

AI or Not—Art as an Ambition to Bear Witness

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Since its inception, photography has faced both high expectations and skepticism, especially regarding the connotations of truth, reality, and evidence it conveys, whether in analog or digital formats. Simultaneously, facilitated by technology, a diverse range of art has emerged, spanning Dadaism, Conceptual Art, and artworks or curations that adopt an archival nature.

Given the growing prevalence of AI-generated images, we are prompted to inquire whether, within the art historical context, there is comparability or competition between photography and AI regarding them as new art genres. Which critical criteria have been developed to recognize photography as a qualified instrument and medium for creating art, and are these criteria applicable to AI-generated art?

(Overcoming) Technological Determinism of Photography

I pose two additional questions in response to this inquiry. Photography consistently grapples with essentials such as aesthetics, ethics, and authenticity, particularly when they intersect and conflict. Photography's inherent nature involves the role of coincidences and luck in capturing pivotal moments, while unpredictable conditions often convey profound messages and insights about the context and surroundings. Moreover, technological advancements, whether in traditional cameras or smartphone lenses, increasingly shape the aesthetics of what constitutes a "good photo." How do we express, interpret, and assign value to these essentials within the fluctuating changes? Additionally, amidst the plethora of AI-generated images accessible online, what elements serve as the punctum, capturing the attention of individual viewers?

Drawing inspiration from the debates surrounding Georges Didi-Huberman's thesis on the "imagining unimaginable," I suggest in this essay that in an era marked by blurred boundaries between reality and virtuality, art creation is called upon to bear witness in its intrinsic manner. Didi-Huberman's interpretations of images are phenomenological and epistemological. For him, photographs are not static but dynamic and contextual; they don't merely mirror scenes by freezing them but empathically convey an experience. Instead of solely seeking historical truth through eventful images, it's essential to understand the

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conditions and surroundings of snapshots, which determine the impression and quality of the images. Therefore, by recognizing the urgency and risks an image brings, such as the four photos from the crematory of Auschwitz, we discern that even a failed snapshot encapsulates the moment and movement of history - its momentum (Chaouat 2006, 87). The experience of taking those photographs is as relevant to historical truth as the scene they present, and the way we see or do not see is historically as critical as what we see. Photographs, whether created as photojournalism or as fictitious compositions, should not merely be seen as means to provide definitive evidence; rather, they bear witness to a much broader context that encompasses the preconditions of their own existence.

Taking Lang Chin-Shan 郎靜山 (1892-1995) as an example, a photographer and pioneer in merging photography and painting, we encounter the ongoing challenge and inspiration of defining the aesthetic, ethical, and authentic values of a picture up to contemporary times. Lang, the first Chinese photojournalist to migrate to Taiwan, gained renown for composing his photographs to resemble traditional Chinese ink landscape paintings. His artistic expression lies not in capturing a pivotal moment but in the deliberate act of composition. By adopting the style of Chinese literati painting, Lang's approach to Taiwan's semitropical landscape was perceived as alienated. Despite Lang's esteemed reputation for personally capturing all elements and delicately incorporating them into his artworks, he faced criticism for being overly manipulative during the 1970s, a period when social-realist photography began to thrive in Taiwan. Although his approach was recognized as a role model and followed by many peers at that time, it was criticized for impeding photography's progression into modernity (Liao 2013, 15).

Figure 1. Lang Chin-Shan. *Drawing Water from the Clear River in the Morning* 曉汲清江. 1934.
Source: National Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan.



Besides the technology that enabled Lang to manufacture idealized landscapes, we might inquire, throughout his lifetime, which criteria Lang's art should adhere to. I suggest it might depend on whether he witnessed something characteristic of the era. Although complicated by the historical discourse defining his style as anti-communist aesthetics (Liao 2013, 19), I notice that instead of being considered representative of "orthodox Chinese culture," Lang's art might have revealed qualities authentic to his time. His photography bore witness to the nostalgia experienced by Chinese migrants in postwar Taiwan who could not return home in their lifetime. In this regard, the technological possibilities of Lang's time not only enabled but also determined his aesthetic.

