

A New Disunity: Preserving Artistic Humanity in the Age of AI
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As Russian visual art theorist and pioneer of abstract art Wassily Kandinsky posited in his seminal work *Point and Line to Plane*, “As soon as we open the door, step out of the seclusion, and plunge into the outside reality, we become an active part of this reality and experience its pulsation with all our senses” (Kandinsky 17). For the visual artist, musician, writer, or theatre and performance practitioner, these words strike at the heart of the ultimate craft. To create art that speaks to the soul, one must experience the world, explore the possibilities, and then funnel that lived experience in all its beauty, comedy, and tragedy onto the canvas or onto the stage. Lived experience in particular is considered one of the most important elements of many artistic and literary theories including postmodernism, which for all its nuance and lack of certain definition makes it clear that to be understood, it relies on *how* the viewer sees rather than on *what* the viewer sees. As scholars and theorists such as Peter Barry have hypothesized, the most critical element of understanding a piece of media is not the presence of the media itself, but the perspective the audience brings to the work and the experience the artist transmits. Audience engagement is also a defining factor in the work of top voices in the field of AI and the Arts, including Dr. Heidi Boisvert. What, then, are the implications of the ever-expanding world of artistic technologies - chatbots that claim to write our thoughts better than we can, art AI programs that generate imagery based on text, and faux-creators who click a button and claim stolen work as their own? Art itself seems to be in crisis in the world of today as well as for the foreseeable future, threatened by a generator of data that cannot comprehend ethics nor creativity. Existing, original artwork is jeopardized alongside the myriad of potential for environmental, personal, and cybernetic harm; the consequences of allowing a non-human entity to engage in human meaning-making carries with it both tension and risk. A return to an organic and fragmented form of human creation in the face of this new condition can provide a way for

art and performance to remain identifiable as coming from a human source. The way forward, utilizing postmodernism, is to value and create art that AI cannot replicate.

Clearly, this still seems a rather bleak outlook of the future for any aspiring artist. I have heard many of my friends and colleagues in the arts voice their fears that AI will take the jobs we have spent our lives dreaming about. Should a computer be allowed to draw and paint and craft for profit while humanity is relegated to performing the menial, laborious tasks for which we originally built the machines? I hope this is not the case. As history has shown us, however, art and theatre will endure; in the face of an unstoppable progress of technology that may overtake us, the answer must be to find a way to ensure the human voice remains heard and the human experience continues to drive art and creativity. To do so, we must see these new tech developments as a tool and not a terror - or at the very least, we must understand our enemy. How can artists address this threat? The answer to a path forward lies in looking once again to postmodernism.

An Examination of Postmodernism

One unique circumstance of utilizing postmodernism as a lens through which to examine a topic is that we must first strive to define it, as many scholars and theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have attempted before. It is generally accepted that there can be no concept of the postmodern without a clear working definition of modernism. While both movements are concerned with a focus on the nostalgic, the fragmented, and a retrospection on earlier times, postmodernism approaches this subject matter with irony, parody, and enthusiasm as opposed to melancholia. An elusive and persistent art form, postmodernism channels the gaudy and the excess, the nonlinear and the nonsensical; although it is largely regarded as a phenomenon that arose in the 1980s, its tenets can be easily traced back as far as

the 1930s in the disjointed Cubist works of Pablo Picasso and arguably even far earlier, such as at the close of the Romantic period when August and Friedrich Schlegel proposed a focus on fragmentation and a poetics of incompleteness (Gerould 29). The German critics claimed that the beauty of human creation lies in the vignette, the glimpse of a vivid moment, and - particularly in the theatre - the abandonment of the wholeness of dramatic action. The beginnings of postmodernism bloomed from the belief that humans resonate with the chaos of existence and the raw, visceral reflection of our own emotions. This formed a basis for disunity and pastiche, which then refined into theory with the addition of semiotics, the study of how meaning is created through less literal forms of communication including signs, symbols, and gestures.

Semiotics and Postmodernism

One of the pivotal works connecting semiotics to postmodernism is French writer Jean Baudrillard's 1981 manifesto *Simulacra and Simulations*, in which he details a fear of the disappearance of what is real in favor of hyperreality. Citing Disneyland as an example of a third-order simulation constructed to convince one that society itself is real, Baudrillard claims that "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (Poster 171). This assertion describes the current state of events, in which the hyperreality of the content generated by AI attempts to erase the truth; it also cites the resurrection of nostalgia - and thereby fragmentation - as a way to combat this condition.

