

CAN AI CREATE BEYOND [_*THE MEDIAN*]?

Generation, meaning and the changing role of creative professionals
A Scriptorium Initiative whitepaper · August 2026

**MAKING SENSE
OF THE [_*UNKNOWN*]**

Why we wrote this paper

If creativity is what gives our profession its value, what happens when a machine can generate creative-looking work in seconds?

We work in branding and communications, a profession that prides itself on creativity. We find the unexpected connection, turn strategy into stories and give organizations a distinctive place in culture. Creativity is not merely one service among others. It is central to how we explain our value and often to how we understand ourselves.

Then generative AI arrived. A machine can now produce a campaign platform, write a manifesto, compose a song, design an identity or generate a film in the time it once took us to formulate a first thought. Its work can be generic or absurd. Increasingly, it can also be fluent, surprising and beautiful. It can produce the visible evidence of our expertise without following the path through which we acquired it.

That creates an existential question: is this the beginning of the end of our profession, or the beginning of a different one? The answer depends on a distinction that technological debate often obscures. Generation is not the same as creation.

Generative AI changes creativity by separating generation from acts that once appeared inseparable from it. It can produce the image without seeing, the song without hearing, the expression of grief without grieving and the appearance of craft without acquiring a craft. It can also reveal possibilities that a human creator may never have reached alone. The real question is therefore not whether AI can produce creative-looking artifacts. It already can. The question is what turns one of its countless outputs into something meaningful.

The machine can leave the median. It takes a life to know where to go next.

This paper follows that question from the creative floor to the creative ceiling. It begins with what AI makes abundant: competence, fluency and variation. It then examines the gravitational pull of learned culture—the median—and the promise and danger of moving beyond it. Finally, it asks what life, taste, craftsmanship, authorship and responsibility contribute after generation.

Nanne H.C. Bos
Amsterdam, August 2026

Act I: the floor is rising

The first consequence of generative AI is not that machines become artists. It is that more people gain access to the products of accumulated human craft. Someone without years of training can produce a plausible illustration, musical demo, film sequence or brand manifesto. The result may not be exceptional, but it can be competent enough to communicate an intention, win approval or enter the market.

This matters. Technical inability has prevented many people from expressing ideas. Smaller organizations have lacked the production resources of large ones. Regional filmmakers have been constrained by effects budgets; entrepreneurs by design costs; non-native writers by language. AI can lower these barriers and redistribute expressive power.

What the evidence shows

Experiments find that people using generative AI can produce ideas rated as more creative than those working alone or using conventional search. The gains are often largest for less-experienced or initially less-creative participants. On standard divergent-thinking tasks, leading language models can also equal or outperform average human samples in originality and elaboration. By an output-based definition—novelty combined with usefulness—it is difficult to argue that AI has no creative capacity.

But the same evidence introduces a warning. In controlled story-writing research, access to AI ideas improved individual stories while making the collection of stories more similar. Each writer benefited; the culture produced by the group became narrower.

What rises	What may fall
Individual fluency, polish and speed	The friction that develops underlying skill
Access to professional-looking expression	The visibility of who supplied the craft
The number of plausible possibilities	Collective diversity when everyone uses similar systems
The creative floor	Distinctiveness if competence is mistaken for quality

Competence is not yet quality

Generative systems are exceptionally good at producing the signs of resolution: balanced composition, cinematic light, elegant language, professional texture and familiar emotional cues. These signs can make an output immediately impressive. But a work may be polished and empty, beautiful and generic, or novel-looking without advancing an idea.

The floor is rising because competent execution is becoming abundant. The ceiling is a different question. It concerns work that changes how we see a subject, a medium or ourselves. Raising that ceiling requires more than generating better surfaces.

Act II: the pull of the median

Generative models learn statistical relationships from vast records of existing expression. Their default behavior is to produce plausible continuations: language, images and sounds that resemble patterns culture has already made legible. “The median” is not a literal description of model architecture. It is our metaphor for the cultural center of gravity—the region most likely to be recognized as coherent, appropriate and familiar.

The median is useful. Communication depends on shared conventions. A sentence must be intelligible; a brand must be recognizable; a film needs enough continuity to be followed. Most commercial creativity is constrained by audience, category, medium, budget and objective. AI is powerful precisely because it has learned how these conventions usually fit together.

