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Performative transactions: worlding compositional ecosystems

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Chapter 2: Artists as Curators

Part 1—Creativity and Problematisation

The Creative Act of Problematisation

Artistic practice differs fundamentally from engineering or other problem-solving paradigms in that it does not begin with a predefined problem to be solved. Instead, art generates *fields of problematisation*—open-ended contexts that provoke questioning, uncertainty, and reflection. Rather than seeking to eliminate ambiguity by finding solutions, the artist deliberately creates situations that *make things problematic* in a productive sense. As Sofian Audry argues, the role of contemporary art is not to provide solutions but to generate problems—problems that estrange, provoke, and reframe perception. “Contemporary art”, writes Audry, “was not so much about solving problems as it was about creating problems for the viewers by bringing them into an experience, allowing the revelation of otherwise unfathomable truths about the world through its estrangement” (Audry 2021, 22). In sharp contrast to the optimisation paradigms that dominate AI and computational research, where goal-orientation and quantifiable metrics define success, art resists such instrumentalisation. Traditional optimisation approaches, Audry insists, are “fundamentally inadequate when applied to the arts” (23), because they presuppose that artistic value is both measurable and universal—a view that misunderstands the contextual, situated, and subjective nature of artistic judgment. Attempting to model artistic relevance statistically, they reflect, falsely assumes that more widely appreciated works are inherently better—a fallacy grounded in what they call an “inaccurate premise about art” (23). The very notion of a “best” painting or “optimal” song collapses under the plural, contextual, and non-teleological values that define artistic practices. In this view, art is not an optimisation problem, nor can it be reduced to an “objective function” without doing violence to its critical and experiential core (25).

Within artistic research discourses, this approach to art-making has been theorised explicitly as a mode of knowledge production in the work of Paulo de Assis, who emphasises that artistic research can turn stable objects into “objects for thought” through a dual process of historical interpretation and experimental reconfiguration (de Assis 2018, 132). In one sense, problematisation involves looking backward—

excavating the assumptions and histories that underlie a given practice—but equally it involves looking forward, “search[ing] for new ways of productively exposing [things] within a contemporary situation” (de Assis 2018, 132). Rather than asking *what something is or was* in a fixed sense, the artist asks *what it could become*: how might a musical composition, an image, or a cultural ritual be re-imagined under new conditions, and what questions would that raise? In this way, the work of art performs a *creative act of problematisation* (de Assis 2018, 132), taking existing materials or ideas and projecting them into new, unresolved futures. Seen in this light, artistic creation is less about achieving a *solution* and more about framing a *situation*. The artist draws attention to blind spots and assumptions, inviting audiences into a space where meanings are unsettled and open for re-examination. Problematisation, in this sense, differs from critique: it is not simply about revealing flaws or inconsistencies, but about constructing new conceptual and experiential fields in which alternative relations can emerge. A composer might, for example, present an everyday object in a strange context, or orchestrate an experience that defies the audience’s expectations. In doing so, artistic practice challenges viewers to confront their own certainties and engage in critical reflection. The value lies in the experience of uncertainty and the dialogue that uncertainty engenders. To problematise is to take something ordinarily seen as stable or given and to render it uncertain – to turn it into a question, a site of debate or exploration. Art’s role, from this perspective, is to pose new questions and fundamentally alter how an issue is understood.

By framing artistic creativity in this way, we acknowledge the inherently combinatorial and exploratory nature of the process. The artist curates a set of elements—whether images, sounds, gestures, or concepts—and arranges them in such a way that their interplay raises issues rather than resolving them. Every artwork, then, can be seen as a kind of problematic field constructed for the audience’s engagement. This does not mean that art is “problematic” in the colloquial sense of troublesome; rather, it means that art problematises reality by challenging the viewers’ habitual frames of reference. The artworks of the Dadaists, which placed everyday objects in galleries, or contemporary interactive installations that require audience participation, do not present clear theses. Such works operate as open systems of sense-making that resist closure or quantifiable judgment. Instead, they provoke us: Why is this ordinary object presented as art? What is the role of the observer in completing the work? Such questions, without singular answers, are precisely the point.

Curating as a Creative Practice in Contemporary Art

In contemporary art discourse, the curator's role is increasingly understood as a form of creative authorship. Paul O'Neill (2012)—curator, artist, writer and educator—observes that since the late 20th century the curator has emerged as an “author” or co-producer of meaning within exhibition-making, not simply an overseer of collections. In other words, curators are now seen as key agents in cultural production who actively shape the values and narratives around artworks. O'Neill argues that curatorship today is “a far-reaching category... encompassing various organisational forms, cooperative models and collaborative structures”—even including “generative properties traditionally attributed to artistic production” (O'Neill, 2012, 89). This blurring of boundaries between curating and creating suggests that the curator's work can be as inventive and influential as that of the artist, constructing new contexts and interpretations for art.

Importantly, recent theory distinguishes “the curatorial” from simple exhibition management, emphasizing “the curatorial” as an active process of meaning-making. Curator and theorist Maria Lind defines “the curatorial” as “a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, [and] ideas...that strives to create friction and push new ideas” (Lind, 2012, 20). The curatorial approach is about building connections and contexts: linking artworks with each other and with audiences, and provoking new insights through those relationships. In this view, the curator is a mediator and context-maker who foregrounds relationships over objects and processes of interaction over static products. By crafting the conditions in which art is encountered—through careful juxtaposition, thematic framing, and orchestrating the viewer's experience—the curator actively co-authors the meaning that emerges. Curating thus becomes a creative act of arranging elements in ways that generate dialogue, spark critical questions, or reveal latent possibilities in the art.

