibition, PR4 explained:

> I think they used my work to put it as a question. Is this technology going to help give visibility to certain stories that have been invisiblized?

As with other forms of art, the human element remained central to how eight participants (PH1, PH2, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, CU1, CR1) reported evaluating the legitimacy of AI-generated imagery. This view was particularly prominent among the traditional photographers and producers of AI-generated imagery, who identified the perceived absence of human presence and lived experience—particularly in relation to emotional connection, vulnerability, and the sense of human experience existing behind the work itself—as a notable limitation in AI-generated imagery. To this end, five participants (PH1, PR1, PR2, CU1, CR1) reported often struggling to feel emotionally connected with AI-generated images in the same way they do with traditional artistic media. For example, despite using AI in their own creative practice, PR1 stated:

> I think if I can tell it's an AI image, it means almost nothing to me, which is weird. I didn't expect that.

CU1 expressed a similar sentiment, arguing that AI-generated imagery often lacks the emotional and cultural depth they associate with meaningful artistic practice:

> It lacks texture… an emotional texture, a cultural texture… And that's why I refer to it as a sterileness, because I'm like, where's the personality? Where's the people? Where's the heart? Where's our understanding? What am I getting from this? That's what I love about art, and it's such cliché thing now, it's the humanity.

On the other hand, four participants (PH1, PR2, PR3, PR4), most notably three of the four producers of AI-generated imagery, questioned the assumption that AI-generated imagery was inherently incapable of emotional resonance or meaningful human expression. While these participants acknowledged that AI-generated images may be interpreted differently than traditional photographs, they maintained that emotional responses to such images are possible, particularly when viewers engage with the artist's intentions, the image's aesthetic qualities, or the broader contexts in which the work is presented. With this in mind, PH1 cautioned against dismissing AI-generated imagery outright, stating:

> I'm going to keep an open mind about it. I mean, I hate to be the person that… I can't be the person that just says no, right? That there's no emotion, that it'll never happen, because it will.

PR3 likewise dismissed the idea that AI-generated images could not produce an emotional response, "You know, an emotional response to only non-AI imagery would be hypocritical, because much of my own work uses AI technology." Similarly, PR2 argued that certain forms of emotional resonance associated with photography, particularly in relation to landscape imagery, could already be reproduced through AI systems:

> You know, what makes a landscape emotional is often the lighting, the colour, the composition, and that's something that I think AI can do as well, if not, in some cases, better than a human photographer.

PR2 was quick to add that they, nonetheless, still see contemporary AI-generated portraits as lacking this emotional connection:

> But when it comes to portraiture, there is still something missing in AI-generated portraits. It's very hard to put into words. If you look at a really well-done portrait, like a Karsh portrait… he has found some way of capturing who that person is… whatever it is in that that makes it work, I'm not seeing in AI-generated images. They still feel kind of flat and lifeless.

Taken together, the views expressed by the individuals comprising my research sample suggest that the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery does not reside in any single technical, aesthetic, or material property of the image itself. Instead, artistic legitimacy is understood as emerging through overlapping considerations relating to intentionality, emotional resonance, creative process, human engagement, contextual interpretation, and institutional recognition. These criteria align directly with the evaluative frameworks participants reported using to assess artistic legitimacy more broadly, regardless of whether generative AI was used in the production of the work.

Notably, traditional photographers and producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery tended to foreground human engagement and creative process more frequently than their counterparts in the other social groups. Likewise, across social groups, participants positioned curators and other cultural institutions as important mediators of artistic legitimacy, emphasizing the role of exhibitions, curatorial framing, and institutional recognition in shaping how AI-generated imagery is interpreted and valued. Indeed, the individuals I interviewed did not approach photorealistic AI-generated imagery as inherently legitimate or illegitimate. Rather, they approached such images as conditionally legitimate depending upon how successfully they believed the work embodied these overlapping evaluative criteria.

5.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the observations emerging for the second part of my analysis of participant interviews. Across these discussions, participants frequently described AI-generated imagery as a deeply polarizing technology, while simultaneously emphasizing that artistic

legitimacy cannot be reduced to any single technical, aesthetic, or material property of an image. To this end, their evaluations frequently centred upon broader considerations relating to human engagement, intentionality, labour, emotional resonance, contextual interpretation, and institutional recognition.

The participants' accounts further suggest that debates surrounding AI-generated imagery extend well beyond questions of aesthetics or technical production alone. Questions about authorship, copyright, consent, artistic labour, environmental impacts, inequality, corporate power, and emotional authenticity were closely intertwined with their evaluations of AI-generated imagery and its place within contemporary artistic practice. Although the participants did not necessarily view AI-generated imagery as inherently incapable of artistic legitimacy, its legitimacy was frequently understood as being conditional upon the extent to which the work embodied the evaluative criteria participants associated with meaningful artistic practice. Collectively, the participants' accounts suggest that the cultural status, artistic value, and social meaning of photorealistic AI-generated imagery continue to be actively negotiated within contemporary photographic and artistic communities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have investigated the evolving, complex relationship between photorealistic AI-generated imagery and contemporary photographic practice, with particular attention given to how photorealistic AI-generated imagery is understood and defined within contemporary fine art photography. In so doing, I examined the basis upon which such images may be granted artistic legitimacy by producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery, traditional photographers, curators, and critics. The introductory chapter set out the background and context for the discussion in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2, I examined nineteenth-century anxieties surrounding the invention of photography and its implications for artistic practice. The discussion offered an overview of the historical debates surrounding artistic legitimacy, authorship, creativity, and technological mediation and their resonance with contemporary discussions surrounding AI-generated imagery. Chapter 3 set out the conceptual framework and methodological approach used to conduct this project. Chapters 4 presented the observations that emerged in relation to the ontological status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery and the issues of authorship and creative agency surrounding this medium. Chapter 5 set out the observations that emerged in relation to the role of AI within artistic or creative practice, and the tensions surrounding the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery within contemporary photographic practice.

In this concluding chapter, the discussion is divided into five sections. I begin by revisiting the research questions that guided my study, reflecting upon them through the lens of SCOT. In section two, I discuss the broader theoretical and scholarly contributions of my research to ongoing debates surrounding the ontology and artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery. In section three, I engage with the limitations of my project and their implications for the conclusions that may be drawn from my work. From there, I offer some potential directions for

future research and conclude with some final thoughts.

6.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

The central research question guiding this thesis asked:

> *How do the intersecting views of artists, photographers, curators, and critics contribute to legitimating photorealistic AI-generated imagery as an authentic art form?*

In seeking to investigate this question, the study is informed by three sub-questions:

1. *How do different stakeholders define or describe photorealistic AI-generated images, and what criteria do they use to evaluate its artistic legitimacy?*
2. *In what ways do different stakeholders perceive AI tools as enhancing or undermining creative authorship?*
3. *What forms of skepticism or acceptance have stakeholders encountered within their professional or artistic communities when engaging with such images—whether by creating, exhibiting, curating, or evaluating such work?*

Below, I address each of these questions.

