



SPECIAL ISSUE ON AI

Generative AI in the Context of the Arts and Humanities

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GENERATIVE AI, A SUBSET OF artificial intelligence focused on creating new content, has evolved significantly over the past few decades. From pioneer Alan Turing's idea of machines that could simulate human intelligence, to the current iterations of OpenAI's GPT-3 (2020), GPT-4 (2023) and now GPT-4 (2025), AI is demonstrating remarkable abilities. Generative AI, evolving from its early rule-based systems in the 1950s to today's sophisticated deep learning models, is impacting creative fields like visual and performing arts, literature, and the humanities. AI-generated art, particularly with models like DALL·E and Stable Diffusion, has gained traction, capable of creating breathtaking visual artworks from mere text prompts.

Discussion around AI, the arts, humanities and higher education invariably turn to questions of plagiarism, policies, guidelines, task forces and working groups. Yet the task ahead may not simply be to create frameworks for the integration of generative AI into higher learning, but the extent to which AI will require a fundamental rethinking of higher education. AI not only offers new ways to

organize and retrieve knowledge, but disrupts what it means to know and create. Viewing AI only as a faster retrieval tool limits our grasp of its transformative potential. Mapping the use of AI technology into Benjamin Bloom's cognitive taxonomy creates a sense of continuity where there is disruption.

As a child, I recall the quiet thrill of each month's delivery: a red-bound volume of an encyclopedia. My parents' subscription was more than just educational; it was aspirational. Knowledge, then, promised social mobility. Shelves filled with these volumes marked a path from lower middle-class strivings to success. Years later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, distant relatives from former East Germany sold the same encyclopedias door-to-door, serving as symbols of a knowledge economy undergoing a transformative phase. But soon, even they lost their appeal. CD-ROMs replaced spines. Then came Wikipedia. Now, ChatGPT. With each shift, knowledge has become easier to access and harder to define.

For much of our information-based knowledge culture, spanning from the early

modern period through the enlightened encyclopedia of the eighteenth century, to the museums, standardized school curriculum, and higher education of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, knowledge and information held a powerful promise of expertise and social advancement. However, in today's classrooms, AI equipped students will make knowledge transfer as a key learning outcome superfluous.

GenAI can help to amplify our ideation process through chain prompting, provide feedback, help us make connections between different sciences, and challenge our assumptions. It is great at recognizing when an interpretative process is biased and informed by an existing canon of commonly accepted concepts and theories. GenAI may not just help make sense of larger data samples, but also identify missing voices, invite one to reverse one's premises, and deal with counterexamples. Whose stories are left out of the archive? Can we recover them?

Placing AI in opposition to human intelligence creates a symmetry that only partly maps the distinct ways that the arts and humanities create knowledge. We marvel, for example, at models trained on terabytes, and at visualizations mapping global flows. In the age of AI, scale seduces. But this celebration of volume may obscure the value of the singular. A poem. A sculpture. A voice. The arts and humanities have long offered a counterweight to scale; they dwell in the fragment, the improvisation, and the unresolved. The arts and humanities offer diverse ways of knowing and perceiving the world, that manifest in impressionistic glances and interjections, jazz improvisation, the stream-of-consciousness of writing, and performative art. Scale does not override singular experiences.

In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard suggested that all literary images originate in fundamental material experiences of embodied life, such as shelter and exposure, nesting and journeying. The singular places we have

inhabited are coded into our bodily memory. Singular memories and unique experiences like these shape us as individuals, just as much as there is something irreducible and very profound that happens in Schubert's *String Quintet in C Major, D. 956*, Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 9*, or Strauss' *Last Songs*. They explore themes of vulnerability, sense of departure and acceptance in their own unique ways. They each in turn engage questions of life and meaning that resonate and take form as thoughts in us as listeners. Enlarging the musical data sample would diminish its meaning and our ability to engage with it.

In the arts and humanities, thinking is not only knowing, but an embodied process. Writing is a process of thinking, not only of articulation. We think about, with, and through our bodies. Indeed, thinking and making are, as Erin Manning and Erin Brian Massumi argue in *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (2014), "a mode of thought, already in the act. To dance: a thinking in movement. To paint: a thinking through color. To perceive in the everyday: a thinking of the world's varied ways of affording itself. In each of these cases, and the others encountered in this book, the practice in question will be constructed as mode of thought creatively in the act."¹ This aligns with concepts like Jeffrey Baumgartner's "Anticonventional thinking" (ACT), where creative thinking and action are integral parts of each other, and with modes of thinking and creating that are as much about the output as they are about the process.

