The artifact isn't the art: Rethinking creativity in the age of AI

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Last week, social media feeds lit up with ChatGPT-generated visuals in the style of Studio Ghibli, the Japanese animation studio famous for its rich, dreamlike art. So many people were using the tool to recreate their profile pictures, personal photos, and favorite memes that it strained OpenAI's servers, leading to CEO Sam Altman asking users to ease off Ghibli-style prompts.

The AI's recreations didn't go viral simply because they were beautiful, though.

Studio Ghibli is known for its resistance to computer-generated shortcuts — all of its art is hand drawn and deeply expressive. For decades, this use of labor-intensive, traditional techniques had set the studio apart from much of the animation industry, but AI was now producing similar visuals in seconds.

This new ability feels like it could be a turning point, proof that AI is no longer just assisting with creativity — it's starting to *perform* it.

This brings up questions about the creative value of people in a world where an AI can mimic one of the most revered examples of human artistry with ease. The moment also invites a deeper question: What do we really mean when we talk about creativity?

> "It's not unusual for science to catch up to art, eventually. Nor is it unusual for art to catch up to the spiritual."
>
> *Rick Rubin, The Creative Act*

Scholars traditionally define creativity as something that demonstrates both novelty and usefulness.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi — known as the "father of flow" — spent his career studying artists, scientists, and creators to understand how original ideas take shape. He made a crucial distinction between capital-C Creativity, the kind that transforms an entire domain, and personal creativity, which may never be publicly recognized but can deeply shape an individual's perception or experience.

Csikszentmihalyi argued that Creativity happens at the intersection of three elements: the individual with the idea, the domain in which that idea operates, and the field that recognizes and values the contribution.

Georgia O'Keeffe is a perfect example. While her contemporaries pushed abstraction through chaos and energy (think Jackson Pollock), she explored tension through scale, color, and the natural world. Her work wasn't fully embraced at first, but today, she is recognized as a pillar of modern art.

Similarly, Einstein's theory of relativity didn't just present a new equation — it transformed how we understand space, time, and reality itself. It led to revolutions in physics, nuclear energy, even GPS.

> Good ideas have become harder to find.

These domain-changing moments of Creativity come from individuals working with the tools of their time. Like paint or telescopes, AI is another tool, but what really sets it apart from the instruments of the past is its impact on pace.

Creators who once spent years developing an idea can now prototype in weeks. Projects that took months now iterate overnight. As someone who teaches entrepreneurship to young innovators, I see this transformation unfolding in real time as venture founders can generate, test, and move on to the next idea at a jarring tempo.

This shift to an era in which ideas are generated, iterated, and shared at breakneck speed, often with AI in the loop, has been described as Creativity 4.0, and it comes at a critical moment — despite increasing resources devoted to R&D, breakthrough innovations are becoming scarcer, according to a 2020 paper out of Stanford University.

Essentially, good ideas have become harder to find.

On this point, Wharton professor and AI expert Ethan Mollick has said that today's generative AIs could transform research in at least four ways and potentially "restart the slowing engine of innovation," breathing new life into academic research, which has become increasingly specialized and incremental.

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AI can't do it alone, though.

Through his research, Csikszentmihalyi came to the conclusion that creativity isn't only rational: "Reason is only one type of information that passes through attention. Percepts, feelings, and motives…all participate in what we call thinking."

This is the aspect of creativity that AI lacks. It doesn't feel tension. It doesn't labor through ambiguity. It doesn't explore. Where AI can offer 10 answers to a problem instantly, humans may wrestle for years to arrive at one — but it could be the only one that matters.

In my classroom, I teach design thinking — a creativity-based methodology for problem solving — and have already been integrating AI in the process. Without question, AI is a great partner for generating lots of ideas for solutions, but there are two aspects of design thinking that AI can't capture by itself.

First, design thinking is about being immersed in a problem and deeply empathizing with humans that are facing it. This requires tapping into one's feelings and finding inspiration in analogous experiences that surround us in our day-to-day lives — acts that are impossible for AI.

Second, while AI can find patterns and help us explore problems in lots of creative and intelligent ways, it does not have the unique human capacity of synthesis, which design expert Jon Kolko has defined as "the ability for the human mind to grasp multiple, often incongruent and even competing ideas, and to manipulate them — at once, and in parallel — into something amazing."

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So we return to the Ghibli-style AI trend. The real headline here isn't that AI can produce these beautiful images — it's that its imitations push us to reevaluate creativity and our role in the process.

As AI's outputs get better and better, our edge over the machines will shift further into the invisible: It's our attention, framing, curiosity, and care that will set us apart. The focus will shift from *what* we create to *why*.

Csikszentmihalyi didn't live to see this current version of generative AI, but I'm sure he would agree that the future of creativity is not more and faster outputs, but more meaningful ones. Not optimized, but alive. Not simply new, but truly *felt*.

The future of creativity won't belong to those who generate the most, the fastest. It will belong to those who make things that matter. That's still human work, and it always will be — only now, we have a new tool to wield.

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