Another compelling example I enthusiastically mention here is the research conducted by the young Taiwanese scholar, Lin Ping 林平, on the 2019 series "Mischpoche" by German artist Andreas Mühe (1979-). "Mischpoche," titled to imply a family including close and distant relatives, features Mühe's own family portraits. The compositions include both living family members and surrogate doll figures representing deceased relatives, embodying the concept of his patchwork family. As the son of renowned German actor Ulrich Mühe and theater director Annegret Hahn, whose performances closely reflected German history throughout their careers, Andreas Mühe's staged family portraits paradoxically rely heavily on the fabrication of scenes. Lin elucidates:

Mühe's visual construction of the family was triggered by a portrait painting of the Krupp family, a great German industrial dynasty whose factories produced weapons for the German empire. (...) Many of Mühe's photographs are given clear titles based on actual historical memories, which are actually invisible fractures embedded in collective consciousness of the nation, the society and the family. He also reveals at the same time how fallible and unreliable the photography can be (Lin 2023, 82).

Figure 2. George Simon Harcourt, *Krupp Family Portrait*. 1931.

Source: <https://www.meisterdrucke.ie/fine-art-prints/George-Simon-Harcourt/857580/Gustav-Krupp-v.-B.-u.-H.-family-portrait.html>.



Figure 3. *Andreas Mühe. Mühe II. Mischpoche. 2016-2019.*

Source: <https://andreasmuehe.com/exhibitions/mischpoche-hamburger-bahnhof>.



Both artists, Lang Chin-Shan and Andreas Mühe, bore witness to their respective eras, separated by more than a half-century, by creating images that reflected their own memories. In comparison to Lang, Mühe might have been more adept at overcoming the political, historical, and technological barriers that troubled artists of their times.

Mediated Gaze and Authentic Reaction

In expanding the context and capacity for the idea of "bearing witness," we cannot overlook the evolving dynamics of gaze relations in photography resulting from advancing technology. Originating from Lacan's theory, the prevalent discourse on the gaze underscores the significance of power dynamics between the camera holder and the "object of desire" (*Objet petit a*). Power relations are intrinsic to the gaze/lens, while the object of desire may either avert or return the gaze. When the object of desire gazes back at the camera holder, it indicates a reversal of power and signifies the reclaiming of subjectivity.

Gazing involves mastering the act of "looking at" (Iskin 1997). The ubiquity of images captured by software-interfered lenses in smartphones and camera drones is altering the dynamics and conventions of how individuals engage with images. While technology evolves continuously, individuals persist in expressing their personal perspectives, interpretations, and subjectivities through the images they create or interact with. Images, which serve as our window to the world, are increasingly mediated by diverse mediums

and technologies, resulting in individuals' perceptions of images varying widely and being highly contingent on the context and cultural backdrop.

I would like to reference Wim Wenders for his insights in this context, particularly regarding his documentary on Sebastião Salgado, which, despite controversies, garnered global acclaim. Wenders suggests that every film originates from memories, embodying a collection of memories and creating new ones (Wenders 2001, 194). The relationship between memory and imagery is profound: memories are often encapsulated within images, while images also have the power to evoke and create memories (Malpas 2021). Wenders's remark implies that images possess significant potential to transcend cultures and intersect both private and public spheres, influencing collective memory and perception. This notion is supported by various critics and examples, illustrating the profound impact of widely recognized images on the global public.

In his 2006 article critiquing Sebastião Salgado's 2004 catalog "Sahel," which was published to raise charity funds, anthropologist Christopher Morton rigorously criticized Salgado's aesthetics, particularly regarding his photos documenting the 1984-85 famine. Morton concluded that:

The inherent beauty of the images is finally revealed to us as a betrayal. Caught in a troubling dialectic between form and content, aesthetic pleasure and emotional turmoil, these images gain their activation. (...) I am left moved by the beauty of these images and yet troubled by these encounters. Salgado's extraordinary eye has taken us to the bedside of the dying, where his art has been forged. Perhaps I am misunderstanding the nature of his practice here, but as an anthropologist I cannot ignore the starkness of their anonymity. The photographs are beautiful, beguiling, visceral (Morton 2006, 176, 177).

In terms of critics highlighting disparities in the perception of images by the esteemed photographer, the focus of Wenders's lens holds significance for the global audience, notably evident in his 2014 documentary "The Salt of the Earth." Lee Wei-I 李威儀, the founder of the Taiwanese magazine "Voice of Photography 攝影之聲," criticized the documentary for overlooking the opportunity to address earlier challenges concerning Salgado's aestheticization of suffering populations, despite the significant role of his images in bearing witness. Lee's perspective implies that Wenders' choice of gaze in documenting Salgado glorifies his persona, thus accentuating his controversial aesthetics.

