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LAHP AHRC Collaborative PhD Studentship

Creative AI as a medium in artistic and curatorial practice

Partner: Serpentine Galleries
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Applications are invited for a LAHP/AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award at **King's College London in collaboration with Serpentine Galleries**. This fully-funded studentship will commence in October 2020.

The proposed PhD project systematically explores new needs created by AI as a medium of artistic production. Art institutions play a crucial role in opening up the black box that currently is AI. They are places for exploring and reflecting the societal impact of this technology, and a critical but also creative response is urgent (Bucher 2018, House of Lords Select Committee for AI 2018, O'Neil 2016). Advanced technologies have had a transformational impact on the corporate world (Whittaker, Crawford, et.al. 2018), while the cultural sector has been slow to acquire an adequate media literacy of the disruptive medium that is new AI. At the same time, the question of contemporary art ecology's interface with technology has been noticed in media studies (Parisi 2013; Hui 2016), which regularly rely on and reflect art works to show the critical potential of the new media they inquire; it has also been noticed in art gallery studies (Paul 2009, Graham 2016). As a response to this gap regarding the media literacy of creative AI, the Serpentine Gallery initiated the *Creative AI lab*, a collaboration with the Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London, in July 2019. The lab has been founded to advance the transdisciplinary understanding of AI needed in the context of arts and technology collaborations through workshops, interviews and reports.

The PhD project would be part of this lab assisting with the research including through participatory observations of the commissioning of AI productions by the Serpentine Gallery. Such an infrastructural analysis would result in a macro mapping of contemporary art's socio-institutional and economic ecology. The aim of the PhD would be to explore and identify best curatorial practice as well as understand critical knowledge gaps thereby informing the organisational structure needed to exhibit technical-artistic production, as well as the complicated intra- and inter-institutional functioning within a field deeply entangled with a new medium such as creative AI.

Analysing the organisational structure and understanding the needed media literacy of creative AI in the cultural sector requires a transdisciplinary approach (Suchmann 2007 and 2011) that traverses the digital technology 'AI' from a technical, societal and aesthetic perspective in the specific context of contemporary artistic practice and cultural institutions and the general context of the rapidly developing applications of AI technologies. Creating artworks using AI often rely on the new programming technology that known as machine learning. Artists need to have a computational know-how of machine learning (Paglen 2019) or (more often) work with a technical producer programming the machine learning system for the artists, who then manipulates an interface preconfiguring specific aspects. A deeper understanding of this new form of artistic production and its technical infrastructure and interfaces are is needed to support the production, costing, and management of artistic AI projects.

Figure 1 Ian Cheng, Serpentine Gallery installation view, BOB © 2018 Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy of the artist and Serpentine Galleries

Besides planning, technical aspect of AI as a creative medium are also deeply linked to questions of agency from two sides: (1) early AI commissions by the Serpentine Galleries have shown that the usage of AI can potentially lead to **reconfiguration of curatorial production** with the technical role becoming a *coproducer* more than just a *contractor* of the artist; (2) the use of AI as a creative medium also **automates aspects of the artistic creation**, leading to a productive tension at play between creativity and automatization. And last but not least, a deeper understanding of creative AI is urgently needed when it comes to commissions that face the public. While AI is being applied to more and more aspects of our lives, the media literacy around it is thin. Understanding societal questions from a curatorial perspective is necessary as they can range from due diligence for the institution to a much-needed reflective consideration of the role of AI in society and its ethical aspects such as bias.

To systematically understand those technical, aesthetical and societal-ethical aspects in creative AI, the research project will use the digital commissions of creative AI in the Serpentine Galleries as case studies hereby asking the following research questions:

RQ1 – exploring artistic practice: How does the usage of AI in artistic practice re-configure responsibilities and creative authorship and how is this reflected in the commissioning process?

RQ2 – exploring curatorial practice: How can the critical and creative response of artworks using creative AI be linked to the broad societal impact of this technology and what strategies can be used in curatorial practises?

While the commissions of the Serpentine Galleries can be used as in-depths case studies, the Creative AI lab has already planned a range from workshops in collaboration with other art institutions, which would ensure access to a broad range of data to cross-reference the data of the analysed cases.

Aims of the project and originality
The research questions aim to map the disruptive effect of the new medium creative AI on artistic and curatorial practice. With this, the project will help to fill the existing knowledge gap by surveying contemporary art productions and commissions involving the technology sector. The project focuses on three intertwined research objectives that combine theoretical and practical work:

I. To understand the media literacy needed in cultural institutions working with art works using creative AI using the case of the Serpentine Gallery.
II. To identify curatorial strategies that need to be adopted internally and externally to open up the black box of AI, i.e. when commissioning AI art works as well as when introducing them to an audience.
III. To transform the implications derived from I and II into a set of operational scenarios that can provide general guidance to cultural institutions when using AI.

Methodology
The project spans a wide range of different disciplines, among them media studies, technology studies and in parts computer science but also critical theory and art history, as well as art gallery and museum studies and organisational studies. Naturally, a mixed methodology for such an interdisciplinary project will lead to the triangulation of a range of methods. This will include the approach of critical theory from the humanities, qualitative research from the social sciences as well as ethnographic methods such as participatory observation. We would also encourage the more experimental approach 'workshop as a method', which has been explored in great depth in the Department of Digital Humanities. To add some more detail to this: art-historic research into past exhibitions and artworks will provide a much-needed background, as will an informed analysis of relevant media and technology studies shedding critical light on contemporary AI - these contribute to research objective I. Furthermore, in-depths interviews with artists, curators and technical producers will allow to contribute to research objective II as will participatory observation and the workshop as a method – these will contribute to research objective II.

Timescale PhD
1-6 months: literature and desk research
6-12 months: beginning of drafting introduction, literature review, methodology draft; familiarising with digital commissions
PhD upgrade between 12-18 months – introduction, literature review, first draft of methodology.
12-24 months field work: participatory observation of commission and interviews.
25-36 months: writing up findings

Dissemination and impact
The project will be fully integrated in a range of planned public events of the Creative AI lab that are planned both at King's College London and the Serpentine Galleries. For the two coming academic years, for example, the Creative AI lab has planned three workshops and two public events; further events are being discussed

for the future. Also, the student will be encouraged and mentored to present research at these events and also to plan her or his own workshops and a smaller conference.

Studentship details:

The AHRC-funded London Arts and Humanities Partnership (LAHP) brings together eight leading British research universities: King's College London, London School of Economics and Political Science, Queen Mary University London, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Royal College of Art, Royal College of Music, School of Advanced Study and University College London.

The studentship includes a stipend at the Research Council UK Home/ EU rate (£17,009 per annum 2019/20 rates) plus tuition fees for three and half years. The awarded candidate will also be entitled to a £550 per annum stipend top-up. As a LAHP student, the successful candidate will have full access to the LAHP Doctoral Training Partnership development activities and networking opportunities, joining a cohort of about 90 students per year. Studentships can be either full or part-time.

Applicants should have a good undergraduate degree in a relevant discipline, and a Masters-level qualification or equivalent which meets AHRC requirements for research training. Applicants with relevant work/professional experience who are considering doing a PhD are also encouraged to apply.

Closing Date: 1ˢᵗ March 2020

For more information and to apply for the studentship, please see the [LAHP website.](#)

Planned interview dates are **Tuesday, 17 and Wednesday, 18 March**.

Literature

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