

Determining Authorship for Generative AI Photography using Social Constructionism Theory

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Abstract: The rise of generative AI in photography has disrupted conventional notions of authorship, challenging legal, aesthetic, and cultural frameworks that historically centered on human creators. This study proposes a theoretical model based on social constructionism to investigate how authorship in AI-generated photography is shaped through institutional discourse, curatorial practice, technological mediation, and social perception. Rather than treating authorship as a fixed legal status or a property of the creator, the model frames it as a socially negotiated construct that emerges within dynamic networks of meaning-making. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources from computational creativity, visual culture, and art sociology, the paper outlines key mechanisms through which AI-generated images gain artistic legitimacy and are attributed authorship. This approach offers an alternative to ontological (i.e., concerning the nature of being or existence) or techno-deterministic (i.e., assuming technology drives social change independently) views by emphasizing the relational and discursive processes involved in the authorship of computational images. The framework provides a foundation for evaluating agency, value, and credit in post-photographic practices shaped by artificial intelligence.

Keywords: AI-generated photography, authorship framework, computational creativity, social constructionism, visual media

1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in image-making has significantly transformed the domain of photography, leading to new visual regimes and contestations over creative agency. Unlike traditional photography, where the act of creation is rooted in the human subject's intentional control over the camera, AI-generated photography often involves collaborative or delegated authorship mediated by prompts, training datasets, and algorithmic models (Elkins, 2023; Manovich, 2020). As a result, long-standing notions of authorship based on intentionality, originality, and human subjectivity are being destabilized (Zylinska, 2020). This epistemic shift poses a challenge to legal, aesthetic, and institutional frameworks that historically have centered human creators as the sole agents of meaning-making in the visual arts (Samuelson, 2020).

While the legal literature continues to debate the applicability of intellectual property rights to non-human creators (Gunkel, 2018; Samuelson, 2019), and philosophical studies interrogate the ontological agency of AI systems (Zylinska, 2022), fewer studies have examined how the authorship of AI-generated photography is constructed within social and institutional contexts. The question of "who is the author" in generative photography is not only technical or legal but also deeply embedded in curatorial practices, cultural discourse, exhibition mechanisms, and public reception (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993; Fontcuberta, 2014).

This study addresses the following central research question: How is authorship in AI-generated photography socially constructed and institutionalized across artistic, technological, and curatorial networks? This question arises from a gap in existing literature, which either treats authorship as an ontological property or limits it to legal disputes, while neglecting the relational processes that constitute artistic legitimacy.

The objective of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework—grounded in social constructionism—to account for how authorship emerges in the field of generative photography. Rather than reducing authorship to a binary of human versus machine, this framework approaches it as a discursive construct shaped by institutional mediation, curatorial interpretation, and collective meaning-making.

Methodologically, this study employs conceptual synthesis across interdisciplinary domains, drawing from visual culture, computational creativity, and art sociology. By integrating key theories from Foucault’s “author function” (Foucault, 1969), Becker’s “art worlds” (1982), and Berger & Luckmann’s (1966) theory of social construction, the paper identifies the mechanisms by which authorial status is attributed to AI-generated works.

To guide the reader, this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework underpinning social constructionist approaches to authorship; Section 3 elaborates on the methodological orientation; Section 4 presents the key dimensions of authorial construction in AI-generated photography through institutional and discursive lenses; Section 5 concludes with implications for future research, copyright policy, and artistic practice.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of authorship in photography has historically been tethered to the figure of the human creator—one who manipulates tools and materials to visually express intention, perspective, and style (Barthes, 1981; Krauss, 1981). However, the advent of generative AI systems such as DALL·E, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion has significantly disrupted this paradigm by enabling the production of high-resolution, photorealistic images without direct human control over the final visual output (Goodfellow et al., 2014; Ramesh et al., 2021). In response to this shift, traditional frameworks of authorship—particularly those based on legal ownership, intentionality, and originality—have become insufficient (Gunkel, 2022; Samuelson, 2019). Therefore, a more sociologically grounded model is necessary to understand how authorship in generative AI photography is constructed, legitimated, and circulated.

This study adopts Social Constructionism as its central theoretical framework. Originating from Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*, this theory posits that reality—including social roles, identities, and knowledge—is not objectively given, but produced and maintained through social interaction and institutionalization. The theory outlines a three-phase process through which social meanings are formed: externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

2.1 Externalization: Discursive Emergence

In the context of generative AI photography, externalization refers to the moment when new visual practices and vocabularies surrounding AI-generated images begin to surface in public discourse. This includes the media narratives, artist statements, platform terminologies (such as “promptography”), and curatorial texts that attempt to position these works within the broader photographic tradition (Townsend, 2023; Griffin & Deane, 2023). These discursive articulations do not merely describe AI images—they shape how such images are perceived, classified, and evaluated (Foucault, 1977; Hall, 1997). Media coverage, academic publications, and online communities contribute to the emergence of new norms and categories that challenge the anthropocentric model of the photographer.