6.1.1 Defining and Evaluating Photorealistic AI-generated Imagery

The first sub-question asked: *How do different stakeholders define or describe photorealistic AI-generated images, and what criteria do they use to evaluate its artistic legitimacy?*

The manner in which the eleven individuals comprising my research sample defined and described photorealistic AI-generated imagery was characterized by considerable ambiguity, with participants frequently drawing simultaneously upon multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings. In other words, for these individuals, the ontological status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery has not yet reached a stage of stabilization or closure. Nevertheless, I observed several recurring definitional patterns .

The participants often framed photorealistic AI-generated imagery as an evolving medium and in relation to broader assumptions surrounding photography; most commonly, the mechanical capture of light and an indexical relation to reality. Within these broader understandings, three

recurring conceptions of photorealistic AI-generated imagery were observed. Some participants understood such images primarily as the product of computational processes, others situated them within broader traditions of digital media, and some considered them as an extension of photography. Notably, these interpretative positions did not map neatly onto the occupational categories represented in my sample (i.e., producers of photorealistic AI-generated images, traditional photographers, curators, and the critic).

The lack of consensus was also reflected in the terminology participants used to describe the medium. Although no fixed terminology has yet emerged to consistently describe photorealistic AI-generated images, participants within my research sample expressed mixed and in some cased dismissive reactions to emerging labels such as “promptography”. This further reflects the ongoing instability surrounding the classification and naming of this medium.

With respect to evaluating artistic legitimacy, it was apparent that the participants comprising my research sample did not do so on the basis of any single criterion. Instead, they described relying on several overlapping considerations, including intentionality, labour, emotional resonance, originality, technical execution, conceptual depth, aesthetic judgement, and the perceived presence of meaningful human engagement within the work itself when making such determinations. Notably, the participants reported that artistic legitimacy was seldom assessed on purely aesthetic or technical grounds alone.

Across the interviews, intentionality and sustained creative engagement emerged as especially important evaluative criteria. Regardless of the social group of which they were part, participants frequently suggested that artistic legitimacy required more than single-prompt AI-generated outputs, or “AI for AI’s sake.” Instead, they emphasized the importance of perceiving some form of human presence, emotional texture, or lived experience within the work itself, often

suggesting that AI-generated images frequently appear lifeless or devoid of this connection. Accordingly, participants frequently reported associating artistic legitimacy with the ability of an image to communicate a sense of humanity or emotional resonance.

6.1.2 Negotiating Authorship and Creative Agency

The second sub-question informing my study asked: *In what ways do different stakeholders perceive AI tools as enhancing or undermining creative authorship?*

Interpretive flexibility also manifested itself in participant discussions surrounding creative authorship. The participants in my study expressed differing views over whether AI should be understood as a tool, collaborator, or as something else entirely. Although the dominant position observed framed AI as a tool under human direction, several participants, particularly the curators, rejected "tool versus collaborator" framings altogether, emphasizing instead the broader socio-technical conditions surrounding AI-generated image production and the ways these systems are developed, governed, and integrated into contemporary creative practice.

Within this context, the participants raised concerns about automation, algorithmic mediation, corporate infrastructure, and the opacity of generative AI systems. Anxieties about these systems potentially undermining creative authorship by reducing perceived effort or artistic labour and accelerating the production of low-effort imagery were also articulated. In particular, the traditional photographers in my sample frequently associated authorship with struggle, labour, and sustained artistic engagement.

Across the interviews, participants commonly evaluated authorship according to the extent to which they could perceive intentionality and conceptual direction within the production process. As such, concerns surrounding automation, shortcuts, and diminished labour reflected broader anxieties that AI-generated image production may weaken authorial qualities participants

associated with meaningful creative agency. At the same time, participants frequently perceived AI systems as enhancing creative authorship through accelerating workflows and reducing repetitive or mundane tasks, supporting experimentation, and expanding forms of visual production. Traditional photographers and producers of photorealistic AI-generated imagery often emphasised the practical and creative affordances of AI-assisted workflows, including storyboarding, retouching, image selection, and visual ideation. Nevertheless, all participants emphasized that the production of compelling AI-generated imagery still required aesthetic judgement, refinement, conceptual direction. Some participants further emphasized the value of prior knowledge of photographic principles such as lighting, composition, and storytelling in producing compelling photorealistic AI-generated images. As such, authorship was often understood as being enhanced through the artist's ability to intentionally direct and shape AI-generated outputs toward desired creative outcomes.

6.1.3 Polarization, Skepticism, and Reception

The third sub-question asked: *What forms of skepticism or acceptance have stakeholders encountered within their professional or artistic communities when engaging with such images—whether by creating, exhibiting, curating, or evaluating such work?*

The participants in my study consistently described AI-generated imagery as highly polarizing within artistic communities. They further suggested that skepticism and acceptance varied across different artistic and professional contexts. Technology-focused spaces, digital media and experimental arts environments, and art galleries, for example, were generally described as more open to AI-generated imagery, whereas analogue-oriented artistic communities, particularly those centred around analogue photography, painting, and other craft-based practices were perceived as more resistant. At the same time, many of the participants in my study expressed

ambivalence in their own positions, noting that their views toward AI-generated imagery continued to evolve alongside the rapid development and increasing visibility of these technologies.

Importantly, skepticism toward AI-generated imagery was rarely framed solely in aesthetic terms, or whether the art was "good or bad." Instead, participant concerns frequently extended toward broader ethical, cultural, and socio-technical issues surrounding AI systems, including copyright, consent, labour displacement, environmental impacts, algorithmic opacity, corporate power, and the concentration of wealth. These concerns often shaped emotional and affective responses toward AI-generated imagery, with several participants describing discussions surrounding AI as emotionally charged, hostile, or increasingly taboo within certain artistic communities and educational contexts.

6.1.4 The Interpretive Flexibility of Photorealistic AI-Generated Imagery

The central research question guiding my study asked: *How do the intersecting views of relevant stakeholders contribute to legitimating photorealistic AI-generated imagery as an authentic art form?*

As noted above, the participants in my study approached the artistic legitimacy of photorealistic AI-generated imagery from different, yet overlapping, perspectives. Although the four relevant social groups identified for this study were distinguished primarily according to their artistic or professional practices, these categories did not necessarily correspond to distinct interpretive positions. Several participants occupied overlapping professional roles, and their perspectives frequently converged and diverged both within and across the groups. Nevertheless, their professional experiences and artistic practices appeared to inform the particular concerns and considerations they brought to their interpretations of photorealistic AI-generated imagery. These observations are consistent with Bijker's (1995) account of SCOT, in which "the boundaries of

social groups, although once clear cut, may become fuzzy; new groups may split off and old groups may merge into new ones" (pp. 47-48). In this regard, while professional distinctions provided a useful basis for identifying relevant actors, the boundaries between relevant social groups did not necessarily correspond to occupational affiliations. Instead, they reflected the overlapping and sometimes competing meanings participants attributed to such imagery.

Although the participants emphasized different aspects of authorship, artistic labour, institutional recognition, ethics, and technological change, they nevertheless converged around intentionality, conceptual direction, aesthetic judgement, meaningful creative engagement, and a sense of humanity as important markers of artistic legitimacy. Collectively, these intersecting perspectives suggested a shared understanding that AI-generated imagery is neither inherently legitimate nor inherently illegitimate.

