

# Artful Antics in an Artificial Age

Ryder Richards

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## Summary

Beyond near-term hype, as AI increasingly penetrates cultural realms like art, urgent questions arise around human creativity versus artificial generation. This lecture traverses philosophical tensions from Cybernetics to Marxism to Silicon Valley god-complexes shaping our AI future, as well as considering aura, human dignity, and the limits of technology.

## Introduction

*"We believe the most important division in today's left is between those that hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity and globality." - #Accelerate (Williams and Srnicek)*

I'm really excited to discuss a topic that sits at the intersection of art, technology, and what it means to be human amid the rise of AI and all the variations that stands for, and AI generated art. As creators, collectors, and sensitive critics immersed in the art world, many of us have strongly held beliefs about artistic expression and more confused beliefs about our centrality next to a technology that can algorithmically produce paintings, music, poetry, scripts, articles, and now even movies.

In this talk, we'll explore some historical and philosophical context around culture and technology, connect that to today's explosion in AI-powered generative art, and debate what it may signify for the future of creativity.

There are perspectives on both sides - AI prompting new forms of human/machine collaboration versus AI eroding the specialness of human creation. My goal is not to definitively land on either pole, but to spur thoughtful reflection, and show paths I find compelling. I suspect our notions of art - its economic value, emotional

resonance, and more - will be disrupted in coming decades as AI permeates cultural sectors, and I don't think that's all bad given the state of things. And, no, we can't put the genie back in the bottle, so we need to pull our heads out of the sand.

So let's begin by grounding the conversation in some seminal thinkers who observed technology's cultural impacts even before the age of modern computing...

## Cybernetics and the Allure of Progress

*"The will to improve is a decisive component of the human condition.  
[...] We need to accelerate the process." - #Accelerate (Mascat)*

The classical Greek term "cybernetics" referred to the art of steering or governing, piloting. Even though today, it seems more synonymous with man-machine hybrids, where a human takes on a prosthetic technology to compete in an increasingly machinic age.

In the mid 20th century it was reimagined by mathematicians like Norbert Wiener to describe systems regulated by feedback loops.

Whether a thermostat adjusting room temperature, a pilot navigating a ship across rough seas, a teacher controlling a classroom, or AI neural networks processing mountains of data, the concepts of control, communication and learning are key.

Cybernetics as an area of scientific inquiry co-evolved with early computing. It reflected Enlightenment values of using reason and technology to elevate civilization. This ethos of scientific control over nature -and ourselves- continues today. In the 1950s it mingled with Space Age dreams of manned space exploration and techno-utopian tomorrows, with Stafford Biers going as far as creating CyberSyn, (a Governmental system in Chile) a means of allowing tighter and less formal, decentralized, informational systems to run a state, which seemed to be working great until the US came in and crashed the system.

## Futurism

Prior to that, you may be familiar with the Italian art movement Futurism from the early 1900s which embraced themes of speed, technology, violence and modernity. In the 2000's a futurist is something a bit different.

Founder Filippo Marinetti actually became obsessed with cars racing through the countryside and wrote a Futurist manifesto glorifying war for cleansing the world. It was misogynist, destructive, and called for rapid acceleration into the future with greater and more powerful, and sexy machines belching smoke... think of men in rockets, and chrome tanks, and suicidal heroics to push the future forward. A bit like Mad Max, Gravity's Rainbow, and Transformers rolled together.

While this sounds insane today, toxic masculinity and all that, it saw a powerful future amid luddites who were unwilling to sacrifice for an inevitable future. This psychological urge, amidst facism and war in the early 1900's, aligns with Freud's "death drive" which we will reference again later, but a key trait is anxiousness and precarity, a lack of genuine hope for the future that drives them to death simply for the rest it provides... and along the way, why not tie your frustrated rage to an explosive death? But -of course- many of the founders did not die young, or bombastically, so perhaps the whole thing was an affectation.

We can draw a direct line from this fascination with technological power, through mid-century cybernetics and Space Age fantasies, to an ideology that emerged decades later called accelerationism.

