Theoretical Dilemmas of Artistic Originality in the Age of Digital Technology

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical dilemmas of artistic originality in the age of digital technology. It examines how traditional concepts of authorship, authenticity, and creativity have been reshaped by digital reproduction, algorithmic systems, and networked forms of artmaking. The discussion begins with the modernist inheritance of originality, tracing how the Romantic idea of the artist as a singular genius evolved into a central value of modern art. It then considers how digital reproduction has destabilized the very notion of the "original," as perfect copies can now circulate endlessly without loss or decay. The analysis extends to algorithmic creativity and the posthuman author, showing how artificial intelligence has turned creation into a shared process between human and machine. The paper also discusses the paradox of digital authenticity, focusing on how blockchain technology and NFTs attempt to restore the "aura" of originality described by Walter Benjamin. Finally, it argues for a relational theory of originality, where creative value lies not in isolation or ownership but in connection, collaboration, and circulation within digital culture. The study concludes that originality today is not lost but transformed, it now exists through relations, systems, and the continuous movement of meaning across human and technological networks.

Keywords: originality, authorship, digital art, authenticity, blockchain, reproduction

1. Introduction

The idea of artistic originality has always played a central role in Western theories of art. In the digital age, this idea faces new challenges. What used to describe the personal vision of an individual artist is now linked to computer programs, data systems, and network platforms. Digital tools such as artificial intelligence, algorithmic image generation, and online archives have changed how artworks are created and understood. The line between creation and reproduction becomes difficult to define. The digital image or sound does not exist as a single material object but as information that can be copied endlessly. When the same file can be reproduced without loss, the idea of an "original" work begins to lose its meaning.

In earlier centuries, originality was often seen as proof of human imagination and individuality. Thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Samuel Taylor Coleridge described the artist as a genius who could bring something new into the world. This view shaped modern ideas about authorship and creative ownership. It also supported the economic system of art by connecting originality with value. The belief that an artist's work is

unique helped define both aesthetic judgment and copyright law. Yet this belief depends on a clear idea of authorship. It assumes that a work begins with a single creator and moves outward into the world as a finished object. Digital technologies question this order. When an image is generated by an algorithm trained on thousands of other images, authorship becomes collective and diffuse.

The modern concept of originality also relied on material presence. Walter Benjamin described how the aura of a traditional artwork came from its physical existence in a specific place and time. The photograph or film, in his view, weakened this aura by allowing unlimited reproduction. In digital culture, the loss of aura becomes complete. The digital work exists only as data. Its meaning depends on circulation rather than presence. The value of an image or video is often measured by how many times it is viewed, shared, or remixed. Visibility replaces authenticity as the main sign of creative success.

Online environments also reshape the social life of art. Artists present their work through digital platforms that sort and display content using algorithms. What appears to be original often results from patterns of recommendation and repetition. Audiences encounter art as part of an ongoing stream of information. Within this flow, originality becomes a matter of recognition rather than invention. The artist must create difference inside a system built on similarity.

The question of artistic originality in the digital age is not about whether art can still be new. It is about how the conditions of newness are formed when technology organizes every stage of creation, display, and reception. The artist, the software, and the audience are now part of the same creative network. Understanding this change requires a different kind of theory, one that studies originality as a relation rather than a possession, and creativity as an open process rather than an act of individual genius.

2. The Modernist Inheritance: Originality and Authorship

The idea of originality in modern art came from the Romantic period. At that time, people began to see the artist as a special kind of person. The artist was not only someone with skill but someone with imagination and deep feeling. The artist's value came from the ability to make something that had never existed before. Art became a sign of individuality. It was no longer only about beauty or imitation of nature. It became a way of showing personal vision. The painter, the writer, or the composer was expected to express inner truth. The work of art showed who the artist was.