It is interesting and quite telling to note that long before AI-generated imagery burst onto the scene, in days when merely having a computer at home was relatively uncommon, theorists displayed a trepidation of media technology, fearing that it would somehow detract from our ability to authentically depict and understand the human experience. Baudrillard warned of the creation of images in the media that have no grounding in reality, explaining in detail his belief

that we as a human society have entered into an age of simulation, a “Liquidation of all referential [...] a world in which the sign is substituted for the real itself” (Poster 167). Semiotics in its basest form proposes four stages of the manifestation of a sign:

1. It is a reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever.

(Poster 170). These four categories elucidate the ability of created images to devolve into senseless, meaningless, and potentially dangerous misrepresentations of meaning; due to the proliferation of image creation by computers, the categorization of semiotics must evolve to include the emergence of material that can be created by an emissary that is not sentient. This fifth and further distorted stage of the sign would classify circumstances in which the sign itself is no longer generated by an entity that can comprehend what it has created. What possible implications could such a creative process, and by extension such an intrusion of material that does not understand itself, have upon a world built on foundations of communicating ideas to audiences who possess the capability to understand and be changed by them? Is the concept of machine learning, by which a computer software revises its algorithm based on new information, enough to allow this new simulacrum to dominate? Throughout human history, the process of performance and meaning-making has been organic, with the human experience at the forefront because there is no alternative. Now, as technology that can create material on its own begins to surface, the way we perceive semiotics as a whole is shifting. Viewing and creating through a postmodernist lens provides the possibility to combat these disturbances; however, humans still have the freedom to choose the manner in which we interpret the signs we create and witness. Postmodernism forms an ideal basis to address this situation, considering its bifold approach to disseminating ideas. Both the disembodied existence of signs and simulacra and the somatic

presence of the body are contained in the approach of fragmentation and pastiche, as Baudrillard notes by underscoring the difference between presence and absence, simulation and reality.

Implications of AI

The world we live in today is becoming more and more inundated by artificial intelligence technologies by the minute. Internet search queries have an AI overview, work emails can be generated by AI chatbots, and the newest iPhones even attempt to summarize the content of text messages using AI software. This pervasive use of technology can be both frightening and can lead one to formulate fears about how AI might affect work and quality of life. In order to combat what I felt was a personal, baseless aversion to the use of artificial intelligence programs, I spoke with Dr. Heidi Boisvert, an authoritative voice who is currently serving as an assistant professor of AI and the Arts at the University of Florida. This program aims to integrate new technologies with existing art forms for the specific purpose of enhancing audience interaction, engagement, and experience. A sample of Boisvert's work took place in the UF theatre department in the summer of 2024, a devised theatrical piece entitled *Painting Humanity*. The project featured various elements of AI in conjunction with performers, including computer-generated projections, chatbots that allowed audiences to contribute to a text messaging scene, and more. According to Boisvert, the project aimed to have the positive outcome of both enhancing the interactive audience experience and also offering nontraditional opportunities for actors to gain experience working alongside technology, achieving "human and nonhuman systems in collaboration" (AI and the Arts). This approach, which maintains the designer, artist, and performer as the driver of the experience but adds technology as a tool - a nonhuman collaborator - embodies the ideals of postmodernism insofar as it encourages the artist to include, adapt, and collage. Using a postmodernist lens to examine the impact that new

non-sentient creators can potentially have on the arts allows us to consider the possibility of “fragmentation through technology,” a concept that Boisvert is excited to further pursue. In the most influential examples of postmodern texts, such as the work of Capote and Kerouac, vignettes and stream-of-consciousness writing are used to capture the ambiguous essence of humanity. While a machine cannot yet grasp these concepts, it is possible to harness the inherent postmodernism of AI, since image generation without experience is in itself an example of an unreliable narrator.

These developments in tech do not come without their obvious risks, however, as Boisvert agrees. “Every part of cultural production will be disrupted,” she claims (AI and the Arts); she anticipates such extreme advances as the creation of an entirely AI actor in the near future through the use of body mapping and modeling. This again echoes Baudrillard’s claim that “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (Poster 167) and, more worryingly, that “Never again will the real have to be produced” (Poster 167). This very situation is what artists fear most. Perhaps the advent of these new technologies could eliminate the need for human input in the creation of art, but I feel it is unlikely. Our existence, our presence, and our art will adapt and include; the only question that remains is how we can successfully do so.

