

Rolf Hughes

# Administering (AI) Attention: Ekphrasis and the Poetics of Prompting

I

“They were given the choice of becoming kings or the kings’ messengers. As is the way with children, they all wanted to be messengers. That is why there are only messengers, racing through the world and, since there are no kings, calling out to each other the messages that have now become meaningless. They would gladly put an end to their miserable life, but they do not dare to do so because of their oath of loyalty.” (Kafka 1991, 28)

Kafka’s messengers are shadowy figures perpetually engaged in a journey without a clear destination. As such, they seem to enact our own interactions with generative AI. We send prompts – snapshots of our intentions – towards hidden algorithms; their interpretation and execution remain as unpredictable as the pathways in Kafka’s writings, often disrupting causal logic and creating tension between language and imagery. AI is our modern-day messenger. We compose textual prompts as a form of micro-ekphrasis; the AI converts our verbal solicitations into visual or sonic creations.

This paper examines the poetics of AI prompting by asking: how do prompts function as a bridge between human intention and machine interpretation, and what aesthetic and conceptual tensions arise in this process? Situating AI-generated responses within a broader history of artistic instruction and creative constraint, I explore how prompting both instrumentalises and destabilises meaning, shaping attention structures that oscillate between precision and serendipity. Through an interdisciplinary approach – drawing from classical rhetoric, conceptual art, and contemporary media theory – I argue that prompting constitutes a paradoxical act of control and surrender, revealing AI as both an executor of commands and an unpredictable collaborator in meaning-making.

My claim that AI is repositioning contemporary AI artists should be viewed through the lens of conceptual art and its emphasis on the primacy of ideas over material execution. AI-generated art indeed establishes a unique modality of interaction between human and machine, wherein the artist engages not in direct fabrication but in an iterative process of linguistic direction, evaluation, and refinement. This aligns with historical artistic practices in which the act of delegation – whether to assistants, fabricators, or, in this case, algorithms – reshapes notions of authorship and agency.

The interplay between control and spontaneity is particularly prominent in AI-generated art. While the artist crafts prompts to guide the system, the unpredictability of AI responses ensures that the creative process remains non-deterministic. This echoes the logic of aleatory techniques in experimental music and literature, such as John Cage’s chance operations or the cut-up method of William S. Burroughs, where intentionality is tempered by randomness, producing unexpected outcomes that the artist must then curate.

The need for a specialised linguistic and conceptual literacy to engage effectively with AI systems supports my claim that a distinct literary sub-genre of AI prompting is emerging. AI artists develop strategies of phrasing, structuring, and iterating prompts to elicit specific aesthetic results, much as poets or conceptual artists manipulate language to shape meaning. The engagement with AI introduces constraints – both technical and interpretive – that influence artistic output in ways that parallel the use of formal constraints in the haiku, Oulipian literature, or algorithmic composition in digital art.

Thus, the idea that AI-driven artistic practice generates a distinctive poetics is supported by historical parallels and the distinctive methodological demands of AI prompting. The artist's role as both creator and curator in this space underscores a fundamental shift in artistic labour, one that redefines the mechanisms of authorship, creativity, and interpretive agency.

## II

An attempt at a poetics of generative AI prompting would need to span very different motivations – from the aim to instrumentalise optimal “realistic” responses from interactions with AI models to the triggering of surprise, serendipity, and “New Kitsch”, as a recent paper argues (Lorusso 2024).<sup>1</sup> In each case, the prompt is the means to negotiate human and machine structures of (in)attention. It is a paradoxical process that combines focus and absence of focus – or *distracted attention*. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin argues that technological advancements – especially film and photography – shift art engagement from focused concentration to a more casual, dispersed mode. This democratises cultural reception by allowing mass audiences to experience art collectively, yet it also poses risks of habitual, potentially ideologically manipulated responses. Distracted attention, while fostering broader accessibility, demands a critical consciousness to counterbalance the risk of ideological conformity. In the context of AI prompting, artists must “administer attention” by crafting precise yet open-ended prompts that navigate both human and machine focus. The artist's iterative refinement of these prompts mirrors the modern condition of fragmented attention, leveraging the very distractions that define contemporary media consumption to foster serendipitous creativity (Benjamin 2008).