But the same capability creates convergence. The model’s safest answer tends to reflect the category as it already exists. When every organization uses similar systems to become more professional, professionalism ceases to differentiate anyone.

Combination, exploration and transformation

Margaret Boden’s distinction among combinational, exploratory and transformational creativity clarifies what AI can and cannot easily do.

Form	Creative movement	Implication for AI
Combinational	Connects existing ideas in an unfamiliar configuration.	A major strength: models can traverse distant associations.
Exploratory	Finds new possibilities within an existing conceptual space.	Strong, although exploration often remains near familiar regions.
Transformational	Changes the rules or the conceptual space itself.	Possible through human–AI systems; the model alone does not establish why the new rule matters.

Exploratory creativity does not necessarily leave a domain. It searches within the rules and may move toward the domain’s neglected edges. Transformational creativity changes the game. The historical avant-garde did not merely make unusual objects; it altered what could count as painting, music, cinema or art.

The learned performance of originality

Asking a model to “be creative” often produces a recognizable performance of creativity: dreamlike juxtapositions, inflated metaphor, neon surrealism, eccentric typography or a familiar gesture of rebellion.

The model has learned both conventions and the conventions of unconventionality. It can imitate the appearance of crossing a boundary while remaining inside a familiar genre of boundary-crossing.

Nor does more randomness solve the problem. Noise is also outside the median. Creativity requires deviation and value. The challenge is not simply to leave the statistical center, but to discover which low-probability possibility contains a meaningful new relation.

Generative AI is trained to produce the probable. Art often begins where probability breaks down – but not everything outside probability is art.

Slop: the economics of the median

“AI slop” should not mean any AI work one dislikes. It is better understood as material generated with minimal intention, judgment or responsibility, usually at a volume that treats human attention as an exploitable resource. Slop can be technically polished. Its defining absence is not beauty but sustained care.

Human beings have always produced derivative, opportunistic work. AI changes its economics. Generation approaches zero marginal cost while attention, judgment and cultural space remain finite. The median can now reproduce itself at industrial scale.

Act III: deviation is not meaning

If the median produces competent sameness, the obvious response is to push the model toward its edges. This is where hallucination becomes interesting. In ordinary AI discourse, a hallucination is an unsupported invention: a factual failure. In art, departure from reality can be metaphor, fiction, distortion, dissonance or world-building.

Truth-bound work	Possibility-bound work
Accuracy is part of the creative constraint. Unsupported invention is error or deception.	Departure from reality may be the material from which meaning is made.
Reporting, research, public information, product claims and advice.	Fiction, speculative design, poetry, surrealism and experimental music.

The distinction is not between boring truth and exciting hallucination. Communications often combines both domains. A campaign may invent a fictional world while remaining bound to truthful claims about a product. Creative freedom therefore depends on knowing which layer can depart from reality and which cannot.

The machine supplies deviation

A model can generate an impossible body, a fractured metaphor or an unfamiliar sonic relation without intending to challenge a convention. Most such outputs are useless. Occasionally, one contains the beginning of a language that a human creator would not have found alone.

But hallucination is not yet creativity. It is unclaimed possibility. The decisive act is recognition: someone notices that this deviation reveals something rather than merely failing. Selection follows, then development, context and consequence.

Stage	Creative function
Generation	Produces a field of possibilities.
Recognition	Notices which possibility contains a meaningful tension.
Selection	Chooses what deserves further attention—and rejects the rest.
Transformation	Develops an accident into a coherent form or rule.
Meaning	Connects the work to experience, culture and an audience.
Responsibility	Determines whether and how the work should enter the world.

*The machine supplies the hallucination.
The artist supplies the life.*

Examples of possibility becoming meaningful

Sougwen Chung's Drawing Operations places robotic systems in a live feedback loop with the artist. The robot responds to Chung's marks and prior drawings; Chung responds to the machine's interpretation. AI is not a shortcut to a painting. The relationship between human gesture and machine deviation is the subject and method of the work.

Holly Herndon's PROTO similarly treated a trained system called Spawn as a participant in collective music-making. The unfamiliar vocal material mattered because consenting performers, musical direction and a sustained artistic inquiry gave it context. The system produced sonic possibility; the ensemble turned it into a proposition about collective intelligence.

These examples do not prove that the machine has become an autonomous artist. They show that machine deviation can alter human intention. The strongest human-AI work is therefore not a handoff but a feedback loop: the human changes the system, the system surprises the human, and the work develops through the exchange.