Immanuel Kant helped shape this idea. In *Critique of Judgment* (1790), he said that genius is a talent that gives the rule to art. Genius cannot be learned or copied. It comes from nature and works through imagination. The artist with genius produces ideas that cannot be explained by reason alone. This view placed the artist above craft. Making art was not only a skill; it was a creative act that revealed the freedom of the human mind. For Kant, the highest kind of originality was not imitation but invention (Kant, 2000). The genius made art that became a model for others, not by following rules but by creating them.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge also described imagination as a divine power. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he said that the creative mind reflects God's creative act. The imagination does not copy the world but shapes it. The artist's work is an act of renewal. Coleridge's idea joined spiritual and artistic creation. It made art a mirror of divine energy. This belief gave originality moral weight. To be original was not only to be creative but also to be true to one's inner nature (Coleridge, 1817).

This new way of thinking changed how society saw artists. In earlier times, artists were often seen as craftsmen. They worked for patrons, churches, or kings. Their task was to serve others. In the Romantic and modern periods, this changed. The artist became a symbol of freedom and independence. The idea of the artist as an outsider, living apart from common life, became powerful. Artists like Beethoven and Byron were admired for their individuality and struggle. Their originality was proof of their authenticity. To imitate others was to lose one's soul.

This idea of originality also shaped how art was owned and traded. As art gained personal meaning, it also gained market value. The artist's name became a mark of worth. Copyright law was created to protect this link between creator and work. It gave artists and writers legal control over what they made. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Rose have shown that modern authorship was built on this system of ownership. It turned imagination into property

(Rose, 1993). A poem, a painting, or a song could be sold like an object. Originality became both an artistic ideal and an economic resource.

The belief in originality also supported the idea of progress. In the nineteenth century, modern life was defined by change. Industry, science, and technology grew quickly. Artists saw themselves as part of this movement. They believed art should renew itself in every generation. Each new style was a reaction to the one before it. To be original meant to break with tradition. Artists such as Cézanne, Joyce, and Stravinsky became famous for their courage to experiment. Critics praised them for creating new languages of form and sound. The story of modern art was told as a line of innovations.

Modernism gave this search for originality a deeper meaning. Artists began to ask what art itself was. They wanted to find the essence of their medium. Painters like Kandinsky and Mondrian tried to express pure feeling or universal order through abstraction. Writers like T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf experimented with time and consciousness. In each case, originality meant exploring the limits of form. The modernist artist was not only a creator but also a thinker.

At the same time, new technology made reproduction easier. Photography, film, and printing changed how images and texts were made and shared. The same work could now exist in many copies. This raised questions about originality. Walter Benjamin wrote about this in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). He said that when art can be copied, it loses its "aura." The aura is the special presence that comes from being in one place at one time. A painting in a church or museum has this aura. A photograph or print does not. For Benjamin, reproduction changed how people experienced art. It made art more accessible but also less sacred (Benjamin, 2008).

Benjamin's idea of the aura described a central problem of modernity. People wanted art to be both original and available. The loss of aura was also a gain. More people could see art than ever before. Art entered daily life. Yet, the idea of originality survived. Even copies were judged by how they related to an unseen original. The modern world lived with both desires: to share art widely and to keep its uniqueness.

In the early twentieth century, avant-garde movements tried to redefine originality. The surrealists looked for truth in dreams and chance. The abstract artists looked for purity in line and color. Each group said it was finding a new beginning. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) questioned whether originality could exist at all. By presenting a common urinal as art, he suggested that originality lies in the act of choice, not in the object itself. The artist became a thinker who created meaning through context. This idea changed art forever.

Even as artists questioned originality, the art world continued to depend on it. Museums, galleries, and critics built careers around identifying original works and new styles. Art history was told as a story of progress, from one "genius" to another. The image of the artist as a unique individual remained strong. It fit modern values of freedom, individuality, and success. The myth of originality served both culture and commerce.

In the mid-twentieth century, new theories challenged this myth. Roland Barthes wrote "The Death of the Author" (1967), where he argued that meaning comes from the reader, not from the writer (Barthes, 1977). The author, he said, is only one voice among many in a text. Michel Foucault also questioned authorship. In *What Is an Author?*, he said that the author is a function created by society. The name of the author helps control meaning and value (Foucault, 1979). These ideas showed that originality is not natural but constructed. It depends on cultural systems that decide who counts as a creator.