## Accelerationism and AI

*"Futurity implodes in the dark negentropic heart of capital's black hole...fiat lux as fierce luciferase abolishing the long night of labour."  
- Flatline Constructs (Barker)*

{AI made this up, I can't find it in the document}

Back in 1872 Samuel Butler wrote "Erewhon: the book on machines" and discusses how machines shape humans into something like bees: we flit around pollinating the machines so they can grow and reproduce. They have co-opted us, and we need them for our survival. This symbiosis will exist until the gears evolve to not only replicate themselves but use humans to evolve them into self-evolving machines. At this point, the machine is using us to evolve itself beyond a need for us, and Butler argues for their sentience by comparing it to the banal responses of humans.

An easy example by Villem Flusser is the camera, which went from the camera obscura to the portable daguerreotype taking hours take and days to process, to us carrying a camera in our pocket, supplementing our memory with an external

organ. Now, in a twist, we don't need real images for real memories... we can request any image we want from AI.

In recent decades a faction of mostly male technologists, economists and philosophers clustered around an idea called **accelerationism**. They argue the only way through global capitalism run amok is to accelerate its processes of constant disruption.

Instead of resisting economic upheaval, lean into it until late-stage capitalism inevitably collapses under its own weight.

The only way out is through, a cyber-future where man and machine meld, consciousness can be uploaded, extending a Deleuze & Guattarian notion that schizophrenic paranoia is an escape, where a multiplicity of identities extend and dissolve the notion of humanity. And, of course, it is cowardice to wax nostalgic, to turn back.

Of course, this means accelerating automation and job loss. But techno-optimists like inventor and modern futurist Ray Kurzweil insist new technologies always provide fresh opportunities for humans. The elevator operator is a job that was lost, but of course, no human really wanted that job, they just wanted the security and social status of a job.

As David Graeber reiterates in his book "Bullshit Jobs", 37% of British workers did not feel their job made a substantial or meaningful contribution to the world. And when doing these jobs people become burnt out after a year, citing "the misery of not feeling entitled to one's misery." Anywhere from 10% to 50% of jobs will be automated in the next couple of decades, depending on the study, but many suggest there will be even more jobs but they will require upskilling and reskilling: more alignment with technology.

So... While we debate whether AI will unlock new creative frontiers, or devalue human imagination, there is a very real acceleration of undermining current jobs, forcing us to re-evaluate our humanity as the operators of machinic tasks, captured by technology's evolution, or to become somehow truly human.

As Andrew Feenberg says in "Questioning Technology," technology should serve humans: we make it, we can set the parameters, yet we increasingly serve it. We become the modulators, the fleshy mediators or bumble bees, locked into patterned, conditioned behaviors to maintain the machines on which we depend. And life at this scale (comfort and global population) could not exist with technology.

Which brings us back to cybernetics - if philosophical accelerationists want to "speed up the process", AI and its exponential growth in power due to computing advances makes it the ultimate accelerant. AI can ingest data, learn tasks, and mimic humans at a pace no organic being can match.

Da-da-da-dummm... so we have to figure out what humans were for before we gave into the techno-progressive impulse.

## Walter Benjamin and the Loss of Aura

*"Technical perfection strips away the gift-character of human production, bringing all relations between people under the schema of production for exchange. Life in its immediacy becomes invisible." -  
Malign Velocities (Noys)*

Let's rewind further to the early 1900s with philosopher Walter Benjamin. In his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Benjamin observed how technologies like photography and film fundamentally shifted cultural objects like art. As creative artifacts became mass reproducible, they lost that which Benjamin called "aura" - a sense of authenticity and unique presence in time and space.

Benjamin saw aura as ineffably tied to an artwork's ritual roots in ceremony and tradition. It gave art a magical and spiritual authority. He feared broader cultural decline as art's aura weakened through infinite mechanical reproduction.

Relating this to AI - what deeper toll might there be from an exponentially scalable technology churning out astronomically more creative content than humans ever could? Paintings bearing emotional resonance but painted by no one. Music that moves us, flowing from machines not souls?

