

The World Through AI: Exploring Latent Space

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What better venue than Jeu de Paume in Paris for an exhibition on artificial intelligence? Established in 2004 from the merging of the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, the Centre National de la Photographie, and Patrimoine Photographique, the museum is dedicated to exhibiting and promoting all forms of mechanical and electronic imagery from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With this commitment, Jeu de Paume serves as the ideal vessel to circumnavigate the world through AI, specifically through the perspectives of contemporary artists and scholars who address both its theoretical and practical challenges. The exhibition ‘The World Through AI. Exploring Latent Space’ (11 April – 21 September 2025), curated by Antonio Somaini with Ada Ackerman, Alexandre Gefen, and Pia Viewing as associate curators, is an exploration into how artificial intelligence reshapes our engagement with contemporary audiovisual culture. By drawing on artworks dating from 2016 to 2025, the exhibition, along with the catalogue – which serves not only as documentation but as an integral part of it, aiming to uncover an alternative mode of displaying meanings – confronts the predicament of AI, addressing diverse aspects of this thought-provoking issue, including infrastructural, ethical, political, and environmental concerns.



Fig. 1: Exhibition entrance. © Jeu de Paume. Photo: Antoine Quittet.

The feeling that accompanies the visitor is that of the so-called ‘uncanny valley’ – namely the unease arising from close encounters with human-like technologies, which, while fascinating, also warn us of AI’s constitutive deceitfulness;[1] or, quoting Kate Crawford, of its being ‘neither artificial nor intelligent’, but a compound of ‘technical and social practices, institutions and infrastructures, politics and culture’.[2] The display extends across four structured thematic sections distributed over two floors and a dozen rooms: Cartographies of AI: Matter, Space, and Time; Detecting, Recognizing,

Classifying: Analytic AI; Latent Spaces and Possible Images: Generative AI; Generative Writings. The exhibition also includes sub-sections (Memories, Hallucinations; Speculative Archives, Counterfactual Histories; Morphogenesis; Words and Images) and several time capsules (Automated Computing, Production, and Communication; Automaton; Machine Vision; Face and Emotion Recognition; Generative Art; Ruins, Imaginary, and Archaeology; Generative Literature and Chatbots), each offering valuable insights into the archaeology and proto-history of AI. In particular, the main merit of the time capsules is to illustrate that AI is by no means a novelty in media and technology developments; rather, it encompasses a long and rich tradition of automatons, machine vision devices, calculators, generative literature, and chatbots, offering a comprehensive overview of AI's cultural and technological development.



Fig. 2: Exhibition view. © Jeu de Paume. Photo: Antoine Quittet.

Both the thematic sections and the time capsules are the result of an ambitious attempt to provide a quasi-encyclopaedic exploration of the complex encounter between art and AI. However, the exhibition's broad scope can sometimes undermine its cohesion, leading to the inclusion of some works that appear playful and exploratory but remain caught within the pitfalls of a technophilic perspective that the curators aimed to challenge.[3] This means that, although visitors will find many thought-provoking pieces, a few elements may feel less relevant or engaging. The exhibition opens by highlighting the most worrying aspect of AI: its nature as an extractive industry with an unprecedented carbon footprint. The show conveys the existence of a critical cartography from both geographical and historical perspectives. In particular, Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler's *Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Technology and Power, 1500-2025* is not merely a striking map depicting a visual genealogy of AI, but a theoretical tool that unpacks its means by tracing how technical and social structures have co-evolved over five centuries. This infographic-like counter-atlas, monumental in scale and densely layered with stylised pictures and descriptions, spans two large walls uncovering the 'shifting tectonics'[4] and the *longue durée* of 'power relations and material economies' underpinning AI and other forms of 'algorithmic governance'.[5] It serves as an alternative to colonial mapping traditions, intertwining histories of communication and computation –

encompassing devices, infrastructures, data organisation – with those of classification and control – including time, education, emotion and intelligence, prisons, borders, and surveillance.



