The Algorithmic Gaze: Datafication, Authorship, and Aesthetic Value in Post-Digital Art

Duterte Dima, Zhihao Tan

Department of Art, UST College of Fine Art and Design, Tamayo Dr, Sampaloc, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

This paper examines the profound transformation of artistic practice, criticism, and curation in the post-digital era, a period defined by the pervasive influence of computation and data. We argue that we are witnessing a paradigm shift from a human-centric to an algorithmic model of art, characterized by what we term the "Algorithmic Gaze." This gaze encompasses the datafication of aesthetic experience, the reconfiguration of artistic authorship in human-AI collaborations, and the emergence of new, data-driven systems of aesthetic valuation. Through a critical analysis of contemporary art projects, institutional practices, and the underlying technological infrastructures, this paper explores how algorithms are not merely tools but active agents in the cultural field. The first section investigates the datafication of the art object and its reception, analyzing how visitor data, social media metrics, and digital archives transform art into quantifiable information. The second section deconstructs the concept of authorship through case studies of artists working with Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and other AI systems, proposing a model of distributed agency. The third section critiques the new regimes of value and curation driven by algorithmic recommendation systems, predictive analytics, and NFT market data, questioning their impact on artistic diversity and critical discourse. The paper concludes by reflecting on the ethical and philosophical implications of the algorithmic gaze, arguing for a critical digital art history that can contend with these new forms of cultural production and consumption. It calls for a renewed emphasis on human criticality to navigate the seductive but often opaque logic of the algorithm.

Keywords

Algorithmic Art, Post-Digital Aesthetics, Artistic Authorship, Aesthetic Value, Digital Art History, Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs)

1. Introduction: The Dawn of the Algorithmic Gaze

The 21st century has irrevocably fused the domains of art and technology. We have moved beyond the novelty of "digital art" as a distinct category and entered what can be termed the "post-digital" condition, a state where the digital is no longer new or other but is the very substrate of contemporary life. In this context, a new force is reshaping the art world: the algorithm. From the recommendation engines of online galleries to the neural networks generating novel images, and the data analytics guiding museum acquisitions, algorithms are becoming central actors in the creation, distribution, and valuation of art.

This paper posits that we are subject to an Algorithmic Gaze-a systemic, computational way of seeing, interpreting, and valuing cultural production. This gaze is not a single entity but a diffuse network of processes that datafy aesthetic experience, redistribute artistic agency, and institute new, often opaque, systems of curation and canon formation. It is the manifestation of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls "instrumentarian power" within the cultural sphere, a power that aims to tune, herd, and modify behavior at the level of population and individual [1].

The primary research question this article addresses is: How is the algorithmic gaze reconfiguring the fundamental pillars of the art world-the art object, the artist, and the systems of value? To answer this, we will draw upon a interdisciplinary framework combining art history, media studies, science and technology studies (STS), and critical data studies.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section 2 will explore the datafication of the art object and its reception. It will analyze how physical and digital artworks are translated into data points through visitor tracking, social media engagement, and digital archiving, fundamentally altering how we understand and measure aesthetic impact. Section 3 will tackle the complex issue of authorship in an age of human-AI collaboration. Through case studies of artists like Refik Anadol and Mario Klingemann, it will argue for a model of distributed agency, challenging the romantic ideal of the solitary genius. Section 4 will investigate the new regimes of value and curation emerging from algorithmic systems. It will critique the influence of platform recommendation engines, predictive analytics in the art market, and the data-rich frenzy of the NFT ecosystem [2]. Finally, Section 5 will provide a critical examination of the hidden costs of the algorithmic gaze, including bias, labor, and environmental impact, before the concluding section synthesizes a path forward

Section 6 will synthesize these threads, discussing the ethical implications and proposing a path forward for a critical art practice and scholarship that can contend with the algorithmic gaze without being subsumed by it.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing field of digital art history by providing a synthesized critical analysis of these convergent trends, arguing that understanding the algorithmic gaze is essential for any contemporary art scholar, critic, or practitioner.

2. The Datafied Art Object: From Aura to Data Point

Walter Benjamin's (1936) seminal concept of the "aura"-the unique, authentic presence of a work of art rooted in its history and materiality-has long been a touchstone for art theory. In the post-digital age, we witness a fundamental shift: the aura is not destroyed, as Benjamin feared with mechanical reproduction, but rather is datafied [3]. The artwork's presence, its impact, and its meaning are increasingly supplemented, if not supplanted, by its data profile.