Participants noted that, because skepticism around AI-generated imagery remains widespread, artists should demonstrate the effort, technical decision-making, and creative engagement involved in its production if such works are to be taken seriously as art. The latter, serve as proxies for achieving the human or emotive quality the participants deemed essential to achieving artistic legitimacy. These concerns reinforce more traditional understandings of artistic legitimacy, echoing earlier critiques of mechanization in the nineteenth century advanced by figures such as Ruskin (1853) and Morris (1901), who similarly feared that mechanization of creative labour would sever the connection between artistry and human agency. While separated by more than a century and shaped by very different technologies, these parallels suggest that contemporary debates surrounding AI-generated imagery form part of a longer historical pattern of cultural anxiety surrounding automation, labour, and the role of human creativity in artistic production.

Participant discussions further suggested that artistic legitimacy emerges through broader networks of interpretation, exhibition, recognition, and cultural response. This perspective closely aligns with Becker's (1982) concept of "art worlds", wherein artistic value is not produced by artists alone, but through the collective activities of curators, critics, institutions, audiences, and others whose contributions help establish the conditions under which works come to be recognized as art. Furthermore, and consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of the field of cultural production, curators were often seen by participants as occupying particularly influential positions within these institutional contexts, possessing heightened authority to shape how such images are contextualized, evaluated, and publicly understood. Across interviews, the participants repeatedly suggested that institutional endorsement, exhibition, and curatorial framing play important roles in shaping whether AI-generated imagery is perceived as culturally and artistically legitimate. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) assertion that artistic legitimacy emerges through unequal struggles over symbolic capital and the authority to define what constitutes legitimate artistic production within a given cultural field.

6.2 Key Contribution of the Findings

At the time of writing this thesis, considerable research exists regarding creativity, authorship, and evaluative biases toward AI-generated outputs (see, Boden, 1994; Cohen, 1981; Mazzone & Elgammal, 2019). However, there is comparatively little research focusing specifically on the relationship of photorealistic AI-generated imagery to, and its place within, existing photographic and artistic traditions. Building on research by Gross (2024), Wasielewski (2024), Belisle (2025), and others, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship examining how photorealistic AI-generated imagery complicates conventional distinctions between photography, digital image-making, and computational media. More specifically, my observations highlight how advances in

generative AI challenge long-standing assumptions that photographic realism necessarily depends upon mechanical capture, indexicality, or the existence of a physical referent before the camera. More broadly, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates concerning whether existing conceptual frameworks surrounding photography remain sufficient in the context of synthetic photorealism.

Beyond questions of ontology and classification, this thesis also contributes to ongoing debates surrounding the artistic legitimacy of AI-generated imagery. Specifically, and consistent with the SCOT framework, the reported observations suggest the cultural and artistic status of photorealistic AI-generated imagery remains interpretively flexible. In turn, this alludes to the legitimation of photorealistic AI-generated imagery being contingent upon the outcome of ongoing social negotiations among overlapping relevant social groups operating within broader artistic, professional, institutional, and technological contexts rather than any single technical, aesthetic, or ontological criterion. Viewed through Becker's (1982) concept of art worlds, these negotiations can also be understood as collective processes through which artistic conventions, practices, and expectations contribute to the recognition of particular forms of artistic production. At the same time, consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) account of cultural production, my observations suggest that these negotiations are unevenly shaped through institutional processes of exhibition, interpretation, and recognition, with curators, galleries, museums, and other artistic institutions frequently positioned as possessing heightened authority in shaping perceptions of artistic legitimacy.

Taken together, these complementary theoretical perspectives suggest that the legitimation of photorealistic AI-generated imagery involves not only competing interpretations of the medium, but also the collective practices and unequal institutional relationships through which certain interpretations may acquire greater recognition and authority. Subject to further empirical

investigation, these findings offer a basis for challenging notions that associate the legitimacy of AI-generated imagery primarily with visual quality or creativity, absent broader questions pertaining to labour, ownership, technological governance, and the ethical infrastructures underpinning these systems.

More broadly, the findings underscore the growing importance of governance and policy discussions concerning transparency, dataset provenance, copyright, labour, and the broader social consequences of generative AI systems.

6.3 Limitations

This thesis brings important nuance to contemporary debates surrounding photorealistic AI-generated imagery. However, there are some limitations that must be acknowledged. The first pertains to the limited sample size. With only eleven participants, most of whom were located in the Ottawa region, the findings cannot and should not be understood as representative of the wider fields of photography, contemporary art, or creative practice. The findings reported in the preceding pages are best understood as exploratory and interpretive in nature, offering insight into how a specific group of individuals negotiate questions surrounding ontology, authorship, skepticism, and artistic legitimacy in relation to artificial intelligence at a specific moment in time. It also merits noting that the four relevant social groups interviewed for this thesis are not inclusive of all possible social groups that may attach meaning, value, or legitimacy to photorealistic AI-generated imagery. While photographers, producers, curators, and critics provided important insight into the debates surrounding these technologies, the distribution of participants across these groups was uneven, with photographers and critics represented less extensively than producers and curators. Consequently, certain professional perspectives and concerns may be more strongly represented in the findings than others. Moreover, other social groups—such as policymakers,

those working in the field of AI development, art collectors, and audiences outside professional artistic communities—may likewise attach different meanings, values, or forms of legitimacy to AI-generated imagery based on their own personal, professional, institutional, or cultural orientations.

This said, although the findings offer no basis for generalizing to wider populations or milieus, their value lies principally in providing the foundations and rationale for undertaking a larger, and far better resourced investigation into the questions I have sought to answer.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

This thesis was designed to investigate how photorealistic AI-generated imagery is interpreted and negotiated within contemporary photographic practice. The findings that emerged, along with the limitations identified, point toward several possible directions for future research.

One particularly important direction concerns the ethical dimensions of generative AI systems and their relationship to artistic legitimacy. This thesis identified recurring concerns surrounding copyright, dataset provenance, labour displacement, environmental impact, opacity, and corporate power, with these issues often discussed as secondary to underlying questions of ontology, authorship, legitimacy, and artistic practice. Future research could more directly examine the broader socio-technical and political conditions of governance and institutional control shaping the development and reception of generative AI within photographic culture.

Another possible direction for future research concerns audience reception and public perceptions of photorealistic AI-generated imagery. While this thesis focused primarily on the perspectives of photographers, producers, curators, and critics, future research could be expanded to include larger and more geographically diverse sample groups. Here, one can envisage using quantitative survey methods to obtain additional insight into how broader audiences interpret and

classify photorealistic AI-generated imagery in relation to photography and contemporary photographic practice.

