

# The World Through AI

Curated by Antonio Somaini

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Alexandre Gefen, Pia Viewing

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Rediscovering the “real” world upon exiting the Jeu de Paume after the exhibition *The World Through AI* means coming to terms with a sense of the end. We feel that our perception is anachronistic, limited, and fragile; we feel that we are naively attached to things, and we look at those things, that light, those colors and shapes, already with a hint of nostalgia. At the Jeu de Paume, the decentralization of the human being that has long been discussed in various fields of culture and science, in the name of the Stieglerian neganthropocene, is not something that is learned, but something that is experienced step by step, room by room. For a few hours, we become thinking, sentient machines, learning to adopt their mathematical *gaze* and even their capacity for hallucination; this is why returning to using our eyes at the end of this extraordinary experience is almost moving.

This is a great achievement for this exhibition on AI and art—the first major exhibition entirely dedicated to this theme—curated by Antonio Somaini, in association with Ada Ackerman, Alexandre Gefen, and Pia Viewing. *The World Through AI* aims to take stock of an elusive subject undergoing rapid transformation, managing to tell us what AI was in the first season of its life; what it has been, and above all what artists have done with it so far, in order to understand and question it critically.

*The World Through AI* is divided into four main sections that move from matter to words in a circular journey that echoes two archaic elements of human expression. In this passage, which is at once technical, cultural, and political, artificial intelligence is interrogated not only as a technological object, but also as a device that reflects and reshapes the structures of thought, language, and power. Each section is accompanied by archaeological media showcases that convey the *longue durée* of the themes addressed, highlighting the continuity between 18<sup>th</sup>-century automata and chatbots, 19<sup>th</sup>-century phrenology, and face recognition.

The *overture* is as unexpected as it is incisive; in the first room, we find Julian Charrière’s geological compositions (*Metamorphism LI*, 2016), which force us to confront the often-ignored material foundations of artificial intelligence: the minerals it consumes, the landscapes it marks, the silent toll it imposes on the planet. Reflections on the ideology and political and ecological weight of AI accompany the entire exhibition and are further clarified by the imposing murals by Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler (*Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Technology and Power Since 1500*, 2023); enormous genealogical maps that allow us to visualise the underground connection that links Dürer’s grids to pixels.



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This broad socio-political premise introduces the first thematic macro-section of the exhibition, dedicated to the so-called “analytic AI”; the deep learning algorithms through which large amounts of data can be classified and categorised. Through these algorithms, machines can “see”, i.e., recognise things and humans, revealing to us—perhaps more than we would like—aspects of ourselves, our hierarchies and categories of thought. For example, *Exposing.ai* (Adam Harvey 2021) discloses the constant theft of images uploaded online for the creation of algorithmic training data sets, while *Faces of Imagenet* (Trevor Paglen, 2022) highlights the political complexity of artificial vision, exposing the opaque structures of bias that shape databases, to the point of interpreting our image according to identity stereotypes of absurd specificity. Finally, Hito Steyerl’s work *Mechanical Kurds* (2025), created specifically for this exhibition, presents the contemporary click worker as the most up-to-date version of the eighteenth century chess-playing automaton (a machine that actually contained a human being). The alienating working conditions of a Kurdish person grappling with image labelling are a way of revealing how the dream of complete automation of intelligence always conceals the exploitation of subaltern identities.

The second thematic macro-section of the exhibition is dedicated to “generative AI”, i.e., works created through learning algorithms that generate new data, such as texts and moving images, from gigantic databases. This is the heart of the exhibition, which explores the ability of algorithms to replace or integrate the most strictly creative functions typical of human beings. The entry point into these complicated generative processes is the notion of “latent space”, introduced by Antonio Somaini as “the abstract space within which complex, high-dimensional data structures (such as images, texts and sounds [...]) are represented in a more simplified lower dimensional form, in order to be processed through different mathematical

operations” (2025, 21). Latent space is therefore the warehouse where an enormous quantity of texts and images is stored in compressed and diagrammatic form. We understand its function thanks to one of the archaeological media cross-sections in the exhibition, which reminds us that the compression of data within spatial constructs is part of our history as human beings; maps, atlases, and even catalogue cards were systems of compression and displacement of information that are not qualitatively different from the coordinates in which data coagulation points are located in latent spaces.

The new creativity distributed between humans and machines is therefore nothing more than a new way of operating on latent space, as shown by the work of filmmaker, writer and researcher Érik Bulloot. His *Cinéma vivant* (2024) is a series of 12 photorealistic digital images generated by a text-to-image algorithmic model. The prompts are the words of the symbolist poet Saint-Paul-Roux (1861-1940) and his cinematic utopia transformed into images in the conditional past tense (*images that could have been*), i.e., endowed with a completely new temporality that breaks down and blurs the sense of linear time. By tapping into AI’s paradoxical sense of time, Bulloot also manages to give shape to Abel Gance’s unmade film, which the director talked about in a 1956 radio show. The images and sounds of his *Le rêve d’Abel Gance* (2025) are entirely generated by AI and open the field to what could become a history of potential cinema. Conversely, Gwenola Wagon’s work rethinks a masterpiece of the past, *La Jetée* (1962), rewriting it through uncanny images of our media-saturated present, to the point of blurring memory and premonition. Her *Chroniques du soleil noir* (2023) is a film that prompts us to question what art of the twentieth century might become in the age of artificial intelligence. What can cinema become when its series of frames can be continuously interrupted and interpolated in an invisible way, or covered with an ever-changing skin? What can video become when

its intrinsic narcissism is enhanced by AI tools, as in the room entirely dedicated to Gregory Chatonsky and his memorial film—not of the life he lived, but of the life he could have lived—which the machine generates in ever-changing sequences? Each visitor witnesses a version of the artist's life, each viewer sees their “own” film linked to the contingency of the moment in which they stand in front of the image.

Questions about the fate of the media remain open and extend beyond cinema, as in the

more photographic section, where AI is both a tool of control and a means of compensating for neglected identities and bringing to light what has been discarded by history (as in *The Archive of Unnamed Workers*, by Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert & Alexia Achilleos, 2022). The exhibition curated by Somaini, Ackerman, Gefen and Viewing is a call to discover a technique on the verge of completely obscuring its own functioning, beyond philanthropic prejudices and technophile enthusiasm.

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## REFERENCE LIST

Somaini, Antonio, Ada Ackerman, Alexandre Gefen, and Pia Viewing, eds. 2025. *The World through AI*. Paris: JBE Books.