Fig. 3: Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, *Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Technology and Power, 1500-2025* (2025). © Jeu de Paume. Photo: Antoine Quittet.

After this striking entrée, the exhibition unfolds by addressing the two faces of AI: analytic and generative AI. The second section – Detecting, Recognizing, Classifying: Analytic AI – concentrates on specific methods, algorithms, and models designed for sorting and categorising information rather than creating new data. The artworks within this section range from Christian Marclay's *The Organ* (2018), which draws on Snapchat's vast archive to compose an audiovisual fresco of contemporary social media behaviours, to more critical-oriented works addressing how systemic biases embedded in AI training data reinforce normative gender roles and erase nonconforming identities, including Trevor Paglen's artificially-generated portraits and Adam Harvey's *Exposing.ai* (2021). Paglen shows the dehumanising effects of machine vision and facial recognition systems that transform images of the revolutionary thinkers Fanon (2017) and De Beauvoir (2019) into ghostly representations. Similarly, Paglen employs an interactive device in which visitors are invited to present themselves to a camera, only to have their images paired with adjectives and descriptions that are frequently misleading, negative, or insulting. Within this segment lies the most powerful and insightful part of the entire exhibition, which exposes the reliance of AI models and their training sets on outsourced micro-labour carried out by underpaid, precarious clickworkers around the world, predominantly from the Global South. Unable to unionise, they are 'ghost workers' who, quoting Matteo Pasquinelli, 'are removed from sight to let the show of machine autonomy go on'.^[6] This is the case with works by Agnieszka Kurant (*Aggregated Ghosts*, 2020), Meta Office (*Behind the Screens of Amazon Mechanical Turks*, 2021-2025), as well as with Hito Steyerl (*Mechanical Kurd*, 2025). In a room set up with three-dimensional, upscaled 'bounding boxes' used for 'detecting, recognizing, and classifying entities such as objects, places, bodies, gestures, faces, and emotions',^[7] Steyerl displays a videographic work. The piece takes us to a Kurdish refugee camp where many Kurds annotate images to train machine vision systems, including those used by Turkish military drones against the Kurds. The work reveals the intertwined nature of labor division,

surveillance, and warfare, and shows how ‘the inner code of AI is constituted not by imitating biological intelligence but by the intelligence of labor and social relations’.[8]



Fig. 4: Hito Steyerl, Mechanical Kurd (2025). © Jeu de Paume. Photo: Antoine Quittet.

The section called Latent Spaces and Possible Images: Generative AI explores models capable of generating new data objects – such as words, sounds, still and moving images – from vast amounts of training data. This field is currently undergoing many transformations since the release of latent diffusion models like Stable Diffusion, DALL-E, and Midjourney in 2022, which provide users more sophisticated tools than GANs (Generative Adversarial Networks) and their variants introduced since 2024. The theory of latent space, foundational in machine learning and AI, not only serves as the exhibition’s conceptual tool but as fundamental to contemporary theories of visual culture, according to Somaini’s introductory text in the catalogue. Latent space is described as a mathematical and multidimensional space, composed of vectors and objects (billions of data points stored in the potentially unlimited internet archive) collected in huge quantities, classified, clustered, processed, and transformed. It is, therefore, not a neutral space but ‘a key component of the machine vision system [...] that is playing an increasingly important role in the ways in which images are analyzed and activated for purposes of extraction, control, and surveillance’.[9]

Operating according to specific models and algorithms, it enables the production and manipulation of media, while also encompassing output that can be misleading, wrong or nonsensical, because of flawed or biased training data, or model misinterpretations and control mechanisms. While it can be considered as a space of virtual possibility, not all outcomes are achievable, as they inevitably depend on the training data and human biases introduced by cultural contexts. Indeed, despite its wide-ranging promises, latent space is a highly controlled environment ‘full of boundaries, blind spots, “no-go” areas, as well as clichés, stereotypes, and default styles’.[10] At any rate, while the theory of latent space explains how AI fundamentally operates (or at least attempts such a difficult task, given its opaque functioning that epitomises the blackboxing effect of digital technologies), offering itself as a rational tool to approach such an intricate issue, its physical inaccessibility along with its conceptual opacity also resonates with the idea of a ‘new dark age’,[11] where understanding is increasingly challenged by the complexity of the media environment we inhabit.