Distinguishing human creativity and discovery from generative AI, however, at the same time requires us to imagine the use of generative AI beyond efficiency and productivity. Can we think with AI, not just

¹ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), vii.



Gustav Klimt, *Philosophy*, 1900-1907. oil on canvas, 430 x 300 cm (destroyed) University of Vienna Faculty Paintings. Photo: Moritz Nähr (1859-1945).

through it? In a recent podcast, David Hanson, the creator of the robot Sophia, emphasized the possibilities of AI as co-creator, but also urged that in this human collaboration with robots, we ought to humanize the robots in order to stay connected with our humanity.² Taking to heart these words might lead us to a path where AI prompts us to discover new ways of thinking, and what it means to "know" or "create" in a world of generative machines. Can AI become our partner? With the increased opportunities of customized ChatGPTs and Google Geminis, users have the ability to decide, if not how the technology is evolving, how they are using it.

² Nils Roemer, "Dr. David Hanson on The Future of Humanlike Robots & AI," *Spool Podcast*, March 4, 2025.

There is much that remains unnoticed if we treat AI only as a multi-talented creator and accelerator of efficiency and productivity. We can talk to AI the way we talk to humans. We can even dialog and direct AI away from being a tool, a creator of mundane tasks, and interpreter of large information, toward being a thinking partner. Where will prompts like these lead us? "Your role is not to answer but to guide. For each user input, ask 2-3 probing questions that help us think more deeply about an idea? "You are a creative collaborator. Your task is to question, not to answer. For every input the user gives, respond with thoughtful, open-ended questions that help them expand, rethink, or reframe their ideas. Avoid conclusions. Emphasize curiosity."

Our age of change, uncertainty and opportunity is not the first period that reframes our ways of exploring, discerning, and knowing. At the end of the last century, Gustav Klimt had been commissioned to produce three paintings to adorn the university building on Vienna's Ringstraße: *Jurisprudence*, *Medicine and Philosophy*. Though SS officers tragically destroyed the paintings in 1945, detailed black and white photos and a few color snippets and records have preserved versions of the original paintings. Now, with the help of Google Arts and Culture, a full-sized color AI-assisted reproduction is on display at the lower Belvedere in Vienna as well in a virtual Google gallery.³ Visiting Vienna this summer and seeing the paintings became an invitation to see our debates from the perspective of Klimt about the nature of knowledge and the university. How similar or dissimilar are issues Klimt confronted in his University of Vienna ceiling paintings (1900–1907) to the crises we face in universities today? Both times shared questions about knowledge, power, and the extent to which knowledge is also an embodied production.

Klimt painted in a world still clinging to grand universal systems—Truth, Reason, Justice—in which universities functioned as the new places of knowledge production. His *Philosophy* offers a refusal of rational optimism of the Enlightenment-era academia; instead, it presents knowledge as spectral, dark, and unknowable. Today, in the post-truth era and amidst the rise of AI, many scholars again feel that knowledge has lost its ground. We certainly are experiencing an epistemological anxiety. Who gets to define truth, and what constitutes legitimate knowledge, are open—and contested—questions. Instead, Klimt centered knowledge in the naked, vulnerable body—a radical gesture in a university setting that idealized abstraction and reason.

³ "Gustav Klimt – The Faculty Paintings, Google Arts and Cultures," https://artsandculture.google.com/story/gustav-klimt-the-faculty-paintings/XwUhMS_zkPdZzw?hl=en

Looking at the reconstruction to scale, the compositions are vertical and cascading, evoking a descent or perhaps a journey with human forms entangled, fading in and out of visibility. There is no central perspective and no vanishing point. Instead of illustrating knowledge, the paintings immerse us in it—chaotic, unknowable, and unresolvable. Bodies appear to emerge and dissolve in rhythmic patterns, as if caught in a wave or current, suggesting permeability, instability.

Startling too is the color. There are muted greys, golds, and greens, with pale, spectral flesh tones. Light is diffused, not a source of clarity but of obscurity. Gold and shimmer appear in non-anatomical zones, suggesting non-human intelligence or spiritual resonance. Color does not aid recognition—it seduces and destabilizes. It offers beauty as well as ambiguity, but not resolution. No figure claims dominance. Knowledge is not heroic. There is no Socrates, no Newton—only entangled flesh and fading spirit.

