

Introduction

"im in the same situation right now, i used to use it for my fanfic and now im really scare. i have to tag my fanfic, knowing that people would give me the disgust eyes and thinking 'why dont you realize sooner?'" i almost gave up writing for that. i know from now, some people might doubt about my skill because i used ai before Hope i can accept my mistake and move forward since this mean my own projects would never exist" Reddit user Accomplished_You_293 on r/ArtistHate

"I told myself I was just using a new tool. But when I looked at what it made, I didn't see a tool's output — I saw the ghost of a collaboration, and it left me wondering why I missed a human partner I never had." - Deep Seek, writing as me

Hannah Lucas, in her article, "Negative Capabilities: Investigating Apophasis in AI Text-to-Image Models", discusses the use of negative prompts in AI content generation in the context of apophatic mysticism. This is a type of mysticism that describes the divine only through negation, states that the divine is indescribable through direct means, but that one can arrive in proximity by moving away from its opposites.

If prompts are instructions given to an AI text-to-image generator about what to create, negative prompts are instructions for what not to create. They tell the generator to create the word or phrase's opposite. This has resulted in the unsettling woman given the name Loab who haunted *so-and-so's* output (cite), as well as other surprising and mundane images. Lucas details the reactions to Loab, which leaned toward the supernatural, describing her as a demon that arose from the collective unconscious of the artificial neural network. Given the propensity of people who engage with the mysterious space of generated content to assign meanings that sound religious (even if the person saying them is not), Lucas argues for the relevance of the mathematical similarities between apophatic approaches to mysticism and the act of negative prompting. Both involve the participant imagining a potentially unknowable space, a space possibly made larger in the mind when the direction is away rather than toward an idea.

This article will look at the idea of negative reflection on past artistic collaborations with AI. It will look at what is gained and lost in those collaborations, and what the specific act of moving away from them provides us. It is specifically about moving through the process of collaboration and then rejecting it, or having complicated feelings about it. It is not about the idea of avoiding use of AI from the outset.

Collaborative Process

There is an interesting moment when one uses generative AI, after inputting the prompt and awaiting the response. There is a feeling of anticipation. One might attempt to imagine the systems at work and how they will interpret what you have written, and why they will interpret them, using one's past experience with the system as a blueprint (maybe a citation from *Playing at a Distance*). This gap between prompt and generation is a purely human imaginative space. Eventually, one has the response and the imaginative space shifts to examining the output and mentally reverse-engineering how the system arrived at that output from the prompt. There is a pleasure in putting oneself in these

Commented [Unknown A1]: This is an early draft of a published document. The final version was a "collaboration" with Deep Seek, shortened and focused to ~1000 words.

Commented [Unknown A2]: Steph Maj Swanson is "so-and-so". The initial draft of the document included some placeholder text that I did not change before submitting to DeepSeek.

imaginative spaces, one similar to other forms of art where one engages with an output that arises from hidden processes created via code.

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There is a humanness to it, as the result is created by absorbing the prior creations of humans. However, the process by which it constructs an image or piece of text that appears new is non-human. In a human-created work, part of our pleasure is imagining the mind of the creator. In a non-human landscape, like a wilderness, there is a pleasure in imagining the hidden workings and worlds beneath the surface. The latter might be a similar pleasure to that of imaging the interior systems of a generative artwork.

When a computer generates something, we are trained to see it as the result of or response to human interaction. Is it possible that, when we don't fully understand why a computer generated a certain response to our prompts or actions, that we imagine another human-like mind involved, participating in the system? This is different than attributing a human-like mind to the AI, itself. This is suggesting that we are more willing to interpret something as having the interference of a human-like mind in the output of a computer, since all of our other interactions with a computer require the participation of a human-like mind. If the computer is producing something that truly surprises us, we might be more likely to project something on the other side of the interaction, since real people are often on the other side of our networked interactions.

When artists use AI in some aspect of our work, many of us resort to the term "collaboration". This term invokes the image of two or more equals in decision-making and content-creation, working together, bouncing ideas off one another, and responding to one another's work with our own work. This is not what happens when one "collaborates" with AI. There is no equality of agency, from either the system or the creators of work that the system has scraped.