Even with these critiques, the art world continued to use the idea of the author. A painting signed by a famous name is still worth more than an unsigned one. Authorship remains a way to give value and identity to art. The figure of the artist as genius still organizes how we think about creativity. This shows the strength of the modernist inheritance. It continues to shape ideas about art even in the digital age.

This inheritance connects three main ideas: genius, ownership, and progress. Genius defines the artist as a special kind of person. Ownership links creativity to property and value. Progress ties originality to innovation and change. Together, they form a structure that made sense in the modern world. It gave art social meaning and economic value. It told people what kind of work was important and who had the right to

make it.

Before digital technology, this system seemed stable. The original work could be found and owned. A painting existed in one place. A book had one author. But now, with digital tools, perfect copies can be made endlessly. The old signs of originality no longer work. A digital file has no single version or place. The line between copy and original disappears. Yet the language of originality still remains. People still look for authors and authenticity even when the medium makes such things uncertain.

The modernist idea of originality cannot explain the creative world of today, but it continues to influence it. Artists still sign their works, and markets still prize uniqueness. These habits show that the myth of originality still carries emotional and cultural power. The modernist inheritance has not vanished; it has become part of the background of how people understand creativity. It remains a structure we live within, even as new forms of art and technology challenge its meaning.

3. Digital Reproduction and the Collapse of the Original

Digital technology has changed how people understand art, creativity, and originality. In the past, an artwork was a single object that existed in one place and one moment. It could be touched, it could age, and it carried the signs of time. The painting on a wall or the sculpture in a museum had a sense of presence that could not be copied. People called this the "original." It was more valuable and meaningful than any copy because it carried the trace of the artist's hand and the memory of its making. The digital age has changed this completely. Digital reproduction makes it possible to create perfect copies that look and sound the same as the original. The idea of the unique work begins to lose its meaning.

When an artwork becomes digital, it turns into data. A photograph, a song, or a film is stored as code made of numbers. The data can be copied endlessly without any loss in quality. Each copy is exactly the same as the first one. It does not matter where the file is or who owns it. Every version is identical. In this new condition, the difference between original and copy no longer makes sense. The work exists everywhere at once. The original is no longer a physical object but a set of information.

Walter Benjamin was one of the first to describe this kind of change. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), he said that when technology allows art to be reproduced many times, the work loses its "aura." The aura is the special feeling that comes from being in the presence of something unique. A painting has an aura because it stands in a certain place and time. It carries the history of its creation and the marks of its material life. When a photograph or a film makes that image available everywhere, the aura weakens. The artwork becomes a product that can move freely through space and time (Benjamin, 2008).

Benjamin's idea of the loss of aura explains what happens in the digital world. A digital artwork has no single location. It does not age or change with time. The file remains the same no matter how many times it is seen or moved. Its meaning no longer depends on its presence but on its circulation. The power of the image comes not from where it is but from how widely it spreads. The digital world turns aura into visibility. The more people see something, the more important it becomes.

Jean Baudrillard described this change in another way. He said that modern culture lives in a state of "simulation." Images no longer represent real things but other images. Reality itself becomes a network of signs. He called this the age of the "simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994). A simulacrum is not a fake copy of something real; it is a copy that replaces reality. In the digital age, an image does not need an original at all. A digital painting, a video, or an AI-generated picture can exist without ever referring to a physical object. What people see on screens becomes real for them, even if it has no original version.

This creates what Baudrillard called "hyperreality." In hyperreality, images and experiences merge. People do not see a clear line between what is real and what is simulated. When someone looks at a digital image, it feels real because it looks perfect. It has color, light, and form, but it has no physical substance. This illusion is powerful because it feels complete. The digital image becomes more attractive than reality itself. It gives pleasure, attention, and meaning to those who look at it. The collapse of the original begins when people start to value the copy more than the thing it imitates.

Digital reproduction also changes how artists make and share work. The artist used to create

objects that would last. The painting or the book was something to be preserved. Today, artists often work with temporary materials such as pixels, code, or sound files. Their work is meant to be shared, remixed, and transformed. Sampling, repetition, and collage are common methods. Artists take pieces of existing material and rearrange them in new ways. The result is not a new object but a new connection between many objects.

