JCARM
Journal of Contemporary Academic Research and Methodologies

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 1 | Issue 4 | May 2026
Website: www.journal.jcarm.in

Research

Human Art and AI-Generated Art: A Contemporary Study of Aura and Creative Meaning

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Abstract: Traditional and classical art has been understood as a human activity shaped by intention, skill, culture, lived experience, and physical form. Walter Benjamin, whose conceptual analysis is our core framework, describes this unique presence as aura. This aura arises from the originality, history, and context of an artwork. In recent years, however, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has expanded into artistic production. AI systems now generate images, imitate artistic styles, and produce works that resemble human creativity. This development compels the need to inquire if AI-generated art possesses the same depth of meaning, historical grounding, and experiential presence associated with the aura of human art. Co-authored by a philosopher and an artist-civil engineer, this paper combines the qualitative method of philosophical analysis with artistic reflection. The aim is to evaluate whether AI systems can replicate or only simulate the qualities that define artistic aura. Our argument is that aura emerges from human intention, historical situatedness, and embodied creative experience. That AI systems reproduce patterns without participation in these conditions of meaning. The contribution to knowledge is a clearer philosophical distinction between human art and AI-generated art. It, further, reinforces the relevance of aura in contemporary debates on technology, creativity, and artistic value.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence Art, Auction, Aura, Digital Aesthetics, and Human Art.

Introduction: Re-Examining Aura and Human Creativity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936, pp. 41-44) analysed how mechanical reproduction reduces an artwork's *aura*. *Aura* is the special presence and historical importance of the original work.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20604873

Mechanical arts can be understood as forms of artistic production mediated by tools and technologies. They include printing, engraving, photography, and later digital systems. This began with early techniques of reproduction that allowed images and texts to circulate beyond singular originals, reaching a wider audience and transforming the status of art (Benjamin, 1936, pp. 41-44; Paul, 2015, pp. 25). Over time, these mechanical processes developed into digital and computational forms. Eventually, they have started leading to AI-driven systems, that are capable of reproducing and generating images. Today, AI-generated art increases this challenge, because algorithms can create images that look human-made. Yet, they are not produced by humans (Elgammal et al., 2017, pp. 114; Ramesh et al., 2022, pp. 5). This raises key questions: Can AI art have *aura*? Can technical novelty replace human creativity and experience?

Art has historically functioned as a medium through which humans have expressed emotions, preserved memories, communicate cultural values, and interpret reality. From ritual objects and cave paintings to modern performance and digital installations, artistic creation reflects the relationship between imagination, embodiment, and meaning (Dewey, 1934, pp. 10; Heidegger, 1971, pp. 19). The philosophy of art, also known as aesthetics, examines the nature of beauty, creativity, interpretation, and artistic value. It emphasizes that art is more than a technical product. That it is also a human and cultural experience. Artistic works often carry the intentions, struggles, beliefs, and historical conditions of their creators. This gives them significance beyond their visual appearance (Gombrich, 1960, pp. 21-24). Understanding art in this broader philosophical sense is essential before we begin examining the challenges posed by AI-generated images and computational creativity.

Benjamin's *aura* is more than uniqueness. It is created through historical context, social meaning, and human involvement (Benjamin, 1936, pp. 46-47). Human artworks are connected to the artist's life and culture (Dewey, 1934; Heidegger, 1971). Philosophy, as the systematic study of knowledge, reality, and value. It provides a framework for examining such questions. The philosophy of art (aesthetics) specifically investigates the nature of art, beauty, interpretation, and meaning. The result is a significantly rich contribution to how art is understood across cultures and periods. AI produces works algorithmically, but it lacks these human experiences (Manovich, 2022, pp. 90). In addition, the ethical and cultural implications of AI-generated art are already affecting markets, museums, and artistic recognition. It is challenging how society values creativity.

This paper examines these differences. It argues that, while AI can generate convincing visual artworks, it cannot reproduce the *aura* of human-made art. Human arts are grounded in human intentionality, lived experience, and cultural history. This study, therefore, reconsiders the nature of creativity in the age of artificial intelligence through Benjamin's framework.

Tracing the Historical and Cultural Roots of Human Art: From Ritual to Modernity

Art has always been part of culture and human life. Prehistoric cave paintings, like those at *Lascaux*, show human beliefs, rituals, and collective storytelling. Their *aura* comes from the physical act of creation in a distant time and place (Eisner, 2002, pp. 33). Renaissance masters, like Michelangelo and Titian, created works that reflected politics, religion, and civic life. Michelangelo's *David* is both an art and a symbol of *Florence*. It embodies the skill, labour, and values of its creator and society (Panofsky, 1991, pp. 80).