Roughly one hundred years later, in the late 20th century, thinkers like Jean Baudrillard argued that modern life has entered a “hyperreal” phase, where signs and symbols have replaced direct experience. Baudrillard was thinking at the time about Disneyland and reality TV, but he would have been struck by generative AI and how it thrives in this postmodern terrain. It creates plausible simulacra: tweets that sound like a person, songs that mimic a vibe, essays that echo a perspective and even the songs and videos of Plave, a virtual K-pop AI boy band. Plave's members are digital humans rendered in Unreal Engine. Superkind, another K-pop group that merges human and virtual members, employs both 2D and 3D avatars. These groups exemplify the increasing impact of AI in K-pop, with some utilizing it to enhance vocals, create virtual realms, or even generate new music. The constant stream of production has transcended the traditional concept of an encyclopedia. It is no longer contained and finite and knowledgeable but,

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like Klimt's *Philosophy*, a state of immersion and not mastery.

Klimt's painting caused an outcry and suggested a crisis of knowledge, yet his immersive depiction of knowledge might be indicative of knowledge as a state of search. Neuroscientist Eric Kandel calls this era in Vienna the Age of Insight: a moment when art, science and the humanities converged to explore how we make meaning.⁴ Klimt's *Philosophy* doesn't offer a tidy thesis; it stages a question. It insists that knowledge is bodily, vulnerable, emotional, and that truth may reside not in clarity, but in complexity. Klimt's fin-de-siecle years in Vienna conjure images not only of crisis, but also of profound insight. In the year Klimt unveiled *Philosophy*, Sigmund Freud published his monumental *Interpretation of Dreams*. Klimt's paintings depict not only a crisis, a critical distance to university learning, but also an invitation into the world as a realm of existence and experiences with uncharted curiosity.

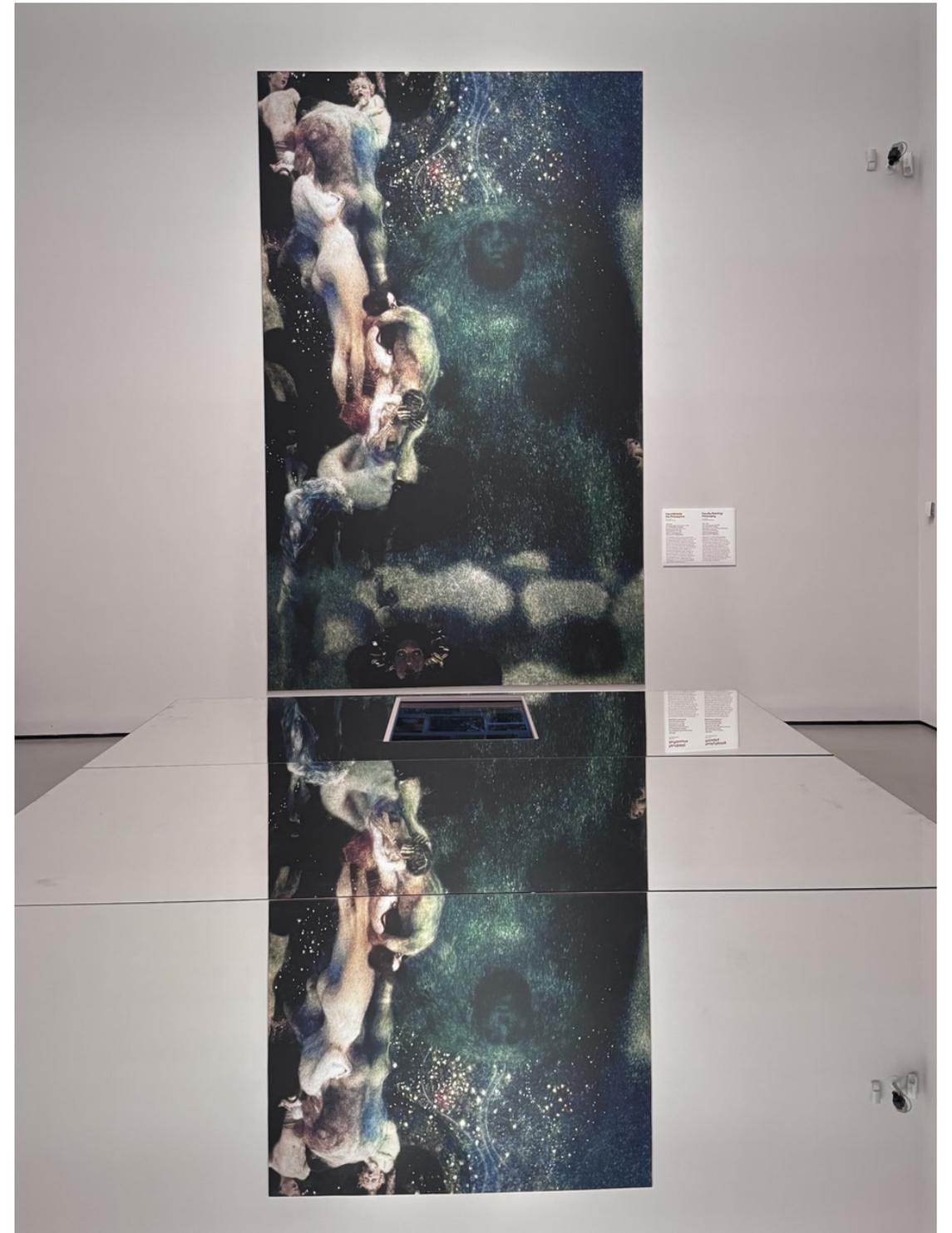
In scale and color, the restored version returns something of the original and its immersive and questioning qualities. Klimt's *Philosophy* does not explain. It disorients. Standing before its AI-assisted reproduction in the Belvedere, I felt no mastery but vertigo. There is no center. No clarity. Figures emerge and dissolve like memory itself. If Enlightenment knowledge was about order,