Lev Manovich describes this as the culture of the "database" (Manovich, 2001). In this culture, everything can be stored, copied, and reused. The artist becomes a curator who selects and organizes. The creative act is not to invent from nothing but to choose and combine. The originality of a digital artwork lies in the way it connects things that already exist. This makes digital art both deeply creative and deeply dependent on what came before. Every new work is made from the traces of old ones.

The change also affects how people view art. In the past, going to see art was a physical experience. People traveled to museums, galleries, or theaters. The work had a clear boundary between itself and the viewer. It was something separate that asked for attention. Digital art appears on screens that people use every day. It shares space with social media, messages, and news. It mixes with the flow of daily life. A digital image can be seen on a phone, shared in a second, and forgotten just as fast. The context becomes part of the artwork itself.

The internet also changes how value works in art. When anything can be copied, scarcity disappears. Scarcity used to create value in art markets. A unique painting or sculpture could be sold for high prices because there was only one of it. Digital art challenges this system. A file can be copied infinitely, so it cannot be owned in the old way. Some artists and collectors now use blockchain technology to make ownership visible. The blockchain records every transaction, creating a kind of certificate called a non-fungible token (NFT). The NFT marks one version of a file as special. It does not make the file unique in itself, but it gives it symbolic ownership. This system tries to restore a kind of digital aura through verification rather than presence (Cooke, 2024).

This situation creates a paradox. Digital reproduction destroys the old sense of originality but also creates new ways of defining it. An artist can claim authorship not through the material object but through the record of creation. The "original" becomes an event or a process instead of a thing. Viewers see art not as a fixed object but as something that moves, changes, and connects with other works.

The digital environment also transforms memory. A painting or sculpture carries traces of its own age. It shows the marks of time. Digital art does not. The file stays new. It can be copied forever without changing. It does not show its past. This creates a new kind of history. The memory of the artwork exists in networks rather than in the object. When people share or alter a file, each version becomes part of its history. The life of the work is made of all its appearances, not a single origin.

Digital reproduction changes how authorship is understood. When an image or song is shared online, it can be changed by anyone. A meme or a remix often has no clear author. It moves through many hands, and each person adds something. The line between creator and audience becomes unclear. The artwork is made by collective effort. This makes the idea of the single author seem outdated. It shows that creation can be social and open rather than individual and private.

The law, however, still follows older ideas. Copyright assumes there is one original creator. It protects the work as property that belongs to that person. But in the digital world, this rule is difficult to apply. When thousands of users remix the same material, ownership becomes unclear. Some say this freedom creates a richer culture. Others fear it takes away recognition from those who make the first version. The debate about authorship is really a debate about value. It asks whether originality can survive when everyone can create and copy.

The digital age also changes the role of the viewer. In a museum, people stand before a painting and observe. They are outside the work. In digital media, the viewer often becomes a participant. They can click, scroll, change, or share. The act of viewing becomes an act of creation. The artwork depends on this interaction to exist. The meaning of the work is not fixed but produced each time it is seen.

Digital reproduction also affects how art is preserved. Keeping a digital artwork alive means keeping its format readable. Technology

changes fast, and old software becomes obsolete. The artwork may disappear not because it breaks but because people can no longer open the file. This creates a new kind of fragility. A painting can last hundreds of years if protected, but a digital file can vanish in a decade if its format is lost. Preservation now means constant renewal.

Digital media also change how time works in art. A painting captures one moment and holds it forever. A video or an interactive work unfolds over time. A digital artwork can change every second. It can be updated or rewritten. It can evolve like a living thing. This flexibility gives new life to creativity but also removes the finality that older art forms had. There is no clear moment when the work is finished. It is always becoming something else.

The digital world also changes how people see themselves. On social media, people produce endless images of their own lives. These images are edited, filtered, and shared. Each picture is both real and artificial. The self becomes another form of digital reproduction. The idea of an original self fades into a series of copies. People present themselves through endless versions, each shaped by technology and audience. This shows how the collapse of the original extends beyond art to daily life.