Why art matters to branding and communications

We turn to art not because brand and communications professionals are secretly trying to become gallery artists. Art is the clearest stress test for the claims our profession makes about creativity. It separates an artifact's surface from its authorship, its technical execution from its meaning and its market value from its quality. Those distinctions are now entering everyday brand work.

A brand also asks an audience to encounter more than an output. It asks people to perceive a point of view, a history, a promise and an intention behind its words and images. If AI can reproduce the surface of that expression, communications professionals must become more precise about what gives the expression credibility and distinction. The art question therefore leads directly back to our professional question: what are we contributing when production itself is no longer scarce?

Act IV: how possibility becomes art

The argument now reaches its central question. If deviation alone is not creativity, what transforms a possibility into meaningful work? The answer is not a single human essence. It is a sequence of capacities and commitments: life experience supplies stakes, taste recognizes potential, craft develops form, authorship organizes the process and responsibility connects the work to its consequences.

Life: experience is not training data

When we encounter an artwork, we rarely encounter only its visible or audible properties. We encounter—or believe we encounter—a trace of a life: attention, memory, development, risk and a history of choices. This is why two visually identical objects can have different value. One may connect to a particular biography and cultural moment; the other may be a technically perfect reproduction.

It is tempting to compare a model's training with an artist's experience. Both absorb existing culture. But a model's data have not happened to it. A person experiences the world from a body and social position, forms attachments, suffers consequences, changes through grief, love, illness, migration and failure, and has something to lose by speaking.

A model has been trained on the traces of experience, but it has not had experiences of its own.

This does not prevent generated work from moving us. It means AI separates the signs of experience from experience itself. It can produce a work that looks wounded without anyone having been wounded. Its arrival asks whether we value experience itself or only convincing evidence of its presence.

For brands, this distinction is practical rather than metaphysical. Communications routinely borrow the language of belonging, courage, care, rebellion or social purpose. AI can reproduce those emotional codes effortlessly. The professional task is to determine whether they arise from anything the organization has actually experienced, chosen or risked. Without that connection, a brand may simulate conviction while possessing none.

Taste: the craft of refusal

Taste is more than preference for a style. It is the ability to decide what deserves attention, which imperfection should remain, when a work is finished, which convention should be broken and which impressive possibility is emotionally empty. Taste is selection shaped by experience.

AI can rank compositions and reproduce learned patterns of evaluation. But its apparent taste is an aggregate of training data, human preference feedback, product decisions and user instruction. It has evaluation without personal stakes. The artist's taste becomes visible not only in what is chosen, but in the thousands of plausible outputs refused.

This is also the work of a creative director, strategist, designer or editor. As AI multiplies options, professional value shifts from producing the first plausible answer to refusing the ninety-nine answers that are fluent but interchangeable. Brand distinctiveness will increasingly depend on disciplined rejection: knowing which attractive idea belongs to the category, which belongs to the brand and which deserves to become something the category has not seen before.

Craft: turning judgment into form

Craftsmanship is knowledge of a medium, sensitivity to small differences, diagnostic ability and judgment developed through repeated encounters with resistance. Stone can break, paint becomes muddy, a voice has a limited range and a film set is constrained by money, weather and bodies. Responding to those limits changes both the maker and the work.

AI can give someone the product of craft without the knowledge of the craft: orchestration without harmony, cinematic imagery without light, eloquence without an ear for emotional falseness. This democratizes expression, but it also creates fragile competence. When the output fails in a way the model cannot repair, the user may not know why.

AI has its own resistance: statistical defaults, inconsistency, hidden bias, seductive clichés and imperfect control. Learning that resistance can become a new craft. Skill moves partly from executing the individual object to designing a possibility space, diagnosing outputs, preserving productive anomalies and developing coherence across iterations.

In communications, augmented craftsmanship means more than mastering prompts. It means understanding rhetoric well enough to recognize empty fluency, typography well enough to see false authority, film well enough to distinguish spectacle from direction and brand strategy well enough to know when personalization fragments meaning. AI can accelerate execution; professional craft keeps the system from determining the standard by which its own output is judged.

The traditional craftsman learns the resistance of the material. The AI craftsman learns the resistance of the probability distribution.

