"Neither Artificial nor Intelligent": Critical Approaches to GenAI in the Art History and Visual Art Classroom

Erin J. Campbell and Catherine Harding

Erin J. Campbell is Professor of Early Modern European Art and Chair in the Department of Art History & Visual Studies at the University of Victoria.
–erinjc@uvic.ca

Catherine Harding is Associate Dean Academic, Faculty of Fine Arts, and Associate Professor in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Art in the Department of Art History & Visual Studies at the University of Victoria.
–charding@uvic.ca

In a recent session at the College Art Association on "Critical AI Literacy in Art & Design Education and Practice," one panelist quipped, citing AI critic Kate Crawford: "AI is neither artificial nor intelligent,"[1] calling artificial intelligence the worst-named computational system in human history. Yet, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is having a profound effect on our understandings of creativity, authorship, sentience, and what it means to be human. As arts educators, how do we encourage our students to engage with AI in meaningful and responsible ways? While the transformative possibilities of GenAI are mind blowing, serious concerns—environmental, political, intellectual property (IP), equity, and bias, among others—have raised alarm bells. As an extractive industry, artificial intelligence poses profound ecological issues. Designed to serve existing dominant interests, AI systems are deeply embedded in power and capital. For arts educators, ever since the advent of ChatGPT in 2022, our classrooms have not been the same, and the chatbot continues to improve—one art historian at the CAA session called the most recent version "scarily good." Guides to teaching with GenAI have proliferated, and universities have quickly scrambled to provide policies, guidance, and workshops to instructors and students. While some educators have responded to the challenges presented by GenAI by resigning, others are retreating into depression. This Polemics section asks: is it possible to embrace the challenge of large language models (LLMs) with both critical acumen and optimism? Within our own research and pedagogical practices, we are experiencing a profound sense of dynamic tension, caught between enthusiasm, as some investigative tasks are simplified and maximized in terms of time spent on task, while also wrestling with the cognitive and ethical dilemmas presented. You will find, within this essay, moments of movement towards embracing the benefits of GenAI, fused with a simultaneous need to proceed with great caution to retain core values of academic rigour and training. We argue here for the absolute necessity of cultivating AI literacy in order to respond, in a clear-sighted way, to a world in which AI (with all its dilemmas) is increasingly inescapable.

Everybody everywhere is talking about GenAI: it is in the media constantly; it is winning awards (Time Magazine "Person of the Year" 2025).[2] On the newsstands, there are magazines devoted to helping you integrate AI into every aspect of your life: parenting, finances, shopping, cooking, work life. Need to write an email? GenAI can help you with that! Log into Zoom—the "AI Companion" is standing by, ready to support. A presentation, a policy, a report, a template? No problem! Yet, while everybody seems to be talking about it, the conversations to date are somewhat muted in fine arts and humanities classrooms. Meanwhile, rumours from campuses across the country are creating panic. From leadership meetings to quick corridor chats, tales are spreading about the class in which 90 out of 120 students confessed to using unauthorized GenAI on their assignment, to choose just one example. Some see AI as a panacea for all that ails us. Others are asking whether AI will lead to human extinction.[3] The environmental and ethical impacts of GenAI are real and urgent; the vectors of knowledge, power, and money never more frightening. What would Michel Foucault have to say? Livelihoods are threatened—some estimate that 300 million full-time jobs will be replaced by GenAI.[4] This statistic is from 2024—what are the estimated labour impacts right now, in 2026? Fakes, factual errors, biases, IP concerns, data privacy, all these issues are scary and seemingly intractable. Artists and writers are deeply concerned about the possibility that AI-generated creative works will undermine the value of their work and ultimately threaten their careers. To cite just one high-profile example, members of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) went on strike in July 2024 over the need for AI protections.[5]

The hyperbolic rumblings that oscillate between AI utopia or AI dystopia are not helping arts faculty have deep, timely, and necessary conversations with colleagues and students. Sure, stern prohibitions against GenAI use proliferate

in our course outlines, and university websites abound with advice, but these are not achieving true understanding or AI competencies because we aren't having regular in-classroom discussions, in-class experimentation, and in-class demonstrations to achieve the deep learning outcomes we need to have with our students to achieve AI literacy. Whether you accept or reject GenAI practices, we believe it is important to foster AI literacy for everyone involved in university processes, and our collective conversations around AI need to be steeped in our sense of what is valuable and worth defending in academic teaching, research, and creative work. It is our job to provide guidance on a range of choices for our students, with their range of needs fully in mind.