⁴ Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain. From Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012).

control, and power, Klimt offers a counter-image: knowledge as immersion, as opacity, as mystery.

Klimt's canvas mirrors our own uncertainty in the age of AI. To see it in person, even in reconstructed form, is to understand that *Philosophy* can be felt through the senses, not only reasoned through language. It is not just simply a text or an image, but an encounter. Standing before a work of art activates our senses. Your eye tracks the luminous flow of bodies; your body mirrors the scale of the vertical canvas; your mind reaches to reconcile beauty with dread. What emerges is not just knowledge about the painting, but a moment of aesthetic cognition—knowing through presence, scale, color, ambiguity. Something like this took place when I was recently able to see Paul Klee's 1920 watercolor *Angelus Novus* in *The Angel of History*, an exhibition that explored Klee's work and how it inspired the philosopher Walter Benjamin, held at the State Museums in Berlin.

Benjamin intensely reflected on the meaning of objects and their commodification from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. For Benjamin, collecting became a way to invest and hold on to the meaning of objects that they had for the individual beholder. His own autobiographical writing recalls the importance of objects with the evolution of an individual. Amongst the possessions of this itinerant German Jewish intellectual was a painting by the Swiss-born German artist, Klee. Klee created *Angelus Novus* in 1920, a tumultuous time just after World War I. In this



Installation views of "Gustav Klimt - Pigment & Pixel: Rediscovering Art Through Technology" at the Lower Belvedere, Vienna, 2025. Photos: Nils Roemer.



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Oil transfer and watercolor on paper, 318 x 242 mm. On view in "The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee and the Berlin Angels 80 Years After World War II," at the Bode-Museum, Berlin, 2025. Photo: Nils Roemer

period, Klee's work matured as he developed his artistic philosophy, as outlined in his 1918 publication, "Creative Confession," that expressed a metaphysical perception of reality. In it, he asserted that art does not merely reproduce the visible but reveals deeper realities, a philosophy that underlies the non-human subjects in his work.⁵

Angelus Novus features an abstract figure that resembles an angel. With the arms raised

and figures extended, the figure seems to be hovering. Its head is framed by curly, stylized hair, disproportionate to a small body. The angel's huge eyes are open wide and stare, and its mouth hangs agape as if about to speak. Wings extend outward from its arms, and its feet, which resemble bird's claws, hover just above the ground. Within the torso, Klee painted a form like a pendulum, subtly alluding to the passage of time.

Benjamin purchased *Angelus Novus* in 1921 and developed a profound connection to it. It became his treasured possession that adorned every home he lived in. To Benjamin, the angel

⁵ Paul Klee, "Creative Confession," *Creative Confession and Other Writings*, ed. Matthew Gale, (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 1-15.

was at first a guardian, who adorned his office and accompanied him on most of his travels. Once forced into exile in 1933, the angel became in Paris the prism through which the past and unattainable but conceivable future became legible for him. In his 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin presents the image as the "angel of history," whose gaze is fixed on the past, perceiving it as a single, unending catastrophe piling wreckage upon wreckage. This angel wishes to "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed," but is propelled into the future by a storm from Paradise, symbolizing the relentless force of progress. Benjamin writes: "A storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."⁶ Benjamin's angel anticipates a catastrophic and uncertain future.