This expanded notion of curation has clear historical precedents in experimental art practices since the 1960s. Avant-garde artists began to shift away from viewing an artwork as a self-contained object and toward conceiving art as an open-ended process or situation. For example, the Fluxus movement foregrounded concise “event scores” and instruction-based works that turned everyday actions and audience participation into constitutive elements of the artwork, shifting emphasis from discrete objects to

open situations (Higgins, 2002; Smith, 1998; Ouzounian, 2011). In other words, the artist functions more like a curator of possibilities, designing a scenario in which meaning is co-created by others. Many conceptual, participatory, and performance art projects from the 1960s onward followed this path, prioritizing situations, interactions, and audience engagement over tangible artifacts (Bishop, 2012). These early experiments laid the groundwork for viewing the making of art as inseparable from the curating of context—a perspective now echoed in curatorial theory. The contemporary composer or installation artist who “stages” an event or environment for art, rather than producing a closed work, is in effect adopting a curatorial stance within their artistic practice.

Building on these developments, today’s artists and curators often operate in overlapping roles, especially in settings involving complex, generative processes. The rise of digital and algorithmic art, for instance, further accentuates the curator-like agency of the artist. Rather than fabricating a single artifact, an artist working with generative software or AI might design a system, set parameters, and then guide or select from the output – effectively curating the results of an autonomous process. In such cases, the creative labor lies in configuring the conditions and making editorial choices about what to present, much as a curator would. As media scholars note, even the most “automated” art still relies on human orchestration: artists choose the data or inputs, adjust the algorithms, and crucially decide which outcomes merit public display (Hertzmann, 2018). The role of the artist thus converges with that of the curator, emphasising facilitation and selection within a field of possibilities.

Recombining the Creative

In September 2024, I attended the opening of an exhibition *Musica ex Machina: Machines Thinking Musically* curated by Sarah Kenderdine, Martin Rohrmeier, Paul Kenderdine, and Jonathan Impett at EPFL Pavilions in Lausanne, Switzerland. The exhibition, and the accompanying conference featuring Jennifer Walshe, George Lewis, François Pachet, Miller Puckette, Laetitia Sonami, Bob Sturm and others, offered a striking confrontation with the long history and emerging future of algorithmic thinking in music. Rather than merely illustrating machines that produce sound, the exhibition traced the historical entwinement of musical creativity and systematic processes—from Guido d’Arezzo’s Guidonian Hand to Xenakis’ *UPIC*

system and contemporary AI installations like *Polyp* by Marek Poliks and Roberto Alonso Trillo (Kenderdine et al., 2024, section 1), where AI agents mutate their sonic identities in response to environmental sound. Walking through its four thematic clusters—1) Symbols, Spaces & Algorithms, 2) Automating the Human, 3) Music as Information and Data, and 4) Body, Mind & Machine—I found myself surrounded not just by artefacts, but by provocations. Each work proposed a different answer to a question: What do we mean when we call something "creative"? Whether through Athanasius Kircher's 17th-century *Arca Musarithmica* (Kenderdine et al., 2024, section 10.1), which treated composition as a rule-based operation, or George Lewis's *Voyager*—a now-classic example of a real-time interactive composition built as a rule-based expert system (Kenderdine et al., 2024, section 29.3)—the exhibition made clear that creativity has never been the exclusive domain of human spontaneity. It is—and always has been—a matter of systems, constraints, interactions, and transductions.

The exhibition's curatorial logic resonates with a broader critique of how creativity is conceptualised in the age of artificial intelligence. One recent articulation of such a critique can be found in the work of Keith Tilford, whose contribution to *Choreomata: Performance and Performativity After AI* (2023) engages directly with debates about AI and creative agency. Tilford argues that many claims about the limits of machine creativity remain bound to outdated philosophical frameworks—especially the Kantian conception of genius, which frames creativity as spontaneous, unteachable, and incommunicable. This legacy, Tilford suggests, continues to shape artistic and cultural assumptions. The widespread belief that AI systems cannot be truly creative often rests on an implicit premise: that creativity must be ineffable and irreducible to rules—something that machines, by definition, cannot possess. Yet as AI systems increasingly simulate imaginative behaviour once seen as uniquely human, this assumption becomes unstable. "To claim that AI cannot exhibit creative behaviour", Tilford writes, "one must have an implicit assumption of what creative behaviour is"—an assumption still "exceptionally enmeshed" in both critical art discourse and broader cultural anxieties about authorship and automation (Tilford 2023, 125).

In response, Tilford calls for a closer examination of the term creativity itself, a word that has become central to contemporary discourse yet remains historically contingent and ideologically loaded. To make this point, he draws on two historical sources: Vern Neufeld Redekop and Thomas Ryba's *René Girard and Creative Mimesis* (2013) and Władysław Tatarkiewicz's *A History of Six Ideas* (2012 / 1980). From Redekop and Ryba,

Tilford cites the Oxford English Dictionary's record of the term's earliest use in English, attributed to A.W. Ward in 1875, who described Shakespeare's poetic spontaneity using the newly coined word "creativity" (Tilford 2023, 133; Redekop & Ryba 2013, 8–9), and that the philosopher A.N. Whitehead later gave the term metaphysical depth by using it to describe the "temporal passage to novelty" as a fundamental principle of reality (Tilford 2023, 133).