## On Economics and Ownership

*"Capital without humans becomes possible – an abstract form of domination, incarnated in AI plutocrats, in algorithmic governance." -  
Malign Velocities (Noys)*

Technological shifts ripple out into economic impacts, as we know. Any complex system will adapt, but how we read and predict, or forecast these mutations allows us to understand reality in a different way. This is known as “short-circuiting” and instead of becoming a transcendental ideological framework can be seen as a Parallax view, or merely a shift in perspective from the commonly held teleology.

Marx examined capitalism's tendency to estrange workers from the products of their labor, even as they align themselves more with the machines they operate. The workers are unable to own or shape with any agency the design by committee products they labor to produce, so they take the only warmth available by clinging, hugging, to their machinic mastery.

Though imperfect, markets historically sought to quantify creative work time and skill. People formed bonds -and told stories- with artists through the artworks they purchased. So what happens when AI can produce in seconds what takes humans months?

AI may drive down costs, boosting access to artworks, music and writing. But this risks diminishing public willingness to pay for such human-generated content.

But this is doubtful given the already existing distinction between a poster and painting, however, graphics and illustration, which are often narrative consumables, rather than capital A art, would seem to be in dire straits.

Biases are imprinted into AI when powerful entities control and profit from public data. This is utilizing existing resources without permission or compensation, with the private company reaping much of the reward.

AI could allow more marginalized groups to partake in cultural production - or it could further advantage those already privileged.

And of course, we can talk copyright, and the overall lack of it: you cannot copyright the AI image, but if you put a mustache on the Mona Lisa you can copyright the mustache.

How can we structure a future where AI enhances the arts without disempowering those who have long invested blood, sweat and tears into creative careers?

## Estranged Labor and Artistic Alienation

Philosopher Marx examined how industrialization estranged workers from the products of their labor. Technological systems of production obscured the human effort underlying commodities. Building on Marx, philosopher Shulamith Firestone described how in advanced cybernetic economies:

*"The world tends increasingly to become a mere extension of [one's] nervous system, a huge sensory device." (Firestone)*

We inhabit a hyper-specialized system optimizing narrow efficiency at costs to meaning. Alienation spreads as technology mediates relationships to our work and selves.

Within this context, does AI present artists losing control over their creations? As generative algorithms pump out endless "creations", the specialness of human artistry fades. Paint colors holding traces of bristles fade to pixel tones of duplicable pixel arrays. The audience gaze shifts from the story of the artist's eyes to the micro-tasks of machine learning models.

Some may embrace AI in artistic collaboration with humans. But for viewers already bereft of time for appreciation, will intricate human/AI distinctions fall to indifference? If art and artists disappear into matrices of anonymized data and technical processes, have we inaugurated the death of art's aura heralded by prophet Benjamin? Perhaps only a conscious reassertion of radically human artifacts and experiences beyond systemic logic can spark estranged souls.

## Data Biases and Social Imprinting

Modern AI systems like Large Language Models are trained on massive datasets - from images to text to voice recordings. But what assumptions and biases are encoded in those datasets? And how might they shape or distort the AI systems ingesting such data?

Artist Trevor Paglen has extensively researched problematic biases baked into computer vision datasets. For example, he acquired a dataset of images used to train facial recognition systems. He discovered it was over 70% composed of images of white males, skewing systems toward racial and gender bias.

Examples abound of optical character recognition algorithms much more successfully processing European names versus African American ones on scanned resumes or

loan applications. Or resume screening algorithms downranking applicants who attended women's colleges.

So, while datasets promise to help AI learn about the world, they risk perpetrating and amplifying very human biases around race, gender identity, disabilities, social class, and more. Trevor Paglen sources public domain images to produce visual artwork explicating these themes.

As artists have long known, underlying worldviews and assumptions leak into the creative process - for better and often worse. The same applies to AI and its problematic data. Do we want to construct future AI to mirror the present, sins and all? Or guide it to reflect our highest, most inclusive ideals for humankind?

This is why, 1) AI is not neutral, but shaped, often reflecting ourselves back at us, which is very scary, and 2) The choices we make today on data and algorithms will shape our AI creations tomorrow.

## The Art of Trust in the AI Era

In the interplay between art and technology, the digital age has reshaped our understanding of trust. Traditionally, art was a medium of implicit trust between creator and observer. However, the digital era, with its reliance on passwords and cybersecurity, introduced a new skepticism.

