Experimenting with AI

Aesthetics, Creativity and Humanistic Knowledge Today

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The following introduction opens the present issue of *Itinera* by gathering a selection of the papers presented at the conference *Artificial Intelligence to the Test. Creativity and Humanistic Knowledge Today* (Università degli Studi di Milano, May 8–9, 2025). The issue examines how contemporary art engages with artificial intelligence not as a neutral instrument but as a dialogical partner in thought and creation. Moving beyond polarized narratives that cast AI either as a threat or as an enhancement of human capacities, the introduction explores the relational space in which human and machine agencies interact, generating new meanings and aesthetic possibilities. By foregrounding interaction rather than autonomy or technical performance, it proposes a framework for understanding AI-based artistic practice as a site for rethinking authorship, intention, and the co-constitutive evolution of humans and their technologies.

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Stemming from the conference *Artificial Intelligence to the Test. Creativity and Humanistic Knowledge Today* (Università degli Studi di Milano, May 8–9, 2025), this issue investigates how contemporary art confronts artificial intelligence, not as a mere tool, but as a partner in thought and creation[1]. It focuses on the experimental dimension of artistic practice, where the encounter with technology becomes a testing ground for new forms of expression.

In contemporary debate, discussions around artificial intelligence tend to revolve around machine learning and the supposed capacity of algorithms to communicate, to reason, and, ultimately, even to think and create. Much of the discourse focuses on the progressive refinement of models and the accumulation of data, as if intelligence could be reduced to the optimization of performance. On one side lies the inert machine, matter awaiting activation; on the other, the human being, responsible for infusing it with energy, intention, and meaning through data, prompts, and commands. In this view, the computer remains a neutral instrument, while the human claims the role of its master and interpreter. Yet, such a perspective neglects another essential dimension: the *relational* and *dialogical* space in which any genuine form of coexistence with technology can unfold. For when the machine is conceived merely as something to be trained or controlled, the debate overlooks the space of interaction, the process through which human and technical agencies confront one another, sometimes in unpredictable ways that generate new meanings.

What emerges instead is a polarized narrative that imagines technology as a potential substitute for human capacities and swings between enchantment and alarm. We are captivated by the generative power of artificial intelligence, yet uneasy at the thought that such power could erode the singularity of human intelligence. The machine thus appears either as an unprecedented amplifier of our capacities or as an actor whose growing autonomy unsettles our sense of authorship, reflecting

[1] The conference and this special issue were developed within the framework of two research projects: 1) *GPTheatre: Generative AI for Humanities*; 2) Prin *MentalFlex: Validation of a novel Psychometric 3D Model of Affect Dynamics*.

our own ambivalence toward the technical. This oscillation is symptomatic of a deeper unease: a difficulty in conceiving technology not as an external or autonomous agent, but as something that co-constitutes our very modes of perception, imagination, and creation. To restore the question of dialogue means to challenge this defensive imagination and to recognize that meaning arises not in the isolation of either term, human or machine, but in their encounter. The point is not to measure whether artificial intelligence can think or create "as humans do", but to explore how such systems transform the conditions under which thought and creation take place.

This ambivalence is not new. French philosopher Gilbert Simondon had already observed that modern culture defined itself as a defensive system against technology, treating technical objects either as lifeless tools or as potentially hostile beings[2]. The same dichotomies resurface today in the artistic field, where the advent of generative systems capable of producing texts and images automatically raises questions about authorship, artistic authority, and the value of works produced by machines. Between catastrophic alarm and uncritical enthusiasm, this issue proposes a different approach, one that focuses on *interaction* as the decisive moment of creation.

The recent diffusion of generative systems has made the "dialogue" between human beings and machines a pervasive metaphor. Yet the dialogical structure of AI alone does not guarantee a genuine exchange. For a real dialogue to take place, the human interlocutor – here, the artist – must take up the challenge and search among the machine's manifold responses for those that open a meaningful trajectory. What matters is not the extraordinary quality of the product obtained through AI, nor the prospect of an autonomous creative entity, but the *process of interaction* itself: the moment when the encounter between human and machine allows the artist to see something in themselves and in their world that was previously invisible. In this sense, the artistic experiment with AI can be understood as a privileged site for rethinking the relationship between human intention, technical mediation, and aesthetic discovery.

Such a perspective also reconnects with the early explorations that first sought to test the dialogue between art and technology. Among the pioneers of this encounter stands the British psychologist and cyberneticist Gordon Pask, who designed interactive systems he described as *aesthetically potent environments.* For Pask, *potency* did not mean technical power, but the ability of a system to generate a meaningful relation with its human counterpart. These environments were conceived as open frameworks that invited participation and reflection, allowing the work to take shape through the interaction itself. Among Pask's experiments, *Musicolour* (1953) stands out as a technically simple

[2] See G. Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*; trans by C. Malaspina & J. Rogove, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2017, p. 16.

yet conceptually revealing project. By converting sounds into light patterns, it enacted a primitive but powerful model of interaction – one that already anticipated the reciprocal exchange between human and machine at the centre of today's investigations. The performer responded to the visual feedback while the system adjusted to the performer's actions, forming a dynamic and unpredictable exchange. The *aesthetic potency* of such systems lies precisely in this reciprocal process, where human and machine bring one another into activity, allowing the work to become something more than either could produce independently. «[The performer] trained the machine and it played game with him», Pask wrote. «In this sense, the system acted as an extension of the performer with which he could co-operate to achieve effects that he could not achieve on his own»[3].