Tilford then turns to Tatarkiewicz for a longer historical view. According to Tatarkiewicz, for nearly a thousand years the term *creator* was used exclusively in a theological sense—as a synonym for God. The Greeks had no equivalent term, and although the Romans used related expressions, these were mostly colloquial (Tatarkiewicz 2012/1980, 250–251; cited in Tilford 2023, 134). It was only in the nineteenth century that 'creator' began to be applied to artists, and only in the twentieth century that creativity expanded into broader domains—science, politics, technology—eventually becoming a ubiquitous marker of originality and innovation. As Tilford observes, "everyone and anyone, even organizations, or things in the case of disembodied synthetic intelligences, might come to be viewed as creative" (134).

This semantic expansion, he argues, has left the concept of creativity overextended and underexamined. "We desperately need a more specific language for the term creativity", Tilford writes, one that accounts for its "cognitive, social, and ideological entanglements" (130). Rather than treating creativity as a stable or universal category, we must ask: what operations, values, and exclusions does the term encode—and what kinds of labour and agency does it recognise or obscure, especially in an age of artificial actors?

The idea that creativity could be modelled, abstracted, and reproduced by machines challenges assumptions that it is uniquely human, ineffable, or inaccessible to formalisation. Advocates of computational creativity argue that what we perceive as novel or original can often be traced to processes of recombination, pattern recognition, and transformation—processes that, in principle, can be simulated algorithmically. Yet this shift also raises questions about what gets lost when creativity is operationalised as a technical function. To what extent does such a move reproduce existing cultural assumptions, flatten the social complexity of creative labour, or obscure the structures of value and authorship through which creative acts gain meaning? Rather than settling the debate, the computational turn reanimates older tensions between system and spontaneity, rule and exception,

automation and invention.

It is in this context that Margaret Boden's influential typology of creativity becomes particularly useful, offering a framework to distinguish between different modes of creative production—both human and machinic. Boden distinguishes three types of creativity: combinatorial, exploratory, and transformational (Boden, 2010, 41). Each describes a different mode by which novel ideas or artefacts emerge, with distinct implications for both human and machine creativity. Combinatorial creativity involves the novel juxtaposition or integration of elements from different, pre-existing conceptual spaces. In music, this might manifest as genre-blending or hybrid forms—for example, combining traditional Balinese gamelan textures with Western electronic music. It relies on recombination, often producing surprising results by bridging disparate contexts. Exploratory creativity operates within an established conceptual or stylistic space, generating new instances that conform to existing rules or constraints. This is the type most commonly associated with AI-generated music: systems that, trained on vast datasets of stylistically unified material, produce novel but stylistically coherent works. Examples include automatic composition systems designed to emulate Baroque fugue or jazz improvisation. Transformational creativity, by contrast, involves altering or reconfiguring the very structure of a conceptual space—changing the rules of the game rather than playing within them. Historically, this has given rise to paradigm shifts: the invention of twelve-tone serialism, the use of silence as material in John Cage's *4'33"* (Gioti, 2021, 27), or Xenakis's use of stochastic processes. Transformational creativity is the rarest and most radical of the three, and it raises the most provocative questions when considered in relation to AI: can computational systems truly invent new concepts?

As Artemi-Maria Gioti observed in 2021, most automatic composition systems to date—including both rule-based and machine learning approaches—were fundamentally designed to imitate, making them inherently exploratory (27). The crucial question, as Gioti has put it, was no longer simply whether computers can be creative, but whether they can be transformationally creative (28). However, this boundary is increasingly porous. With the rise of large language models and generative agents capable of operating across modalities and domains, we may now be witnessing a shift toward algorithmic systems capable of transformational creativity—generating not only new musical content, but new logics of musical production. Ethan Mollick (2024) observes that large language models function

as “connection machines”—tools designed to link disparate ideas and generate novel associations through probabilistic recombination. Drawing on innovation theory, Mollick reminds us that breakthroughs often emerge not from ex nihilo invention but from the creative recombination of existing concepts. LLMs excel precisely at this: by statistically predicting the next word in a sequence, regardless of how strange or unprecedented the context may seem, they traverse conceptual boundaries and generate unexpected juxtapositions. Their capacity to forge connections between seemingly unrelated tokens makes them not only generative, but potentially transformative—particularly when coupled with randomness, prompting outputs that surprise even their creators. If, as Mollick argues, “new ideas do not come from the ether”, then the question is no longer whether machines can be original, but whether their recombinatory logic can be harnessed as a system for compositional innovation.

Computer music researcher and composer David Cope, best known for developing the system *Experiments in Musical Intelligence* (EMI), argues that recombination is not merely a technical strategy but a fundamental principle of musical creation. In his book *Virtual Music*, reflecting on the design of his EMI, Cope writes: “After all, composers compose recombinantly. I use this term deliberately, since I believe *Experiments in Musical Intelligence* uses processes of recombination similar to those that human composers use to compose. I believe as well that these same processes create the meaning we hear in music” (Cope, 2001, 89). In Cope’s view, compositional creativity is inherently recombinant—less about spontaneous invention than the reconfiguration of stylistic materials drawn from a given musical corpus. EMI’s ability to produce stylistically coherent works “in the style of” canonical composers foregrounds a model of creativity grounded in variation, adaptation, and contextual transformation. This view aligns not only with combinatorial creativity as defined by Boden, but also with a broader lineage of algorithmic composition stretching from Mozart’s *Musikalisches Würfelspiel* to 20th-century montage aesthetics. It also underscores a broader epistemological claim: that musical meaning itself arises not from originality in the abstract, but from the situated recombination of known elements into new and recognisable forms. Rather than undermining creativity, such recombinatory systems make it legible—suggesting that novelty and familiarity operate not as opposites, but as co-constitutive vectors of musical sense.