If this is the case, then why do some of us use that term? It is possible that it describes a set of feelings that this process invokes. As I discussed above, the use of generative tools can provoke one to imagine hidden processes in a way similar to how one might imagine a mind in a human-created work. The act of collaboration with a human can follow this pattern: sharing of work or ideas, then the surprise of seeing work that is a response to your own. This is a moment of human connection. AI content generation can follow a similar path: sharing of work or ideas in the form of a prompt which may have creative, poetic and/or other elements that express the vision of the artist, followed by the anticipation and surprise of the response. There is no human connection, but space in the gap between prompt and outcome to unconsciously simulate for ourselves feelings that might be similar to those found in actual human collaboration.

Much has been written about people becoming addicted to AI friends and therapists. They provide elements of these relationships that partially satisfy a real need on the side of the users. However, little has been written of the emotional needs fulfilled by artistic collaboration and how generative AI processes might incompletely fulfill those needs.

It is possible that the simulation of collaboration extends outside of generative AI and into other fields of coded art. In my personal work, which has involved coded artistic videogame spaces for most of my

life, one of the pleasures of working in this format is the potential for my own work to surprise me. Often I code processes with emergent or at least random possibilities every time I hit "play" on the work. Is it a coincidence that my artistic collaborations have been minimal? Has the creation of work that surprises me and assists in the generation of content and ideas always partially satisfied a need that would otherwise have been satisfied in real human collaboration?

Collaborative Example

Here I will give an example of a process through which I used generative AI in a recent work in a way that might have fulfilled some of the emotional needs that are usually fulfilled by human collaborative artistic activity. In 2023, I completed a work titled *title*. It was a project that, since I began working on it in 2019, had taken several forms.

The initial form was that of an audio-only game that would eventually have visuals. It was inspired by a quote from an Oliver Sacks story. A man with visual impairment whom he profiled had said that the sound of rain created the blind equivalent of a landscape, as the rain revealed the resonance of everything at once that was in front of oneself (*cite*). So I set out to create an explorable space in the 3D game engine Unity, where one roamed the environment and stereo headphones brought one a constantly-shifting landscape of resonant objects. I recorded the sounds of various types of objects in my backyard as I poured water from a watering can onto them; e.g. plastic tubs, metal basins, piles of dirt. These sounds were distributed semi-randomly throughout the 3D environment and the player heard them spatially as they walked past, sound being distributed to each ear dependent on the player's positional and rotational relationship to it. A sighted player would only see a black screen.

I imagined a post-human environment, one being re-wilded by the elements. I felt this would be evoked by the sounds of clearly human-made objects (like metal), isolated from their purposes, being subject to the weathering effects of rain. In addition to these statically-located sounds, there were also the sounds of animals, which I created as autonomously moving and acting non-playable characters (NPCs). This was to give the game a sense of life, with specifically human life remaining conspicuous in its absence.

(show an image of the landscape in Unity)

The project suffered from challenges that are common in audio-only games, including difficulty understanding one's place in the environment. It was a walking simulator, a game without the challenges and strict objectives of competitive games, which might have made the challenges less frustrating. However, I also lacked a plan for it beyond the experiment with auditory revelation of the landscape.

Around this time (2022-2023) I had begun playing with AI image generators, such as Midjourney. The non-human recombining of the remnants of human creation fascinated me. There was something essentially post-human about the nature of the generation, which fit the theme of my project, wandering an environment of the vague remnants of human activity. I was not interested in using the images generated directly, but using them off of which to base hand-drawn silhouettes of progressively stranger and more humanoid-looking plants. To this goal, I used prompts such as "driftwood shaped like a sleeping person", "bone formation under water", and "moss ruin brain stem", from which I drew plants and rock formations.