Authorship: more than making by hand

Art history prevents us from locating authorship only in physical execution. Rodin modelled, fragmented and recombined forms, but specialist assistants enlarged models, carved marble, made moulds and cast bronzes under his direction. The Musée Rodin estimates that roughly

one hundred practitioners worked for him over time. Authorized bronzes can still be produced from the models and moulds he bequeathed.

Rodin authored a system of production. Yet the studio also reveals hidden labor: Camille Claudel and other practitioners made consequential contributions. Delegation preserves authorship only by raising another question—whose craft has disappeared beneath the master’s name?

Damien Hirst pushes the question further. His Spot Paintings follow a visual grammar of grids, spacing, color and controlled variation, while assistants executed most of the paintings. The work’s identity resides less in a particular brushstroke than in the rule system, seriality and authorization.

The analogy to generative AI is strong but limited. Rodin and Hirst show that the artist need not execute every element. They do not show that any request constitutes authorship. Their work belongs to sustained practices in which the artist established a proposition, governed production and placed the result in a cultural argument.

Brand and communications work has always been similarly distributed. A campaign may involve strategists, writers, designers, photographers, directors, production partners, clients and media systems, while a small number of names receive public credit. AI does not create distributed authorship; it makes the distribution less visible and potentially more unequal. The practical question is therefore not whether AI “made” the campaign, but who originated its governing idea, made the consequential choices, supplied the underlying cultural labor and accepts responsibility for the result.

Quality: the success of transformation

“Is it art?” and “Is it good art?” are different questions. Institutional framing may make an object art without making it insightful or important. Quality is historically contested, but strong work often demonstrates formal coherence, specificity, depth, risk, resonance and the ability to change a cultural conversation. It rewards sustained attention rather than merely surviving a glance.

AI makes the early stages of the quality spectrum easier. It can generate an artifact, satisfy recognizable standards and create an aesthetic experience. Authored work requires intention and taste to organize the process. Significant art requires the work to deepen or transform a conversation.

Quality in communications is more constrained but no less demanding. A strong piece of brand work must be distinctive and recognizable, surprising and strategically appropriate, emotionally resonant and truthful. AI can improve novelty or polish while weakening brand fit, credibility or long-term coherence. The quality question is therefore not “Is this good for AI?” or even “Does this look good?” It is “Does this expression make the brand more meaningful, more specific and more trustworthy?”

Christie's: value is not proof of quality

In 2018 Christie's sold Portrait of Edmond de Belamy, generated with a GAN and presented by the collective Obvious, for \$432,500—nearly forty-five times its high estimate. The sale confirmed that an AI-generated image could become a valuable art object. It did not establish that the machine possessed experience, taste or intention.

The buyer acquired more than a portrait: a physical object, institutional validation, speculative scarcity and a place in the story of AI art. The case also exposed distributed authorship because the underlying implementation was associated with artist-programmer Robbie Barrat. Behind the simple story of a machine artist stood historical artists in the dataset, model architecture, code, selectors, printers, an auction house and a collector.

Christie's 2025 Augmented Intelligence sale showed how quickly the question evolved. Debate had moved from whether an algorithm could make an auctionable image to whose data, rights and labor were embedded in the work—and whether the named artist had developed a genuine practice.

What Christie's sold was not only an image. It sold a historical threshold: the moment the art market decided that the question itself had value.

Act V: the profession after generation

We can now return to the anxiety that began this paper. If the creative professional's value rested on being the only person capable of producing a polished sentence, image or film, part of that value is disappearing. Competent execution is becoming less scarce. The appropriate response is not to declare human creativity sacred. It is to move upstream.

*When generation is no longer scarce,
creativity moves from producing
expressions to determining what is worth
expressing.*

The emerging professional does not merely prompt a system. They identify a human tension, map the conventional field, expose its assumptions, design a possibility space, recognize meaningful deviations, develop them through craft and take responsibility for what enters culture. "Prompt engineer" is too narrow. The role is closer to probability director, editor, cultural interpreter and accountable author.

The cross-domain evidence

The most successful uses of AI support this distinction. Machine learning restored John Lennon's authentic performance for the Beatles' Now and Then; musicians and producers determined arrangement and legitimacy. Netflix reported that generative tools made a complex effects sequence in the Argentine series El Eternauta feasible at its budget; the technology served an existing narrative intention.