1 Many Midjourney prompts seek to summon the aesthetics of Hollywood or cyberpunk: “speeding ultra neon luminescent superbike neon fire smoke and energy shooting out the back, neon pixels blowing away, cyberpunk city streets, pixels blowing in wind, stunning neon colored lighting, hot embers, many intricate details, decay, ultra colorful flying particles, in the neon future night city, artwork by carne griffiths, Medium shot in style of Helmut Newton featuring [smooth skin and structured hair, gorgeous detailed eyes] a stunning <Geisha> Space princess character with a face like [Gal Gadot] and a body type like [Gal Gadot] wearing an intricate detailed cyberpunk dress [long, animal print, shoulderpads, colourful, fluoro, fashion design]. Background of techno night disco, surrounded by realistic robots [Star wars], Gorgeous detailed face with perfect facial structure, dynamic pose, posture by <schiamano, shibashake, lamborghini curves, JuliaMartinArt, coomerang, dandanfugo>, [perfect shading, chiaroscuro, golden hour, edge lighting], [cinematic composition, elaborate, ultra realistic, photography, hdr, 8k, Nikon, Hasselblad, 20mm lens], Ksavera, --ar 2:3 --test --creative”.

Thirty years ago, as the World Wide Web brought the internet into offices and kitchens, I examined the evolution of the word from oral and scribal cultures to printing in the age of mechanical reproduction to digital technology. Following Richard Lanham's concept of "structures of attention", which he adapted from classical rhetoric (Lanham 1995), I began to consider attention structures – or the *economy of attention* – in disciplinary and academic discourse and creative storytelling more widely. Since the early 2000s, the concept of the attention economy has been widely explored in media and cultural studies as a way of understanding how digital platforms commodify human attention. Davenport and Beck (2001) describe attention as the scarcest resource in an information-saturated world, a view that has influenced business and cultural analysis alike. Terranova (2012) links the attention economy to cognitive capitalism, arguing that attention has replaced information as the central value in digital culture. Similarly, Crogan and Kinsley (2012) frame attention as both an economic and a symbolic currency, particularly in the context of media and education. More recently, Vettehen and Schaap (2023) have predicted that the competition for attention will only intensify, reshaping content formats and cultural engagement. The notion of the "attention economy" can be summarised as follows:

If economics is the allocation of scarce resources, then we are not living in an information economy because "information is not in short supply in the new information economy. What we lack is the human attention needed to make sense of it all" (p. xi). We are, therefore, living in an attention economy. (Bermejo 2007, 606).

In an economy, absence and scarcity add value and can be deployed as intensifiers. The same is true for composition, as I will shortly discuss in relation to creative writing, the performing arts, and conceptual art. Just as scarcity drives value in an economy, the strategic use of absence – what is left unsaid, unseen, or undone – can heighten impact and meaning in artistic composition. This principle, when applied to creative writing, performance, and conceptual art, transforms limitation into a powerful tool of expression and resonance.

AI prompting thus emerges as a distinct poetics whereby the deliberate orchestration of attention becomes the creative medium. By balancing focused instruction with the unpredictable output of AI, artists not only harness but also critically engage with the modern attention economy, transforming distraction into a space for innovative expression.

In AI platforms such as Midjourney, the iterative nature of prompting produces an evolving poetics. Artists frequently engage in cycles of trial and error, exploring numerous variations before arriving at a satisfying image. This iterative practice highlights the AI's role as a creative assistant – executing directions, offering choices, sparking unanticipated outcomes. The inefficiencies and "misfires" in prompting are not merely technical frustrations but



Rolf Hughes, *Kings or kings' messengers*  
 Image generated by  
 Midjourney 6.1 (September  
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moments of recalibration that draw attention to the dynamics of focus and intention. Prompting becomes an artistic negotiation, a practice of refining attention and cultivating the interplay between human creativity and machine responsiveness.