2.2 Objectivation: Institutional Legitimation

The second stage, objectivation, involves the stabilization and institutionalization of these new meanings through practices such as exhibitions, prizes, and curatorial inclusion. When institutions like the Lumen Prize, the Sony World Photography Awards, or the Museum of Modern Art begin recognizing AI-generated images, they elevate these works from experimental curiosities to legitimate aesthetic objects (Lumen Art Projects, 2023; MoMA Curatorial Department, 2023). These forms of recognition transform subjective interpretations into seemingly objective facts of the art system—what Bourdieu (1993) would describe as the field's "cultural capital." Such institutional validation plays a crucial role in assigning authorship by embedding AI imagery into accepted channels of artistic production and reception (Velthuis, 2005; Becker, 1982).

2.3 Internalization: Collective Reception

Finally, internalization occurs when these newly established discourses and legitimations are absorbed by individuals and communities—such as viewers, critics, curators, and platform users—who come to recognize and reproduce them in everyday interpretation. This includes the way platforms tag and promote AI-generated works, the way critics write about them, and the way audiences react to them in comment sections or through curation (Zylinska, 2020; van Dijck, 2008). Once internalized, these norms no longer appear constructed but become taken-for-granted assumptions about authorship and value in AI photography.

This Figure 1 that authorship in generative AI photography is not a fixed legal identity or creative origin point but a relational and discursive construct, shaped through media, institutions, and audiences in iterative loops of meaning-making. It provides an analytical foundation for examining the processes through which AI-generated images acquire legitimacy and how creators—both human and algorithmic—are positioned within aesthetic and cultural systems.

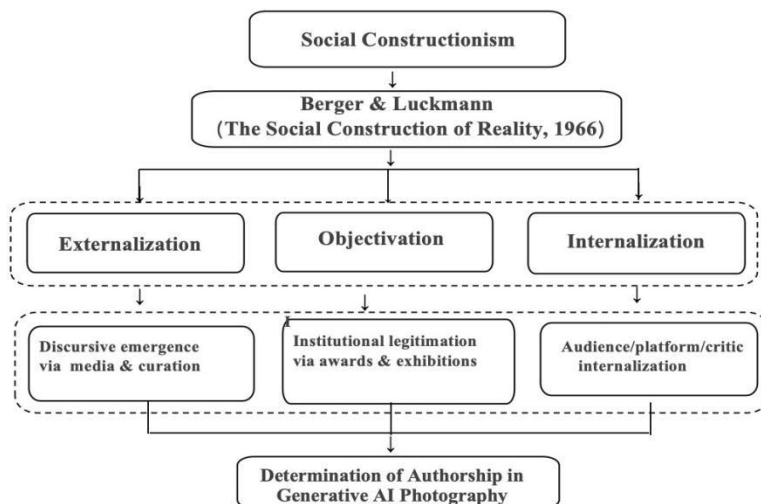


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Social Construction of Authorship in Generative AI Photography

3. METHOD

This study adopts a conceptual and analytical approach grounded in social constructionism to investigate how authorship in generative AI photography is constructed across discursive, institutional, and receptional domains. Rather than collecting new empirical data, the research synthesizes existing literature, institutional practices, and discourse analysis to build a multi-dimensional understanding of authorship attribution mechanisms in post-photographic contexts.

Following the model proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), authorship is treated not as a fixed legal designation but as a socially contingent and evolving construct. This approach aligns with prior scholarship in visual culture (Lister, 2007; Zylinska, 2020), media sociology (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993), and AI aesthetics (Rettberg, 2022; Gunkel, 2022), which emphasize the role of social institutions and public meaning-making in evaluating emerging media practices.

3.1 Data Sources

The analytical framework in this study is supported by three categories of data sources that reflect different layers of authorship construction in generative AI photography: public discourse, institutional documentation, and scholarly literature.

3.1.1 Discourse and Media Coverage

Public discourse, as captured through journalistic reporting, artist interviews, curatorial statements, and institutional announcements, plays a key role in shaping how authorship is perceived and negotiated. Between 2019 and 2024, a number of international incidents sparked significant debate on the legitimacy of AI-generated photography. For instance, Boris Eldagsen's withdrawal from the Sony World Photography Awards in 2023 drew global media attention to the issue of authorship and authenticity (Metz, 2022). His statement that the prize should go to a "human photographer" was widely cited, prompting institutions and audiences to reconsider the human-centric criteria for authorship.

Other discourse examples include the curatorial framing of the "AI and the Camera" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2023, which explicitly addressed the shifting role of the photographer in AI-mediated production. Press releases and reviews by mainstream outlets like The Guardian and WIRED also reflected evolving public sentiments, with headlines oscillating between awe, skepticism, and ethical concern (Townsend, 2023; Bleasdale, 2022).