To be clear, at issue here is a specific form of AI: GenAI, or, more precisely, LLMs—large language models with public access, supported by corporate entities such as Google and Microsoft. We are all familiar with the platform names: ChatGPT, Co-Pilot, Claude, Omega, etc. The advent of open access to LLMs, starting with the November launch of ChatGPT in 2022, provided public access to processors able to scrape large amounts of publicly available data, including image, audio, and text, process the data methodically, and generate responses in image, audio, and text at lightning speed in answer to user prompts.

This Polemics section arose from a panel at the 2025 UAAC conference at York University in Toronto, titled "'Neither Artificial nor Intelligent': Critical Approaches to GenAI in the Art History, Art, Design, & Museum Education Classroom," organized by Erin J. Campbell and Catherine Harding (and chaired by Harding). The contributions from arts educators included here demonstrate ways that we can critically engage our students in the GenAI conversation. The authors offer pedagogical techniques and guidance, strategies, and advice on how to navigate these treacherous waters while supporting the rights of our students to their own creativity, their own critical thinking, and, simultaneously, the deep sense of struggle many feel around the ethical and environmental issues. Our contributors show that we must keep up with the rapidly changing landscape of LLMs. We can't hide our heads in the sand. Despair is not an option. Writing is thinking, creating is thinking. To flourish, human creativity and thinking need resistance, friction, and time on task, not the ease and speed of LLMs. Yet, we are addicted to speed in the face of rapidly increasing information, data, ideas, images, audio, and tasks. Academic workloads are growing exponentially. LLMs are good at many academic tasks. They provide critical feedback on writing, compile literature reviews, brainstorm research questions, and, through iterative processes, force us to think more deeply, more critically. In our experience, GenAI demands that we push deep, critical thought processes beyond a superficial adoption of the tools and tasks that it generates. For teaching, GenAI can improve course design and assignments, ensure learning outcomes align with modules and assessments, and create daily course activities. For administration, GenAI can write academic reports, data-crunch for program reviews, and align activities with institutional strategic plans—excellent! What it can't do is reproduce and reflect on individual, embodied human experience and translate that into images, text, music. It can't replace the human hand in acts of creativity. Writing and creating are thinking. GenAI does not think—it assembles, orders, processes.

This GenAI moment we are in offers us the opportunity to double down on the value of human thinking and human making with our students as we grapple with what we are gaining and losing—this is, we would argue, a key component of AI literacy. Demonstrating the value of time on task, critical thinking, and creativity have never been more urgent. AI challenges us to advocate for the value of our pedagogy and our assessments, of what constitutes knowledge and understanding. This puts the onus on us, as teachers, artists, and scholars, to practice these values in real time with our students. Those of us who engage with GenAI are amazed that we are having conversations with machines. These

conversations are fluent, human-sounding, pleasant, affirming—the machines praise us and validate our questions and our work. After all, creative production and scholarship can be lonely pursuits. With GenAI algorithms built to flatter and validate us, AI engineers seek to encourage dependencies on these technologies, while the profits increase for OpenAI, Anthropic, Google, Microsoft, etc. As we worry about capitalism, power, and the potential devastating environmental impacts of large processing installations, such machine-human exchanges are seductive because they sharpen our creativity and our thinking, reveal dimensions of a project that hadn't occurred to us, and provide methodical, organized critical feedback with the pros and cons of a particular course of action clearly laid out.

For our students, we need to share such GenAI conversations in the classroom to encourage critical reflection on the role of these machines in our lives. As Melanie Mitchell, professor at the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico argues, these systems provide "a great opportunity to deepen our understanding of cognition," but "we must be aware of all the dangers, risks and issues that are involved with deploying them in the real world."[6] Our students need to learn about the risks and benefits of these technologies from us, in our classrooms, so they can demand regulation to protect the rights and interests not just of artists and scholars, but of humanity. As Mitchell argues: "these systems are not yet reliable. Nor are they conscious. They're not deciding to do anything that might be harmful to us. The real potential for harm is in humans using them, and therefore we do need to regulate them."[7]

Regulation is certainly one of the pressing issues in the ongoing debate. But at the end of the day, this is ultimately about how we all meet change—in this case, a wave of technological change that is tsunami-like in its scale and impact. It raises fundamental questions about human behaviour, adaptability, and transformation in our worldmaking systems. Many students we interviewed talked about their emotional responses of anger, frustration, and despair at being co-opted as users/data producers for social media platforms, and now, in turn, as creatives and thinkers facing the task of getting a higher education. They feel forced to navigate the uneasy terrain of being technophilic and yet against techno-utopianism and techno-determinism.[8] How do we, as instructors and leaders in academic thought, offer safe, nurturing communities for the crucial conversations that need to happen? We can learn from systems thinking to reflect continuously as we face the changes represented by GenAI by concentrating on learning-by-doing, which is clearly demonstrated in the experimentation, openness and adaptability offered in the contributions published here.