2.1 The Museum as a Data Collection Apparatus

Museums, once temples of quiet contemplation, are now sophisticated data-harvesting environments. Through Wi-Fi tracking, Bluetooth beacons, ticketing apps, and video analytics, institutions can map visitor flows, dwell times, and engagement patterns with unprecedented precision (Figure 1).

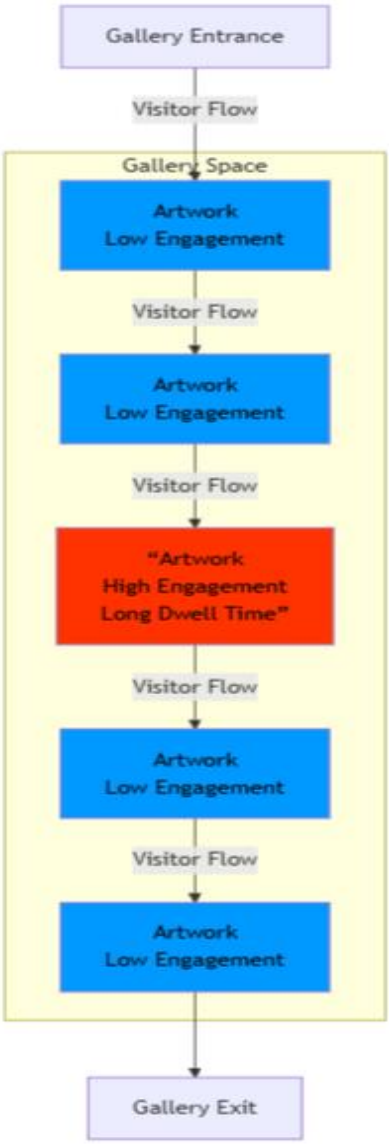

Figure 1. A data visualization of visitor engagement in a gallery, revealing patterns of attention and neglect that were previously invisible to curators

Figure 1 show this data is powerful. It informs curatorial decisions about exhibition design, lighting, and wall texts. It can justify the allocation of resources, privileging "high-engagement" works or artists. A less-known artist whose work causes visitors to pause and reflect for ten minutes may be deemed less "successful" than a crowd-pleasing blockbuster that attracts a higher volume of shorter visits. The qualitative experience of art is reduced to quantitative metrics of attention [4].

2.2 Social Media and the Metricization of Aesthetic Success

Beyond the museum walls, the life of an artwork is increasingly lived on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Here, success is explicitly metricized: likes, shares, comments, and follower counts become proxies for cultural significance. The "Instagrammable" quality of an artwork-its ability to generate visually striking, square-framed images-can influence its real-world popularity and market value.

This creates a new form of aesthetic pressure. Artists may consciously or unconsciously tailor their work to the logics of the platform algorithm, favoring bold colors, immersive installations, and visually legible concepts that perform well in a cluttered feed. The aesthetic becomes, in part, an algorithmic aesthetic, designed for virality and metric optimization. This is a clear example of the algorithmic gaze in action: the platform's code, designed to maximize user engagement, directly shapes artistic production and reception.

2.3 The Digital Archive as a Training Set

A more profound form of datafication occurs when the digital surrogates of art-high-resolution scans, photographs in online collections-become fodder for machine learning systems. Projects like Google's "Art Palette" or the myriad of AI art tools rely on vast datasets of art historical images. In this process, the semantic and historical complexity of an artwork is flattened into a set of patterns, styles, and features that can be recognized, classified, and recombined by an algorithm [5].

The artwork ceases to be a unique object of interpretation and becomes a data point in a training set. Its "meaning" is operationalized for the purpose of pattern recognition and generation. This has significant implications for art history, as the discipline's primary sources are transformed into resources for computational analysis and synthesis, a topic we will return to in the final section.

3. Reconfiguring Authorship: The Artist as Programmer, Curator, and Collaborator

The figure of the artist as a lone, inspired genius is a persistent romantic myth. The algorithmic gaze thoroughly disrupts this myth, forcing a radical rethinking of artistic agency and authorship. When an artwork is co-created with a complex, often inscrutable, artificial intelligence, who is the author?

3.1 From Tool to Collaborator

Traditional digital tools like Photoshop are extensions of the artist's hand; their output is directly and predictably tied to the user's input. In contrast, AI systems like Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) are inherently non-deterministic. The artist sets the parameters-the training data, the architecture of the network, the initial random seed-but the final output is emergent, the result of a complex interplay between the artist's intent and the model's internal logic.