A third possible direction for future research concerns the evolving nature of participant attitudes and public perceptions surrounding AI-generated imagery over time. Throughout this thesis, many participants described their own views of generative AI as having shifted alongside the rapid development of the technology itself, particularly as AI-generated outputs became increasingly photorealistic and integrated into broader creative and professional workflows. It seems plausible that longitudinal research would likely provide valuable insight into how perceptions of AI technologies and their acceptance or rejection continue to evolve in relation to changing technological capabilities, institutional responses, and broader cultural normalization. Seen through the lens of the SCOT framework, such research would be especially valuable in examining whether current tensions surrounding AI-generated imagery persist, stabilize, or transform as generative systems become increasingly embedded within everyday artistic and photographic practice.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

As an artist and photographer who is active in local arts communities, I have followed the rapid development of generative AI with considerable interest. What initially appeared to be a technological novelty quickly evolved into a powerful set of tools capable of producing not only photorealistic imagery, but also illustrations, graphic design, literature, music, and other forms of creative expression. As these systems became increasingly sophisticated and accessible, they also raised important questions surrounding creativity, authorship, artistic labour, and the place of AI-generated imagery within contemporary photographic and artistic practice. These questions were not limited to my own experiences as a photographer, but were frequently echoed across

professional, artistic, and public discussions surrounding generative AI. It was this convergence of technological change, cultural uncertainty, and the often polarized debates surrounding AI-generated imagery that ultimately motivated the research presented in this thesis.

What I found most surprising throughout undertaking this research project was the extent to which participant perspectives resisted simple pro- or anti-AI stances. Even the strongest critics of AI-generated imagery did not reject the possibility that such images could possess artistic legitimacy under certain conditions. Conversely, several participants who actively incorporated AI into their creative practice remained deeply skeptical of the technology, particularly with respect to questions of authorship, labour, ethics, and legitimacy. Rather than revealing a clear divide between supporters and opponents of AI, the findings suggest a far more nuanced landscape in which acceptance, skepticism, enthusiasm, and concern frequently coexisted within the same individuals.

Another finding that surprised me was the extent to which participants perceived attitudes toward AI-generated imagery as becoming more negative over time. Prior to conducting this research, I had assumed that as generative AI technologies became increasingly sophisticated, accessible, and commonplace, artists and audiences would gradually become more accepting of their use. Instead, several participants suggested the opposite. In particular, they noted growing skepticism and, in some cases, outright hostility toward AI-generated imagery within artistic and photographic communities. While opinions varied, participants frequently attributed this shift to growing awareness of the ethical issues surrounding generative AI systems. In this sense, greater familiarity with AI may not necessarily lead to greater acceptance; rather, increased exposure to these technologies may intensify existing concerns regarding their ethical, cultural, and artistic implications.

References

Adobe. (2025). Adobe Photoshop. https://www.adobe.com/ca/products/photoshop.html

Allen, J. M. (2022). *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial* [Digital Image]. https://www.jasonmallen.com/space-opera-theater

Arnold, M. (1869). *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. Thomas Nelson & Sons.

Astray, M. (2024). *Reclaiming the Brain: How my Real Photo F L A M I N G O N E won an AI Award*. Milesastray. https://www.milesastray.com/news/newsflash-reclaiming-the-brain

Audry, S., & Ippolito, J. (2019). Can Artificial Intelligence Make Art without Artists? Ask the Viewer. *Arts (Basel)*, *8*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8010035

Ayres, C. E. (1935). The Gospel of Technology. In H. M. Kallen & S. Hook (Eds.), *American Philosophy: Today and Tomorrow* (pp. 25–42). Lee Furman, Inc.

Bacon, F. (1963). *Three Studies for Portrait of Henrietta Moraes* [Oil on canvas]. Museum of Modern Art, New York. https://www.francis-bacon.com/artworks/paintings/three-studies-portrait-henrietta-moraes

Barthes, R. (1977). Rhetoric of the Image (S. Heath, Trans.). In *Image Music Text* (pp. 32–51). Fontana Press. (Original work published 1964)

Barthes, R. (1977). The Death of the Author (S. Heath, Trans.). In *Image Music Text* (pp. 142–148). Fontana Press. (Original work published 1967)

Basu, S. (2023). Three Decades of Social Construction of Technology: Dynamic Yet Fuzzy? The Methodological Conundrum. *Social Epistemology*, *37*(3), 259–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2022.2120783

Baudelaire, C. (2018). The Salon of 1859: The Modern Public and Photography (J. Mayne, Trans.). In F. Frascina & C. Harrison (Eds.), *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429498909 (Original work published 1859)

Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds*. University of California Press.

Belisle, B. (2025). Critical Response I: Photography and AI: Why It Matters, Though. *Critical Inquiry*, *51*(2), 397–404. https://doi.org/10.1086/732921

Benjamin, W. (2010). The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version] (M. W. Jennings, Trans.). *Grey Room*, *39*(39), 11–38. https://doi.org/10.1162/grey.2010.1.39.11 (Original work published 1935)

Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (Ninth edition). Pearson.

Berlyne, D. E. (1971). *Aesthetics and psychobiology*. Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Bijker, W. E. (1995). *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change*. MIT Press.

Bledsoe, E. (2024, April 9). *Backpedaling Brisbane Portrait Prize excludes uses of Midjourney and DALL·E (but their reasoning…*. Medium. https://medium.com/comms-briefing/backpedaling-brisbane-portrait-prize-excludes-uses-of-midjourney-and-dall-e-but-their-reasoning-is-a62ad8bad430

Boden, M. A. (1994). What Is Creativity? In M. A. Boden (Ed.), *Dimentions of Creativity*. MIT Press. https://direct-mit-edu.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/books/edited-volume/1841/chapter/50990/What-Is-Creativity

Boden, M. A. (2004). *The creative mind: Myths and mechanisms* (Second edition.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203508527

Boden, M. A. (2009). Computer Models of Creativity. *The AI Magazine*, *30*(3), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.1609/aimag.v30i3.2254

Bolton, R. (1989). Introduction. In *The Contest of meaning: Critical histories of photography* (pp. ix–xix). MIT Press.

Boscaino, M. (2021). Developing a Qualitative Approach to the Study of the Street Art World. *Street Art & Urban Creativity*, *7*(2), 8–25. https://doi.org/10.25765/sauc.v7i2.473

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press. http://archive.org/details/PierreBourdieuDistinctionASocialCritiqueOfTheJudgementOfTaste1984_201810

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (S. Whiteside, Trans.). Polity Press.

Bringsjord, S., Bello, P., & Ferrucci, D. (2001). Creativity, the Turing Test, and the (Better) Lovelace Test. *Minds and Machines (Dordrecht)*, *11*(1), 3–27. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011206622741

Buchanan, B. G. (2001). Creativity at the Metalevel AAAI-2000 Presidential Address. *The AI Magazine*, *22*(3), 13–28. https://doi.org/10.1609/aimag.v22i3.1569

Bull, S. (2010). *Photography*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203867297-13

Bull, S. (2013). Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). In M. Durden (Ed.), *Fifty key writers on photography* (pp. 51–56). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074954

Burnett, T. B., & Taplin, J. (2023, March 13). Opinion | To protect human artistry from AI, new safeguards might be essential. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/14/artificial-intelligence-threatens-creative-artists/

C2PA. (2026). *Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA)*. https://c2pa.org/

Cambridge. (2023). *'Hallucinate' is Cambridge Dictionary's Word of the Year 2023*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment. https://www.cambridge.org/news-and-insights/www.cambridge.org/news-and-insights/hallucinate-is-cambridge-word-of-the-year-2023

Carlyle, T. (1843). *Past and Present*. Chapman and Hall.