Digital reproduction has turned originality into a question rather than a fact. The original no longer stands alone. Every work exists within a field of versions, copies, and relations. The artist's task is to find meaning within this field, not to escape it. The power of art today lies in its ability to reveal how connection and repetition shape meaning. What was once a limit, the copy, has become the condition of creation itself.

4. Algorithmic Creativity and the Posthuman Author

Algorithmic systems have changed how people think about creativity, authorship, and art. The artist is not seen as one person working alone anymore. Making art now happens through a network that joins humans, machines, and data. Computers can now make images, music, and text that look creative. This makes people ask new questions about what an author is and whether originality still depends on human imagination.

An algorithm is a list of steps that a computer follows to reach a result. In art, these steps can make pictures, sounds, or words. The artist gives the system instructions or data to use. The computer then creates results that can be simple or unexpected. The artist's job is to make the process, not each small part. This kind of art is called generative art. It uses both rules and chance. The system can make many results that all follow the same plan but look different.

Early computer artists helped people see how machines could be creative. They wrote simple programs that drew lines, shapes, and colors. The artist made the logic that guided the system. The machine then carried out the work. This showed that creativity could exist inside a system, even without the artist touching the work directly. The act of making art became a way to think about the relation between control and freedom.

Machine learning has made this kind of creation more complex. Modern systems can learn by looking at huge amounts of data. They find patterns and create new examples that look like the data they studied. When a program makes a new image or piece of writing, it does not copy one single thing. It mixes many examples into something that feels new. It seems creative, but it does not think like a person. The computer cannot feel or judge. It works through numbers, learning from difference and repetition.

This way of making art changes the artist's role. The artist becomes a guide who sets up the process. They build systems that can make choices on their own. The artwork becomes a result of both human design and machine activity. The artist and the system form a partnership. The computer cannot act without a person, but the person cannot control the computer's choices completely. The final work comes from the mix between them.

When people talk about posthuman creativity, they mean that humans and machines work together in a shared way. The human body and mind are not separate from the tools they use. The machine becomes a part of how the human thinks and creates. In algorithmic art, this connection becomes easy to see. The artwork is not only the result of human effort. It is also a trace of how the system works. Creativity becomes a meeting point between people and machines.

Artists who use algorithms often say that working with these systems feels like having a conversation. The artist gives the computer data and rules. The system answers by creating

pictures or sounds. The artist then reacts and makes changes. The process repeats again and again. The art grows out of this back-and-forth. The meaning of the work comes from the exchange. It is never fully planned.

This type of art also changes what originality means. In the past, originality meant creating something completely new. It was a sign of individual imagination. In algorithmic art, the idea of originality moves away from the single artist. The creative act is building a system that can make many new things. The artist's originality is in designing possibilities. Each time the system runs, it makes something new. The artwork is not one object but the process that produces objects.

This change also makes people question who owns the work. If a computer creates a picture, who should be called the author? The person who built the program? The person who gave the computer data? The person who asked it to create? It becomes hard to say. The creative act now includes many steps and many people. The idea that art belongs to one person no longer fits. Art becomes a shared process.

Algorithmic art also changes the meaning of authenticity. Before, an artwork was authentic because the artist made it by hand. The painting showed the touch of the maker. In digital and algorithmic art, this link does not exist. The artist's hand never touches the work. But the system and the data carry the artist's mark in another way. The way the program is written and the data it uses show the artist's choices. The result is not fake, but its authenticity comes from the process, not the object.

Many artists describe working with computers as a learning experience. They train the system, but the system also changes how they think. The process is like a circle where both sides affect each other. The artist must imagine how the system will act. The computer's reactions then lead the artist to make new decisions. The act of creation becomes a kind of shared thinking. The work exists between two forms of intelligence—human and machine.

This way of making art also changes how viewers experience it. A painting in a museum is still and complete. It does not change when people look at it. A digital artwork can move or respond to touch. It can look different each time it appears. The viewer becomes part of how it works. What the viewer does can change the outcome. The artwork becomes alive only when people interact with it. It depends on movement and reaction.