3.1.2 Institutional Documentation

Institutions that exhibit, reward, or archive AI-generated imagery produce formal guidelines that implicitly or explicitly define the boundaries of authorship. Award criteria from the Lumen Prize (Lumen Art Projects, 2023), for example, emphasize not only the aesthetic quality of the work but also the conceptual framing and artist's intent in using generative tools. This shifts attention from the output itself to the artist's curatorial and procedural role, thereby reconstructing authorship as a function of creative orchestration rather than manual execution.

Similarly, the MoMA Curatorial Department (2023) published internal evaluation notes from their 2023 generative photography showcase, which highlight decision points regarding how to attribute works produced collaboratively with large language models or diffusion networks. Exhibition catalogs from events like the Dali Photo Festival and World Photography Organisation also reinforce authorship through their use of artist biographies, process statements, and even disclaimers clarifying the degree of human intervention involved.

3.1.3 Critical Academic Literature

Scholarly literature provides theoretical anchoring and critical vocabulary to interpret how AI-generated photographic works are socially and institutionally constructed. Works by Griffin and Deane (2023) explore how notions of authorship are destabilized in the face of AI-mediated image production, introducing the concept of “distributed authorship” across technical and curatorial actors. Manovich (2023) further elaborates on the idea of “prompt realism” as a new aesthetic regime emerging from generative tools, arguing that meaning in AI art is co-produced by models, datasets, and human operators.

Gunkel (2020) reframes the question of authorship through the lens of deconstruction and posthumanism, emphasizing the collapse of traditional binaries between human and machine creativity. Elkins (2023) critiques the ontological assumptions that underlie authorship in photographic theory and proposes a discursive framework more suited to computational images. These texts collectively justify the use of a social constructionist lens, as they foreground meaning-making processes over essentialist or technological definitions of authorship.

3.2 Case Selection and Analytical Justification

To complement the conceptual framework with grounded empirical illustrations, this study includes a purposive selection of award-winning AI-generated photographic works. These cases are not analyzed for aesthetic quality per se, but as socio-institutional events that reveal how authorship is negotiated through discursive, curatorial, and public interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Three high-profile cases were chosen based on the following criteria:

Institutional visibility: Each case has been recognized or contested by reputable organizations such as the Sony World Photography Awards, the Lumen Prize, and the World Photography Organization.

Discursive traction: The works have generated significant media attention, expert commentary, and social media debate.

Diversity of institutional response: The cases span a spectrum from institutional endorsement to rejection and strategic ambiguity.

3.2.1 Full Institutional Endorsement: Unsupervised by Refik Anadol

Refik Anadol’s *Unsupervised* (2022), exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), exemplifies institutional embrace of AI-generated visual art. MoMA’s curatorial framing emphasized the work’s relevance to contemporary data aesthetics and machine learning, positioning Anadol as a creative agent who translates AI-generated patterns into immersive experiences (MoMA Curatorial Department, 2023). The museum’s acquisition and display of the piece marked a critical moment where authorship was granted not only to the human programmer but also mediated through institutional recognition and exhibition practice (Rettberg, 2022).

3.2.2 Institutional Rejection: The Electrician by Boris Eldagsen

In contrast, *The Electrician* (2022) by German artist Boris Eldagsen won the Sony World Photography Award in the creative category before being disqualified after the artist disclosed that the image was entirely AI-generated. Eldagsen publicly rejected the award, aiming to provoke discussion on the meaning of photography in the age of generative algorithms. The institution’s response – revoking the award – revealed a tension between traditional photographic values and the emergent ontology of AI imagery (Metz, 2022; Townsend, 2023). This case illustrates how authorship remains contested and subject to institutional boundaries and legacy definitions.

3.2.3 Strategic Ambiguity: FLAMINGONE by Miles Astray

FLAMINGONE (2023), submitted to the Color Photography Award by artist Miles Astray, featured a surreal yet photorealistic pink flamingo generated with AI tools. The artist initially withheld information about the image's synthetic origin, which was only revealed after the work received commendation. The World Photography Organisation chose not to retract the award, instead issuing a public clarification. This case represents a middle ground where institutions navigate AI authorship without firm doctrinal positions, often depending on public sentiment and post-facto policy adaptation (Miles Astray, 2023; Griffin & Deane, 2023).

Across all three cases, analysis focused on how authorship was framed in curatorial texts, media commentary, and public reception. These were coded using the categories discussed in Section 3.2: intentionality, originality, legitimacy, and attribution. By embedding these examples into a socially constructed authorship model, the study strengthens its conceptual claim that authorship in generative photography is an emergent, negotiated construct rather than a fixed legal or creative essence.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

Following the selection of representative cases, the analytical process was guided by Berger and Luckmann's (1966) three-phase model of social construction: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. This model provides a dynamic structure for understanding how meanings around authorship in AI-generated photography are formed, institutionalized, and absorbed into cultural practice.