We can point to the impact of Adrienne Maree Brown's writings since 2017, which highlight the value of relationship-building, making small-scale fractal change, and the power of collective action within futures thinking.9 Eschewing neoliberal habits of mind and thought, she shows how care, collective action, relational resilience, and imagination/futures thinking can help us. Taking note of the moment, with so many of us working to transform university systems within the lens of decolonial and gender-equity theory and practice—and at a time when embodied pedagogies and intersectional thinking are impacting classrooms—holding collective conversations about the advent of GenAI seems imperative.

Our three contributors, Twyla Exner, Samantha Chang, and Erin Campbell, model the kind of courageous conversations we need to be having with our students and colleagues. All recognize what Exner refers to as "polarized responses" to GenAI, and yet they wade into the fray, despite their own discomfort, because they feel it is their job as educators, artists, and scholars to engage in debate, however complex the issues.

Exner's account is based on a third-year studio course that she designed: "Explorations in Art & AI." The course provided students with a safe space to

confront the issues raised by GenAI and creativity head-on. Exner brings us into the classroom, sharing the varied student responses to GenAI along with examples of the artwork they created using a range of GenAI tools. Rather than rejection or acceptance, students learned to grapple with the complexities of being a creative artist working with GenAI, while confronting the existential nature of creativity, authorship, and other core values involved in art-making. Interestingly, students were less concerned about using GenAI to generate text, because they applied a different, high-value meaning-making schema to creative work, pointing to an area for future conversations with visual arts students. We discussed this complex response during the conference, being mindful that each student brought unique value systems and mindsets to the novel experience of using GenAI in relationship to their art-making.

Through the example of a second-year art history assignment, Samantha Chang approaches GenAI as a "disciplinary stress test," showing how GenAI provides an opportunity to rethink assessment practices. She poses an important question: why are art history assignments so easily automated? Drawing on Sarah Elaine Eaton's concept of "postplagiarism" and the principles of Universal Design for Learning, Chang argues against what she refers to as the "surveillance model" and has designed her assignment to reduce inequities in the art history classroom. Rather than asking students to do busy-work writing generic essays that reproduce stale academic formulas, Chang's GenAI test images assess students' capacity to make connections, use different types of art historical analysis (image comparison and response to readings), and provide a synthesis within a specific historical context.

While Exner and Chang offer examples from the studio or art history classroom, Campbell's essay is based on her experience as Chair leading an art history department, shepherding individuals through the murky waters of early-onset GenAI. While discussing various strategies to instigate dialogue in her department, Campbell leans heavily on the classrooms of a group of sessional instructors who show courage in leading their students through the complexities of the polarized responses evoked by GenAI. Like Exner and Chang, Campbell's instructors are dedicated to working side-by-side with students to develop habits of critical, creative, and curious engagement with GenAI. The issues are complex and exciting, and demand deep levels of critical thought and engagement within the discipline. We hope that this collection of essays ignites a shared collegial conversation in which we learn together how to navigate this major paradigm shift in arts education.

ENDNOTES

1 For the original reference, see Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2021), 8.
2 Charlie Campbell, Andrew R. Chow, and Billy Perigo, "The Architects of AI are Time's 2025 Person of the Year," *Time Magazine*, December 11, 2025, https://time.com/7339685/person-of-the-year-2025-ai-architects/.
3 Catherine de Lange, "Letter from the Editor: Introduction," in *New Scientist Essential Guide: The AI Revolution: What the New Age of Artificial Intelligence Means for Humanity*, ed. Catherine de Lange (New Scientist Essential Guides, 2024), 3.
4 De Lange, "Letter from the Editor," 9.
5 AP, "Hollywood's Video Game Actors Vote to Strike Over AI Protections," *CBC News*, July 25, 2024, https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/sag-aftra-video-game-actors-strike-1.7275627.
6 De Lange, "Letter from the Editor," 15.
7 De Lange, "Letter from the Editor," 15.
8 Sofian Audry, *Art in the Age of Machine Learning* (The MIT Press, 2021), 165.
9 Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy* (AK Press, 2017).