Critical Reflection

Is everyone still an artist in the age of AI?

critical reflection
Is everyone still an artist in the age of ai?

Introduction

"Everyone is an artist"—a famous statement made by Joseph Beuys in the 20th century—seems to take on new possibilities today, as artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly permeates the art world. With the widespread use of generative AI tools such as Midjourney and Stable Diffusion, people without artistic training can now generate seemingly "artistic" images simply by inputting a few lines of text. My curatorial project stems from this phenomenon and asks a core question: Has AI lowered the threshold for art-making, or has it blurred the standards of artistic judgment? And in this technological shift, does art education still hold irreplaceable value?

This reflection will revisit my learning journey throughout the "Curating" course, analyzing how my curatorial project evolved from a focus on AI display to a comparative inquiry into the impact of educational backgrounds. Drawing on curatorial theories and critiques of AI art, I will explore: 1) the relationship between AI technologies and art education; 2) a contemporary reinterpretation of Beuys's ideas; and 3) how emerging curators might position themselves critically between technological development and cultural analysis.

Theoretical Framework and Course Foundations

The first few weeks of the course laid the theoretical groundwork for understanding contemporary curatorial practice. Among the assigned readings, Claire Bishop's

Artificial Hells offered a crucial overview of participatory art. [1]She argues that many participatory projects merely give the illusion of audience empowerment while failing to account for structural inequalities, resulting in what she calls "aestheticized participation" (Bishop 2012).[2] This critique prompted me to rethink the notion of AI as a universally accessible tool—does it truly enable equal creative participation, or does it reproduce new forms of algorithmic gatekeeping?

Joseph Beuys's concept of "social sculpture" also deeply influenced how I view the curator's role. As we learned in class, his claim that "everyone is an artist" did not imply that everyone can draw or sculpt, but rather that each person has the creative potential to contribute meaningfully to society through collaborative processes (Beuys 2007)[3]. This idea resonates strongly with Jacques Raniere's theory of "the equality of intelligences" in *The Emancipated Spectator*, where he advocates for educational models that resist intellectual hierarchies and instead affirm the learner's agency (Rancière 2009)[4]. Positioned in the context of AI image generation, these ideas led me to realize that curators should not merely showcase technological spectacle—they must design critical pathways for engaging with tools, education, and judgment.[5]

Finally, Joanna Zylinska's *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* suggests that the true challenge of AI art lies in how it redefines creativity itself—not in how well machines can mimic human aesthetics (Zylinska 2020)[6]. Her insights encouraged me to ask: How can curatorial practice respond meaningfully to technological shifts, without reducing art to an operational outcome?

[1] Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012).

[2] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

[3] Joseph Beuys, *What Is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys*, trans. Volker Harlan (Forest Row: Clairview Books, 2007).

[4] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

[5] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

[6] Joanna Zylinska, *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020).

Reflection on Project Development

My initial curatorial idea centred on showcasing artificial intelligence technologies, including the use of artificial intelligence to curate machine-produced visuals as a form of drive. The programme had a strong interactive element but lacked a key dimension. Through peer feedback, classroom discussions, and especially the collective curatorial activities in the summer hall, I realised that such a design had the potential to be a technology showcase rather than a platform for enquiry.[7] This realisation led me to reconstruct the core concept of the exhibition - not around AI output per se, but around how individuals with different artistic pedigrees use the same AI tools, and the structural differences this may reveal.

This curatorial turn deepened my understanding of Boyce's theory. As I have documented in my blog, Beuys' claim is not one of "skills-based democracy" but of the liberating power of creative participation (Beuys 2007).[8] In my revised proposal, I invited art students from the ECA and the China Academy of Art to generate work using artificial intelligence, while opening up the same generative tools to non-art participants. Visitors were invited to create and present their own AI-generated images as well as the students' work. By blurring the educational background of each creator, the exhibition provoked the viewer to ask: can we distinguish artistic expertise purely by looking at the work?