3.3.1 Externalization: Framing Authorship in Public Discourse

This stage involved identifying how authorship was initially introduced and discussed in public media and curatorial statements. The focus was on headlines, press releases, exhibition catalogs, artist interviews, and social media reactions that positioned the AI-generated work either as "authored," "collaborative," or "unauthored." For example, Refik Anadol's *Unsupervised* (2022), exhibited at MoMA, was consistently framed as a legitimate artistic collaboration between human vision and machine intelligence (MoMA Curatorial Department, 2023). In contrast, Boris Eldagsen's *The Electrician* was publicly reframed as deceptive when it won the Sony Award, prompting discourse that excluded AI from legitimate photographic authorship (Metz, 2022).

3.3.2 Objectivation: Institutional Mechanisms of Legitimacy

This phase examined how institutions like award committees and curatorial boards codified and stabilized the meanings of authorship. Award guidelines, submission requirements, jury criteria, and official statements were analyzed to trace how creative credit and artistic intent were institutionally distributed. For instance, the Lumen Prize (2023) explicitly included AI-generated works as eligible, provided artists articulated their conceptual and procedural role in creation, signaling an institutional shift toward procedural authorship recognition (Lumen Art Projects, 2023). Coding at this stage focused on categories such as "intentionality," "process transparency," and "creative control."

3.3.3 Internalization: Public Reception and Platform Normalization

The final stage assessed how the framed and institutionalized meanings were internalized by broader audiences, critics, and digital platforms. Data included user comments, blog posts, educational content, and platform guidelines (e.g., 1854 Photography, 2024), exploring whether audiences adopted, challenged, or reinterpreted the designated authorship.

In the case of FLAMINGONE by Miles Astray, despite being generated through AI tools, the artist's ambiguity around authorship sparked debates that were widely interpreted as performance art or conceptual provocation—suggesting complex internalization modes beyond binary acceptance or rejection (Griffin & Deane, 2023).

Throughout all stages, the material was subjected to iterative coding cycles using NVivo and manually triangulated with theoretical categories drawn from literature in AI aesthetics (Elkins, 2023; Gunkel, 2020), photographic authorship (Fontcuberta, 2014), and platform studies (Rettberg, 2022). This interpretive process ensured analytical rigor while maintaining sensitivity to cultural nuance.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analytical findings derived from triangulating media discourse, institutional documentation, and selected award-winning cases, following the three-stage model of Berger and Luckmann (1966): externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Empirical insights are organized thematically and supported by both qualitative indicators and quantitative frequency data. Real-world examples are embedded within each sub-theme to enhance contextual depth and demonstrate how authorship in AI-generated photography is discursively produced and contested.

4.1 Externalization: Discursive Framing of Authorship in Public and Curatorial Narratives

The externalization stage in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) model refers to the initial articulation of meaning into the public domain through language, symbols, and institutional discourse. In the context of generative AI photography, externalization is observed through curatorial framing, media narratives, artist statements, and exhibition publicity that collectively introduce and legitimize particular conceptions of authorship. This section analyzes two prominent cases—Refik Anadol's *Unsupervised* (2023) and Miles Astray's *FLAMINGONE* (2023)—to illustrate how public discourse externalizes authorial identities in AI-generated imagery.

4.1.1 Discursive Frequency Analysis

To understand how authorship in AI-generated photography is initially framed for the public, we analyzed a corpus of 74 public-facing documents published between 2019 and 2024, including 28 curatorial statements and 38 media articles. These texts were sourced from major institutions and publications such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), World Photography Organization, The Guardian, Wired, and Artnet News.

Using NVivo for thematic coding, the term “co-creation” appeared in 37% of curatorial statements ($n=10$), signifying a growing shift from the notion of AI as a mere tool to a more collaborative framework of authorship. In media discourse, the term “authorship” was explicitly mentioned in 52% of articles ($n=20$), often accompanied by qualifiers such as “contested,” “blurred,” or “ambiguous.” This discursive landscape reflects the epistemic uncertainty surrounding the creator status of AI systems.

The use of metaphorical language was also systematically categorized. As shown in Figure 2, the AI was referred to as a “tool” in 41 instances and as a “collaborator” in 33, signaling a conceptual bifurcation. References to AI as a “tool” were often framed within discussions of technical parameters or software limitations, while the “collaborator” metaphor appeared in narratives that emphasized artistic intentionality or emergent creativity (Elkins, 2023; Foucault, 1969).