In this kind of art, the idea of the finished work loses meaning. The system can always make new versions. Each version is complete in its moment but not final. The art keeps changing as long as it exists. This way of thinking matches how people live with technology. Life online moves fast, and nothing stays the same for long. The artwork reflects this condition. It becomes a record of change.

This also brings new questions about ethics. The data that machines use often comes from work made by other people. Some artists worry that their creations are being reused without permission. Others say that learning from data is part of what art has always done. All artists take ideas from the world around them. The difference is that machines can use so much more material and do it very fast. This changes the balance between influence and copying.

Artists who work with algorithms must think carefully about their materials. They have to ask where their data comes from and what it shows. Machines can repeat patterns of bias found in data. They can spread unfair ideas or images. The artist must make choices that reduce this risk. Making art with machines also means taking responsibility for how those machines behave.

Algorithmic creativity shows that art is not just a personal act anymore. It is made through networks of people, tools, and systems. The artist is not replaced by the machine. The artist's role changes. They become a designer, a teacher, and a collaborator. Their originality comes from building relations and processes that create new things. The artwork is part of a larger world where creativity belongs to both humans and machines.

This kind of art reflects how people now live with technology. Phones, computers, and networks shape how people see and think. The line between human and machine becomes thin. Art made with algorithms shows this change in a clear way. It helps people see that creativity is not a single spark but a shared flow of ideas and actions. The posthuman author is not one person but a relation between many forces. Art becomes a sign of how humans and machines build the world together.

5. The Paradox of Digital Authenticity:

Blockchain and the Return of the Aura

Digital technology has created a world in which art can be copied without limit. Every image, sound, or text that exists in digital form can be reproduced perfectly. This condition has dissolved the material basis of authenticity. Walter Benjamin wrote in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that the aura of an artwork comes from its presence in time and space, and that reproduction destroys this presence. The digital environment extends this logic until the distinction between original and copy almost disappears. Yet blockchain technology has emerged as a new system that attempts to restore authenticity.

Blockchain records transactions in a permanent and verifiable way. Each entry in the chain is linked to the one before it, creating an unbroken record that cannot be easily altered. In the world of art, this technology has been used to create non-fungible tokens, or NFTs. An NFT is a digital certificate that confirms ownership of a specific digital file. The file itself can still be copied, but the token marks one version as the "authentic" one. In this sense, NFTs create a form of scarcity within the infinite reproducibility of the digital world. They promise a new way to experience uniqueness and possession.

Hannah Cooke (2024) describes NFTs as a form of restricted presence, echoing Benjamin's concept of the aura. The token creates a symbolic space around the digital work, giving it a sense of authenticity that exists not in material form but in social recognition. The aura in this case does not arise from physical singularity but from verifiable ownership. The blockchain serves as a kind of ritual framework that establishes the origin and history of the artwork. Each transfer or sale becomes part of its digital biography. This process reintroduces a trace of historical continuity, which Benjamin saw as essential to the aura.

At the same time, this return of the aura is paradoxical. The blockchain does not make the digital file unique in substance. It makes it unique in record. The value of the NFT depends on belief in the authority of the system that verifies it. Zoran Poposki (2025) argues that NFTs represent the "apotheosis of commodification" in digital art. They turn the idea of authenticity into a form of market value. The aura that Benjamin described as a spiritual

quality becomes a financial one. The NFT gives art a sense of originality by attaching it to a transaction. In this way, the token becomes both proof of ownership and a sign of economic speculation.

This process reveals a contradiction at the heart of digital authenticity. On one hand, blockchain offers a technical solution to the problem of reproducibility. It allows digital artists to claim ownership and receive compensation for their work. On the other hand, it reduces authenticity to an abstract form of property. The unique record replaces the unique object. As Jussi Sipilä (2020) notes, the blockchain redefines authorship and originality by linking them to verification rather than creation. The digital artist becomes a producer of traceable data instead of material forms.

The idea that blockchain restores authenticity can be seen as a response to anxiety about loss. In a culture where everything can be copied, people seek new ways to mark possession and difference. NFTs answer this need by giving digital art an identity that can be owned and traded. Yet this identity exists only within a system of code. Giancarlo Frosio and Anthony O'Dwyer (2024) describe this as the transformation of art into a digital asset. The artwork becomes part of a financial network where authenticity and ownership are measured in cryptographic terms. The aura returns, but in the form of data.