These historical developments illustrate how human creativity has evolved from ritualistic and symbolic expression, toward highly formalized artistic practices. It lays the groundwork for subsequent movements in Western and non-Western art (Arnason & Mansfield, 2013, p. 15; Gombrich, 1960, pp. 21-24). Each era contributes to a cumulative cultural memory, allowing art to serve as both a record of human experience and a medium for societal reflection. Art functions not only as aesthetic experience, but also as a site of philosophical inquiry. Questions of meaning, intention, and ethical engagement are answered in the work itself. Through the lens of philosophy, the study of these artworks illuminates how human perception, culture, and cognition interact with visual and performative forms.

Even modern art carries *aura* through story and human presence. Picasso's *Guernica* is more than a painting. It is also an historical witness to the horrors of war, with each brushstroke reflecting the artist's emotional engagement (Arnason & Mansfield, 2013, p. 311). A similar distinction can be observed in architectural and civil engineering drawings. When a human engineer or architect designs a bridge, public building, or road network, the drawing reflects more than technical calculation. It embodies professional judgment, environmental awareness, social needs, cultural priorities, and responsibility for human safety (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 145; Pallasmaa, 2009, pp. 9-12). Unlike AI systems, human designers are also morally and professionally accountable for the social consequences of their constructions. For example, the design of a community bridge may consider local geography, patterns of movement, historical identity, and the lived

experiences of the people who will use it. Every adjustment in structure, spacing, material selection, and form, reflects intentional human reasoning shaped by training and experience (Schön, 1983, pp. 50-55). Engineering design also depends on judgment developed through experience, revision, and practical reflection (Petroski, 1992, pp. 3-6). AI systems can generate technically efficient design models by analysing datasets and optimizing structural patterns. But they do not understand the social meaning, ethical responsibility, or human significance attached to such projects. Recent architectural theory also observes that AI-assisted design may optimize efficiency. Yet, it will remain detached from lived human experience and social meaning (Leach, 2022, pp. 66-71).

The distinction, therefore, lies in the human consciousness and contextual understanding involved in its creation, and also in the final product. Marina Abramović's performance, *The Artist is Present*, creates *aura* through real-time human interaction. The viewer shares a moment of unrepeatable presence with the artist, something AI cannot replicate (Paul, 2015, pp. 76). These examples illustrate that human art is inseparable from the context, effort, and life experience of its creator.

AI Art: Expanding Creativity While Challenging Traditional Notions of *Aura*, Ethics, and Cultural Value

AI-generated art may be technically sophisticated. Yet, they remain fundamentally different from human artistic creation. *Generative Adversarial Networks* (GANs) and diffusion models create images by analysing huge datasets of human-made works and recombines patterns (Elgammal et al., 2017, pp. 112-114). As an advanced stage of mechanical arts, AI represents a shift from reproduction to autonomous generation. Where, systems learn patterns and produce novel outputs, such as portraits in classical styles, hybrid cultural imagery, and abstract compositions (Manovich, 2022, pp. 92). AI can generate novel styles, such as landscapes in the style of *Van Gogh*, or abstract portraits that blend multiple artistic traditions. Yet, it does not intend meaning or have lived experiences.

For example, AI-generated portraits have been sold at auctions. Some fetched high prices, raising debates about originality and value (Bendor et al., 2020, pp. 3). Neural-network reconstructions of historical art, like reimagined medieval illuminations, can look authentic, but lack the human intention behind brush, ink, or storytelling (Manovich, 2022, pp. 92). Additionally, AI has been used to generate portraits designed to evoke human emotions, such as sadness or joy, and digital recreations of cultural symbols, like African masks or traditional Japanese motifs (Gatys et al., 2015, pp. 103-105;

Elgammal et al., 2017, pp. 116). While these examples mimic human expression, the meaning remains algorithmic and context-free (Zylinska, 2020, pp. 88-93).

The rise of AI art, further, raises ethical and cultural questions. Using human-generated datasets without consent can exploit artists, while undermining their creative authority (Cohen, 2021, pp. 64). For instance, AI systems trained on the styles of existing artists can generate works that closely resemble their techniques without attribution. Such raises concerns about intellectual property and artistic ownership (Bendor et al., 2020, pp. 3; Cohen, 2021, pp. 64). Market forces often reward AI works for novelty, rather than for meaningful cultural engagement or historical resonance. This challenges traditional notions of artistic value (Paul, 2015, pp. 80; Graw, 2019, pp. 147). Museums increasingly distinguish human and AI art to preserve context, emphasizing that *aura* is historically, socially, and emotionally grounded (Benjamin, 1936, pp. 46-47).