Cadbury's Shah Rukh Khan-My-Ad used AI and personalization to let small retailers create localized celebrity advertisements. AI changed who could participate; it was fundamental to the idea. Heinz's AI Ketchup treated model outputs as an experiment about the brand's cultural association with ketchup. Both moved beyond cheaper execution toward a proposition enabled by the system.

The failures clarify the boundary. Synthetic voices resembling Drake and the Weeknd created a viral song without consent. Streaming services have faced floods of generated music and fraudulent listening. Marvel's Secret Invasion titles were judged not only as images but as a labor signal from a powerful studio. Glasgow's Willy's Chocolate Experience used extraordinary synthetic imagery to advertise a physical world that did not exist. In each case generation became detached from consent, context, truth or responsibility.

What remains human?

No particular production task is guaranteed to remain exclusively human. Capabilities will change. The more durable issue is which responsibilities cannot disappear. Someone must decide what is worth saying, why a deviation matters, whose experience is represented,

whether a claim is true, whether consent exists and whether the work deserves the audience's finite attention.

This is not an argument for human superiority but one for human obligation. AI does not relieve the creative profession of judgment; it makes judgment more consequential. The easier it becomes to produce, the more important it becomes to refuse.

A practice for moving beyond the median

Begin with life. Name the lived observation, contradiction or cultural tension before asking for outputs.

Map the median. Ask what the category normally says and looks like. The center must be visible before it can be challenged.

Break one rule deliberately. Change an assumption about audience, medium, chronology, authorship or purpose—not merely the surface style.

Invite deviation. Use distant domains, conflicting perspectives, unusual constraints or proprietary material to widen possibility.

Recognize rather than consume. Treat outputs as provocations. Ask what an anomaly reveals and reject plausible distractions.

Develop through craft. Transform the selected possibility until it becomes specific, coherent and related to a larger intention.

Test for meaning. Ask what the work allows an audience to see, feel or understand that the median did not.

Assume responsibility. Verify truth-bound claims, document provenance, address consent and stand behind the result.

A new beginning if we can earn it

Generative AI does not settle the question of machine creativity. It unsettles our assumptions about human creativity. It reveals how much professional work depends on learned conventions, how readily aesthetic competence can be automated and how often the appearance of originality is constructed from familiar ingredients.

That can feel like an ending. The floor beneath a profession organized around competent artifacts is moving. But creativity was never generation alone. It is the transformation of possibility into meaning: recognizing what matters, developing it into form, relating it to a life and a culture, and accepting responsibility for the encounter.

AI expands the possibility field. It can combine distant concepts, explore neglected regions and produce deviations that estrange our habits. It cannot independently establish why one deviation deserves to become part of culture. Life provides stakes. Taste recognizes potential. Craft gives judgment form. Authorship organizes the process. Responsibility justifies the work's place in the world.

AI generates possibilities beyond the median. Human creativity turns the right possibility into meaning.

The arrival of AI may diminish a profession that sells execution as its primary scarcity. It may also inaugurate a more demanding profession: one that designs new relationships among brands, culture, audiences and intelligent systems. Which future emerges will not be decided by the models. It will be decided by what we ask them to generate, what we choose to develop, what we refuse to publish and what we remain willing to stand behind.

AI raises the creative floor. We raise the ceiling when experience, taste, craftsmanship and responsibility transform possibility into meaning.

About the Scriptorium Initiative

The Scriptorium Initiative is an independent initiative focused on the future of communications in the age of AI. Founded by Marc Cloosterman, Eric van Hall and Nanne Bos, it brings together communications leaders, brand strategists, researchers, technologists and forward-looking organizations to explore how artificial intelligence will reshape reputation, trust, corporate storytelling, stakeholder engagement and the operating model of communications itself.

Its name refers to the medieval scriptoria in which knowledge was copied, interpreted, preserved and advanced during periods of profound societal change. Communications leaders face a comparable moment today. The challenge is not simply to adopt more powerful tools. It is to understand how judgment, creativity, institutional trust and leadership must evolve when intelligence and expression become scalable.

Scriptorium works at the intersection of research and practice through whitepapers, experiments, learning journeys, fellowships and collaborative forums. It approaches AI not as a predetermined future but as a field that communications professionals should investigate and shape deliberately. Its premise is human-first: the future of communications will not be defined by technology alone, but by how leaders combine intelligence with trust, speed with judgment and innovation with humanity.

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