This shift also has social and philosophical implications. The aura in Benjamin's sense involved distance and reverence. It invited contemplation by placing the viewer before something unrepeatable. The blockchain aura, by contrast, depends on visibility and transaction. It is created by the act of buying, selling, and displaying proof of ownership. The experience of authenticity becomes public and performative. Displaying an NFT signals participation in a network of value. The uniqueness of the work lies not in what it is but in who owns it and how it circulates.

Some scholars see in this development a symptom of what Benjamin would have called fetishization. The NFT transforms the idea of originality into an object of desire detached from the artwork's content. The focus moves from the image or sound to the token itself. Pablo Somonte Ruano (2021) points out that NFTs turn artworks into "crypto-commodities," objects

whose main value lies in their exchangeability. In this sense, blockchain reintroduces the aura not by restoring authenticity but by reinventing its economic function. The aura becomes a brand that distinguishes one digital file from countless others.

Artists and critics remain divided on whether NFTs represent a true return of authenticity or a new form of illusion. Some digital artists use blockchain to secure their work and to build independent markets outside traditional institutions. Others view NFTs as an extension of speculative capitalism. The tension between these positions reflects the broader paradox of digital authenticity: the attempt to recover uniqueness through systems that depend on reproduction. The NFT market thrives precisely because the underlying images can be copied endlessly. The more visible and circulated the image, the more valuable its token becomes.

This paradox shows that authenticity in the digital era is not about material originality but about social trust. The blockchain functions as a symbolic institution that produces credibility. Ownership verified through code replaces authenticity grounded in presence. In this sense, blockchain art fulfills Benjamin's prediction that new technologies would change the function of art in society. The digital aura is not a return to the past but a transformation of what it means for an artwork to have value.

6. Toward a Relational Theory of Originality

The modern understanding of originality has long depended on the idea of separation. The artist was imagined as an independent subject whose creative act stood apart from the world. This view presented originality as a private property that belonged to a single mind. In digital culture, this idea has become unstable. Art today is made within systems of constant exchange and collaboration. Algorithms, archives, audiences, and networks all contribute to the creation of meaning. Originality cannot be explained as an individual act when every work arises from shared data and social context. To speak of originality now requires a new framework, one that treats creation as relational rather than isolated.

A relational theory of originality begins with the idea that no work exists in isolation. Every artwork depends on a set of conditions that make it possible. These conditions include technological tools, cultural histories, and

patterns of interaction. The artist works within a field of relations rather than outside it. This does not mean that originality disappears. It means that originality happens through relationships instead of through separation. In this view, the creative act is a response to existing materials and systems. The work becomes original when it transforms these relations in new ways.

Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of difference helps describe this process. Deleuze argued that creativity does not come from nothing but from variation within what already exists (*Difference and Repetition*, 1994). Difference, for him, is productive. It is not the opposite of identity but the source of it. When applied to art, this means that originality arises from difference rather than invention. Every new work repeats the world in another form. The artist does not escape influence but uses it to generate new configurations. Originality becomes a matter of transformation within a network of differences.

This approach aligns with how digital art functions. A digital artwork often emerges from databases, archives, or code libraries. The artist selects, modifies, and rearranges existing information. The originality of the work lies in how these elements are connected. The value of the artwork comes from its capacity to create new relations among data, images, and viewers. The creative process becomes an act of composition within a living system. Each decision reorders the connections that define meaning. In this sense, originality is an event that happens between things, not inside them.

Relational originality also shifts the role of the artist. Instead of being the origin of meaning, the artist becomes a mediator of connections. The artist's work is to create conditions where something new can emerge. This approach reflects the idea of "assemblage" described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). An assemblage is a network of interacting forces—human, material, and symbolic. An artwork is one kind of assemblage. It brings together elements that already exist and arranges them so that new meanings appear. The originality of the work lies in the pattern of its relations, not in the isolation of its author.