James Clegg's seminar also had a profound effect on my thinking. He emphasised that 'the exhibition space is never neutral' but rather a framing device that asks questions. This prompted me to rethink my spatial layout: instead of presenting the results of AI in a linear format, I created a 'discursive environment' in which viewers had to navigate comparative works and form their own aesthetic criteria . I ultimately titled the exhibition 'Is Everyone an Artist?' , and kept the question mark to keep the

---

[7] Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2008).
[8] Joseph Beuys, *What Is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys*, trans. Volker Harlan (Forest Row: Clairview Books, 2007).

curatorial exploration open rather than dogmatic. Meanwhile our mentor, Frances, gave me a timely wake-up call while I was immersed in my own grandiose curation to bring my exhibition up to the level of a new breed of curator. This made me choose my artists again.

Curatorial Methods, Theory, and Practice

As the course progressed, I began to understand that curating is not only about how to exhibit artworks—it is also about asking questions through exhibition-making. To address the tensions between AI creativity and educational background, I developed a comparative approach within my project: I invited art students from ECA and the China Academy of Art to use AI tools to generate works, and these were presented alongside audience-generated images. By blending these works and anonymizing their creators, I sought to challenge visitors to ask: Can we "see" whether a work was made by someone with formal artistic training?[9]

This curatorial structure was informed by Paul O'Neill's argument that curatorial narratives themselves must bear critical responsibility. The exhibition format, O'Neill suggests, should not simply present content but actively produce meaning through its structure and relationships[10]. This led me to foreground relational complexity rather than categorical authorship in my display strategy.

To avoid turning AI into a mere spectacle, I paid particular attention to "prompt engineering" as a creative mechanism. Events like Prompt Battle demonstrate that AI-generated art is not inherently democratic; rather, the quality of results often depends on the prompt-writing skills of the user[11]. This raised further questions: Does an art education improve one's ability to prompt creatively? Is creative control within AI environments just another form of epistemic privilege?

[9] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge, 2011).
[10] Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).
[11] Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

In terms of visual and spatial strategy, I drew from James Clegg's "60-minute exhibition challenge" introduced in Week 4. Clegg emphasized that an exhibition must be driven by questions, not simply by assembling objects. This inspired me to abandon categorical layouts (e.g., by country, background, or authorship), and instead use contrast and juxtaposition to lead viewers into deeper aesthetic and epistemological reflection[12]. In this sense, the exhibition itself becomes a curatorial problem-space rather than a solution.

Audience and Pedagogical Reflection

The primary audiences I envisioned for the exhibition were art students, students from other disciplines, and members of the wider university community. By targeting individuals of similar age and educational level, I intended to minimize variables and focus specifically on the impact of formal art education. In this design, audiences are not only observers but participants: they can enter prompt words at the exhibition entrance, generate their own images, print them, and display them within the exhibition space. This "generate-and-display" mechanism activates their agency and asks: "Does my work look like it was made by an artist?"

This approach draws on Jacques Rancière's concept of the "equality of intelligences" in *The Emancipated Spectator*, which argues that spectators do not need to be guided in order to understand—they should be treated as autonomous decoders of meaning[13]. Accordingly, I chose not to label which works were made by art students and which by non-art participants. Instead, I encouraged viewers to engage critically with the visual material and draw their own conclusions.

At the same time, I recognized that participatory potential does not always guarantee equitable access. As Bishop warns, many participatory projects simulate equality

---

[12] Claire Doherty, *Situation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
[13] Joseph Beuys, *What Is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys*, trans. Volker Harlan (Forest Row: Clairview Books, 2007).

while remaining structured by knowledge hierarchies[14]. To address this, I extended the project's reach beyond the exhibition space by placing portable AI-generating stations at the university library and other public areas, where I invited passersby—like a "street photographer"—to participate. This helped diversify the audience and aligned with Beuys's notion of "social sculpture," in which creativity is activated in public and collective spaces[15].

Collective Practice and Relational Aesthetics

The F²amily Group

Aside from the construction of individual curatorial projects, one of the most inspiring experiences I have been involved in this semester has been the collective curatorial exercise Leave Your Memory at Summerhall, where we worked together to create a collage around the theme of 'Collective Power' without any clear roles. 'In this project, themed 'Collective Power', we did not have any clear roles, but worked

[14] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).
[15] Joseph Beuys, *What Is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys*, trans. Volker Harlan (Forest Row: Clairview Books, 2007).

together to create a collage based around 'Edinburgh Memory'. We used objects collected from the city's everyday life - bills, supermarket tickets, flowers, candy wrappers, maps and personal graffiti. Everyone spontaneously contributed their own fragments and narratives, resulting in a sensual, multi-layered visual field.