As for the phenomenon of hallucinations, the exhibition also presents a range of artistic explorations of its visual implications, including striking examples of kitsch aesthetics that are at times hyperrealistic, at others distorted, and often disturbing, or eerie. For instance, consider the obscure and nightmarish visions of Trevor Paglen (*Adversarially Evolved Hallucination*, 2017); the psychedelic works of Andrea Khôra, exploring the intersections of corporate interests and mental health crises (RAPTURE, 2024); and the liquid, hazy, glitchy pieces of Inès Sieulle, who investigate privacy violations and sexual abuse by the chatbot Replika (*The Oasis I Deserve*, 2024). In other cases, artistic speculation on AI hallucinations goes one step further, challenging fundamental human categories of perception such as space and time, in a dystopic mise-en-abyme that blurs or transcends the distinction between memory and imagination (Gwenola Wago, *Chronique du soleil noir*, 2023), or by identifying a radically new faculty of the human brain, described as a ‘fourth memory’ by Grégory Chatonsky (*La Quatrième Mémoire*, 2025). Drawing on Bernard Stiegler’s theory of three types of retention, Chatonsky explores ‘the “latent spaces” in which vast zones of our cultural memory have been encoded and positioned as data points, enabling complex computational and statistical operations that generate images, texts, and voices suggesting alternative pasts and counterfactual stories’.[12]



Fig. 5: Grégory Chatonsky, *La Quatrième Mémoire* (2025). © Jeu de Paume. Photo: Antoine Quittet.

While these artistic investigations delve into the unsettling and often ambiguous visual phenomena produced by AI hallucinations, the exhibition further expands to consider how artificial intelligence can play a constructive role in reshaping contemporary epistemologies, particularly through its engagement with historical knowledge and archival critique. Here too, the most compelling works are those adopting politically-engaged approaches oriented toward an alternative or speculative archaeology, aiming to fill gaps in histories and flawed archival narratives through a direct critique of Western colonial perspectives that despoiled and continue to overshadow non-Western cultures. Speculative archaeology contrasts with the vitrification of history tailored to the Western gaze, which values its own aesthetic pleasure above the violence such embalming conceals. This is evident in the

work of Nora Al-Badri (*Babilon Vision*, 2020), who trains GANs to generate new images of Mesopotamian, Assyrian, and Neo-Sumerian artefacts from the world's largest (all Western) collections, reappropriating them as part of a techno-heritage that asserts her 'right to archaeology' as a person of Iraqi origin. In the same vein, Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Alexia Achilleos display their *Archive of Unnamed Workers* (2022) to pay tribute to 'the [forgotten] identities of all the people who made these discoveries materially possible'.[13] Nouf Aljowaysir visualises the gaps in AI training and its hallucinations when attempting to recognise non-Western subjects and, more broadly, how images from Western Asia migrate and are received (*Salaf [Ancestors]*, 2021-2025). This critical reappropriation of historical narratives intersects with a broader contemporary epistemological inquiry into AI's role in reshaping our understanding of nature and visual representation, thereby bridging the political dimension of archival critique with AI's aesthetics and mimetic capacities. This occurs within a framework that increasingly focuses on 'pre-modern non-Western societies', as highlighted by Joanna Zylinska in her catalogue essay, where she discusses the 'shadow animism of AI'[14] and emphasises the sense of unity and continuity suggested by AI aesthetics. Indeed, the part of the exhibition called Morphogenesis (a sub-section of Latent Spaces and Possible Images: Generative AI) more directly addresses AI's capacity to imitate nature, while challenging the concept of photorealism, as exemplified by Joan Fontcuberta's remediation of Karl Blossfeldt's photographs (*eHerbarium*, 2023-2024); or, in other instances, by revealing the incommensurability between the sincere perception of natural phenomena and the mannered world of AI-generated images, as seen in Jacques Perconte's depiction of Mont Blanc's melting glaciers (*Better Mont Blanc*, 2024), a digital exploration employing pixel-based and abstracted painting techniques that capture the mountain's sublime landscape while revealing its fragility due to climate change. The last sections feature works that build on the text-to-image models and vice versa (whether the text is written or spoken), engaging with the oddities and apophenia[15] found in *xaorymutants* (2024-2025) by Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst and in Julien Prévieux's *Poem, Poem, Poem, Poem* (2024-2025). Notably, in *Ekphrasis* (2025) by the Spanish collective Estampa, the process of mise-en-parole of what the machine detects unfolds in real time on screen as a composite image of words and short phrases unceasingly following one another, and based on excerpts from well-known films. This work 'invites us to reflect not only on new forms of algorithmic ekphrasis, but also on the future of montage in the age of AI', Somaini states,[16] and, one could add, on the future of film criticism and arts writing.