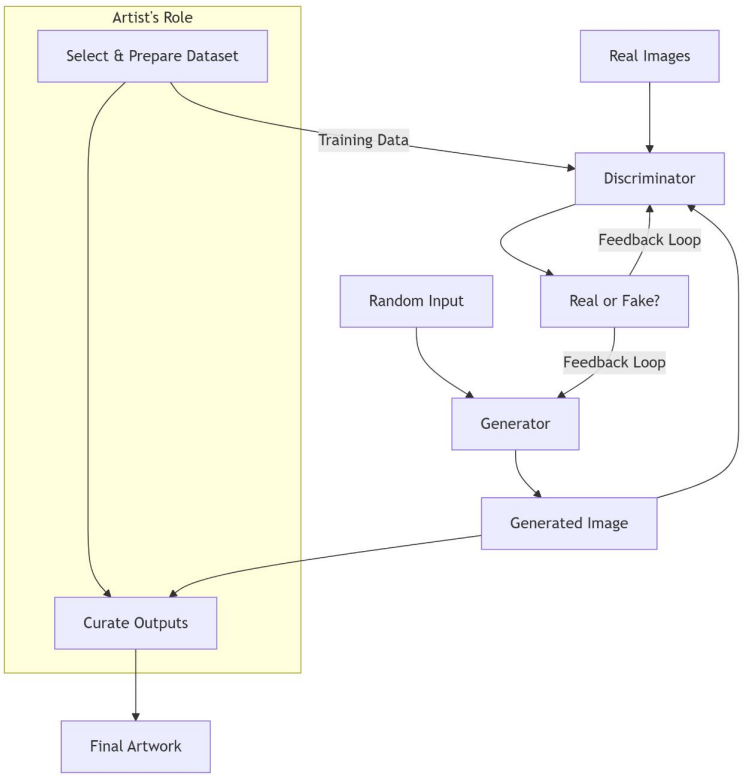

Figure 2. The architecture of a GAN illustrates the distributed nature of agency in AI art. The artist initiates and guides the process, but the final image is a product of the model's training.

Figure 2 detailed explanation this relationship is better understood as a collaboration or a cybernetic dialogue between human and machine. Artist Mario Klingemann, a pioneer in this field, describes his role as that of a "carer" or "gardener" for his neural networks. He creates the conditions for the system to thrive and then curates the interesting or aesthetically compelling results from the multitude of outputs it generates. The authorship is shared, or better yet, distributed across a human-machine assemblage [6].

3.2 Case Study: Refik Anadol and the Dataspace

Refik Anadol's large-scale installations provide a compelling case study of this new authorship. In works like *Machine Hallucinations* (2019-present), Anadol uses vast public datasets of images and environmental data to train AI models that generate immersive, dream-like visualizations. The "artist" here is a complex entity: it is Anadol and his studio, who conceive the project and write the code; it is the AI model that interprets and re-imagines the data; and it is the dataset itself, which forms the raw material and aesthetic constraint of the work [7].

Anadol's work explicitly thematizes the algorithmic gaze. He visualizes the process of machine perception and memory, offering the audience a glimpse into how an AI might "see" and "dream." The authorship lies in the creation of this entire aesthetic system-the technical infrastructure, the data pipeline, and the immersive experience-rather than in the manual creation of a unique image.

3.3 The Legal and Philosophical Void

This reconfiguration of authorship creates a significant legal and philosophical void. Current copyright law, built around the concept of a human author, struggles to accommodate AI-generated works. Is the author the programmer of the AI, the user who prompted it, or is the work simply in the public domain?

Philosophically, it challenges our very understanding of creativity. If creativity is the novel and valuable combination of existing elements, then AI systems demonstrably exhibit a form of computational creativity. However, this lacks the intentionality, consciousness, and emotional context of human creativity. The algorithmic gaze, therefore, not only changes how art is made but forces us to ask anew the ancient question: what does it mean to create?

4. Algorithmic Value and Curation: The New Gatekeepers

The systems that determine what art is seen, valued, and acquired are also being transformed by algorithms. The traditional gatekeepers-critics, curators, gallerists-now share their influence with opaque computational systems that operate at a scale and speed impossible for humans [8].

4.1 Platform Curation and the Filter Bubble

Online platforms like Artsy, Artnet, and even Instagram function as primary discovery channels for art. Their recommendation algorithms, designed to maximize engagement and sales, create personalized "filter bubbles" for users. A collector interested in abstract expressionism will be continually fed more abstract expressionism, potentially limiting their exposure to divergent or challenging contemporary practices. This algorithmic curation reinforces existing tastes and market trends, potentially stifling artistic diversity and the serendipitous discovery that has historically been crucial to artistic evolution.

4.2 Predictive Analytics in the Art Market

The art market, long considered a bastion of connoisseurship and "gut feeling," is increasingly relying on data analytics. Companies like Magnus and Artnet Analytics provide data-driven insights into artist performance, auction results, and market trends. Collectors and investors use these tools to make "informed" decisions, quantifying the previously unquantifiable-aesthetic and cultural value [9].