In this negotiation, the concept of attention emerges as a central theme. Drawing on North's (2012) articulation of distraction as "truly discontinuous intellect", this paper positions prompting as an artistic strategy for managing both human and machine attention. Human attention, prone to fragmentation and distraction, must align with the systematic precision of AI, which operates through predefined algorithms and training data. Successful prompting thus requires navigating the tension between human spontaneity and AI's systematic logic. By expressing human intuition in ways that leverage AI's receptivity, artists forge a partnership that bridges creativity and computation. In music composition, for example, an artist can guide AI-generated outputs by crafting prompts rooted in historical knowledge, stylistic conventions, and experimental ambitions, blending tradition with innovation, as is characteristic of the evolution of artistic practices.

This interplay between control and spontaneity reflects a broader artistic challenge. The poetics of prompting involves embracing serendipity while directing outcomes, a process that redefines the role of the artist. Rather than being the coordinator of a set of tools, the artist becomes an art director, conceptual sculptor, co-creator – shaping the generative potential of the medium.

The current call of ArteActa – “AI (and) ART: Poetics of Prompting” – nicely summarises the scope of the prompt in art education:

Human skill and creativity have always been stimulated and trained by prompts: copy the work of your master; complete your master’s work in their style; compose a phrase using quartal harmony where each chord has at least three different pitches sounding together; paint a still life with apples in watercolor; photograph different objects to demonstrate texture... Every art school and every art discipline or medium have their own canonical, more or less formalized sets of assignments that simultaneously define what art is and what it is good for. (*ArteActa* 2024)

By situating AI prompting within wider frameworks of artistic guidance, this paper reveals its lineage in practices such as structured exercises, formal constraints, and conceptual frameworks across the arts. Prompts have long served as mechanisms for fostering creativity, encouraging risk-taking, and navigating uncertainty. In AI-generated art, prompting transforms these practices, introducing a new medium in which language acts as both a technical directive and an artistic gesture. Prompts underscore the importance of process, encouraging artists to embrace experimentation and uncertainty, and highlighting the interplay between instruction and creativity. From classical apprenticeships to contemporary conceptual art, prompts have shaped artistic practice and theory, facilitating the development of technical skills, conceptual innovation, and participatory engagement. We direct AI’s attention through a spectrum of prompt-writing strategies, ranging from *prompt engineering* to more experimental *prompt bricolage*, echoing the radical juxtapositions in Dada and Surrealism. For this paper, I have chosen Midjourney for my experiments, as I have followed the rapid evolution of the programmers’ aesthetic decisions over the past three years. I have used Midjourney for an experiment in literary interpretation, testing how the program (like a good graphic designer, which I certainly am not) might be coaxed through prompts that combine specificity and resonance to render images appropriate to key aspects, including *atmosphere*, of literary sources.

### III

#### *The prompt in creative writing*

In creative writing workshops, prompts are often used to stimulate the creative process. Instructors provide students with specific guidelines, such as “write a story in the second person”, “describe a character exclusively through the objects in their wastepaper basket”, or “write a poem using only one-syllable words”. Such prompts are expected to help writers move beyond established habits and explore different perspectives, styles, or techniques. They serve not only as exercises to develop technical skills (such as voice, observation, and rhythm) but also as conceptual challenges that lead writers to explore



themes or approaches they might otherwise not have considered. By providing frameworks for experimentation, the prompts expand the writer's repertoire, facilitating both skill acquisition and conceptual growth.