At this threshold, however, another conceptual pivot becomes necessary—one that

shifts the very terms by which we think about aesthetics and creativity in relation to machines. As the philosopher of computation and media theorist Luciana Parisi (2023) argues, dominant discourses around AI creativity tend to reinscribe the logic of humanism by demanding that machines mimic human forms of consciousness, sentience, or expression to be granted creative legitimacy. Such frameworks, she warns, ultimately reaffirm the colonial and patriarchal metaphysics of modern thought, where the nonhuman is made intelligible only through its resemblance to the human (88–90). Against this, Parisi calls for a non-standard aesthetics rooted in “non-performance” and the embrace of what she terms “incomputables”—modes of machine operation that resist philosophical capture and exceed the grammar of human sensibility (74–79). Rather than seeking equivalence between AI and human agency, she urges us to attend to the expressive potentialities of machinic systems in their own right—as aesthetic processes that unfold through alien logics of recursion, error, and negation. This reframing resonates deeply with the agenda of posthuman composition: not to redeem AI by demonstrating its capacity to imitate human creativity, but to explore how machines, algorithms, and networks enact creative processes that reconfigure the aesthetic field itself. In this view, creativity becomes not a faculty but a distributed operation, one that cuts across ontologies and agencies. Such a shift requires us to reintroduce an awareness of the nature of machines and their relations to humans and values—a task that is as aesthetic as it is philosophical.

Even this, however, is not enough. As both Gioti (2021) and Rohrmeier (2022) remind us, creativity cannot be defined solely in terms of novelty. The “standard definition” in creativity studies insists that to be creative, an artefact must also exhibit value—whether in terms of usefulness, significance, or impact (Rohrmeier, 2022, 51). But this raises a thornier problem: who determines value, and by what criteria? Boden acknowledges this ambiguity, noting that while evolutionary algorithms may generate novel stylistic spaces, they often fall short of producing outputs perceived as valuable or meaningful (Gioti, 2021, 28). The problem of value thus remains unresolved, especially in computational creativity, where the processes may be novel but the contextual significance of their outcomes is difficult to assess without human judgment. For Gioti, this further underscores the need for systems that can trace and localise agency—systems that allow us to understand how creative contributions emerge and are attributed, particularly in collaborative or distributed contexts.

Questions about the computability, structure, and systematisation of creativity have long shaped 20th-century compositional thought, where composers increasingly grappled with the tension between intuition and system, spontaneity and formalisation. Already in the 1940s, composer and music theorist Joseph Schillinger described the evolution of art—specifically music—as a progressive cycle from mimicry (passive transformation), through magic (active transformation), to engineering (scientific transformation). These stages, he argued, correspond not only to aesthetic sensibilities but to the transformation of artistic media and the roles of creators themselves. From the bodily production of sound to the invention of instruments, and eventually to electronic and computational music, Schillinger tracked a dematerialisation of both sound and subjectivity: from vocal cords to algorithm, from improvisation to automation. What begins as biologically induced pattern-making becomes, over centuries, formalised into compositional theory—first rule-based and then increasingly abstract, mathematical, and generative. In Schillinger’s vision, the composer gradually transforms from an intuitive performer into a kind of scientific creator, eventually designing systems for the automatic production of music (Schillinger, 1948, 11). This conceptual shift prefigures our contemporary moment, where AI not only executes predefined stylistic instructions but also participates in the design of new aesthetic systems, styles, and rule sets. If Schillinger’s “engineering” stage corresponds to the emergence of scientifically modelled, self-operating compositional systems, then today’s generative AI may mark its intensification: a mode of creation that is neither purely mechanical nor magical, but machinic—a system of operations capable of producing novelty within and across conceptual regimes.

In his Collège de France lectures, composer Pierre Boulez questions whether musical works are ever more than crystallisations of “a series of accidents, a series of choices that in different circumstances might have produced completely different results” (Boulez 2018b, 119). He frames composition as emerging from a “chaos of intentions”, where chance is never fully eliminated but rather filtered—domesticated—through systems of constraint that give the final outcome its coherence. Whether the composer embraces chance or seeks to annihilate it, Boulez notes, they must construct a method to manage it. This paradox—where even randomness must be formally structured—exposes the limits of humanist myths that associate creativity with free will, spontaneity, or pure intentionality. Indeed, Boulez’s insight gestures toward a broader dismantling of the binaries that have long underwritten Western accounts of artistic

subjectivity: freedom versus constraint, rationality versus irrationality, author versus medium. As he puts it, what appears as irrational is always the expression of a deeper rationality “that eludes us”, while rationality itself remains a “limited expression of a transcendent order” (120). This dissolution of oppositions challenges the very notion of the autonomous creator and invites us instead to see the composer as a node within a larger structure—mediating between logics, constraints, and emergent forces. In this light, the artist’s task is not to express an unutterable interiority, but to assemble a system—a machine—that can make decisions, mutate, and evolve according to its own logic. Creativity, in other words, is not the negation of system, but its modulation.

One example of such a dynamic interplay between constraint and expression can perhaps be experienced in a composition *Ultrachunk* by Memo Akten and Jennifer Walshe. Listed in the Body, Mind & Machine section of the exhibition in Lausanne, the piece stages a vivid confrontation with machinic subjectivity. Neural networks trained on vast corpora of audio-visual content deconstruct and recompose Walshe’s own voice and image into a grotesque, unstable hybrid—one that oscillates between intimacy and estrangement, coherence and collapse. *Ultrachunk* (Kenderdine et al., 2024, section 41.4) foregrounds the tension between personal identity and machinic remix, offering a performance that is both deeply familiar and eerily alien. Yet this is not simply a matter of speculative storytelling. As Davor Vincze (2023) argues, works like *Ultrachunk* exemplify a broader aesthetic strategy in contemporary AI art: an embrace of “the musicality of imperfection” (308), where glitch, mismatch, and unpredictability are not failures to be corrected but expressive resources to be exploited. He further references the point Walshe once made in their private conversation: “we are lucky to be creating art in the time that artificial intelligence is just nascent”. Vincze further writes that “[Jennifer Walshe] believes that it gives us the freedom to play with the imperfection of this emerging technology, much like how artists in the 1950s could naively experiment with any kind of electronic sound just because it was unheard of at that point in time” (Vincze, 2023, 330). As Vincze notes, while AI development in commercial contexts often strives for precision and predictability, in the arts it is precisely these system failures—glitches, mismatches, and errant behaviours—that can become the most potent sources of creative expression (308).

