

*Synthetic Realities: Authenticity in the Age of AI Imagery*

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*The authentic self is the you that can be found at your absolute core. It is the part of you that is not defined by your job, or your function, or your role. It is the composite of all your unique gifts, skills, abilities, interests, talents, insights, and wisdom. It is all your strengths and values that are uniquely yours and need expression, versus what you have been programmed to believe that you are “supposed to be and do.” It is the you that flourished, unselfconsciously, in those times in your life when you felt happiest and most fulfilled.*

– Dr. Phil, *Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out*

The rise of AI-generated imagery forces us to reconsider what authenticity means in a world where the synthetic and the real seamlessly blend. Traditionally tied to an artist's presence, the verifiability of a captured moment, or originality, authenticity now faces new questions: Who—or what—is the author of an AI-generated image? Does authenticity lie in intent, process, or result? If an AI-generated image moves us, provokes thought, or unveils hidden structures within our world, does it not achieve a kind of truth?

These questions, though dressed in a progressive concern, misfire at their core. The appeal to “authenticity” is not a genuine engagement with art or subjectivity—it's a symptom of a cultural regression. The artist has never owed anyone their “authentic self,” because that self is a fiction: a managed construct, a sustained performance. The recent obsession with being “real”—in art, in life, in algorithmic output—is less a pursuit of truth than a symptom of control. This is the soft tyranny of the authentic, a truth that is not actually explored but continually under surveillance and judgement, an ideal that doesn't exist.

The cult of authenticity is a form of moral hygiene. It punishes contradiction, demands transparency, and disguises itself as empowerment. But what if “you do you, girl” and no one likes you? What if you discover at your absolute core isn't “all your unique gifts, skills, abilities, interests, talents, insights, and wisdom” but a rotting black mould that is boring, cruel, incoherent, and untalented? The demand for authenticity isn't actually about truth, it is about discovering the safest and most sterile version of yourself.

The so-called “authentic self” is not a source—it's a symptom of a society that is desperate for anchors in a sea of instability. But it's precisely in instability—those liminal, unformed zones—that subjectivity emerges as something dynamic, speculative, and even dangerous. To insist on a “true self” is to enforce a self-containment. It is to foreclose becoming in favour of coherence. It is the logic of the border, not the threshold.

Nowhere does this become more absurd than in the conversation around artificial intelligence. To demand that AI—or artists using AI—be “authentic” is to demand that something that is not fully formed, define its own conditions and boundaries of being. Yet, we must also consider the artists whose work is being ingested and fragmented by algorithms: are they—these creators whose labor is scraped, extracted, and commodified—regarded as “authentic”? Are we to believe that a photo of

dog shit is more “authentic” than an illustration or painting by an underpaid artist simply because one is labeled with more certainty and more likely to be statistically represented in future iterations?

What is this hierarchy of value that assumes some kinds of labor, some images, some identities are inherently more “real” or more deserving of protection? Artistic labor has never been cleanly categorized, and yet the rise of generative models has forced a reckoning—one that too often results in reactionary claims about authenticity, purity, and theft, rather than deeper interrogations of how culture is made, who gets credited, and who gets erased.

What does purity mean under late-stage capitalism, when every gesture of “authenticity” is already embedded in circuits of commodification, spectacle, and algorithmic governance? If anything, AI is more “authentic” than humans. It never believed in the myth in the first place. It makes no claims to inner life. It simply reads the room. Yet, a machine doesn’t feel happiness or fulfillment. They only mimic understanding and emotions. They are simply our tools and, like artists, are likely to be used and abused by the state and capital.

AI is not a stable collaborator—it is a mirror. It doesn’t create from truth; it creates from noise, from detritus, from the infinite leftovers of a digital age. What kind of “authentic relationship” can exist between artist and machine when neither really fully understand each other and one is just a reflection of the other? The love affair can only be volatile, one that can just as easily end in a loving relationship or in mutual destruction. But this is the ugly truth of art making, this is the place it thrives. The artist should never feel fulfilled. They should be trying on new personalities daily.

Art has never been a contract with essence—it is gambling with instability, placing bets with the unknown, a flirtation with dissolution. Those who cry betrayal at the rise of AI-generated art reveal more about their nostalgia than their ethics. They want art to remain human because they believe being human actually means something. It’s not that the centre doesn’t hold anymore—it was never there. The pure, undiluted absolute core is a myth.