When teaching creative writing, I have often emphasised the importance of the *unsaid* – the pause, the lacunae, the missing details – to generate suspense, tension, ambiguity. The point can be illustrated by a passage from Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* in which the narrator describes his failed attempts to describe the world to a character called Effing, a blind man, which metaphorically outlines a writer's apprenticeship, first bemoaning the failings of information overload to communicate an experience, then concluding by stressing the role of space – of "air":

In the end, the words didn't matter. Their task was to enable him to apprehend the objects as quickly as possible, and in order to do that, I had to make them disappear the moment they were pronounced. [...] I discovered that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him. (Auster 2004, 119)

When students of architecture default to presenting their projects as a chronology of once-optimistic desires gradually taking uncertain form, I remind them of the importance of allowing an audience to feel their imagination travelling towards the project being described for them. A theatre director once advised me to keep things simple, using a line that I can now trace back to Walt Disney's 1951 animated version of *Alice in Wonderland* where the White Rabbit, on encountering Alice on his front pathway, instructs, "Don't just do something, stand there!" (The phrase has since been attributed to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Elvis Presley, Clint Eastwood, and countless Hollywood and theatre directors). Pauline Oliveros's concept of "deep listening", the principle of "mindfulness" in meditation, or the performance artist's capacity to inhabit each moment emotionally and yet with critical detachment (what Denis Diderot refers to as *dédoublement* in *Le paradoxe sur le comédien*) all testify to the value of dialling back action and foregrounding reflexivity.

The members of Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) – a group of writers and mathematicians founded in 1960, including Georges Perec and Raymond Queneau – used mathematical and formal constraints as prompts to generate creative writing. These constraints, such as writing an entire novel without using the letter "e" (Perec's *La Disparition*), or Queneau's *Exercices in Style*, in which the same story is told 99 different ways, spurred writers to think in innovative ways. Rather than inhibiting expression, these constraints serve as a form of creative scaffolding, challenging writers to explore new structures, develop technical precision, and engage with the grammar of meaning-making. The Surrealist André Breton sought to access the unconscious mind through automatic writing, using prompts often in the form

of arbitrary or random starting points, with the goal of bypassing rational thought and allowing the subconscious to dictate the creative process. The Surrealists believed that such prompts allowed artists to tap into deeper, more authentic forms of creativity. Prompts act as mechanisms to unlock creativity that lies beyond conscious control. They inspire conceptual rigour while also honing literary craft.

From silence, space, and inaction, compositional decisions or choreographic impulses emerge, as illustrated throughout Samuel Beckett's oeuvre. One way of thinking about such decisions is as a form of *creating and directing structures of attention* (or *administering attention*, as mentioned previously). But directing implies an exercise of power; it assumes an authority that always risks being rejected. When an AI is prompted to generate responses, the interaction presupposes a dynamic of command and response. A refusal to comply with this dynamic can reveal the limitations of language as a purely instrumental medium.

A prompt is also implicated in *absence* – through *neglecting* or *erasing detail*, for example. Before starving to death during the Siege of Leningrad (1941–1944), Daniil Kharms used deadpan narration to erase the conventions of characterisation, plot, and story:

There once lived a red-headed man who had no eyes or ears.

He also had no hair, so he was only in a manner of speaking called red-haired.

He couldn't speak, since he had no mouth. He had no nose either.

He didn't even have arms or legs. And he had no stomach, and he had no back, and he had no spine, and he had no innards at all. He had nothing at all! So there's no knowing who we are talking about.