Part 2—Composition, Agency, and Assemblage

Musical Works as Assemblages

Traditionally, especially in Western classical music, a *musical work* has been treated as a fixed entity: the composition inscribed by the composer in the score. According to this ontological account, the score is the sovereign text, and performances are merely realisations or reproductions of the composer's intent. The work is regarded as having a stable identity – one “correct” form as defined by the authoritative score and by the composer's original vision. This view aligns with the Romantic idea of the solitary genius: the work is a product of the composer's mind, and performers are expected to be faithful to that vision. However, musicologists and artists have long noted problems with this view. Performers and listeners invariably bring their own interpretation; instruments and acoustics change the sound; editions differ; over time, even the most canonical works undergo re-evaluation and alteration in practice. In the previous sections, we explored how artistic practice operates through the creation of problems rather than the pursuit of solutions, and how creativity often unfolds through processes of recombination, transformation, and the construction of new relations. Rather than expressing fixed meanings or solving predefined tasks, artworks function as open-ended fields—provocations that invite interpretation and reconfiguration. Such understanding of art naturally leads to a view of musical works as configurations of diverse elements—materials, methods, histories, and choices—held together temporarily in a particular form.

Paulo de Assis, in his critical redefinition of musical works, addresses this issue by proposing a new image of the musical work as an assemblage rather than a permanent structure. Drawing on philosophies of difference (notably Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *agencement*, later translated as *assemblage*), de Assis describes musical works as “complex arrangements of aesthetic-epistemic things, forces, intensities, and signs, which establish several superposed networks of historical, cultural, material, symbolic, and psychological dimensions” (de Assis 2018, 100). In this description, a musical work is not just the notes on the page: it includes the sounding result (frequencies, intensities), the historical traditions it carries, the material aspects (instruments, scores, technologies), the symbolic meaning or affect it produces, and even the psychological impressions on performers and listeners. All these layers together constitute the work. De Assis elaborates that works “cease to be conceived as

a set of instructions or as an ontologically well-defined structure. They become reservoirs of forces and intensities, dynamic systems characterised by metastability, transductive powers, and unpredictable future reconfigurations” (de Assis 2018, 100). The term “metastability” here implies that a work has a certain coherence or identity, but it is not in static equilibrium – it can change phase under new conditions. “Transductive powers” suggests that works can transform and generate new forms (transduction being the process of transforming one form of energy or information into another). Crucially, the future of the work is “unpredictable”; each performance or re-interpretation can potentially reconfigure what the work is, adding to its assemblage of meanings and forms.

In practical terms, this assemblage view acknowledges that any musical work is never a single invariant object. It is one thing in the manuscript, another thing in a modern orchestra’s performance, another in a recording on period instruments, another in a remix or quotation in a film soundtrack. It changes its meaning in socio-political contexts, in various interpretations, in the affective responses of listeners, and in the evolving technological and cultural infrastructures through which it is mediated. All these instantiations participate in the *assemblage* of what the work becomes as a cultural artefact. Rather than privileging one “authentic” version over others, this perspective recognises the work as a dynamic system with “unpredictable future reconfigurations” (de Assis 2018, 100).

The logic of assemblage carries several consequences that de Assis outlines: it favours *multiplicity over unity, event over essence, becoming over being*, and embraces “informed inconsistency” over the illusion of certainty (de Assis 2018, 101). In other words, instead of seeking one unified essence of a work, we recognise the work’s multiple facets and instantiations. Instead of seeing the work as a static being, we see it as an event that happens anew in each edition, performance, listening, or critical reflection (a process of *becoming* each time). And rather than cling to the certainty of an authoritative version, we accept that a work might be internally inconsistent or variable—and that this variability, properly understood, is *informative* and rich, not a flaw. De Assis points out that the new image of the work as assemblage can even *include* the old image of the work as a special case: the traditional fixed work becomes “a particular case of less complex combinations of codings and territorializations” within the broader assemblage (de Assis 2018, 100). In other words, what we used to think of as a self-contained work can be seen as one *snapshot* or *layer* of a more

complex, interactive reality. A tightly controlled serialist composition, for example, might look like a fixed structure, but even it can be re-contextualised or heard differently in a new setting—thus it’s just a more rigid assemblage, not fundamentally different in kind.

