Title

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Stolen Strokes: AI, Creativity, and Power

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Abstract: This paper employs Standpoint Theory to critique AI-generated art, exposing power imbalances between tech corporations and marginalized artists. It highlights economic displacement, cultural appropriation, and advocates for equitable frameworks prioritizing consent and inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, AI-generated art has made its way into the world of art. Modern ML algorithms now enable rapid creation of original-seeming artworks, sometimes even indistinguishable from human-made pieces, with minimal effort. AI-driven creativity occupies a central place in popular culture, fueling startups, and venture capital. While these achievements are lauded by some as 'democratization' of creativity, a Standpoint Theory analysis reveals deep power imbalances between tech companies and artists. The fascination of the general public towards generative art overlooks the growing tensions between rapid technological progress and the declining artistic endeavors. The increasing commodification of art[1] has paved way for its overconsumption, where a near endless supply of AI-generated graphics have become a disposable commodity in global markets, robbing the livelihoods of actual artists. As the algorithms perfect the replication of artistic styles and create novel new images, they pose the risk of undervaluing ages of accumulated techniques, symbolism, and emotional connections[2] embedded in human art.

This paper problematizes the rise of AI-generated art and sheds light on economic exploitation of artists and power imbalance through the lens of Standpoint Theory. Using the theory's focus on how social context shapes power structures, we analyze the penalties experienced by traditional artists, the privileges afforded to those who embrace AI, and the emerging truths about equitable technological development. This work is in partial fulfillment of the ENGR184 course at UCLA following the blueprint curriculum guidelines[3]-[5].

ANALYSIS

Standpoint Theory provides a powerful lens for examining AI-generated art because it centers the experiences of those most affected by technological change. Developed within feminist philosophy, this theory posits that marginalized groups, situated as 'outsiders within,' offer valuable insights that challenge dominant narratives and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of societal dynamics. In the context of AI-generated art, this means privileging the perspectives of artists, those whose work has been used without consent. Their unique position, often overlooked by tech developers or casual users, reveals power dynamics that might otherwise remain obscured.

Power Structures

The rise of AI-generated art is rooted in decades of technological shifts that reconfigured power over creative labor. Digital tools like Photoshop in the 1980s expanded artistic capabilities but introduced early tensions around ownership and authenticity[6], and initiated a gradual transfer of control from artists to corporations. This shift deepened with economic models such as Adobe's transitions to subscription-based Creative Cloud, which turned artists from owners[7] into renters of the very tools they used. By monetizing access rather than ownership, corporations established hierarchies that prioritized profits over autonomy.

The internet further amplified these power imbalances by positioning itself as a platform for visibility and exposure. Social media platforms allowed artists to share work widely, but exposed their work to unauthorized use. Many artists discovered their work posted online without their permission[8], and without any acknowledgement. These artworks populated data goldmines[9] that trained AI systems like GANs[10] and diffusion models[11] (like DALL-E). These practices reduced centuries of artistic practices to quantifiable data points, replicating styles without crediting origins. Today, power over AI art is concentrated in entities like Google, Meta, and OpenAI, which dominate both development and profits, and sideline academic innovation and artistic input. These tech giants dictate how AI tools function, whose data is used, and who benefits.

Penalties: Marginalization of Traditional Artists

The most immediate concern for artists is economic displacement. As companies increasingly turn to AI tools instead of hiring human artists, many creators face diminishing opportunities. Getting access to an AI model for the generation of any graphic is significantly cheaper and quicker than hiring an artist, designer, illustrator or a photographer. The creators whose work led to the development of these models face several financial precarities. These economic disparities become even worse for artists from marginalized communities who depend entirely on their craft for survival.

A second penalty is the absence of credit, consent, or compensation for the labour of the actors involved. A clear illustration of this is the case of *Edmond de Belamy*[12], an AI-generated portrait auctioned at Christie's for a whopping $432,000. The portrait, marketed as 'created by AI,' was in fact the product of a GAN trained on a dataset of more than 15,000 human-made portraits spanning multiple artistic styles. However, none of the original artists received any recognition or financial compensation, nor the researchers who developed the model did. The profits went entirely to Obvious, the Paris-based collective that marketed and sold the painting. This hints towards erasing the labor of artists while celebrating AI as an autonomous creator.