Spanning four decades from Salgado's documentation of "Sahel" to the present day, perspectives toward Salgado's achievements have shifted considerably, and the perception of photography itself has evolved. Nevertheless, the contradictory mix of authentic feelings described by Morton – beautiful, beguiling, and visceral – is possibly a characteristic uniquely inherent in photography, and seemingly applicable to AI-generated works as well. Reflecting on the artworks mentioned above and how their aesthetic, ethical, and authentic values have been assessed, in the context of anticipating the future of AI-generated photography, I propose that commentary can never be too late or too early.

Witnessing the Uncanny and Unpredictability of Technology

Considering the recent controversies in Taiwan and other regions regarding whether prize-winning artworks created by or with assistance of AI should be recognized or categorized differently, I would suggest allowing more space for discussion before making judgments. Here, characteristics such as beautiful, beguiling, visceral, and uncanny seem appropriate for describing AI-generated works in the current phase, as exemplified by two famous pieces: "The Electrician" by Boris Eldagsen from his "Pseudomnesia" series, awarded by the 2023 Sony World Photography Awards, and "Twin Sisters in Love" by Annika Nordenskiöld, recognized by the 2023 Artificial Intelligence Art Award at the Ballarat International Foto Biennale. Both pieces exhibit a black-and-white photographic style reminiscent of early 20th-century images and demonstrate striking parallels. It remains a mystery whether the jury was aware that "The Electrician" was generated by AI and why a piece simulating an image from an earlier time was chosen for the award. Meanwhile, it raises curiosity about whether the two artworks awarded within a year signify that the aesthetic of "The Electrician" has become an archetype for AI-generated photography, for which "Twin Sisters in Love" was awarded.

Figure 4. Boris Eldagsen. *The Electrician*. 2023.

Source: <https://www.lensculture.com/projects/1740967-the-electrician>.



In Nordenskiöld's image, the central depiction of intimacy between humans and marine creatures adds an uncanny quality, emphasizing the playful interaction between photographic reality and the surrealistic scene generated by AI. The use of black-and-white aims to evoke a sense of authenticity, reminiscent of the era when coloring journal photos was not only costly but also often detached from immediate reality in a timely manner. Thus, black-and-white photos were deemed as "more truthful" (Stellino 2020).

Despite being presented in two separate artworks by different artists using different AI software, the four women in the images share resemblances in facial features and hairstyles, giving the impression of being close female relatives or sisters. The reproduction of identical faces evokes reminiscences of the earlier photographic technique of multiple exposures, now bearing a closer association with cloning technology. Despite the fictional context, viewers may experience visceral reactions and subconscious fears related to mutation when confronting the pseudo-reality depicted in the images.

Figure 5. Annika Nordenskiöld. *Twin Sisters in Love*. 2023.

Source: <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/world-s-first-ai-art-award-ignites-debate-about-what-is-photography-20231004-p5e9td.html>.



In response to Eldagsen's concept of "Pseudomnesia," suggesting "fake memories," and Wenders's discourse on the interrelation between created images and memories, I propose that images that are distant from us but impact us will not necessarily become definitive "fake" memories. Here, I draw on Alison Landsberg's use of the term "Prosthetic Memories". This concept refers to the outcome of a spectator's affective and cognitive experience of specific historical events as portrayed by mass media (Landsberg 2004). Although the audience has not directly lived through those times, it is highly probable that these histories become internalized into the collective consciousness through the act of gazing. Extending the concept of "Prosthetic Memories" to apply it to the AI era, we find ourselves amidst an accelerating learning process of AI, which is reshaping our modes of memory. Meanwhile, the unforeseeable potential of AI not only leads to a rapid shift in artistic criteria but also influences how art creations reflect their circumstances. We are currently immersed in a realm of "experiencing the past and memorizing the future," surrounded by an inexhaustible array of genuine, retouched, composed, or AI-generated images. My plea for art and art criticism to encapsulate a fluid context remains steadfast in bearing witness, whether within or beyond the confines of an artwork's frame.

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