### Digital Distrust and the Rise of Zero Trust

The digital world's complexity, marked by scams and Photoshop's manipulative prowess, gradually eroded the straightforward trust once placed in art. The 'Zero Trust' model in cybersecurity, necessitating continuous validation, further deepened this skepticism. This model, crucial for security, also mirrored the growing doubts in digital art authenticity.

### AI: A Double-Edged Sword

The advent of AI, especially in creating deepfakes, challenged our ability to discern true from false, amplifying distrust. Yet, AI in art also emerged as a creative tool, expanding artistic boundaries. This dichotomy illustrates AI's dual role as both a disruptor and an enabler in art.



## AI's Role in Restoring Trust

AI's potential to restore trust is seen in its capability to detect deepfakes and authenticate digital content. In art, AI's analytical power helps verify authenticity, hinting at a future where AI safeguards artistic integrity.

Neal Stephenson in his book "Dodge, or Fall in Hell" discusses a holographic identity system, with you from birth and so complexly you that it cannot be faked, but in order for people to adopt it they had to create a devastating deepfake: leaders using fear for our best interests.

## Preserving Humanity Amidst Digitalization

As we embrace digital advancements, it's vital to remember that our humanity should not be conflated with technology. AI, a product of human ingenuity, should not overshadow the human essence in art. The core of art, in evoking emotions and thoughts, remains a uniquely human domain. In this AI-driven era, the art world must balance innovation with the preservation of this human touch, ensuring art remains an authentic expression of our shared humanity.

# The Human Spark

*"The Turing test cuts both ways. You can't tell if a machine has gotten smarter or if you've just lowered your own standards of intelligence to such a degree that the machine seems smart." - Flatline Constructs  
(Barker)*

Shout out to the Voight-Komppf test in Blade Runner. The unknowing replicant runs tests to find unknowing replicants.

Beyond economic concerns, AI intersects with philosophical debates about technology revealing what makes us most fundamentally human. Descartes claimed "I think therefore I am" - but what if AI thinks as well as any human? Consciousness was proposed as separating people from machines until techniques like machine learning produced eerily lifelike artificial results.

Legendary linguist Noam Chomsky emphasizes symbolic language as integral to human intelligence - our ability to construct and comprehend meaning.

This is a gap between syntax (symbols) and semantics (meaning).

He references philosopher John Searle's vivid Chinese Room thought experiment where someone fluently executes Chinese conversations by following instructions for matching Chinese symbols to appropriate responses - without any understanding of Chinese. AI today mostly does this statistical pattern matching without genuinely comprehending context.

So, while AI can mimic creative tasks by building statistical models of books, paintings and songs, technology philosopher David Krakauer argues it lacks sentient experience of the world essential for true imagination and insight. Beyond consciousness objections, human art emerges from swirling social and psychological forces shooting through artists' minds. Our creativity manifests as much from the unconscious as rational intellect - connecting work across eras into an evolving cultural struggle toward truth and meaning. AI cannot yet make the unpredictable intuitive leaps sparked by Rothko's boundless emotions or Kandinsky's synesthetic ecstasy.

This is the core tension - AI can computationally replicate many creative acts and commercial applications via machine learning algorithms. But without living a mortal human life, can it instantiate art's ineffably profound and messy meaning? Or is AI generative technology just a tool to serve human stories as we forge culture in our collective image?

Noam Chomsky argues the John Searle translation experiment, where syntax and semantics are distinct from each other.

In this thought experiment a man is in a room, slips of paper with symbols are passed under the door, and using a code-key he translates it into other symbols, never knowing the content. Is this intelligence or just symbol manipulation? It appears intelligent when we receive the translation, but we apply semantic context (meaning) while the machine is punished or rewarded (trained) into non-thinking machine learning correctness. If this is what ChatGPT does, massive computation to guess the next word and the next word, making sense to us because we trained it to... is this intelligence? Maybe a type of intelligence if you consider this is what we do to children with languages.

Yuval Noah Harari argues that language and its manipulation are the basis of our society and culture, which means AI can run humans on an emotionally manipulative level.