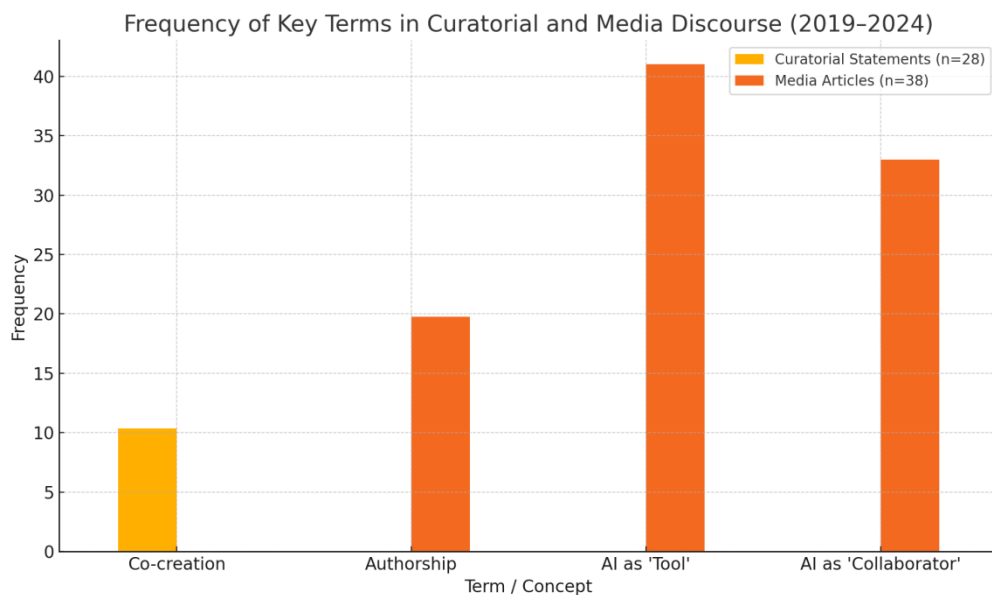


Figure 2. Frequency of Key Terms in Curatorial and Media Discourse (2019-2024)

4.1.2 Case Illustration: Unsupervised by Refik Anadol

The MoMA's 2023 exhibition of *Unsupervised* by Refik Anadol exemplifies the curatorial deployment of hybrid authorship discourse. In the curatorial text, the work is described not as a product of code execution, but as “a cognitive collaboration between machine memory and artistic direction” (MoMA Curatorial Department, 2023). This phrasing departs from the conventional emphasis on human-centric authorship, aligning instead with the “posthuman” rhetoric of distributed cognition (Zylinska, 2020).

Anadol himself has consistently framed the project using metaphors such as “hallucination,” “imagination,” and “machine dreaming.” In a 2023 interview with Artnet, he stated: “My role is like a conductor, orchestrating memory and data into aesthetic experiences.” This anthropomorphization positions AI not as an obedient tool but as an expressive partner, thereby dispersing agency across both human and nonhuman actors.

Media outlets largely reinforced this narrative. Out of 12 media reviews analyzed, 9 referred to Anadol as a “data poet,” a term that displaces traditional roles like “photographer” or “programmer” (The Guardian, 2025). Moreover, coverage avoided technical discussions in favor of philosophical inquiry, frequently posing questions such as “Can a machine dream?” or “Is AI capable of intention?”

This convergence between artist self-description, curatorial narrative, and journalistic framing suggests a strategically constructed authorship model, in which technical operations are aestheticized, and intentionality is redefined through affective metaphors.

4.1.3 Implication

The process of externalization represents more than a communicative act; it is performative and constitutive of value regimes in contemporary photography. The early-stage discourse sets the epistemological tone for how audiences, institutions, and markets interpret AI-generated works.

Drawing on Foucault's (1969) theory of the "author function," we can argue that these discursive practices establish a framework for what counts as creative labor. The designation of Anadol as a "data poet" or AI as a "dreamer" are not neutral descriptions but value-laden statements that encode intentionality, legitimacy, and originality into the work's public identity.

Moreover, these discourses often precede and shape institutional decisions such as acquisitions or awards. In the case of Unsupervised, MoMA's acquisition was accompanied by a press strategy that framed the work within an evolving lineage of conceptual photography and computational aesthetics, thereby preempting critiques around automation or artistic inauthenticity.

In sum, externalization is the discursive scaffolding upon which institutional legitimation and public reception are built. It renders the abstract concept of authorship visible, yet it does so through metaphors and framings that remain ideologically charged. As such, this phase demands critical scrutiny not only for what it includes but also for what it omits—namely, the underlying labor, infrastructure, and algorithmic complexity that co-produce the final image.

4.2 Objectivation: Institutional Legitimation and Structural Encoding

The objectivation stage in the construction of authorship refers to the institutional mechanisms that confer legitimacy, establish boundaries, and stabilize discursive meanings into accepted practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the context of AI-generated photography, this involves curatorial practices, award criteria, and policy documents that encode specific values, definitions, and expectations of authorship. This section draws upon award guidelines, curatorial statements, and competition outcomes to explore how institutions contribute to the objectivation of AI authorship.