Composition, Completion, and Presence

Total completion and perfection dissatisfies us intrinsically as human beings, and therefore the current state of AI image generation can cause an uncomfortable, uncanny valley-esque sensation. This is due to the need to preserve composition when AI tools are a part of the art we create. Theatre in its purest form intends to represent life itself; AI represents un-life, material created by something that can learn but cannot experience. As Michel Foucault

and Roland Barthes theorized, can literary or theatrical work exist without an author? Perhaps, by combining postmodernism's intent to reflect the collage of humanity with AI technology's ability to rapidly learn, quickly refine, and deliver content, we can achieve the creation of a novel form of fragmentation, a new disunity that can adapt and thrive in the changing environment of today's world while keeping the human experience at the forefront. Lyotard in particular emphasized the importance of the human body, positing that the body "occupies a space [...] is a technological object" (Lyotard 92). The theorist goes on to claim that the body is also "an essential site of resistance, because with the body there is love, a certain presence of the past, a capacity to reflect" (Lyotard 92). This captures the essence of what could be possible through merging postmodernist nostalgia with the concept of presence to maintain meaning. Without a human as the agent, there can be no presence, and without presence, there is a lack of embodied performance.

Speaking boldly to the possibilities of postmodernism's ability to communicate humanity is the work of academic and performance studies professor Diana Taylor, more specifically her 2020 book *¡Presente! The Politics of Presence*. Taylor disseminates the work of performance artist Regina José Galindo's work *Earth*¹, a piece in which the artist stands nude upon a mound of earth being plowed by a backhoe. Faced with an impassable abyss on all sides created by machinery, Galindo stands "silent, rooted like a tree [...] an indistinguishable form of materiality that obstructs the machine" (Taylor 106). The piece speaks to the indestructibility of the machines of technology, society, and politics, but also to the enduring presence of humanity in the face of adversity of all kinds. Knowledge, in Taylor's view, and by extension artistic expression, is a process of being, knowing, and acting with others. It is inescapable, as we see in Taylor's work, that the machine must be a part of the performance, yet it is a simulacrum to be

¹ See Fig.1

interpreted by the present body. Technologies and the way we interact with them, depict them, and revolt against them remains a human ability - a human necessity to be preserved.

Adapting the Arts

The true threat that AI generation programs pose exists not so much in the present but in the frighteningly near future, when both the speed and precision of the program's creation will supersede our own. What an artificial engine can hopefully never capture, however, is the substance of the human experience. It is incredibly fitting that one of the objects AI struggles to correctly generate is the human hand; a computer cannot grasp how the hand moves, how the fingers function, and it furthermore cannot comprehend how the human hand creates art that is visceral, moving, passionate, and born of so many more multitudes than a fine-tuned, falsely airbrushed generated image. The pastiche of postmodern art is a result of the amalgamation of experience and the attempt at expression of human emotion, something a program should never be able to replicate at the risk of devaluing the entire human experience itself. Progress for progress' sake, especially if it endangers human expression, is something to be wary of; as Lyotard warned in his essay *Defining the Postmodern*, "The idea of progress was rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole [...] this development, taking place by an autonomous force, doesn't respond to a demand coming from human needs" (Lyotard 9). If we as humans are the sum of our beliefs, the experiences we have had, and the desires we long to depict, our fight is that of reclaiming our humanity from an entity that has no right to its ownership. However, postmodernism in and of itself is an art dedicated to innovation, improvisation, and adaptation. Its value as an artistic and literary form lies in its ability to include, mutate, and evolve precisely to tell the continuing story of humanity. In order for the soul of human-made art to survive, it must learn not to attempt to

compete with or fear the advent of new technologies that can rival the human hand, but to work to preserve art while utilizing new tools that help us do so. We are flawed in ways machines cannot understand; it is in flaws and fragments that the beauty of what we create lies. Artists must both embrace technology and impugn technology. We must make art that is disjointed. We must make art that is ugly. We must make art that makes no sense. We must make art that is not art. To save our story, we must remember our humanity.

Fig. 1

Regina José Galindo, *Earth*, 2013, as shown in Diana Taylor's *¡Presente!*, 2020.



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