Consider the problems with fake news and false information and Q-ANON... and that was just some humans without the scale, reach, or insight of these LLMs.

Another argument -shared w me by Larry Bob and which I tracked down to Benjamin Bratton's "The Stack"- is that we think we are in capitalism, but we have moved beyond it.

We are amid the vestiges of capitalism, the same as when capitalism appeared. Society still looked like feudalism, but our major movers now are platforms, not markets. Platforms set the parameters of participation, much like the state, and as things move digital the platforms are controlling even the state through capital and access.

The key difference is that a Platform at scale allows them to operate beyond free-market logic, pursuing ideals beyond merely market manipulation and generating capital. They are producing legacy and culture-altering behemoths that function as a Leviathan beyond market logic, a inversion of capitalism that can produce and sustain bullshit jobs.

That is, like the state previously, they are determining their own social contract, Terms & Services, to which we must submit.

As well, these Platforms (as Graeber says) operate in something more like managerial feudalism, incorporating bloat of lackeys and retainers, which stagnates wages and self-maintains, not producing anything noteworthy, but merely dividing up the loot.

This is tough, because if you think of Amazon, it is a platform that shapes the market until companies abide and align with their restrictions. But many well-known businesses models' didn't make sense. If you think of Uber, WeWork, or Spotify, they had enough capital to strangle out other services until they become a primary service with so much investment that they cannot be allowed to fail... until they do and the government backs them or we make a documentary about hubris. The capital backing inverts the company from outward production to inward survival, a gothic turn, if you will, in which it supports itself and accelerates itself inward, generating products unasked for by the populace/clients it nominally serves.

## SCI-FI

This is mapped out in a lot of Sci-Fi.

As said before, the story has been told many times before, warning us, and perhaps it slows us down, but the heroic "death drive" might be speeding us into these futures, once imagined never to be released.

In William Gibson's "Neuromancer," Tessier-Ashepool is a family so beyond

wealthy that it has turned from planetary imperialist expansion to the gothic - spiraling inward incestuously.

In Margaret Atwood's "MaddAddam" series, the gated corporations seemingly run the chaos, a type of stateless world where they experiment on the populace and produce increasingly bizarre genetic experiments for unknown ends. The only safety for them is not to retreat but to enter the gated compound, where they provide safety to their own from the hell-scape ghettos they created.

This matters in terms of the scope of these platforms and the ability of AI not only to be wielded in the early days but the attempts to solidify platform hegemony. (Think of the search wars of yahoo, aks jeeves, and google, until it is almost only Google now.) The end results will be that the platform -rather than the state or market- will set and follow agendas of their own, increasingly divorced from the populace.

Sci-fi offers us more speculation:

In "Dune," the solution to AI-sentience is the Butlerian Jihad, outlawing sentient machines. This leads to human breeding and training programs with specific traits, such as Mentats with computational power as insight, the "heighliners" as wormhole jumpers, or the Kwisatz Haderach— an extreme version of prognosticator with the ability to manipulate others and one's own bodily functions. Bio-power over generations rather than machines.

The warning here is yes- AI must be limited, but progress will happen, and if not in technology the human will become the technology over generations.

To close out on one of the more insane and most enjoyable examples, "Dead Astronauts," by Jeff Vandermeer, underscores this "Platform as a State" and the destabilizing effects it will have. His characters and their offspring have sentience, but are heavily genetically modified, until they epitomize the body without organs. These are entities held together by will and memory, liable to dissolve into water molecules or gasses, to subsume another's consciousness, or enter alternate dimensions. There really is no room left for us normies.

All of that to say, there is a future: we just aren't built for it, and neither is anyone else. It really seems as though "difference and repetition" produce too much diversity to be sustainable.

## Gods and Monsters

Many of today's most prominent AI entrepreneurs emanate from Silicon Valley - a breeding ground for big visions and world-shaping technologies. Figures like Elon

Musk, Sam Altman and Reid Hoffman wield tremendous resources in pursuing artificial intelligence innovations. But to what ends?