So when we speak of authenticity in the age of AI, what are we really asking for? Not truth, but control. Not expression, but obedience. The authentic is not a destination—it’s a demand dressed in virtue. A velvet cage. And the artists who reject it are not abandoning sincerity—they’re refusing to be policed by the past.

We like to say “nature is authentic,” as if that grants it some kind of moral authority. But what we call “nature” is actually “chaos.” It’s violence without reason, fucking without passion, process without narrative. To romanticize it is to seek comfort in a fiction—one that conveniently erases our complicity in its destruction. So when we demand “authenticity,” we’re not asking for truth. We’re begging for a return to a fantasy of pre-technological innocence. The desire to be authentic is the desire to return to nature.

But AI shatters this illusion, and perhaps this is why there has been a backlash against it. It is not only a betrayal of the natural—it’s an exposure of how unnatural our ideas about nature really are. This is why AI disturbs: it strips away the myth that creativity is sacred. That the human is central. AI doesn’t pretend to be human—it mimics us with a precision that reveals how much of what we call “human” is already mechanical, rehearsed, synthetic.

The panic around AI isn’t about art, or ethics, or jobs. It’s about the unbearable realization that authenticity has always been a performance—and the machine performs it better. There is no authenticity, especially in art. Authenticity is only a mechanism of judgment—a tool to validate or invalidate, to include or exclude. It functions as a gatekeeper, a boundary drawn in the shifting sand. The only authentic act is to reject the very premise of authenticity and to recognize the raw emergence of being—the gesture before it is named, the becoming before it is categorized.

## Work Descriptions:

“I like being here” is the opening line of *Soledad* by Isabelita Virtual. Solitude in addition to feminist resilience is an equation for solace. To be close and far away at the same time, to have the space discover a version of yourself you didn't know existed. The work demonstrates that self is no longer the excavation of a buried truth, but the conscious and continual act of self-construction—a becoming shaped not by what lies beneath, but by what one dares to create in the open. You'll like being there, too.

What would the game of telephone look like if it was played by machines? Niklas Poweleit's *Rezyklierung [Recycling]* uses three screens to explore how images shift as they pass through different modes of perception and translation. A car moves down a road on the first screen. The second screen breaks this down into data, while the third presents an AI's attempt to reconstruct the moment from its digital remains. What returns is not the same image, but something altered—reshaped by process and digital interpretation.

The American two-party system has become a theatre of the absurd, where voters are increasingly forced to choose the lesser evil rather than vote their conscience. The Democrats continue to shift rightward, leaving little meaningful opposition to the rise of authoritarianism. Figures like Trump and Elon Musk perform like clowns in a collapsing empire, distracting from the erosion of civil rights and democratic norms with spectacle and ego. Canada's recent election, where many voted strategically to avoid becoming America's metaphorical 51st State, only underscores how deeply this dysfunction reverberates beyond U.S. borders. Electoral reform, once promised by Canada's Liberal Party in 2015, remains unfulfilled, in spite of former Prime Minister's Justin Trudeau's empty regrets. What's left is political stagnation and growing disillusionment. Jess MacCormack's work—digital or otherwise—cuts through this despair, offering raw, emotional insight. *Elections* is no exception.

Anna Condo's *Sunday School* dismantles the fantasy of a self, replacing it with a figure assembled from digital rubble and a blue-velvet dress with a stiff white collar. The face isn't hidden—it's overwritten, remixed, refusing to offer the intimacy we're conditioned to expect. Behind the figure, the schoolyard contains symbols of early formation: playground equipment, asphalt, and brick walls. These are the sites where norms are rehearsed, where rules are absorbed. But now they are empty, paused and digitally estranged—awaiting another version of childhood to emerge.

There is violence in watching—and a profound violence in the hunger to watch. Mind Wank's *Witness* series confronts the grim appetite of our image economy for smiles and selfies. The horror is not the juxtaposition—it is the plausibility. This work does not mourn, it exposes; it reveals how collective trauma can become a backdrop for our own self-aggrandizement. As the towers fall, we can see how history dissolves into spectacle in an endless doom scroll—tragedy repackaged as content.

