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Generative AI and Creative Expression: When Machines Learn to See

Generative AI has fundamentally changed how we think about creativity. These systems learn from massive collections of human-made art, absorbing patterns, styles, and techniques. But here's the thing: machines do this without actually understanding what they're looking at. They can't grasp context, history, or the human experiences behind the images. This gap between what AI can technically do and what it actually understands is what makes it interesting for artists.

In creative work, AI acts like a strange mirror. It shows us the biases baked into its training data, mostly Western art, mostly famous pieces, while also giving us new ways to question those same biases. Models like Stable Diffusion can render anything in any style, which raises uncomfortable questions, such as what does it mean when AI can make poverty look beautiful? Who benefits when suffering becomes aesthetic?

The Work That Inspires Me

Refik Anadol's *Unsupervised* at MoMA asks a beautiful question: "What would a machine dream about after seeing the collection of The Museum of Modern Art?" He fed an AI over 200 years of art from MoMA's collection, and it generates these constantly shifting, otherworldly forms that fill entire rooms.

What gets me about *Unsupervised* is how it makes you think about what machines actually "see" when they look at art. The AI learned from MoMA's collection, which is already a very specific selection of what counts as important art, mostly Western modernism. So when the machine "dreams," it's dreaming in patterns it learned from that specific tradition. The results are stunning, but they're also recycling existing hierarchies about what art should look like.

This connects to my own work exploring how AI handles different realities. If Anadol shows machines dreaming Western art history, I'm interested in what happens when you force those same algorithms to look at places like Manila with all its poverty, pollution, and postcolonial complexity. Can Monet's romantic impressionist style, designed to beautify French leisure, do anything meaningful with Manila's harsh urban reality? Both projects use AI to reveal something important: aesthetic systems, whether made by humans or machines, aren't neutral. They carry power, history, and choices about what deserves to be seen as beautiful.