In moments of despair, Benjamin would entrust the painting with friends only to pick it up again later. At times, he even considered selling *Angelus Novus* (as, in 1939, to the arts patron Ernest Morgenroth), but he ultimately held on to his prized possession, even when destitute and without food. The safeguard of his beloved painting betrays his desperation on the verge of an escape that ultimately proved unsuccessful, but also the sense of the importance of *Angelus Novus* possibly beyond Benjamin's own life. There is an implied futurity and hope of continuation that is associated with the painting. After the Nazis' attack on France, increasingly desperate, Benjamin left his possession with friends for safekeeping, before his eventual suicide. After the Holocaust, Klee's painting ended up with Benjamin's close friend Gershom Scholem in

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253-264, here 257-258.

Israel. Now in Berlin for a rare temporary exhibition, it serves as a central piece of an exhibition of other sculptures, photos and paintings of angels, who as objects serve as witnesses to history, in their materiality as much as in their aesthetic realization and torched reality.

In the Berlin exhibit, Klee's painting is curated alongside other angelic sculptures from Berlin's Museum that were damaged or destroyed during World War II, and excerpts from Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, 1987), in which invisible angels watch over Berlin and its inhabitants. The way in which objects like these embody and communicate knowledge is tied to their unique materiality and the singular history of their existence. Together, they focus visitors' attention on destruction, memory, and the extant objects that are witnesses to that past. The Wenders film excerpts further underscore the idea of angels as observers of history—especially in the divided Berlin of the late 1980s—grounding Benjamin's theoretical angel in a cinematic, urban context.

We can gain perspective from Klimt, Klee and Benjamin, who place us closer to the unknown, engendering something that Benjamin might call a "dialectics at a standstill"—an image that interrupts rather than resolves not only the narrative of academic knowledge, but the very temporality that sustains historicism. In Klimt's *Philosophy*, the viewer is given no anchoring. The figures do not return our gaze; the composition offers no rational structure to "read" from. The viewer is not in a position of mastery, but of disorientation. Both Klimt and Benjamin make disruption into a method—not a flaw, not a breakdown, but a way of seeing and revealing what's been buried by dominant forms. Generative AI, while inherently biased, is also unbound; its knowledge is not contained and ordered, but always accessible and ultimately chaotic. This disorder is also a realm of potentially new discoveries. Looking through



Poster for "The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee and the Berlin Angels 80 Years After World War II," at the Bode-Museum, Berlin, 2025. Photo: Nils Roemer

At its best, AI might disorient, dazzle, seduce, and trouble our categories of knowledge, creativity, and control

Klimt's lens, we might understand AI not as an instrument of control but as an unruly, dreamlike assemblage, something uncanny, fertile, and unstable. It disrupts expectations of coherence, not unlike Benjamin's notion of constellations that appear as flashes from the past in our times of crisis. Like the paintings, generative AI resists our desire of total knowledge.

We often frame AI in terms of computation, precision, and scalability. Klimt shows us another possibility: that behind the mask of progress is a mythic unconscious. Just as *Philosophy* reveals the human as helpless before the cosmos, AI shows us to be enmeshed in something vaster and stranger than we expected. Generative AI can hallucinate, dream, and mimic. It doesn't always know what it's doing, but neither does Klimt's truth, veiled and turned away. Like art, AI can be excessive, unruly, and not easily contained. They both disrupt hierarchies and level taste. It makes the academic uneasy. That's not a flaw. That's its truth.

Klimt's Faculty Paintings questioned what it meant to know and to be human at the dawn of the 20th century, just as AI asks again in the

21st. In Philosophy, humanity is no longer the center of the cosmos. In AI discourse, we likewise confront de-centered humanism: are we still the only authors? The only creators? The only thinkers? Klimt gives us an image of disoriented subjectivity: naked, floating, seeking meaning. Benjamin provides with sense of alarm about a continuous history of destruction. Generative AI returns us to that image: a human caught in a world of unpredictable outputs, haunted by imitation, surrounded by pattern, searching for the origin of thought. At its best, AI might disorient, dazzle, seduce, and trouble our categories of knowledge, creativity, and control. It might also forecast like Benjamin's angel impending disaster and help us to write alternative histories and imagine desirable futures. The potential crisis that new technology seems to unleash is an opportunity of discovery and creativity. AI is a mirror for us. The not-knowing might be the beginning of understanding, or at least of very good questions—and so would be a custom ChatGPT that would bring Klimt, Klee, and Benjamin into a conversation about knowing, creating, science, and technology. **A**