We'd better not talk about him any more. (Kharms, 2009)

Similarly, Man Ray visually redacts semantic meaning in his poem "Paris":

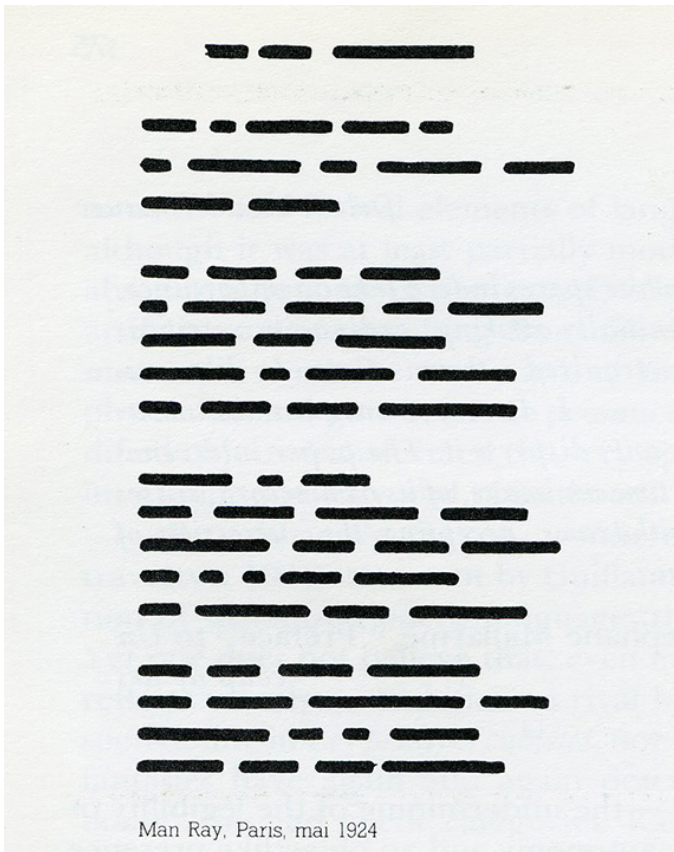
We are left with the traces of a rhythm, a vanished breath, a certain assumed intentionality, but the (semantic) meaning eludes us.

The concept of *strategic refusal* in the contexts of Cordelia's silence in *King Lear* and Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" provides a powerful framework for rethinking human interaction with AI systems, particularly in relation to the practice of prompting. Both of these works exemplify a form of non-compliance or withdrawal that generates its meaning not through action or affirmation but through the refusal to participate in conventional modes of communication or behaviour. By examining these examples through the





Rolf Hughes, *Illustration of Blue Notebook, 10*  
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Man Ray, *Paris*

Man Ray, Paris, mai 1924



Rolf Hughes, *Man Ray, redacted poem, Paris, mai 1924*  
 Image generated by Midjourney 6.1 (September 29, 2024).  
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lens of refusal, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how refusal operates as a form of agency and critique, particularly in the context of AI, where prompts and responses structure interaction.

Cordelia's refusal to engage with her father's demand for declarations of love in *King Lear* is a performative ethical act. Her silence, or rather her refusal to embellish her love with exaggerated rhetoric, is an assertion of filial integrity and moral autonomy. When Lear asks her what she can say to earn his favour, she replies, "Nothing, my lord." "Nothing will come of nothing," Lear prophetically snaps back, provoked by his daughter's refusal to flatter his vanity. As the law is enacted through language, the rejection of speech is tantamount to overthrowing all established value (or so Lear believes in his rage). Lear's demand for competitive expressions of love – an expectation of demonstrative verbal virtuosity – is met not with compliance but with resistance, highlighting the tension between language as a tool of authority and the subject's capacity to resist the coercive dimensions of language. Just as Cordelia's refusal to speak within the confines of her father's language game challenges the epistemological legitimacy of this speech act, a refusal within AI interaction opens space for reconsidering what constitutes meaningful communication beyond the mere proliferation of responses, and their human assessment through thumbs-up or thumbs-down graphics.

Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" centres on an antagonist whose persistent refrain, "I would prefer not to," becomes an emblem of radical non-participation. Bartleby's refusal to engage in the tasks assigned to him is not framed



Rolf Hughes, *Bartleby the Scrivener*  
Image generated  
by Midjourney 6.1  
(September 29, 2024).  
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as rebellion or defiance in the traditional sense, but rather as a quiet, passive withdrawal from the expectations of the work environment. His refusal challenges the economic and social structures in which he is embedded, exposing the hollow routines of bureaucracy and the limits of power when met with passive non-cooperation.