Carnovalini, F., & Rodà, A. (2020). Computational Creativity and Music Generation Systems: An Introduction to the State of the Art. *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, *3*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.3389/frai.2020.00014

Cha, Y.-J., Baek, S., Ahn, G., Lee, H., Lee, B., Shin, J., & Jang, D. (2020). Compensating for the loss of human distinctiveness: The use of social creativity under Human–Machine comparisons. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *103*, 80–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.08.027

Charr, J. (2025, March 11). What is Promptography, and Should Museums Exhibit It? *MuseumNext*. https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-is-promptography-and-should-museums-exhibit-it/

Cheng, M. (2022). The Creativity of Artificial Intelligence in Art. *Proceedings*, *81*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2022081110

Chohan, U. W. (2024). *Non-Fungible Tokens: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (First edition.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003435518

Cockburn, C., & Ormrod, S. (1993). *Gender and Technology in the Making*. SAGE Publications.

Cohen, H. (1981). *On the Modelling of Creative Behavior*. The Rand Corporation. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA116896

Cohen, H. (2002). A Self-Defining Game for One Player: On the Nature of Creativity and the Possibility of Creative Computer Programs. *Leonardo (Oxford)*, *35*(1), 59–64. https://doi.org/10.1162/002409402753689335

Cohen, H. (2010). *Driving the Creative Machine*. Orcas Center, Crossroads Lecture Series. https://www.aaronshome.com/aaron/publications/orcastalk2s.pdf

Cohen, M. F. (2000). Imagination amplification. *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications*, *20*(1), 54–55. https://doi.org/10.1109/38.814562

Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300252392

Dahl, O. (2023). *What is Synthetic Photography?* Photography. https://vocal.media/photography/what-is-synthetic-photography

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications.

Di Bello, P. (2013). Lady Eastlake (1809-1893). In M. Durden (Ed.), *Fifty key writers on photography* (pp. 82–86). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074954

Eastlake, E. (1980). Photography. In B. Newhall (Ed.), *Photography, Essays & Images: Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*. New York: Museum of Modern Art; Boston: Distributed by New York Graphic Society. http://archive.org/details/photographyessay0000unse (Original work published 1857)

Eckel, J. (2018). Selfies and Authorship: On the Displayed Authorship and the Author Function of the Selfie. In J. Eckel, J. Ruchatz, & S. Wirth (Eds.), *Xploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (pp. 131–165). Palgrave MacMillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57949-8

Edgerton, D. (1993). Tilting at Paper Tigers. *The British Journal for the History of Science*, *26*(1), 67–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007087400030144

Eldgasen, B. (2023, April 19). LET'S CLEAN UP THE MESSY TERMINOLOGY [Blog]. *Boris Eldgasen*. https://www.eldagsen.com/sony-world-photography-awards-2023/

Ellul, J. (1965). *The Technological Society*. Knopf.

EMOP. (2025). *EMOP 2025*. Photo Edition Berlin. http://www.photoeditionberlin.com/programm-1/emop-2025-landingpage/

ePHOTOzine. (2010, December 4). *Adobe Photoshop CS5 Software Review*. ePHOTOzine. https://www.ephotozine.com/article/adobe-photoshop-cs5-13341

Filimowicz, M. (2022). *Deep fakes: Algorithms and society*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003173397

Fineman, M. (2012). *Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Flusser, V. (1983). *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Reaktion Books.

Foucault, M. (1979). Authorship: What is an Author? *Screen*, *20*(1), 13–34. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/20.1.13

Gangadharbatla, H. (2022). The Role of AI Attribution Knowledge in the Evaluation of Artwork. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, *40*(2), 125–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/0276237421994697

Google AI for Developers. (2026). SynthID: Tools for Watermarking and Detecting LLM-Generated Text | Responsible Generative AI Toolkit. https://ai.google.dev/responsible/docs/safeguards/synthid

Grassini, S., & Koivisto, M. (2024). Understanding how personality traits, experiences, and attitudes shape negative bias toward AI-generated artworks. *Scientific Reports*, *14*(1), 4113–4115. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-54294-4

Greenberger, A. (2024, June 13). Photographer Wins AI Image Contest with Real Picture, Then Gets Disqualified. *ARTnews.Com*. https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/photographer-wins-ai-image-contest-real-picture-gets-disqualified-1234709692/

Gross, E. C. (2024). The art of AI: Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence in Photography. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov. Series VII, Social Sciences, Law*, *17*(1), 65–70. https://doi.org/10.31926/but.ssl.2024.17.66.1.12

Growcoot, M. (2023, October 10). Photo Competition Slammed for "World's First" AI Image Contest. *PetaPixel*. https://petapixel.com/2023/10/10/photo-competition-slammed-for-worlds-first-ai-image-contest/

Gupta, P., Mahajan, R., Badhera, U., & Kushwaha, P. (2024). Integrating generative AI in management education: A mixed-methods study using social construction of technology theory. *The International Journal of Management Education*, *22*(3), 101017-. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2024.101017

Hall, S. (2021). Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse. In C. Brunsdon (Ed.), *Writings on Media*. https://read-dukeupress-edu.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/books/book/2955/chapter/3587319/Encoding-and-Decoding-in-the-Television-Discourse (Original work published 1973)

Hård, M. (1994). Technology as Practice: Local and Global Closure Processes in Diesel-Engine Design. *Social Studies of Science*, *24*(3), 549–585. https://doi.org/10.1177/030631279402400304

Hassan, M. M. (2025). The Impact of AI on Transforming Concepts in Contemporary Photography. *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, (36). https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.613

Hegel, G. W. F. (1949). *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (T. M. Knox, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1821)

Hertzmann, A. (2018). Can Computers Create Art? *Arts (Basel)*, *7*(2), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7020018

Hong, J.-W., & Curran, N. M. (2019). Artificial Intelligence, Artists, and Art: Attitudes Toward Artwork Produced by Humans vs. Artificial Intelligence. *ACM Transactions on Multimedia Computing Communications and Applications*, *15*(2s), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1145/3326337

Horton Jr, C. B., White, M. W., & Iyengar, S. S. (2023). Bias against AI art can enhance perceptions of human creativity. *Scientific Reports*, *13*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-45202-3

Humphreys, L. (2005). Reframing Social Groups, Closure, and Stabilization in the Social Construction of Technology. *Social Epistemology*, *19*(2–3), 231–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691720500145449

Juma, C. (2016). *Innovation and its enemies: Why people resist new technologies*. Oxford University Press.

Kari, C. (2025, October 15). *Understanding Academic Art*. Academy of Fine Art Germany. https://academy-of-fine-art.com/en/blog/academic-art-idealism-instead-of-realism/

Kline, R., & Pinch, T. (1996). Users as Agents of Technolgical Change: The Socail Construction of the Automobile in teh Rural United States. *Technology and Culture*, *37*(4), 763–795.