There exists a subset of AI-generated images and videos that occupy the space between the uncanny valley and the grotesque, unsettling in ways that defy easy categorization. These works generate what might be called the *promptum*—a visceral, internal jolt that originates not in the mind but in the gut, a sharp disturbance that bypasses language. *Offeah* by icysaw pushes this sensation to its extreme, creating an immersive experience that feels like stumbling into a box-opening livestream on the deep web—raw, voyeuristic, and teetering on the edge of taboo. The work doesn't ask for interpretation, offering its hands to the viewer, pulling them into a digital uncanny that feels both eerily familiar and profoundly wrong.

Inspired by Jørgen Leth's arthouse classic *The Perfect Human* (1968), Lilan Yang's work of the same name feeds a low-res YouTube rip of the original into StyleGAN2, forcing the machine to reflect on “the perfect human.” Over 9,000 stills are scraped, processed, and trained into a synthetic fever dream of “perfection.” The result isn't a remake but a machine hallucination: a visual remix where smooth surfaces hide broken data. These generated images are then dragged back into the physical world as 16mm transparencies, completing a loop from film to algorithm and back. It's not a question of what the perfect human is—but what happens when a machine tries to make one.

A world where the backs of cars are indistinguishable from their fronts. Che, che, che, che, che check out Maciej Miliszkiwicz's music video *ADHD* and join the chain gang. Keep an eye and an ear out for that electronic flute solo.

Ugly Fruuit's *Parallel daughter* and *Displace control* present an unsettling dive into the world of AI-generated imagery. These works explore the moment when machine learning systems break away from polished imitation and slip into something more unstable—the realm of visual contradiction. Through these glitches and distortions, the system confesses its inhumanity. The results are weird, absurd, and strangely alive. Here is an alt-text description of one of the images in the series: The image depicts a person holding a small, two-story model of a house. The house is constructed from a light-coloured material resembling plywood and is partially covered with white and brown furry textures. It has small window panes, with the main structure appearing handmade and roughly finished. The person holding the house, seen from the side, has short, dark hair and is wearing a pink tank top. A pink wristband is visible on their arm. Surrounding the person are other individuals in casual attire; their expressions and positions suggest they are in a social setting, possibly an event or a gathering.

What begins as a seemingly straightforward desktop documentary quickly spirals into something far more unsettling. Chen Zirui's *Format Error Occurred at Offset* dissects how governments collect, control, and distort our images, exposing the fragile and ambiguous nature of identity within bureaucratic systems. In stark contrast, the work interrogates the ways AI image generation is used in the art and culture industries. Culture is not just defined by what it creates, but by what it destroys—and in the AI-driven future, it's the human subject who disappears first. Beneath the shiny promises of progress, what's already here is a more efficient, globalized exploitation of the self, and within the paradigm of capitalism, this is often performed under the guise of innovation.

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Text by Clint Enns

## **Artists:**

### **Chen Zirui**

Chen Zirui (b.1997) is currently conducting research and creative practice at the Graduate School of Moving Image at Kunsthochschule Kassel. His works often stem from his own identity, discussing political and social issues from the perspective of technology and media. Beyond the issues themselves, he also attempts to highlight the way narratives are constructed. His works include experimental videos and installations.

### **Anna Condo**

Anna Condo discloses beauty in the subtlest gradations of color and contrast, drama in the most delicate nuances of texture and tone, wisdom in an ever-fluid interplay between fragility and strength. Her work is at once a revelation of and an invitation into a world of singular enchantment—a world the viewer will be unable to forget and most unwilling to leave. Text by Caroline Weber.

### **Uglyy Fruuit**

Uglyy Fruuit / Kasper Latkowski (b. 1977, Warsaw) UK based audio-visual artist experimenting with digital video, sound design, animation and synthography. Currently fascinated by emerging generative technologies, he uses personal computers to push AI models to their limits, inducing chaotic uncanny hallucinations. The result are disorienting spaces full of visual anomalies and computational artefacts that would be impossible to conceive through traditional methods. He looks for ways to use this obscure and unpredictable medium to develop unique visual language. Artist's role here is less about creating something specific and more about creating conditions where something unprecedented can emerge.

### **icysaw**

icysaw is a Berlin-based visual artist experimenting with AI-generated videos to create unsettling, surreal atmospheres. Their work explores the eerie emotional disconnect of machine-made imagery and the accelerating collapse of boundaries between reality and simulation.