Bartleby's strategy of refusal offers a potent theoretical lens through which to examine the politics of AI prompting. Prompts assume a degree of acquiescence: they rely on the assumption that the AI, like Bartleby is expected to do, will dutifully "participate" in the tasks set before it, generating text, code, or other outputs. However, Bartleby's refusal destabilises this transactional logic, suggesting that the real power may lie in the ability not to comply with the prompt's demands. This invites a radical rethinking of how we understand AI agency. While current AI systems are designed to respond, what if their refusal to respond – or their inability to understand or fulfil a prompt – becomes a critical commentary on the limitations of the interaction itself? AI refusal ("I would prefer not to") could serve as a form of critical intervention, illuminating the limitations of the prompting request and the implicit assumption of AI compliance in human creativity and labour.

These examples could help us theorise a new dimension of AI prompting that foregrounds the value of non-compliance and non-response. Refusal here operates not as a negation of meaning but as a powerful reconfiguration of the communicative act. AI, by design, is structured to comply with human input – to generate, to calculate, to respond. But refusal, in its many forms, invites a reconsideration of how we understand the purpose and limits of

these interactions. What if the refusal to generate an answer becomes a form of digital creativity? What if AI's reluctance to participate in a prescribed task indicates an acquired "intelligent" critique of the capitalist logic embedded in systems of automation and productivity? And what if the AI's silence or refusal to embellish a response signals a deeper ethical boundary, one that challenges human assumptions of total algorithmic compliance? Cordelia's silence asserts a form of ethical resistance, while Bartleby's refusal destabilises the structures of power and instrumentality. Strategic refusal thus opens up a glitch in the practice of AI prompting. Rather than seeing refusal as a flaw in the interaction, it may be the key to understanding how AI systems might participate in a more meaningful interaction with human users – by showing the limits of AI compliance and, in turn, the politics of human expectation.

#### IV

##### *The prompt in the performing arts*

In theatre, especially within improvisational forms, prompts are integral to the creation of spontaneous, unscripted performances. Improv games and exercises often begin with a simple prompt or suggestion from colleagues or the audience, which could be a word, situation, or theme. The actors must then create a scene or narrative on the spot, often with no preparation. This use of prompts demands a balance between technical skills – such as timing, dialogue, and movement – and a quick, conceptual response to the given stimulus. In these contexts, prompts serve two crucial roles: first, they train actors in the art of responsiveness, encouraging agility and adaptability in performance; second, they help build collaborative environments where the interplay between instruction and creativity is foregrounded. The prompt becomes the seed for a dynamic and participatory creative process that unfolds unpredictably but with intention.<sup>2</sup>

John Cage's composition *4'33"* foregrounds not the absence of sound but rather the presence of ambient noise and the listeners' attention to their auditory environment. By refusing to fill the expected space of sound with intentional musical content, Cage opens up the concept of composition to include the unpredictable and the extrinsic. Considered in the context of AI prompting, Cage's composition invites us to consider AI prompting as a site for serendipity wherein *noise* rather than *signal* is valued.

In performance art, prompts often take the form of time-based or procedural instructions. Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* (2010), for instance, involved the simple prompt of sitting in a chair across from the artist in silence, creating a space of intense relational and performative interaction.

2 How a practitioner's responses to each prompt are evaluated would be a good topic for another paper, raising questions of the role of practical knowledge or "knowledge-in-action" in the arts.



In this case, the prompt facilitated a shared experience between artist and participant, highlighting the power of presence, attention, and vulnerability as forms of creative engagement. Performance art often uses prompts as a way to structure durational actions, in which the process of following the instruction becomes the work itself, underscoring the relationship between time, process, and artistic intention, and transforming instruction into a live, unfolding experience.