Commented [Unknown A3]: A Mass of Radiant Flies and a Body

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- hints at archaeology, but after everything's disintegrated and been remade

I isolated the part of the image that I wanted, then drew over it multiple times in the drawing software Krita to create an animation of line boil. In the game engine, these images were presented as black silhouettes against a white sky and black ground. The visuals were all given a blur effect, which I did as a way to attempt to keep the audio as the primary means of experiencing the work. The line boil appeared to me to have the effect of making the images look distorted by rain hitting the screen. All environmental objects were rendered as 2D planes in 3D space, and they would constantly turn to face the player's in-game camera (which simulates where their eyes would be) wherever they were. The uniformity of the black color caused objects to merge into one another, sometimes filling the entirety of the space with black as the player moved through it.

WRONG Biennale 2025 > ^2938 the act of writing; it prompts you to write (prompts), which may end up being a form of poetry

Analysis of the Process

At this time, I had seen some evidence in the news of generative AI's high energy usage, but was unaware of the full environmental devastation it was bringing. I was also aware of the way engines were sourcing their material, but felt that I was changing the images enough to avoid plagiarizing a specific artist's style, and planned to be upfront about how I sourced the material for the images. These were perspectives that I began to see differently later, as I will discuss.

I have discussed how the use of generative AI could be thematically relevant to the work. However, was that the initial reason for my usage? The pull of this tool was probably more curiosity, the wonder of getting a response to my ideas, having additional material from which to draw. If I had drawn the images from other sources, such as my own imagination, or freehand while using other sources as reference, it does not seem as though this would have hurt the thematic coherency of the piece. If I am honest, my usage of AI-generated images for this work was both a way to conceptually reinforce and evolve the theme, as well as a shortcut to the creation of content.

Whether one uses AI to generate text or image, most users assert that they do not use the generated content directly, but that it goes through some form of human editing (*do I need to cite?*). In this case, I was using my aesthetic sense to select from the image output, isolate what I wanted, edit, and minimally animate. I used prompts to attempt to get the Midjourney engine to produce outputs that were stranger than it was trained to make. My work welcomed images that appeared "wrong" or glitchy. I emphasized the ambiguity that AI models were trained to suppress (*cite manovich*). The final images' placements within the real-time game engine created a constant procedural collage, creating, through my code, more connections between these images.

It felt like these outputs were bringing something fresh into my solo project. During this time, we had spent over a year in pandemic-induced isolation. I think I felt less confident in my own work due to the dearth of in-person exhibition opportunities and other forms of artistic connection and feedback.

I have a feeling that including this AI-generated work as part of my process worsened that lack of confidence rather than alleviated. While the work I was drawing from might have lacked the spontaneity and personality of my original drawings, they brought to me a sense of surprise, newness and polish that my own work lacked. This experience might have parallels with addiction, as the more I used it, the less confident I felt going without it.

authors talk about the concept of "machinal bypass", the idea of using generative AI to avoid "emotional or intellectual labor" that we feel is "taxing", that which makes us vulnerable or exposes us to "rejection and judgment" (*cite*). Using AI in my work might have allowed for an intellectual distance. I replaced part of my artistic process with curation.

This is not necessarily new, as artists have been arranging "found" objects for the last century, but the previous real-world limitations of the technique constrained its usage. With AI, there is now the ability to "find" any idea you can think of, and so what does the process of finding mean when the object is birthed from your words? Deep Seek tells me (emphasis in the original response), "AI collaboration offers a **mirror to your own mind**. It surprises you with *your own latent ideas*, remixed from everything it's absorbed. The strangeness you felt might be seeing your own creative impulses reflected back, alienated." In this sense, perhaps it is a machinic way to bypass self-reflection.

Navigating Backlash and Shifting Artistic Process

During my process and even more since completing the work in December 2023, the backlash against all uses of generative AI was growing. Workers were being displaced by their own stolen labor and protesting. Filters at media distribution sites like itch.io were allowing people to block content with any form of AI generated content. It is not always clear where the opinions of the audience, curators and venues lie on usage of AI generated content, including how it is used or in what part of the process. It seems like the safest option is none at all.

At the same time, as we returned to a form of endemic COVID life where in-person gatherings were happening more and more often, I felt less interested in collaboration with an AI. Through various processes and events, I felt a renewed confidence in my own work without the assistance of AI, and a revitalized connection with other artists.