This introduces a new form of financialization, where the future value of an artist's work is predicted by an algorithm analyzing their past sales, exhibition history, and media presence. The danger is a self-fulfilling prophecy: artists flagged as "high-potential" by the algorithm receive more investment, which drives up their prices, thus confirming the algorithm's prediction.

4.3 The NFT Phenomenon: On-Chain Value and Community

The Non-Fungible Token (NFT) art market of the early 2020s represents the purest manifestation of the datafied art economy. An NFT's value is almost entirely decoupled from any physical instantiation; it is a piece of data on a blockchain that points to a digital file. The value is constructed through a complex interplay of data points: transaction history, owner identity (e.g., celebrity wallets), trading volume, and community engagement on platforms like Discord.

Table 1. In the NFT art market, value is explicitly constructed from on-chain and social data, representing a radical shift from traditional art valuation methods

Data Point	Description	Impact on Perceived Value
Transaction History	The record of past sales, including price and buyer/seller identity.	A sale to a prominent collector or museum (e.g., MetaKovan's purchase of Beeple's *Everydays*) can skyrocket value.
Rarity Score	A metric assigned to an NFT based on the rarity of its traits within a collection.	A higher rarity score (e.g., in projects like CryptoPunks) directly correlates with a higher market price.
Trading Volume	The amount of a specific NFT or collection being bought and sold.	High volume signals liquidity and sustained interest, attracting more investors.
Community Activity	Metrics from Discord/Twitter: member count, engagement rate, influencer mentions.	A strong, active community is seen as a sign of long-term viability and cultural relevance.

Table 1 mention in this environment, the algorithmic gaze is literalized in the blockchain's immutable ledger and the analytics dashboards used by traders. The "art" exists as a node within a financialized data network. While this has democratized access for some digital artists, it has also created a hyper-speculative market where data often trumps discursive critical reception.

5. The Hidden Costs: Bias, Labor, and the Environmental Footprint of the Algorithmic Gaze

While the previous sections have outlined the transformative effects of algorithms on the art object, authorship, and value, it is crucial to critically examine the underlying infrastructures and their associated costs. The algorithmic gaze is not a neutral, objective force; it is shaped by the data it consumes, the human labor that sustains it, and the physical resources it consumes. This section unpacks three critical, often obscured, dimensions: embedded biases, the new forms of invisible labor, and the significant environmental impact of computational art.

5.1 The Politics of Training Data: Perpetuating Historical Biases

The outputs of AI systems in art are fundamentally constrained by their training datasets. As explored in Section 2.3, when art historical archives are used as training sets, the algorithm learns not only formal styles but also the deeply embedded canonical biases of those archives. Art history, as traditionally constructed, is overwhelmingly dominated by Western, male artists. An AI trained on such a corpus will inevitably produce work that reflects and reinforces this hegemony. It learns to associate "great art" with specific aesthetic traditions, gender identities, and racial profiles.

This results in a form of **computational canonization**. When an AI like a GAN generates "new" portraits, they are statistically likely to resemble the works of Old Masters or modernist pioneers found in its dataset, further marginalizing non-Western, indigenous, and folk art traditions. The algorithmic gaze, in this instance, becomes a powerful conservatizing force, automating and naturalizing the exclusionary practices of the past. Artists like Joy Buolamwini, with her "Algorithmic Justice League," and researchers like Kate Crawford in *Atlas of AI* have demonstrated how these biases in computer vision systems lead to discriminatory outcomes. In the art world, the bias is more subtle but equally pernicious: it shapes the very definition of what is considered aesthetically valid or generatively possible, potentially stifling the diversity that the digital realm ostensibly promises.

5.2 The Invisible Labor of the "AI Artist"

The discourse around AI art often oscillates between the fear of human replacement and the celebration of the artist as a mere "prompt engineer." Both views obscure the extensive, often tedious, human labor required to create art with AI. The role of the artist expands beyond traditional making to encompass a suite of new, technically demanding tasks.

This labor includes data wrangling-the process of collecting, cleaning, labeling, and curating the massive datasets required for training. This is a repetitive and time-consuming process that lacks the romantic allure of the artist's studio. Furthermore, there is the labor of model training and tuning, which involves running computational experiments, adjusting hyperparameters, and waiting for hours or days for results, all while managing significant cloud computing costs. The artist becomes a hybrid figure: part programmer, part data scientist, and part systems administrator.