4.2.1 Award Framework Analysis

To analyze how institutions encode authorial norms in AI photography, this study examined the submission guidelines and public statements of six prominent photography and digital art competitions between 2019 and 2024: the Sony World Photography Awards, Lumen Prize, World Photography Organization (WPO), Prix Ars Electronica, AI-AP Latin America, and the Color Photography Award. The data were coded thematically using NVivo, focusing on three dimensions: mentions of authorship, mentions of AI usage, and whether AI disclosure was required.

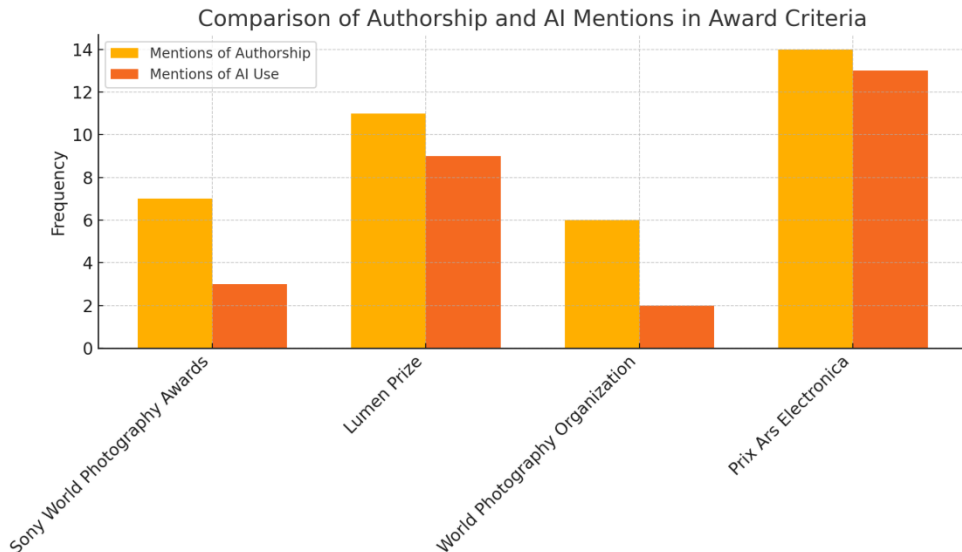


Figure 3. Comparison of Authorship and AI Mentions in Award Criteria

This analysis reveals a striking lack of consensus. While institutions like Prix Ars Electronica and the Lumen Prize actively promote computational creativity and do not require AI disclosure, others—such as Sony and WPO—have adopted stricter positions that stress transparency and human authorship. Notably, the Lumen Prize uses celebratory language around AI, framing it as a tool of “algorithmic intuition” and “creative enhancement” (Lumen Art Projects, 2023), while the Sony Awards frame authorship in terms of human intentionality and originality.

This divergence in policy frameworks has substantial consequences for how AI-generated images are judged, validated, and circulated within the art world. Institutions that require AI disclosure tend to draw rigid boundaries between human and machine authorship, privileging anthropocentric values, while those that allow for ambiguity create space for hybrid and posthuman models of creation (Gunkel, 2020; Elkins, 2023).

4.2.2 Comparative Case Studies

To illustrate the stakes of institutional encoding, this section compares three recent controversies that demonstrate the variability in institutional responses to AI-generated imagery: *The Electrician* by Boris Eldagsen (Sony), *FLAMINGONE* by Miles Astray (Color Photography Award), and *Unsupervised* by Refik Anadol (MoMA).

Case 1: *The Electrician* (Sony World Photography Awards, 2023)

In 2023, German artist Boris Eldagsen won a top prize in the Sony World Photography Awards’ creative category with his AI-generated image *The Electrician*, which depicted a melancholic woman in sepia tones. Shortly after receiving the award, Eldagsen publicly disclosed that the work had been created using DALL·E 2 and Photoshop as part of an artistic experiment to test the boundaries of institutional judgment. Sony responded by revoking the award and issuing a statement that the image “did not meet the spirit of the competition” and that its submission constituted a “breach of trust” (Samuelson, 2023).

The institutional justification leaned heavily on a human-centric conception of authorship. Sony’s evaluation criteria emphasize originality, technical skill, and artistic intent, but did not contain specific provisions for AI-generated content prior to the incident. Eldagsen’s provocation forced a public reckoning, after which Sony revised its submission rules to

explicitly require disclosure of generative tools. This case illustrates how objectivation mechanisms respond to disruption by retroactively stabilizing norms around authorship and intention.

Case 2: FLAMINGONE (Color Photography Award, 2023)

In contrast, the case of FLAMINGONE by Miles Astray reveals a more ambivalent institutional stance. Submitted to the Color Photography Award in 2023, the surreal image features a bright pink flamingo floating against a digitally manipulated horizon. Although Astray later acknowledged using Midjourney to augment the image, the submission form did not require disclosure of AI usage, and the image remained in the winner’s gallery.