Play is the key word here, not in the sense of entertainment, but as a mode of creative engagement that replaces control with responsiveness. The encounter between human and machine unfolds as an open-ended exchange of gestures, a dynamic coupling in which both partners act and react, co-determining one another. The human remains the author (intention still originates in them) but the artificial agent responds, constrains, and suggests new paths, amplifying the creative process rather than replacing it.

This cooperative vision has deep anthropological and philosophical roots. Thinkers from André Leroi-Gourhan to Gilbert Simondon, among others, have emphasized that human and technology have always evolved together in a relation of reciprocal constitution. As Leroi-Gourhan observed «the human hand is human because of what is makes, not of what it is»[4]: technology is not external to humanity but one of its necessary extensions, a «secretion»[5] of the human body. Similarly, Simondon's notion of *techno-aesthetics*[6] defines sensitivity itself as something that evolves within the coupling (*couplage*) of human and technical agencies. This coupling is not a relation between pre-constituted subjects and objects, but the very condition for their emergence. It is precisely *within* this relation – between artist and algorithm, gesture and code – that new forms of aesthetic experience are beginning to emerge. The essays and artistic projects collected here explore in depth this very space of encounter.

The issue opens with Pina De Luca's *Il molteplice umano*, which offers a philosophical reflection on the transformations of the human in the age of artificial intelligence. Drawing on Nietzsche, Zambrano, Deleuze, and Blanchot, the essay conceives the human not as a stable essence but as a

[3] G. Pask, *A Comment, a Case History and a Plan*, in J. Reichardt (ed. by), *Cybernetics, Art and Ideas*, Studio Vista, London 1971, p. 78.
[4] A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole*, trans by A. Bostock Berger, *Gesture and Speech*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) – London, 1993, p. 240.
[5] See *ivi*, p. 91.
[6] See G. Simondon, *Sur la tecno-esthétique*, trans. by A. De Boever, *On Techno-Aesthetics*, "Parrhesia" (14), 2012, pp. 1-8.

plural, mobile, and hybrid process, an ongoing becoming shaped by its technical and symbolic couplings. Rejecting both human exceptionalism and the total delegation of agency to machines, De Luca envisions creativity as a relational act emerging from negotiation between heterogeneous parts: human, artificial, and environmental. Through this lens, AI is not an adversary or a mirror, but a participant in the open-ended work of re-creating the human.

From this philosophical horizon, the issue moves to the domain of language with Minghui Hu's *The Task of the Human-Machine Translator: Scaling Intelligence and Preserving Transcendence*. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's reflections, Hu explores how the encounter between algorithmic and human intelligence transforms the meaning of translation itself. Focusing on the case of classical Chinese, the essay exposes the limits of automation and advances the idea of "cyborg translation", where the machine's capacity to scale meaning coexists with the human aspiration to meaning beyond computation.

Moving from language to image, Francesco D'Isa and Lorenzo Manera's *From the Representationalist Stance to Conceptual Blending in AI-Generated Images* investigates how generative systems redefine the visual field by merging linguistic, conceptual, and aesthetic processes. Building on Nelson Goodman's distinction between autographic and allographic art forms, the authors describe prompting as a hybrid practice that turns language itself into a design medium. Through the notions of "semantic attractors" and "conceptual blending", they analyse how words shape the latent space of AI models, producing images that function as mixed cases between notation and instantiation.

In *Soglie di eccedenza. Forme di resistenza estetica nell'era algoritmica*, Sara Matetich extends this investigation by addressing the aesthetic and political stakes of algorithmic creativity. Drawing on Heidegger, Boden, and Rancière, Matetich interprets error and deviation not as technical anomalies but as moments of disclosure, thresholds where the machine's logic reveals its own excess. Her essay shows how generative art transforms algorithmic instability into poetic and critical potential, turning hallucination into an act of resistance and imagination.

Placed in close dialogue with this perspective, Pietro Lafiandra and Flavio Pizzorno's *From Miss Polly Had a Dolly to THE PØRNØGRAPHƏR* examines the aesthetic and theoretical stakes of image production through generative models. Through two short films by the HARIEL collective, the authors analyse what Pietro Montani calls inert syncretism, the automatic coupling of text and image characteristic of contemporary AI systems. Drawing on Vilém Flusser's critique of the apparatus, they argue that algorithmic hallucination can acquire both aesthetic and cognitive value, becoming a

mode of resistance that disrupts the classificatory logic of datasets and reconfigures the possibilities of AI cinema.

A shift in focus occurs with Giovanni Aloi's *When the Algorithm Takes Root*, which extends the discussion to the ecological dimension of representation. Through vivid examples and art-historical reflection, the essay shows how algorithmic visions of "impossible flora" blur the boundary between nature and simulation, seducing viewers into a capitalist sublime that replaces ecological awareness with spectacle. Drawing on thinkers such as Mark Fisher and Guy Debord, Aloi argues that these artificial botanicals both mirror and deepen our estrangement from the living world. Against this aesthetic of illusion, he calls for a renewed realism, one grounded in discernment, care, and the fragile vitality of what still grows beyond the screen.

This ecological thread continues in Saverio Macrì's *The Senses of the World*, which highlights one of the key features of AI-based art: its deep entanglement with data. Focusing on artistic practices that transform digital information into sensory experience, the essay proposes a shift in how we understand art made with or through AI, not as imitation of intelligence, but as a reconfiguration of perception. Drawing on the works of Tomás Saraceno, Maja Petrić, and Thijs Biersteker, Macrì shows how technologies of sensing and computation reveal the hidden rhythms of the living world. Engaging with Whitehead's philosophy of feeling, the essay redefines data as a medium through which art can articulate new forms of sensitivity.