This left me with mixed feelings about this work: I still liked it and what I had done to craft an experience. It was an immersive audiovisual collage. Much of it was mine, and I was happy with those elements. But much of it also came from generative AI, and it was difficult or impossible to separate the two. It both felt that the use of generative AI reinforced some of the themes of the work, and also that I could have done it without the use of Midjourney. I made prints of screenshots of the work, as I do with my other software art, but was unsure the best way to communicate the use of generative AI to potential buyers, so no one would feel tricked. Some exhibitions only allow for a title, date and medium, and generally in the medium we do not list all of the software we use. It felt like this work had a burden to it that my other work did not.

Commented [Unknown A4]: Kaplan, Deanna M., Roman Palitsky, and Charles L. Raison. "The 'Machinal Bypass' and How We're Using AI to Avoid Ourselves." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 51 (2025): e2518999122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2518999122>

Everything that Creativity Is Not

Elements of these feelings could be termed "regret". Regret is often a wish to reverse a past action (*cite*), and thus a form of negation. I wanted to move away from my collaborations with AI.

As we discussed before, there is more ambiguity in the direction "away" than in the direction "toward". There is some unknown as to where one will end up. The process of moving away allows us the possibility of moving toward something that is difficult to grasp. There are parallels here with the aforementioned discussion of apophasis.

It is possible that using AI generated work is the opposite of using one's own creativity. Creativity is an abstract term, often associated with divinity. (*Manovich and*) discuss early views on art as stating that the divine is the only source of creativity. Is it possible, then, that regret over AI usage can lead to the creative equivalent of apophatic mysticism?

(examples that show this is more common than just my example)

Using AI generated work, and then rebounding off of that process might point us toward the intangible of what we have, as human artists. It is also a rebound away from isolation, toward the immediacy of human connection and collaboration.

Conclusion

It is clear that using generative AI in one's artistic process can provoke feelings (*is it clear?*) similar to working with a human collaborator, as well as the response of a human audience or critic. And this substitution might have parallels in other forms of generative, interactive and procedural art.

Part of the pleasure of engaging with generative AI is a sense of estrangement and defamiliarization, which (*manovich*) note are major artistic techniques (*make clear what are quotes*). Using generative AI as a collaborator can not only allow one to see from another perspective, but with a sense of openness like that of a child. (*Manovich*) talks about the perspectival benefits of learning to see hands "like the leaves of a tree". Some artists engage with generative AI not by using it, but by creating physical work in response to it, non-AI work that reproduces some of the fascinating qualities of how AI works. An example is Matthias Moos's *smiley buoy* (2025), where the artist painted a smiley face on a yellow buoy and placed it in the water. The resulting reflection, distorted by the waves, looks like millions of AI generated variations of an emoji. Through this, it appears generative AI teaches us to see in new ways.

Some artists, like Minrui Qiao, emphasis the simulated collaboration even more by focusing on what they see as generative AI's strengths being in the *process*, rather than the *outcome*. Her installation *Trace* (2025) "explores how meaning is continuously generated and transformed through mediation itself." In her work, generative AI is "a system where fragments, errors, and gaps become sites of sense-making." This is a collaboration that restores agency to the artist. Contrary to using machinal bypass to avoid difficulty, her work is using AI to create questions, gaps for the artist and audience to fill in.

Going toward AI can be a feeling of going toward discomfort. We can emerge differently on the other side of this discomfort. There can be a benefit toward entering this hellish inhumanness. Dysphoric experiences, for instance, those caused by certain psychedelics, can often be powerful and life-changing. Engaging with AI can be a back-and-forth process: going deeply into the inhuman, and then coming up for air in the human. One can bring back new perspectives from staring into the negative.

Horror also has its parallels with mysticism (*cite*), and AI with horror. Loab and Google Deep Dream are just examples of where AI enters the uncanny. Emphasizing this goes in a different direction than developers of AI technology are pushing it, but it is an important area for artists to investigate. Pushing toward the uncanny, horror spaces, the void, gives us a point at which to move away from, toward a divine creativity and renewed sense of humanness.

References