I contributed the shopping bills I had accumulated in my life, which seemed trivial but recorded the rhythm and memory of my daily life in a foreign country. There is no curator or audience in the process; each of us is both creator and viewer. This intertwining of multiple identities allowed me to understand for the first time the concept of 'relational space' put forward by Nicolas Bourriaud in Aesthetics of Relation - art is no longer a finished work, but a social form of exchange between people[16]. In this project, the meaning of art comes from the collaboration of time and place rather than the aesthetic object itself.

This practice also made me realise that curating can be not only 'organising exhibits and spaces', but also 'building relationships and actions'. What we leave on the wall is not just a collage, but also a way of 'co-creation of memory'. In the absence of hierarchical structures, curating becomes a process of generating a collective subject. As Grant Kester puts it in Works in Dialogue, 'When art becomes a dialogue, creative power is redistributed [17].

This experience has directly influenced my reset of 'audience participation' in my solo exhibition project - I began to think whether I could introduce this kind of decentralised, co-constructive thinking into the audience aspect of AI-generated art,

---

[16] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
[17] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

so that the exhibition would not only present the process of judgement, but also become everyone's contribution to the 'work in dialogue'. The exhibition will not only be a process of judgement, but also a space for everyone to explore their 'artistic identity'.

Curatorial Identity and Personal Growth

This course has not only enhanced my curatorial knowledge but also helped clarify my identity as a practitioner. Initially, I saw curating as a technical operation— organizing artworks, texts, budgets, and space. Over time, I came to view it as a critical practice involving storytelling, inquiry, ethical reflection, and spatial orchestratio[18]n. A curator is not simply a manager of logistics but also a cultural mediator and question-poser.

Through the collective curatorial project at Summerhall—where our group collaboratively designed a collage-based installation titled "Leave Your Memory"—I learned the value of co-creation. This open, participatory structure demonstrated that the depth of a curatorial project often arises not from singular authorship but from sustained dialogue and shared experimentation. It also encouraged me to consider how "curatorial space" can be opened up in solo projects to allow more voices to shape the final form. As Suzanne Lacy wrote in *Mapping the Terrain*, "the curator is no longer the planner but the facilitator"[19].

The course also helped me identify future areas of inquiry: How can art education be meaningfully redefined in the context of AI? How can curating build critical public space in a post-digital age? I now understand my curatorial role not simply as a

[18] Claire Bishop, "Participation," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 10–17.
[19] Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

project organizer but as someone who cultivates the social, pedagogical, and imaginative potential of artistic encounters.

Conclusion

Reflecting on this course, I feel that I have not only developed a curatorial project but also undertaken a deep inquiry into the politics of authorship, aesthetics, and education in the age of AI. From theoretical readings to exhibition-making workshops, from blogging to peer feedback, I came to understand curation as an ongoing critical negotiation.

My exhibition *Everyone is an Artist?* is not just a reflection on Beuys's theory—it is a response to contemporary debates around who gets to make art, how technology mediates taste, and whether education still matters in a generative world. I wanted it to be not just an exhibition but a platform for questioning. As Rancière writes, "Education is not about transmission—it is about ignition"[20]. So too is curating.

Going forward, I plan to continue exploring the tensions between technology, social structures, and education, with a particular focus on designing curatorial formats that activate participation and provoke reflection. I hope to curate not only exhibitions, but also critical conversations.

---

[20] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

Reference

1. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

2. Joanna Zylinska, *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020).

3. Joseph Beuys, *What Is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys*, trans. Volker Harlan (Forest Row: Clairview Books, 2007).

4. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

5. Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2008).

6. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

7. Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

8. Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

9. Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

10. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012).

11. Claire Bishop, "Participation," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 10–17.

12. Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

13. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

14. Claire Doherty, *Situation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

15. Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge, 2011).