Beyond the economic harm, artists experience a deeper loss of creative control that threatens their professional identity and cultural heritage. The art generator algorithms have no inherent sense of what is respectful to artists. AI systems can appropriate sacred designs, clan symbolism, without acknowledging their cultural significance and context. This technology reduces these traditions to mere visual patterns and data points, and undermines the connection between creative expression and personal identities of the artists.

Privileges: Embracing AI Technologies

Artists who incorporate AI tools into their toolbox gain access to new creative capabilities and position themselves as innovators in this changing landscape. Their adoption and alignment with changing technologies may lead to recognition, and financial rewards that others might not receive. Prominent figures like Refik Anadol[13] have gained significant visibility recently and achieved remarkable success. His immersive installations harness large datasets and these new advanced algorithms. He has gained institutional support from large museums and galleries to display his work as mesmerizing experiences for the public. His adoption of AI-generated art and AI tools granted him these opportunities and resources, which otherwise would have been unavailable to artists solely working in traditional media.

The economic advantages for AI-embracing artists can be substantial. The AI art market is projected to grow at annual growth rates as high as 40.5%[14]. Artists who position themselves within this new and expanding art segment stand to benefit in ways the opposing artists might not. As mainstream audiences become increasingly fascinated and invested in artistic capabilities of artificial intelligence, prominent institutions and art collectives are allocating capital to acquire these works, which could potentially create new revenue streams for artists.

Apart from being aligned with corporations on the financial gain aspect, AI tools also democratize certain aspects of art creation, which allows artists to transcend traditional limitations. AI allows the artists to gain insights from vast amounts of data to get inspiration from their next masterpiece. It can create unexpected and unforeseen connections between diverse elements, fueling creative spark. This also gives them an efficiency edge by automating repetitive and time-consuming tasks and focusing solely on the conceptual aspect of art. Artists utilizing AI can potentially complete more commissioned works and beat competition.

RESULTS

Emerging Truths

A crucial truth emerging from artists' standpoint is the problematic absence of consent mechanisms in the AI training process. Currently, the artists have no way of opting out of having their work and given the large-scale data scraping operations, this seems almost next to impossible. The burden of exclusion falls on the creators rather than the tech corporations, and this inversion of consent, where the right to use creative work is assumed unless explicitly told otherwise, reveals how power structures prioritize technological development over artistic autonomy. True equity cannot exist until consent is obtained and not presumed.

A second insight is the asymmetric power relationships between individual artists and corporate developers. The growing grass root resistance among artists represents not merely resistance to change but recognition that advancement is occurring within existing systems of exploitation. Last year, over thousands of artists signed a petition[15] against the exploitative operations of AI companies. Some artists have begun using subtle digital modification techniques such as adversarial cloaking[16] to prevent AI from analyzing patterns and replicating their styles. These resistances highlight the fundamental imbalance of power - artists are forced to defend themselves from AI, rather than being involved in shaping its development.

Finally, inclusive governance structures and strong legal frameworks to ensure transparency are urgently needed. Currently, decisions about AI art tools are made primarily by tech

companies with minimal input from artists and their communities. Involvement of artists, particularly from marginalized and traditional communities, is essential for an equitable approach. This might include transparent documentation of training data, artists-led ethics committees, and collaboration between researchers and artists.

These emerging truths do not offer simple solutions but instead problematize dominant narratives about technological progress. By revealing these complexities through the standpoint of marginalized artists, we gain insights that challenge simplified views of AI art as either wholly beneficial or entirely harmful.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing AI-generated art through standpoint theory reveals how current approaches to development and implementation reinforce existing power imbalances while creating new forms of marginalization. By centering the perspectives of artists, we counter the arguments that present AI art as a neutral technological progress. The analysis demonstrates that addressing the exploitation of artists requires systemic changes: legal frameworks that protect artistic rights in the digital age, consent and compensation mechanisms for training data, and inclusive governance structures that center artistic communities in decision-making processes.

This paper does not reject technological progress but calls for progress that respects human dignity and cultural contexts. It offers not just critique but also a vision on how AI might augment than replace human creativity, honor than appropriate culture, and distribute rather than concentrate creative freedom. By embracing these insights, we can work toward AI-generated art that makes its way to every artist's toolbox.

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