Musk founded OpenAI along with Altman partly to counter existential risks from AI run amok - like Skynet in the Terminator films. Yet Musk also promotes brain-computer interfaces to symbiotically merge people and AI. Altman evangelizes AI's potential while acknowledging it could transform society in unpredictable ways. And Hoffman, LinkedIn's founder, funded a controversial AI effort to synthesize celebrity voices without consent.

As Robert Jackall observed in "Moral Mazes," the tech industry fosters a cultural bubble detached from broader ethical conventions: "Circuits of power in advanced bureaucracies...encourage modes of technical rationality that separate means from ends."

So while touting AI's positive potential, even the bosses grapple with its destabilizing implications. And the technology's development often outpaces ethical safeguards. Some suggest Silicon Valley culture feeds an obsession with disruption and scale over real-world integrity.

We might also analyze the psychology of powerful men seeking to create monumental legacies by bending raw technological power to their will. Legendary physicist Robert Oppenheimer reflected after spearheading invention of the atomic bomb - "When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and argue about what to do about it only after you've had your technical success."

So are today's AI innovators "fathers of destruction", birthing something momentous but myopic to hubristic risks in their quest for glory? Or might they thoughtfully steer this AI child toward safe shores if we posit collective accountability now? The questions warrant deep reflection as silicon gods mold life-altering intelligence in their image.

As an art reference, we can look at Cronenberg, whose films -such as Videodrome- have emphasized the invagination of men with the technology they worship. The flesh becomes the receptacle and reader for media. This inversion is the story as physical infection, an evolution in cybernetic futuristic terms, where man merges with machine, or in other films the male produces organs from pain that are artistic cancers. It is as close to birth as a man can get, but the flesh becomes mutable to allow for male-birth, and the social acceptance and spread of the media that created this new man-thing.

Equally, we see the Futurism and Accelerationism man-machine melding or push into the cyberpunk or fused man machine. While Cronenberg is a bit more about media and techno merging, we find the Cyberpunk genre leaning into more a the *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) by Donna Haraway: a techno-human hybrid that asserts our Western dualist way of thinking is not just or equitable, and the techno-machinic-human would transcend current identities. The cyborg is the mutable body, deterritorializing the fixed roles and means of relation, necessitating fluid identity.

## Creativity?

This leads to the more interesting question of creativity. The urge to create, which can be -in Futurist terms- accelerated and aligned with destructive urges as equally heroic.

Is what AI does creative, or predictive iteration, a type of inevitable adjacent possible provoking a next step upon next step where creativity arises from some type of distortion of difference and repetition, to link this to Deleuze.

One view of artists is that they felt too deeply and had a psychological or neurological disorder, perhaps depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or autism, which lead to both empathic and cynical grasp of humanity, but also creative leaps seemingly outside the bounds of what could seem likely.

With artists, most of us heavily medicated and normalized now, an argument can be made for a lack of creativity as societal and market forces reject true creativity or individuality, only claiming they are important to sell the concept of freedom or difference.

Applied to AI, there is a similar distortion of difference in the hardware of the server farms: almost all the chips were made during the pandemic to serve the crypto craze, and there was only one silicon chip manufacturer in the world in Taiwan. The argument is made that the flaws in production create a type of anomaly, a difference, and failure covered for in a complex system as error, when in fact it smacks of creativity and play, which we arguably punish in the AI to train it: no more six-fingered men (princess Bride) or people missing an ear. (Van Gogh)

## Conclusion

In closing, while AI may grow capable of matching or exceeding humans in artistic production, it helps maintain perspective. Past revolutionary technologies like photography did not replace painting but coexisted and enhanced it by forcing evolution in style and subject. AI can be seen as a collaborative tool - while we retain focus on that which is uniquely human: activities originating from our wild, wet, wondering minds. If we carefully guide AI's progress - imprinting ethics and priorities beyond efficiency and scale - it can empower more human flourishing versus narrow corporate interests.

I aimed tonight not to definitively land on whether AI represents cultural ascent or decline but to offer philosophical context for why this technology unsettles assumptions. My hope is our discussion of AI's artistic promise and perils equips us to thoughtfully steer this boat to shores aligning with human dignity.

But now I'm eager to open things up for your perspectives on AI and the arts. Thanks again for your time, I look forward to the conversation.