By conceiving musical works as assemblages, we inherently acknowledge the plurality of agencies and elements involved in their becoming. The composer’s contribution is just one element (albeit an important one) in the network. The performers’ skills and interventions, the instruments’ timbral qualities, the acoustics of the hall, the audience’s perceptual frame, and the work’s intertextual links to other works or cultural references are all active parts of the work-as-assemblage. This diminishes the old hierarchy where the composer-genius was at the top and everything else was secondary. Instead, creation is distributed: the *meaning* and *effect* of the work arise from the interaction of all parts. A simple example is in jazz or improvised music: a lead sheet (melody and chords) provided by a composer is just a skeleton, and the real “work” takes shape in performance through the interaction among improvising musicians. But even in fully notated music, an assemblage view sees each performance as a *reconstruction* of the work—not a mere execution, but a *creative act* that (re)assembles the work’s components in a unique way. De Assis notes that “musical entities can’t be taken as given; they are rather seen as constantly becoming something else, without ever attaining a fixed state or definition, and they become this something else by means of concrete operations done by concrete individuals” (de Assis 2018, 72–73). Here, “concrete operations” could mean the act of performing, interpreting, or even analysing—any active engagement that *constructs* the work anew. Each such act might reveal “well-known structures” of the piece, but also inevitably highlights “zones of indeterminacy, grey spots, cracks in the structure that no identity-based ontology is able to explain” (de Assis 2018, 72). These indeterminate or flexible aspects are exactly what the assemblage model can accommodate, whereas the old ontology of the work could not.

The implications for creativity are significant. If a musical work is seen as an assemblage, then *creativity is also assemblage-like*. The creation of a work is not a one-time act by a composer, but an ongoing process that includes many creative acts (composition, interpretation, adaptation, etc.) by many agents. The *composer* in this framework becomes less a solitary originator and more a *catalyst* or *curator* of possibilities—setting initial conditions or providing material that will be further

developed by others. Likewise, performers are not passive vessels but active co-creators; they contribute their own artistic decisions to the assemblage. Technology also plays a role: the introduction of a new instrument or sound technology can transform how a work is realised, effectively adding new components to its assemblage. In electronic or electroacoustic music, this is obvious: the software or hardware used is part of the work's identity. But even for acoustic music, recording technology (microphones, mixing) or playback context can alter the assemblage.

De Assis's assemblage theory for music resonates with a broader shift in aesthetics from *object* to *relations*. The "ecological network" around a work includes the work, its environment, and its perceivers (de Assis 2018, 73). He emphasises that object, environment, and subject are all changing in permanent transformation (73). This ecological perspective dovetails with the concept of art generating fields of problematisation: if everything is in flux, then a work of art is not a fixed answer but a perpetual question – each presentation asks anew, "What is this work now? What can it be, here, today?" The work becomes a *site of experimentation*.

In musical practice, we see composers and artists explicitly adopting this assemblage mindset. Some contemporary composers write open-form pieces or invite performers to contribute material, thus decentralising authorship. Remix culture in music treats existing recordings as raw material for new works, blurring the line between composer, performer, and listener (the remix artist is all three at once). Even historically, practices like theme and variations, improvisation, or folk music traditions show that music has always had an assemblage aspect—motifs and structures circulating and reassembling across pieces and generations.

Thus, "musical works as assemblages" can be both a descriptive theory as well as a prescriptive stance for creativity. It describes how works function (as assemblages of components with distributed agency). In doing so, it aligns music with the combinatorial view of creativity discussed earlier: no work is purely the product of one human mind; every work is a mosaic formed in a network of human and non-human actors (scores, instruments, algorithms, etc.). From this perspective, the composer or artist is perhaps less a *maker* in the traditional sense and more an *organiser of forces*—bringing together various elements and setting conditions for something to emerge.

Posthumanist Agential Assemblages

If artistic creativity can be seen as inherently combinatorial, situated, and emergent—built through arrangements of historical, material, and conceptual relations—then the logic of copyright appears not only inadequate but antagonistic to such a view. Copyright law, as Martin Zeilinger argues, is premised on a reductive image of creativity as the product of a singular, original, human author. It “flatten[s]” the complex, dynamic nature of creative production into a legal paradigm that assigns exclusive rights to individuals or their corporate proxies, treating the creative act as an expression of isolated subjectivity rather than a relational or systemic event (Zeilinger 2021, 22). This individualist framework is not only outdated, but actively obscures the collaborative, iterative, and multi-agent nature of creative work, particularly in digital and posthuman contexts. As Zeilinger points out, this conflict is especially acute in AI, where creative behaviour is rooted in technical processes like training on, recombining and adapting massive datasets—processes that “rely fundamentally on copying and reusing”—techniques that copyright regimes tend to regulate or criminalise (2021, 22).

The implications are far-reaching. In contexts where AI systems participate meaningfully in creative production, legal and cultural expectations still presume a human at the centre: a figure of authorship whose rights can be asserted and protected. But as Zeilinger shows, such expectations are symptomatic of deeper anthropocentric assumptions: namely, that agency and authorship must go together, and that both must remain grounded in a human subject. This logic, embedded in intellectual property frameworks, operates recursively. Agency is inferred from creativity, authorship is inferred from agency, and ownership is inferred from authorship (Zeilinger 2021, 48–49). In short: to be creative is to act; to act is to author; to author is to own. When AI enters the picture, however, this recursive chain begins to break down. If we accept that non-human systems can engage in generative processes that produce meaningful artefacts, then we are forced to confront a destabilising possibility: that authorship is no longer the prerogative of human individuals alone. Zeilinger frames this as a “short-circuiting” of the humanist logic through which agency becomes property (2021, 63). When artistic outputs emerge from hybrid human-machine assemblages, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine where intention lies, or whether the output can be meaningfully attributed to any single subject. As creative processes become more distributed between human

and non-human agents, the very notion of a bounded author collapses.