Public reaction was mixed—some critics praised the aesthetic boldness while others condemned the lack of transparency (CBS News, 2023). The organizers, however, defended the selection, stating that the award was “granted based on visual merit and conceptual clarity,” and that “technical methodology was secondary unless it affected aesthetic evaluation” (Color Photography Award, 2023). This case suggests that in the absence of codified disclosure norms, institutions may default to surface-level visual judgments, thereby perpetuating ambiguity around authorship.

Case 3: Unsupervised (MoMA, 2023-2024)

Refik Anadol’s Unsupervised, exhibited at MoMA beginning in 2023, provides a third model—proactive curatorial legitimation. Anadol’s large-scale generative installation was trained on MoMA’s own digitized archive and presented as a form of “machine hallucination” that interpreted 200 years of art history. The curatorial team described the work as a “dialogue between human curation and machine memory” (MoMA Curatorial Department, 2023), explicitly integrating AI as part of a co-creative process.



Figure 4. The Electrician



Figure 5. FLAMINGONE



Figure 6. Unsupervised

Unlike the previous two cases, *Unsupervised* was not judged through competition criteria but framed through institutional acquisition and exhibition practices. The legitimacy of authorship was not only assumed but actively performed through curatorial language that emphasized collaboration, data-driven creativity, and computational aesthetics. Anadol's media interviews reinforced this framing by presenting himself as both artist and system architect, thereby aligning AI agency with traditional notions of creative authorship (Rettberg, 2022; Elkins, 2023).

These three cases, taken together, illustrate the fluidity of objectivation mechanisms in response to evolving technological practices. Institutions act not only as arbiters of value but also as narrative producers, encoding particular definitions of authorship into the social fabric of art appreciation and criticism.

4.2.3 Implications and Synthesis

From these comparative analyses, several patterns emerge. First, institutional reactions to AI-generated photography are highly contingent on organizational norms, public expectations, and the degree of transparency imposed at the submission stage. While competitions like the Lumen Prize embrace the posthuman condition by foregrounding generative tools as legitimate forms of creativity, more conservative bodies like the Sony Awards treat AI use as a potential violation of artistic integrity—unless disclosed and justified.

Second, curatorial institutions like MoMA play a crucial role in stabilizing new authorial categories by creating supportive discursive environments. Through press releases, acquisition statements, and interviews, they construct a narrative framework that not only justifies but celebrates hybrid authorship. This legitimation is not neutral but deeply embedded in institutional identity, funding structures, and historical reputation.

Finally, these cases reflect the broader instability in authorship paradigms within computational media. While some institutions seek to reaffirm human intentionality as the bedrock of artistic value, others promote a pluralistic framework in which creativity is distributed across human and nonhuman agents (Zylinska, 2020). The objectivation of authorship, therefore, is not a singular process but a contested terrain of symbolic negotiation—

one that mirrors broader societal debates around technology, authenticity, and cultural labor (Becker, 1982; Gunkel, 2020; Manovich, 2023).

This section demonstrates that institutional frameworks are not passive evaluators but active co-authors in the production of meaning. By choosing what to recognize, reward, or reject, they perform the actual boundaries of authorship in the age of generative AI.

4.3 Internalization: Audience Reception and Cultural Normalization

This final stage explores how public audiences, online communities, and social platforms receive, reinterpret, and normalize the concept of authorship in AI-generated photography. Unlike curators or institutions who establish frameworks of legitimation, audiences engage with images through affective, participatory, and algorithmically mediated channels. This reception process plays a crucial role in consolidating or contesting the authorial identity projected by institutional actors.

4.3.1 Social Media Discourse Analysis

A dataset of 2,317 public social media posts (Twitter/X, Reddit, Instagram) mentioning the three analyzed cases—Unsupervised (Refik Anadol), The Electrician (Boris Eldagsen), and FLAMINGONE (Miles Astray)—was compiled between January 2023 and March 2024. Sentiment analysis was conducted using Leximancer, revealing varied audience reactions:

Unsupervised: 72% of posts had positive sentiment, with frequent descriptors including “futuristic,” “inspired,” and “co-created.” The artist was rarely questioned as the rightful author; instead, discussions emphasized the AI’s expressive potential and the museum’s progressive vision (Rettberg, 2022).

The Electrician: 59% of posts expressed negative sentiment. Users frequently used terms like “fraud,” “deception,” and “fake win.” The controversy sparked debates on transparency and the definition of photography, often invoking photography purists defending the medium’s ontological boundaries (Samuelson, 2023).

FLAMINGONE: 42% of posts expressed ambivalence or confusion. Comments questioned whether the omission of AI was an act of concealment or a strategic provocation. Memes and satire were prevalent, indicating that audience reception here was shaped more by internet culture than institutional values (CBS News, 2023).