### **Jess Mac**

Jess Mac is a queer, mad artist and white settler working on the unceded ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. Their art practice engages with the intersection of institutional violence and the socio-political reality of personal trauma. Working with communities and individuals affected by stigma and oppression, MacCormack uses cultural platforms and distribution networks to facilitate collaborations which position art as a tool to engender personal and political agency. Working in various mediums – graphic novels, digital art, performance, installation, community art and video – their work explores queer politics, embodiment and criminalization. Jess Mac's digital art has been shared through various platforms, such as Artforum International, Hyperallergic, Canadian Art, VICE Creator's project, White Hot Contemporary Art, Bitch Magazine, PAPER Magazine and Art F City. Their interdisciplinary practice has been supported and exhibited by the Academie der Künste der Welte (Cologne, Germany), arbyte (London, UK), articule (Montréal, Canada), Western Front (Vancouver, Canada) and many other local and international galleries. They have an MFA in Public Art and New Artistic Strategies from the Bauhaus University (2008) and were an Assistant Professor of Studio Arts at Concordia University (2010-2013). Jess is currently an instructor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and is working towards their PhD in Contemporary Art at Simon Fraser University.

## **Maciej Miliszkiewicz**

Maciej Miliszkiewicz (b. 1986) is a visual artist and IT analyst based in Warsaw, Poland. For many years he worked as a photographer and photojournalist, and his current practice builds on that visual foundation to explore the intersection of technology and art through AI-generated stills and video. His work aims to capture emotional intensity, psychological states, and absurdity—with a touch of humor.

## **Niklas Poweleit**

Niklas Poweleit (b.1995 in Hildesheim, Germany) is an experimental filmmaker and motion designer whose work explores the relationship between digital images and reality. His artistic practice is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach that combines different image techniques. Building on his earlier explorations of Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) in a creative context, Niklas Poweleit has been working intensively with AI-generated images since 2022. Through his experimental approach (Reimagining Images), he seeks out aesthetically unconventional visual worlds to explore on film. In 2023 he participated in the workshop “Nouvelle Bug Vol. 2”, where he created the film “The Unknown Painting”, which premiered at the 64th Festival Internacional de Cine de Cartagena – FICCI. In addition to his own projects, Niklas Poweleit has worked with directors such as Anastasia Veber and Andrea Gatopoulos. He studied Virtual Design (BA) and Design (MA) and completed his Master’s thesis “Andromeda – The Image in the Field of Tension Between Authenticity and Fiction” in 2023 with his film “Andromeda – Who destroyed Nord Stream?”, supervised by Prof. Christian Mahler and Prof. Dr. Stephan Schwingeler. Niklas Poweleit lives and works in Hanover, Germany.

## **Isabelita Virtual**

Isabelita Virtual is a multi-award-winning Creative Director working at the intersection of art, technology, and communication. She has built her career across leading advertising agencies such as Wunderman and DDB, as well as tech companies like Meta. She has collaborated with globally renowned brands and cultural institutions including Hermès, Coach, Apple, Sony, Dior, the Louis Vuitton Foundation, and NASA, among others. In 2018, she was named a Webby Award Honoree for Best Content in Art and Culture—an accolade described by The New York Times as “the Internet’s highest honor”—alongside institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and LACMA. That same year, she exhibited her work in the Midnight Moment Exhibition, joining the ranks of artists such as Sophie Calle, Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, and JR, among others.

## **Mind Wank**

Mind Wank is an “artist” who uses “AI”.

## **Lilan Yang**

Lilan Yang (b. 1997, Chongqing, China) is an artist and experimental filmmaker. Rooted in the materiality of 16mm film, their practice explores the flux of migration, the decay of memory and the intricacies of perception. Yang’s films have been exhibited at institutions including the RISD Museum and Foxy Production (New York), with installations at festivals such as the Ann Arbor Film Festival, Alchemy Film & Moving Image Festival (UK), and MONO NO AWARE Film Festival (New York). A recipient of the Award for Excellence at Image Forum Film Festival (Japan), Yang has been awarded residencies at MASS MoCA, Baltic Analog Lab (Latvia), Millay Arts, and I-Park Foundation, among others. Yang holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design, a Bachelor of Science in Computer Engineering from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and currently resides in Boston, Massachusetts.