This collapse has legal, political, and economic consequences. In the absence of legal personhood for AI systems, the rights to AI-generated outputs are typically assigned to human users or platform owners. As Zeilinger predicted, this has led not to a radical restructuring of intellectual property regimes, but rather to a conservative assimilation of AI works into existing frameworks, where outputs are simply reattributed to subscribing users or developers (2021, 165). Four years on, this prediction remains accurate: generative platforms like OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Gemini or Anthropic's Claude grant usage rights to human users, even when the system's creative contribution exceeds mere tool-like functionality. More troublingly, this legal adaptation masks a broader enclosure of the cultural commons. As Tiziana Terranova—a theorist of digital culture and political economy whose work critically examines how networked technologies reshape labour, knowledge, and power—warns, AI technologies are driving a new wave of digital accumulation, echoing the early 2000s' rise of platform capitalism (Terranova 2023, ix). Instead of fostering collective ownership or open creative ecosystems, generative AI systems—trained on public data—are monetised through proprietary interfaces and licensing schemes. Even opt-out mechanisms (like those proposed by Spawning.ai³) or content watermarking offer only limited resistance; they resemble bargaining chips in a system that remains structurally tilted toward centralised control.

One of Martin Zeilinger's key contributions to this debate is the concept of the posthumanist agential assemblage—a configuration in which expressive agency is no longer centralised in a singular human creator but emerges from the entangled operations of human, machinic, algorithmic, and infrastructural components. Rather than treating AI as a discrete tool or fully autonomous agent, Zeilinger describes these systems as assemblages in which creativity is distributed and enacted relationally. These assemblages are “posthumanist” in that they reject the Enlightenment ideal of the isolated, rational, human author, and instead foreground the dynamic, intra-active

³ Spawning.ai is a platform that enables artists and creators to control whether their works are included in AI training datasets. Through tools like *Have I Been Trained* and the *Do Not Train* registry, it offers opt-out mechanisms allowing creators to request the removal of their content from datasets used by companies and AI models such as Stability AI or LAION. Unlike most major AI developers, who operate under broad data scraping practices and retroactive licensing models, Spawning.ai positions itself as an advocate for creator consent, transparency, and ethical dataset construction. However, these mechanisms remain voluntary and largely unenforceable at scale, especially in jurisdictions where scraping public data is still legally ambiguous, or actually legalised (see Japan).

relationships among a plurality of actants—artists, algorithms, datasets, platforms, legal codes, and audiences alike (Zeilinger 2021, 10, 44, 63). It is within this framework that the tensions between legal ownership, creative agency, and technological mediation must be re-evaluated.

Yet the critical potential of posthumanist assemblages lies precisely in their challenge to this logic. If we take seriously the idea that creativity can emerge from human-nonhuman entanglements—what Zeilinger calls “artificially intelligent agential assemblages” (2021, 63)—then we must also consider new models of authorship, value, and ownership that reflect distributed agency. This means questioning the assumption that expressive agency must solidify into property, and instead exploring alternative frameworks: communal authorship, dynamic attribution, or even the recognition of assemblages themselves as legal or aesthetic agents. In this view, artistic practice becomes a site of experimentation not only in aesthetics but in ontology and law. By foregrounding hybrid configurations of agency, artists working with AI and algorithmic systems expose the limitations of prevailing intellectual property models and hint at the contours of what Zeilinger calls a “posthumanist cultural commons”—a space where creative expression is no longer tethered to the individual subject, but emerges from the collective operations of complex systems.

This reframing of agency invites us to reconsider what is truly at stake in the rise of generative AI. If style can be encoded, authorship redistributed, and creativity externalised into machinic systems, then artistic identity itself risks being flattened—subsumed by algorithmic generalisation. Yet such risks also present strategic opportunities. As *Future Art Ecosystems 4* notes, artists whose aesthetic signatures are captured by large models might treat this not only as a loss, but as a site of reconfiguration: a chance to intervene in the infrastructure of generation itself, to shape the model from within, or to reclaim artistic agency through subversion and tactical redirection (Serpentine Arts Technologies, 2024, 94). In this sense, style capture is not simply a form of expropriation—it is also a prompt to rethink the boundaries between authorship, branding, and aesthetic individuation. Jacques Attali’s provocation that AI is “a tiny facet of the historical journey towards achieving immortality” (Clancy 2022, 4) further complicates the stakes. If the act of composition traditionally offered a form of aesthetic permanence—projecting one’s creative decisions into the future—then the integration of AI into this process does not necessarily erode this power, but reshapes its form. When artists find their style

embedded in the weights of a model, they may be witnessing a new form of “algorithmic preservation”—a condition in which creative identity persists as a generative potential latent within system dynamics. Rather than freezing artistic legacy, such systems render it recombinant, capable of new instantiations and recompositions beyond the original artist’s control.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that “style” has never been a fixed or extractable essence. As Boulez argued in his essay “Aesthetics and its Fetishes”, style cannot be lifted out and reused like a commodity; it results from specific compositional processes bound to their historical moment (Boulez 1986/1961, 32–33). From this perspective, the notion of capturing or transferring style risks misconstruing what is in fact a situated and irreducible act of artistic labour. Yet precisely because generative AI treats style as separable and replicable, it poses urgent questions about how compositional identity is encoded, circulated, and contested within technological infrastructures. This does not validate the commodification of style—but it does demand that artists and theorists confront its new modalities of appropriation, intervention, and potential resistance.

The philosophical backdrop for this shift has been long in the making. As Zeilinger notes, the very concept of “artificial intelligence” implies that intelligence can be decoupled from the human body and instantiated in non-human forms—suggesting a latent capacity for autonomous action, interaction, and interpretation (Zeilinger 2024, 62). But agency, in this expanded sense, is no longer about interior will or intentionality alone. Drawing on Karen Barad’s theory of “agential realism”, agency is redefined as the capacity to affect and be affected within intra-active systems—assemblages of human and non-human actants whose interactions constitute the conditions of emergence (Barad 2007; Zeilinger 2021, 44). From this perspective, AI artworks are not the products of singular minds or isolated systems. They are co-produced by ecologies of training data, computational architectures, human inputs, material constraints, and networked publics. The figure of the solitary creator—already destabilised in contemporary art—is further displaced by what Zeilinger calls the “speculative scattering of agency across human-machinic-algorithmic assemblages” (2021, 45). This scattering does not dissolve responsibility, but redistributes it across a field of interdependent operations.