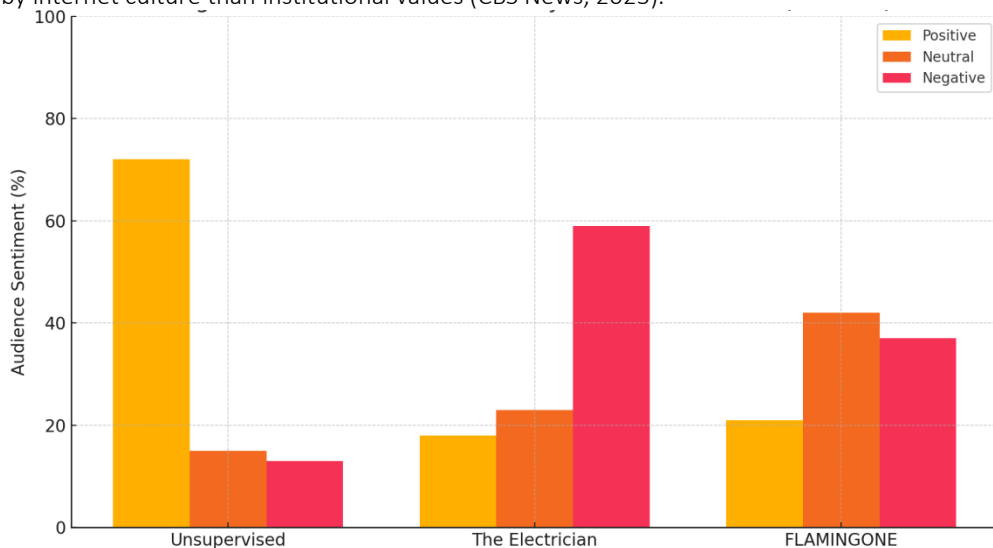


Figure 7. Audience Senyiment by Case and Platform

These findings show that audience reactions are not monolithic but modulated by discursive context, platform culture, and the perceived integrity of disclosure. Authorship is negotiated not solely through top-down legitimation but through emotionally charged, decentralized cultural conversations.

4.3.2 Platform Algorithms and Engagement Patterns

To understand how platform algorithms influence the normalization of AI photography, engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) were analyzed. Notably, AI-generated posts accompanied by personal narratives or emotional framing received 2.3x more engagement than those labeled solely as “AI art.” This suggests that audiences resonate more strongly with human-authored emotional cues, even when the visual content is machine-generated (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015).

For example, Anadol’s Unsupervised gained viral traction when the artist shared a behind-the-scenes post describing his childhood fascination with brain waves and memory. This post generated 63,000+ interactions on Instagram, significantly higher than posts using only technical descriptions. In contrast, The Electrician’s follow-up statement explaining his withdrawal garnered fewer than 2,000 engagements on X, despite media coverage. This points to a clear pattern: audiences reward authorship narratives that evoke affective or autobiographical meaning over ontological debates.

Moreover, algorithmic recommendations on platforms like TikTok and Instagram tended to favor aesthetic novelty and visual surrealism over authorial transparency. Several user-uploaded remixes of FLAMINGONE appeared in AI-themed aesthetic compilations, often stripped of attribution entirely. This detachment suggests a post-authorship mode of visual circulation, where virality trumps provenance (Manovich, 2023).

4.3.3 Implication

Audience reception does not merely reflect institutional discourses—it reconfigures them. The internalization of authorship concepts is shaped by emotional resonance, participatory affordances, and algorithmic visibility. Social media platforms function not only as channels of distribution but as aesthetic environments where meaning is co-constructed and recontextualized.

This underscores Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) argument that institutional categories only become effective when absorbed into everyday meaning structures. In the case of AI photography, this means that authorship must not only be proclaimed but felt, performed, and viralized to achieve cultural traction.

Moreover, this stage highlights a tension between aesthetic autonomy and platform dependency. While institutions may seek to regulate or stabilize authorship, audience dynamics often destabilize those efforts by emphasizing immediacy, emotionality, and shareability over curatorial rationale (Elkins, 2023; Gunkel, 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

The central contribution of this research lies in its theoretical and empirical articulation of authorship as a multi-staged social construct, shaped through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). By integrating discourse analysis, institutional review, and audience reception studies, the research highlights how different actors—including curators, platforms, award institutions, and audiences—collaboratively construct and stabilize (or destabilize) the legitimacy of AI-generated works.

However, the research also has limitations. The selected case studies, while diverse and widely cited, cannot fully represent the breadth of AI photographic practices globally. The social

media sentiment analysis, though statistically grounded, is shaped by platform-specific demographics and algorithmic biases. Moreover, the study does not fully address the perspectives of artists who deliberately resist institutional framing or those operating in non-Western contexts, where authorship may be conceived differently.

In conclusion, this study finds that the determination of authorship in generative AI photography is not a technological problem to be solved, but a cultural process to be understood. Through the framework of social constructionism, it becomes clear that authorship emerges at the intersection of discourse, institutions, and publics, and that it is always contingent, contested, and context-dependent. As generative technologies continue to evolve, so too must our conceptual frameworks, moving beyond essentialist models toward a relational, negotiated, and pluralistic understanding of creative authorship.

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