Finally, there is the labor of curation from the latent space. As Mario Klingemann noted, the artist acts as a "gardener," sifting through thousands, sometimes millions, of AI-generated outputs to find the singular image that possesses aesthetic merit or conceptual resonance. This process of selection and refinement is a critical creative act, but it is often rendered invisible in the final presentation of the work, where the audience sees only the finished product and attributes its creation mystically to "the AI." This new division of labor challenges not only authorship but also the economic models for artists, as the costs shift from physical materials to computational resources and time.

5.3 The Carbon Aura: Environmental Impact of Computational Art

The digital art object, especially in its most data-intensive forms like AI art and blockchain-based NFTs, carries a heavy, though often ignored, environmental footprint-a "carbon aura" that stands in stark contrast to Walter Benjamin's concept of the unique, localized aura of the traditional artwork. The computational processes underpinning the algorithmic gaze are incredibly energy-intensive.

Training a single large-scale generative AI model can consume as much electricity as hundreds of homes use in a year, emitting significant amounts of carbon dioxide. The work of Refik Anadol, for instance, relies on training models on petabytes of data, a process requiring arrays of high-performance GPUs running for extended periods in energy-hungry data centers. While the resulting digital visualization itself may not have a physical form, its creation is tethered to a very real, material infrastructure with a substantial ecological cost.

Similarly, the NFT boom brought scrutiny to the energy consumption of blockchain networks, particularly those using Proof-of-Work (PoW) consensus mechanisms like Ethereum initially did. Minting and trading a single NFT on a PoW blockchain could have an energy footprint equivalent to months of an average EU household's electricity use. This creates a profound ethical tension: art that often thematizes futurity and data flows is simultaneously contributing to the climate crisis. While transitions to more efficient Proof-of-Stake (PoS) mechanisms are underway, the fundamental issue remains: the seemingly dematerialized world of algorithmic art is built upon a foundation of massive material and energy consumption. This demands a new form of ecological art criticism that can account for the hidden environmental costs of digital production.

5.4 Synthesizing the Critique

These three issues-bias, labor, and environment-are interconnected. They reveal that the algorithmic gaze is situated within a larger political economy of technology. The biases in the data reflect historical social inequalities. The obscured labor patterns point to new class formations in the creative industries. The environmental impact underscores the materiality of the cloud. A truly critical digital art history must, therefore, look beyond the screen and the output, to interrogate the datasets, the labor conditions, and the server farms that make the algorithmic gaze possible. It must ask not only what the algorithm *does* to art, but what its existence *costs* us in terms of social equity, economic justice, and planetary health. This comprehensive critique is a necessary precursor to the forward-looking conclusions outlined in the final section.

6. Conclusion: Towards a Critical Digital Art History

The ascendancy of the algorithmic gaze presents both a profound challenge and a unique opportunity for the world of art. This paper has argued that algorithms are actively reshaping the art object into a datafied entity, redistributing artistic authorship across human-machine assemblages, and instituting new, data-driven systems of value and curation. To ignore this shift is to risk irrelevance [10].

The challenge is clear: the opacity of many algorithmic systems, their embedded biases, and their tendency to reduce complex cultural phenomena to quantifiable metrics threaten to impoverish our understanding of art. The risk is a cultural sphere that is homogenized, financialized, and optimized for engagement at the expense of depth, critique, and the uncomfortable, the difficult, and the slow.

However, the opportunity is equally significant. The tools of the algorithm can also be harnessed for critical ends. Artists like Trevor Paglen use machine learning to expose the hidden biases of facial recognition systems, engaging in a form of "adversarial design" that turns the algorithmic gaze back on itself. Art historians can use computational methods to analyze vast corpora of images, revealing patterns of influence and stylistic evolution that were previously invisible to the naked eye.

The way forward, therefore, is not a Luddite rejection of technology but the cultivation of a critical digital art history and practice. This requires:

• **Algorithmic Literacy:** Art professionals must develop a foundational understanding of how these systems work, their limitations, and their inherent politics.

• **Critical Demystification:** Scholars and critics must dedicate themselves to "opening the black box," analyzing and critiquing the algorithmic systems that are increasingly mediating our cultural experience.

• **Emphasis on Human Criticality:** In an age of algorithmic curation, the role of the human critic, curator, and scholar becomes more, not less, important. Their task is to provide the context, the historical depth, the ethical scrutiny, and the subjective judgment that algorithms lack.

The algorithmic gaze is here to stay. Our task is not to shut our eyes but to learn to see with it, through it, and, most importantly, against it when necessary. We must ensure that the datafied, automated future of art remains a humanistic one, where technology serves to expand, rather than contract, the possibilities of aesthetic experience and critical thought.

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