Kulkarni, A., Kulkarni, A., Gudivada, D., & Shivananda, A. (2023). *Applied Generative AI for Beginners: Practical Knowledge on Diffusion Models, ChatGPT, and Other LLMs* (1st ed.). Apress. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4842-9994-4

Kwok, A. O. J., & Koh, S. G. M. (2021). Deepfake: A social construction of technology perspective. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *24*(13), 1798–1802. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1738357

Łabuz, M. (2024). Deep fakes and the Artificial Intelligence Act—An important signal or a missed opportunity? *Policy and Internet*, *16*(4), 783–800. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.406

Lin, A. C. (1998). Bridging Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches to Qualitative Methods. *Policy Studies Journal*, *26*(1), 162–180. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1998.tb01931.x

Liu, B. (2023). Arguments for the Rise of Artificial Intelligence Art: Does AI Art Have Creativity, Motivation, Self-awareness and Emotion? *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad*, *Avance en línea*(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.5209/aris.83808

Lovejoy, M. (with Lovejoy, M.). (2004). *Digital currents: Art in the electronic age* (3rd expanded ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203005279

Lovelace, A., & Menabrea, L. F. (2015). Sketch of the Analytical Engine invented by Charles Babbage, Esq. In R. Hammerman & A. L. Russell (Eds.), *Ada's Legacy: Cultures of Computing from teh Victorian to the Digital Age* (pp. 32–105). AMC and Morgan & Claypool Publishers. (Original work published 1843)

MacKenzie, D. (1989). Missile Accuracy: A Case Study in the Social Processes of Tehcnological Change. In W. Bijker, T. P. Hughes, & T. J. Pinch (Eds.), *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* (pp. 195–222). MIT Press.

Maguire, J. S., & Matthews, J. (2012). Are we all cultural intermediaries now? An introduction to cultural intermediaries in context. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *15*(5), 551–562. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549412445762

Manu, A. (2024). *Transcending Imagination: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Creativity*. Chapman and Hall/CRC. https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003450139

Mao, X., & Li, Q. (2021). *Generative adversarial networks for image generation*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-6048-8

Marburger, M. R. (2024). Artistic intelligence vs. Artificial intelligence. *Artnodes*, (34), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.7238/artnodes.v0i34.425712

Mazzone, M., & Elgammal, A. (2019). Art, Creativity, and the Potential of Artificial Intelligence. *Arts (Basel)*, *8*(26), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8010026

Meyer, E. T. (2007). *Socio-Technical Perspectives on Digital Photography: Scientific Digital Photography Use by Marine Mammal Researchers* [Doctoral dissertation]. Indiana University.

Meyer-Eppler, W. (1957). Static and Psychologic Problems of Sound. In H. Eimert & K. Stockhausen (Eds.), *Die Reihe: Electronic Music* (pp. 55–61). Theodore Presser Company.

Millet, K., Buehler, F., Du, G., & Kokkoris, M. D. (2023). Defending humankind: Anthropocentric bias in the appreciation of AI art. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *143*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107707

Mills, B., & Barlow, D. M. (2009). R. Barthes: The Death of the Author. In *Reading Media Theory* (Second, pp. 574–599). Pearson.

Moore, G. E. (2006). Cramming More Components onto Integrated Circuits,. *IEEE Solid-State Circuits Society Newsletter*, *11*(3), 33–35. https://doi.org/10.1109/N-SSC.2006.4785860 (Original work published 1965)

Morris, W. (1901). *Hopes and Fears for Art*.

Mumford, L. (1964). Authoritarian and Democratic Technics. *Technology and Culture*, *5*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.2307/3101118

Museum of Modern Art. (1937). *Photography: 1837—1937*.

Nake, F. (1971). There Should be no Computer Art. *Bulletin of the Computer Arts Society*, *2*, 18–19.

Nake, F. (2010, February). *PARAGRAPHS ON COMPUTER ART, PAST AND PRESENT*. CAT 2010: Ideas before their time: Connecting the past and present in computer art (CAT). https://doi.org/10.14236/ewic/CAT2010.7

Nelson, R. R., & Winter, S. G. (1982). *An evolutionary theory of economic change*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Newhall, B. (1949). *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*. New York, Museum of Modern Art. http://archive.org/details/historyofphotogr00newh

Newman, B. (1967). *Voice of Fire* [Painting]. National Gallery of Canada.

Norman, D. A., & Rumelhart, D. E. (1981). The LNR approach to human information processing. *Cognition*, *10*(1), 235–240. https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277(81)90051-2

Ogburn, W. F., & Nimkoff, M. F. (1955). *Technology and the Changing Family*.

Oppenheim, A. N. (with Oppenheim, A. N.). (1992). *Questionnaire design, interviewing, and attitude measurement* (New ed.). Pinter Publishers.

Palmer, D., & Sluis, K. (2024). The Automation of Style. *Media Theory*, *8*(1). https://doi.org/10.70064/mt.v8i1.1072

Petrea, A. (2025). Photography in the Light of AI-Generated Images. *CONCEPT*, *29*(2), 160–173. https://doi.org/10.37130/0xnx6h41

Phillips, C. (Ed.). (1989). *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critial Writings, 1913-1940*. Museum of Modern Art/ Aperture.

Photography as Fine Art. (1854). *The Illustrated Magazine of Fine Art*, *3*(13), 1.

Pickstone, C. (1998). Francis Bacon: The human body. *The Month (London. 1882)*, *31*(3), 120–121.

Pinch, T. (1993). Turn, Turn, and Turn Again: The Woolgar Formula. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, *18*(4), 511–522. https://doi.org/10.1177/016224399301800407

Pinch, T. (1996). The Social Construction of Technology: A Review. In R. Fox (Ed.), *Technological Change* (pp. 17–36). Routledge.

Pinch, T., & Bijker, W. (1986). Science, Relativism and the New Sociology of Technology: Reply to Russell. *Social Studies of Science*, *16*(2), 347–360. https://doi.org/10.1177/030631278601600200 9

Pinch, T. J., & Bijker, W. E. (1984). The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other. *Social Studies of Science*, *14*(3), 399–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/030631284014003004

Raser, T. (2015). *Baudelaire and Photography: Finding the Painter of Modern Life* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315096537

Reinhuber, E. (2022). Synthography – An Invitation to Reconsider the Rapidly Changing Toolkit of Digital Image Creation as a New Genre Beyond Photography. In *ArtsIT, Interactivity and Game Creation* (Vol. 422, pp. 321–331). Springer International Publishing AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95531-1_22

Rejlander, O. G. (1857). *Two Ways of Life* [Photograph]. The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Media Museum, Bradford, United Kingdom.

Roose, K. (2022, September 2). An A.I.-Generated Picture Won an Art Prize. Artists Aren't Happy. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/technology/ai-artificial-intelligence-artists.html

Rostow, W. W. (1959). The Stages of Economic Growth. *The Economic History Review*, *12*(1), 1–16.

Ruskin, J. (1853). *The Stones of Venice: Sea Stories* (Vol. 2). Dana Estes & Company.

Russell, S. (1986). The Social Construction of Artefacts: A Response to Pinch and Bijker. *Social Studies of Science*, *16*(2), 331–346. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312786016002008

Sawyer, R. K., & Henriksen, D. (2023). *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1980). Minds, brains, and programs. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *3*(3), 417–424. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00005756

Shawcross, N. M. (2013). Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). In M. Durden (Ed.), *Fifty key writers on photography* (pp. 26–29). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074954

Siles, I. (2012). Establishing the Internet in Costa Rica: Co-optation and the Closure of Technological Controversies. *The Information Society*, *28*(1), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2012.632257

Smith, O. F. (1998). *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*. San Diego State University Press.

Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. Picador.

Sony AI. (2025, August 26). Sony AI – Unleash Human Imagination and Creativity with AI. https://ai.sony/

Sundararajan, L. (2014). Mind, Machine, and Creativity: An Artist's Perspective. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, *48*(2), 136–151. https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.44

Symonds, M. (2020). *The Appeal of Art in Modernity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351233941

Tagg, J. (1988). *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. MacMillan.

Taylor, J. (2024, February 2). Australian 'contemporary' portrait prize allows entries wholly generated by AI. *The Guardian*.

https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/feb/02/brisbane-portrait-prize-ai-allowed-rule

The National Gallery. (2012, May). *Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present*. https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/about-us/press-and-media/press-releases/seduced-by-art-photography-past-and-present

Thompson, E. P. (2017). Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism. In S. Aronowitz & M. J. Roberts (Eds.), *Class* (pp. 27–40). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. (Original work published 1967)

Thornton, G. (2023, April 20). Promptography? [Medium]. *Full Frame*. https://medium.com/full-frame/promptography-d0b66dc8bdab

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley-Blackwell.

van Maanen, H. (2009). *How to Study Art Worlds: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values* (1st ed.). University Press.

Vasudevan, K. (2019). Depth of Field: How DSLR cameras informed video journalism habitus and style. *Journalism Practice*, *13*(2), 229–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2017.1419826

Vu, V. (2025, April 28). AI will ruin art, and it ruin the sparkle in our lives. *The Globe and Mail*. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-ai-will-ruin-art-and-it-ruin-the-sparkle-in-our-lives/

Wasielewski, A. (2024). Unnatural Images: On AI-Generated Photographs. *Critical Inquiry*, *51*(1), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1086/731729

Weidinger, L., Uesato, J., Rauh, M., Griffin, C., Huang, P.-S., Mellor, J., Glaese, A., Cheng, M., Balle, B., Kasirzadeh, A., Biles, C., Brown, S., Kenton, Z., Hawkins, W., Stepleton, T., Birhane, A., Hendricks, L. A., Rimell, L., Isaac, W., … Gabriel, I. (2022). Taxonomy of Risks posed by Language Models. *Proceedings of the 2022 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, FAccT '22*, 214–229. https://doi.org/10.1145/3531146.3533088

Whipple, K. (2022). When Everyone's a Critic: How U.S. Arts and Culture Critics Strategize to Maintain Their Cultural Authority. *Journalism Studies*, *23*(2), 245–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.2017794

White, L. Jr. (1970). *Medieval Technology and Social Change*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1962)

Williams, Z. (2023, April 18). 'AI isn't a threat' – Boris Eldagsen, whose fake photo duped the Sony judges, hits back. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/apr/18/ai-threat-boris-eldagsen-fake-photo-duped-sony-judges-hits-back

Winner, L. (1980). Do Artifacts Have Politics? *Daedalus*, *109*(1), 121–136.

Winner, L. (1993). Upon Opening the Black Box and Finding It Empty: Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of Technology. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, *18*(3), 362–378. https://doi.org/10.1177/016224399301800306

Woolgar, S. (1991). The Turn to Technology in Social Studies of Science. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, *16*(1), 20–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/016224399101600102

Xu, Y., Zhou, G., Cai, R., & Gursoy, D. (2024). When disclosing the artificial intelligence (AI) technology integration into service delivery backfires: Roles of fear of AI, identity threat and existential threat. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *122*, 103829-. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2024.103829

Yanagi, S. (1972). *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty* (B. Leach, Trans.). Kodansha International Ltd.

Youngblood, G. (1970). *Expanded cinema*. Dutton.

Yoxen, E. (1989). Seeing with Sound: A study of the Development of Medical Images. In W. Bijker, T. P. Hughes, & T. J. Pinch (Eds.), *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* (pp. 281–303). MIT Press.

Zhang, M. (2023, April 14). Artist Refuses Prize After His AI Image Wins at Top Photo Contest. *PetaPixel*. https://petapixel.com/2023/04/14/artist-refuses-prize-after-his-ai-image-wins-at-top-photo-contest/

Appendix 1: uOttawa Ethics Certificate

02/12/2025

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-11-25-11700
Titre du projet / Project Title	The Negotiated Image: AI, Art, and the Social Shaping of Photography
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de maîtrise / Master's thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	02/12/2025
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	01/12/2026

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
Sean SYTSMA	Département de communication / Department of Communication	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Daniel PARÉ	Département de communication / Department of Communication	Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada

550 Cumberland Street, Room 154
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

613-562-5387 • 613-562-5338 • ethique@uOttawa.ca / ethics@uOttawa.ca
www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

02/12/2025

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout évènement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completedfour weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

Mathieu LAFLAMME
Responsable d'éthique en recherche / Protocol Officer
Pour/For **Barbara GRAVES** Président(e) du/ Chair of the **Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences sociales et humanités / Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board**

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada
550 Cumberland Street, Room 154 Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

613-562-5387 • 613-562-5338 • ethique@uOttawa.ca / ethics@uOttawa.ca
www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie | www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Interview Guide: Photographers & Practitioners

1. Can you tell me a bit about your artistic or photographic background? Have you ever shown your work in galleries or submitted to competitions?
2. Have you ever experimented with photorealistic AI image generation?
    a. If yes, please can you tell me more about the type of work it was and the factors informing your decision. What were your first impressions of it—either from your own experience or from what you've seen others create?
    b. If not, please can you tell me more about the factors informing your decision not to experiment with this medium.
3. When you evaluate an image, whether your own or someone else's, what makes it "good" or worth taking seriously?
    a. Do these same criteria apply when you think about photorealistic AI-generated images? Why? Why not?
    b. What comes to mind when you hear or read the term 'photorealistic AI-generated imagery? Are there any ideas, debates or connotations you associate with it?
    c. Do you see photorealistic AI-generated imagery as part of photography's tradition, or as something else? Why? Why not?
    d. Have you come across any different terms being used in conversations around this type of work? What do you call such images?
4. In your view as a photographer, how does the rise of photorealistic AI-generated imagery challenge existing norms of legitimacy in photography?
5. In your view, where does "using AI" begin? How do you distinguish between the use of everyday algorithmic tools in photography (like HDR, auto-enhancement, Photoshop features) and generative AI? Where do you personally draw the line and why?
    a. Have you ever been unsure whether a tool counted as "AI"? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which this feeling arose.
6. Has the rise of AI affected how you think about your own creativity, skill, or professional identity as a photographer? If yes, how? If no, why not?
7. With photorealistic AI-generated images, where do you believe authorship lies? Do you see AI as a tool, a collaborator, or something else?
8. What is gained or lost when photographers use AI as part of their creative practice?
    a. Do you feel the same emotional resonance with a photorealistic AI-generated image as one created without AI? Why or why not?
    b. On a personal level, do you have any concerns about the use of AI in creative practice? If yes, please can you elaborate. If not, please can you tell me why not.