Fig. 6: Estampa, *Ekphrasis* (2025). © Jeu de Paume. Photo: Antoine Quittet.

Here, the exploration on the vagaries of large language models takes a step further, as they are not immune to hallucinations, unexpected randomness, and nonsensical loops of meaning (Estampa, *Repetition Penalty*, 2026). Notwithstanding these evident and well-known limitations, their capacity to ‘stimulate imagination through the effects of strangeness’[17] appears to justify their inclusion in literary collaboration. This is an approach that helps overcome the sterile and dichotomous competition between human and machinic creativity and the anthropocentric ‘myth of creativity’,[18] which ultimately represents a false dilemma.

Through all these paths, and notwithstanding the limitations arising from the presence of some decommitted approaches – which may be even more uncanny than AI itself, considering the dark times we are living in – the exhibition offers a dispositif that allows our artificial unconscious to come to the fore, revealing both its limits and conditions of possibility. Or, like a pharmakon, it functions as both a disturbing, dizzying poison and a remedy for our eventually dulled collective intelligence and clouded minds. Here, we discover that despite its ‘uncertain ontology’ AI is undeniably a cultural object that asks us to rethink our ways of being or ‘being-with’, as it is many things: [...] a technology, a system, a computational stack, an investment, a product, a story, a promise, a fantasy, a threat. AI has thus become ‘an empty signifier’. Like God, love, or money, it is a vessel for the techno-imagination of twenty-first-century humanity.[19]

Featuring diverse innovative artworks – some continuing the artist’s previous research, others produced specifically for the occasion or rarely exhibited before – this exhibition offers a timely and effective display of how the art world is responding to the aesthetic, cultural, and political challenges posed by AI. At the same time, while certain artworks provide a compelling, thought-provoking engagement with the topic, others linger on formal and less engaging aspects that lack critical depth. Will this exhibition push the boundaries of audiovisual debate on, and/or through, AI? It is hard to say, as the rapid transformations of this haunting technology often outstrip our ability to fully grasp its implications, making each exploration both urgent and inevitably provisional.

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1. Natale 2021.
2. Crawford 2021, p. 8.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ilMmyy6hIA>
4. Crawford 2021, p. 11.
5. Somaini 2025, p. 67.
6. Pasquinelli 2023, p. 8.
7. Somaini 2025, p. 85.
8. Pasquinelli 2023, p. 2.
9. Somaini 2025, p. 32.
10. Somaini 2025, p. 47.
11. Bridle 2018.
12. Somaini 2025, p. 146.
13. Ackerman 2025, p. 183.
14. Zylinska 2025, p. 194.
15. Centre Pompidou devoted an entire exhibition to this topic: Apophenia, Interruptions: Artists and Artificial Intelligence at Work (25 September 2024 – 6 January 2025), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/8XTprom>.
16. Somaini 2025, p. 232.
17. Gefen 2025, p. 257.
18. Manovich & Arielli 2024.
19. Zylinska 2025, pp. 204-205.