Human Intentionality, Embodiment, and the Irreplaceable Nature of *Aura*

Aura exists because humans create art with intentionality, physical engagement, and emotional depth (Dewey, 1934, pp. 33). Each brushstroke, sculpted form, or improvised performance is an extension of human experience (Arnheim, 1974, pp. 15-18). The physical interaction between the creator and the artistic materials also contributes to *aura*. Their texture, resistance, movement, and bodily engagement shape the final work in ways that exceed purely computational production (Pallasmaa, 2009, pp. 21-24).

The *aura* of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* comes from both the painting itself and the knowledge of the artist's life, struggle, and mental state. Abramović's performance *aura* arises from her bodily presence and the shared emotional tension with the audience (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 38-42). Philosophical reflections on art have long emphasized intention, embodiment, and meaning as central to artistic creation, reinforcing the view that art is not merely an object, but a lived and interpretive experience (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 145; Dewey, 1934, pp. 36). AI lacks consciousness, emotion, and historical embedding. Even when it reproduces a Van Gogh-like *Starry Sky* or an abstract portrait, these works are algorithmic re-creations without personal experience or cultural memory (Boden, 2010, pp. 6). While AI is a tool that can extend human creativity, the true *aura* of art is tied to human effort, history, and intention. Its social and ethical dimensions cannot be manufactured (Gombrich, 1960, pp. 57-58; Cohen, 2021, pp. 64).

Consider the construction of a human portrait painting. A human artist may spend weeks observing a subject, interpreting facial expressions, emotional states, memories, and

social context before applying paint to canvas. Every colour choice, brushstroke, correction, and compositional decision reflects intentional judgment shaped by lived experience and emotional engagement. By contrast, an AI system constructs portraits by analysing patterns within datasets and statistically generating visual outputs based on learned correlations (Elgammal et al., 2017, pp. 112-114). Although the final image may appear aesthetically convincing, the process lacks personal memory, emotional struggle, bodily engagement, and historical consciousness. The difference, therefore, lies not only in the artwork itself. It also lies in the mode of creation. Human artistic creation also involves processes of revision, uncertainty, experimentation, and material engagement that cannot be reduced to algorithmic generation. Painters may alter colours repeatedly before achieving emotional balance within a composition. While, sculptors respond physically to texture, resistance, weight, and spatial form during creation. Similarly, architectural and engineering sketches often develop gradually through interaction between imagination, calculation, environmental limitations, and practical judgment. These creative processes can therefore be said to be shaped by intuition, memory, cultural experience, and embodied perception, not only by technical skills (Pallasmaa, 2009, pp. 45-48).

AI systems can imitate stylistic patterns and produce efficient outputs. However, they do not participate in the lived process of creative struggle and interpretation that characterizes human artistic and technical practice (Sennett, 2008, pp. 20-25).

Conclusion: Preserving *Aura* in the Age of AI

Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura* remains critical in the age of AI. While AI can produce technically impressive works, it cannot replicate the historical, cultural, and emotional depth found in human art (Dewey, 1934; Heidegger, 1971). Examples like AI portraits, neural-network emulations of famous artists, and AI attempts to mimic human emotion or cultural symbols show AI's skill and novelty, but also its limitations (Elgammal et al., 2017; Bendor et al., 2020; Gatys et al., 2015). *Aura* exists when human intention, lived experience, ethical awareness, and cultural context converge. It demonstrates that human creativity will remain irreplaceably valuable, even as AI becomes more advanced.

Furthermore, the rise of AI challenges scholars, artists, and audiences to reconsider the definitions of originality, authenticity, and value in contemporary art. It invites ongoing dialogue between philosophy, art history, and technology. Each field provides unique insights into how art communicates meaning. The persistence of *aura* highlights that art is not reducible to technique or appearance. It is inseparable from human experience,

intentionality, and social engagement. In practical terms, the coexistence of human and AI-generated art suggests a collaborative future, where AI acts as a tool, extending human creativity without supplanting it. Ethical practices, transparency in AI datasets, and recognition of human contributions are essential to preserve both the cultural significance and moral integrity of artistic production. By maintaining this balance, the art world can harness the benefits of AI. While, safeguarding the irreplaceable qualities that define human-made art.

By bringing philosophy, artistic practice, and technological reflection into dialogue, this study contributes to ongoing debates about creativity, authenticity, and human meaning in the age of artificial intelligence.

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