9. How have you seen peers, audiences, or institutions react to photorealistic AI-generated images—whether your own, or those created by others? What types of conversations, attitudes, or debates have you noticed around this work?
    a. Have you ever had to justify your use of AI to others? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which this occurred
    b. Have you noticed any changes in how conversations about photorealistic AI-generated imagery are framed or discussed within the art world—by photographers, critics, or institutions—over time? Do you have any broad sense of whether and/or the extent to which the photography community is any more or less receptive to photorealistic AI-generated imagery?
    c. Are there any particular spaces, either online or off, where these types of discussions seem more positive or negative?
10. Have you encountered any formal or informal rules emerging around crediting, displaying, or submitting photorealistic AI-generated imagery? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which you came across these rules.
    a. How do you think competitions, galleries, or online platforms shape public perception of photorealistic AI-generated images? Do you think that by giving these types of images visibility or recognition, they influence how audiences interpret or value them?
11. Does it matter to viewers whether they know if AI was involved in creating/generating an image? If yes, please can you elaborate about why and how disclosure matters. If not, please can you tell me why not.
12. Broadly speaking, where do you see the future of photography heading with the rise of AI tools?
    a. Are there any types of recognition, regulation, or support you would like to see for photographers working with AI?
13. Is there anything that you think is important for me to know about AI as a creative medium that we haven't covered?

Interview Guide: Curators

1. Can you tell me a bit about your professional background? What types of work do you typically exhibit?
2. Have you ever exhibited photorealistic AI-generated imagery? Other types of AI-generated work? If yes, please can you tell me more about the type of work it was and the factors informing your decision. If not, please can you tell me more about the factors informing your decision. Would you ever consider doing so? Why? Why not? (i.e., What factors shaped your decision)?
3. When you evaluate an image for exhibition, what makes it "good" or worth taking seriously and including?
    a. Can photorealistic AI-generated image fulfil those same criteria? Why? Why not?
    b. What comes to mind when you hear or read the term 'photorealistic AI-generated imagery? Are there any ideas, debates or connotations you associate with it?
    c. Have you come across any different terms being used in conversations around this type of work? What do you call such images?
4. In your view as a curator, how does the rise of photorealistic AI-generated imagery challenge existing norms of legitimacy in photography?
5. In your role as a curator, where would you say the use of AI begins? How do you distinguish between the use of everyday algorithmic tools in photography (like HDR, auto-enhancement, Photoshop features) and generative AI? Where do you personally draw the line and why?
    a. Have you ever been unsure whether a tool counted as "AI"? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which this feeling arose.
6. Has the rise of AI influenced how you think about creativity and authorship? If yes, how? If no, why not?
    a. Has this affected the types of work you choose to exhibit?
7. With photorealistic AI-generated images, where do you believe authorship lies? Do you see AI as a tool, a collaborator, or something else?
8. What is gained or lost when photographers use AI as part of their creative practice?
    a. Do you feel the same emotional resonance with a photorealistic AI-generated image as with one created without AI? Why or why not?
    b. From a professional standpoint, do you have any concerns about how AI is being used in creative practice? If yes, please can you elaborate. If not, please can you tell me why not.
9. How have you seen peers, audiences, or institutions react to AI-generated images—whether your own, or those created by others? What types of conversations, attitudes, or debates have you noticed around this work?

a. Have you ever had to justify your gallery's showing of photorealistic AI-generated images to others? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which this occurred

b. Have you noticed any changes in how conversations about photorealistic AI-generated imagery are framed or discussed within the art world—by photographers, critics, or institutions—over time? Do you have any broad sense of whether and/or the extent to which the photography community is any more or less receptive to photorealistic AI-generated imagery?

c. Are there any particular spaces, either online or off, where these types of discussions seem more positive or negative?

10. Have you encountered any formal or informal rules about crediting, displaying, or submitting photorealistic AI-generated imagery? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which you came across these rules.

    a. How do you think competitions, galleries, or online platforms shape public perception of photorealistic AI-generated images? Do you think that by giving these types of images visibility or recognition, they influence how audiences interpret or value them?

11. Does it matter to viewers whether they know if AI was involved in creating/generating an image? If yes, please can you elaborate about why and how disclosure matters. If not, please can you tell me why not.

12. Broadly speaking, where do you see the future of photography heading with the rise of AI tools?

    a. Are there any types of recognition, regulation, or support you would like to see associated with showing photorealistic/non-photorealistic AI-generated imagery?

13. Is there anything that you think is important to know about AI as a creative medium or about your curatorial experience with it that we haven't covered?

Interview Guide: Critics

1. Can you tell me a bit about your professional background? What types of work do you typically review or write about?
2. Have you ever reviewed photorealistic AI-generated work, or considered doing so? Why? Why not? (i.e., what factors shaped your decision?)
3. When you evaluate an image, what makes it "good" or worth taking seriously? How do you decide whether an image merits critical attention and/or public discussion?
    a. Can photorealistic AI-generated images fulfil those same criteria? Why? Why not?
    b. What comes to mind when you hear or read the term 'photorealistic AI-generated imagery? Are there any ideas, debates or connotations you associate with it?
    c. Have you come across any different terms being used in conversations around this type of work? What do you call such images?
4. In your view, how does the rise of photorealistic AI-generated imagery challenge existing norms of legitimacy in photography?
5. In your role as a critic, where would you say the use of AI begins? How do you distinguish between the use of everyday algorithmic tools in photography (like HDR, auto-enhancement, Photoshop features) and generative AI? Where do you personally draw the line and why?
    a. Have you ever been unsure whether a tool counted as "AI"? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which this feeling arose.
6. Has the rise of AI influenced how you think about creativity and authorship? If yes, how? If no, why not?
    a. Has it affected the types of work you choose to review and write about?
7. With photorealistic AI-generated images, where do you believe authorship lies? Do you see AI as a tool, a collaborator, or something else?
8. What is gained or lost when photographers use AI as part of their creative practice?
    a. Do you feel the same emotional resonance with a photorealistic AI-generated image as with one created without AI? Why or why not?
    b. From a professional standpoint, do you have any concerns about how AI is being used in creative practice? If yes, please can you elaborate. If not, please can you tell me why not.
9. Have you observed any notable differences between in how your audiences responds to pieces you've written about photorealistic AI-generated work versus your reviews of other forms of art?
    a. Have you ever had to justify a review of photorealistic AI-generated images to others? If yes, please can you tell me more about the context/situation in which this occurred

b. Have you noticed any changes in how conversations about photorealistic AI-generated imagery are framed or discussed within the art world—by photographers, critics, or institutions—over time? Do you have any broad sense of whether and/or the extent to which the photography community is any more or less receptive to photorealistic AI-generated imagery?

c. Are there spaces, either online or off, where these types of discussions seem more positive or negative? Are there particular platforms, journals, or publications that seem more open or more resistant to covering AI-generated work?

10. How do editorial priorities shape or influence the way photorealistic AI-generated imagery is received by readers, critics, and the broader art community?
11. Does it matter to viewers whether they know if AI was involved in creating/generating an image? If yes, please can you elaborate about why and how disclosure matters. If not, please can you tell me why not
12. Broadly speaking, where do you see the future of photography heading with the rise of AI tools?

    a. Are there any types of recognition, regulation, or support would you like to see associated with showing photorealistic/non-photorealistic AI-generated imagery?

13. Is there anything that you think is important to know about AI as a creative medium or about your experience as a critic with it that we haven't covered?