This view changes how originality is judged. In the traditional model, originality meant invention without precedent. In a relational model, it means discovery within relation. The

artist reveals new possibilities hidden in existing systems. A remix, a collage, or an algorithmic artwork can all be original if they reorganize relations in unexpected ways. This understanding also changes how value is assigned. Instead of focusing on ownership, it emphasizes participation and connection. The originality of a work can belong to the system that produces it as much as to the person who made it.

The relational perspective also affects how audiences engage with art. When art exists as a network of relations, the viewer becomes part of the creative process. Meaning arises through interaction rather than passive observation. Each encounter with a digital work creates a new version of it. The experience depends on context, on where, how, and by whom the work is seen. Originality thus continues to unfold as the work moves through different spaces. The artwork becomes a dynamic process rather than a fixed object.

This view of originality is not limited to digital media. It can describe creativity in any context where connection matters more than isolation. In performance, installation, or participatory art, originality often comes from the relationships formed between artist, audience, and environment. The artist's role is to shape these relations into forms that provoke reflection or emotion. The originality of the work is distributed across all who take part in it.

The relational model also responds to ethical and social questions raised by contemporary art. In a globalized culture, creation often involves using materials from many sources. Artists draw on shared images, languages, and technologies. A relational theory acknowledges this dependence without denying the possibility of originality. It replaces the idea of ownership with the idea of contribution. Each participant adds to a larger process. This approach supports a more collective and ecological view of art, where originality belongs to the interaction between individuals and systems.

Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics" describes art that takes human relations as its medium (*Relational Aesthetics*, 1998). For Bourriaud, the artwork creates spaces of encounter rather than objects for display. The value of the work lies in its capacity to build new social connections. A relational theory of originality extends this idea beyond human interaction to include technological and material relations. Digital systems, algorithms, and networks become part of the creative dialogue. The originality of digital art lies in its ability to reshape how these elements interact.

This relational understanding also changes the temporality of originality. In the modernist tradition, originality was tied to the moment of creation. The work was considered complete once the artist finished it. In a relational model, originality is continuous. It evolves as the work interacts with its environment. Each reproduction, remix, or reinterpretation adds to the work's life. The original becomes an open field of potential rather than a fixed point of origin. This approach fits the fluid nature of digital culture, where works circulate, mutate, and adapt over time.

In this framework, originality is not a static quality but a process of becoming. It depends on the ongoing negotiation between repetition and difference. Each act of creation redefines what originality means. The work's identity is not fixed but relational, shaped by its connections and transformations. This view invites a more inclusive understanding of creativity—one that values interaction over isolation and participation over possession.

A relational theory of originality does not deny the importance of the artist but redefines it. The artist remains central as the one who initiates relations, designs systems, and invites participation. But the originality of the work no longer depends solely on the artist's intention. It depends on how the work functions within a network of relations. This perspective opens new ways to think about creativity in a world defined by connection and exchange.

7. Conclusion

Digital technology has changed how originality is understood. In the past, an artwork was linked to the artist's hand and a single, material form. The artist was seen as a unique creator who gave meaning to the work. In digital art, this link is broken. A file can exist in many places at once. Each copy is the same as the first. The difference between original and copy no longer matters. The value of a work depends on how it connects things, not on its material form. Originality becomes a way of building new relations out of what already exists. The artist becomes a maker of systems, not only a producer of objects.

The role of the artist also changes. Creation now happens inside networks of code, data, and communication. Machines, algorithms, and viewers all take part in the process. The work grows from many actions and choices. A painting once carried the trace of one person's labor. A digital artwork carries the movement of many agents, both human and nonhuman. Authenticity no longer comes from the object itself but from its circulation and recognition. Systems like blockchain create digital records that give works an identity, but this identity lives in information, not in physical presence.

Originality now depends on relation instead of isolation. A work can be original because it connects known elements in a new way. Each digital artwork speaks to other works, tools, and contexts. The act of creation is shared among people, machines, and networks. The meaning of originality shifts from invention to connection. What makes a work valuable is not its distance from others but its ability to form new relations among them. Digital culture shows that creativity is not the property of one mind but the result of many forces meeting in the same space.

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