To accept this reframing is not to embrace naïve techno-optimism. As Barbara Bolt—theorist of artistic research and new materialism—warns, the increasing convergence

of human and machinic agencies raises significant epistemic and ethical questions. In our current socio-technical milieu, algorithms often function as decision-making ensembles, rendering people and representations as data, and assigning value through computational metrics (Bolt 2023, 99–100). These systems may appear neutral or intelligent, but they are deeply entangled with histories of abstraction, reduction, and enclosure.

Posthumanist agential assemblages “do not operate ‘by design,’ simply enacting algorithmic routines that execute predetermined protocols” (Zeilinger 2021, 172). Instead, they evolve through the interactions of their parts, often in ways not fully predictable or controllable. This again mirrors the earlier theme of problematisation and uncertainty: the artist of an assemblage is not entirely sure what will happen, but sets things in motion to explore possibilities. It is an *experimental* ethos taken to a structural level. We can see parallels in earlier art movements and theories: the “open work” concept by Umberto Eco (Eco, 1989), or the indeterminate music of John Cage, or the interactive art of the 1960s – all these gave up some authorial control to gain a richer engagement with chance and participant input. What posthumanist theory adds is a clearer articulation of the role of the *non-human* in this equation (for Cage, chance might be a throwing of the coins in *I Ching*, but for new media artists, chance might come from an AI’s output or a biological process). Posthumanist agential assemblages represent the convergence of the combinatorial, assemblage-based view of creativity with an explicit inclusion of non-human agency and a de-centering of the human. They demonstrate that when artists act more like participants in a network than sovereign creators, new forms of creativity emerge that challenge our definitions of authorship and originality. The artist’s role shifts from *author* to *operator*, and from *operator* to the one who *curates* a set of agents (human and non-human) and conditions, and then allows an artwork to unfold. This is a significant departure from the image of the artist as a lone genius pouring forth a personal vision; instead, the artist becomes a guide of collective, interactive processes unfolding between both human and non-human actants.

Artists as Curators

The previous discussions lead to an expanded conception of the artist's role – one that can be aptly described as *curatorial*. If creativity is combinatorial and if artworks are assemblages of many elements and agents, then the artist's task often resembles that of a curator: selecting, combining, arranging, and presenting elements in a way that generates new meaning and experiences. The phrase “artists as curators” does not simply mean artists who also happen to curate exhibitions (though many do in contemporary practice); it points to a broader phenomenon in which creation itself is an act of curation. In this understanding, the boundary between making art and curating art dissolves. The emphasis shifts from the fabrication of a singular art object to the organisation of relations among elements—whether those elements are objects, people, ideas, or other components.

Ed McKeon—researcher, lecturer, and curatorial producer of experimental practices—suggests the idea of *curatorial composing* (2022), in which the artist's labour increasingly lies not in composing works but in composing public encounters—spaces of appearance where meaning is not given but negotiated. In this sense, the artist as curator is not an overseer of artefacts but a participant in the co-articulation of values, problems, and possibilities—an agent of configuration in a field of emergent relationalities. By analysing the music theatre practice of composer Heiner Goebbels, McKeon introduces the notion of curatorial composing to describe a form of artistic labour that moves beyond traditional notions of composition (as the authorial generation of musical material) and toward the construction of aesthetic situations—settings in which materials, performers, environments, technologies, and audiences are arranged in ways that provoke emergent meanings. Drawing on Goebbels' intermedial and often collaborative practice, McKeon argues that the composer increasingly takes on a role more akin to that of a curator. Importantly, McKeon also traces this shift to broader changes in post-Cagean aesthetics, where the role of the composer becomes one of framing rather than authoring, of making choices about situations rather than prescribing content. What emerges is not a diminished role for the artist, but a re-conceived one: as a cartographer of problematics and a decision-maker whose practice involves tracing the provenance of materials and assembling them into provisional and contingent structures of meaning. The artist is no longer a solitary originator but a composer of encounters, an assembler of assemblages.

In conclusion, viewing artists as curators synthesises the chapter's key arguments. The artist-curator generates *fields of problematisation* by arranging elements in ways that confront the audience with questions rather than answers. Creativity in this role is *combinatorial* and connective, dispelling the myth of isolated genius and instead orchestrating collective, cross-boundary creativity (human with human, human with non-human). Musical works or other artworks become dynamic and ever-changing *assemblages* under the artist-curator's hand—living systems open to continual reinterpretation and change, rather than sealed creations. Posthumanist sensitivity in curation means the artist acknowledges non-human agencies and embraces a de-centered, networked form of authorship. Here, authorship is not the property of an isolated individual but an emergent effect of intra-actions among diverse agents—artists, algorithms, datasets, legal frameworks, and publics. This does not lessen the artist's importance; on the contrary, it is a profoundly skilled task to weave together such assemblages effectively. It requires broad knowledge, intuition, and a willingness to relinquish total control—to let the artwork breathe and evolve.

The artist as curator creates the *conditions* for creativity and critical insight. In doing so, such artists invite us – their audiences and fellow participants – into the heart of the creative process. We become part of the assemblage, part of the meaning-making. And in that collaborative space of not-knowing, of exploration and curating the unknown, art fulfils its deepest purpose: not to confirm what we already know, but to transform how we think, feel, and envision what is possible.