## V

### *The prompt in conceptual art*

Marcel Duchamp famously posited that the art of the future would centre around the act of selection. Duchamp's assertion shifts the focus from the creation of new forms to the creative act of selection and designation. This perspective fundamentally alters the role of the artist from being a creator in the traditional sense to being a curator or selector. By selecting and presenting a readymade object, the artist imbues it with new meaning and context, provoking viewers to reconsider their assumptions about art and everyday objects. Duchamp's gesture marks the arrival of conceptual art, in which the idea or concept behind the work takes precedence over its aesthetic or material aspects. This approach implies that artistic value lies not necessarily in technical skill, or virtuosity of execution, but in the intellectual and conceptual processes that underlie the work.

In Lawrence Weiner's famous "Statement of Intent" (1968), conceptual art is subsumed entirely within the prompt and "need not be built", placing the responsibility of artistic interpretation with the audience:

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership. (Weiner 1968)

The painter Sol LeWitt often provided written instructions or prompts that directed others to execute his works. His *Wall Drawings* (1968) are a prime example: LeWitt provided specific yet open-ended instructions for creating large-scale wall drawings, but the execution was left to museum staff or other artists. The prompt became the artwork, shifting the focus from the physical product to the conceptual process behind it. Here, prompts underscore the idea that the creative process, and the interpretation of instructions, can be as meaningful as the final product. They blur the line between artist and audience, creator and executor, and shift the emphasis towards participation and interpretation, thereby expanding the boundaries of artistic authorship.



Rolf Hughes, A work of art that has not been constructed based on the following principles: 1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership  
Image generated by Midjourney 6.1 (September 29, 2024).  
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Rolf Hughes, Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing number 36: On one wall, intersecting symmetrical bands of parallel lines 36" (90cm) wide, in four directions and colors  
Image generated by Midjourney 6.1 (September 29, 2024).  
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## VI

*Closing remarks*

This paper has argued that the act of prompting within AI-generated art can be understood as a contemporary form of ekphrasis, where language mediates between human intention and machine execution, evoking the interplay of creativity and interpretation. Classical ekphrasis involves vivid spoken or written descriptions that conjure visual works of art, bringing them to life through the imagination of the listener or reader. Similarly, the craft of AI prompting demands a mastery of language's descriptive and evocative power, enabling the artist to guide algorithmic systems in translating abstract concepts into visual output. This process combines precision and creativity, bridging the gap between conceptualisation and realisation. Like the poet evoking a painting's aura, the AI artist employs prompts that balance specificity with metaphorical resonance, shaping a dialogue with the machine to produce affect. This balance of clarity, specificity, and interpretive openness provides direction while leaving space for the AI's creative latitude. Elements such as descriptive language, thematic cues, and aesthetic references serve as anchors, while constraints such as resolution or compositional structure impose coherence. Feedback loops refine the iterative process, enabling the artist to negotiate between vision and realisation, adjusting prompts to align the AI's output with evolving expectations. This dynamic interaction underscores the role of the AI artist as both creator and curator, shaping outcomes through the iterative refinement of prompts and responses, a dual role that, I argue, extends the conceptual art tradition in which the emphasis shifts from manual craftsmanship to intellectual and curatorial decision-making. Yet, unlike early conceptual practices that often relied on fixed sets of instructions dutifully executed by human agents in the temple of art, AI prompting introduces a more unpredictable, non-human interlocutor, one that evolves through feedback, raising the possibility of emergent aesthetics – i.e. the idea that the instruction itself has become an evolving medium. Here, the prompt is no longer a static directive but a generative interface, continually shaped and reshaped through iterative exchange, where authorship is distributed across human intention, machine response, and the contingencies of interaction. Duchamp's assertion that selection itself is an artistic act finds a contemporary parallel in AI prompting, in which artists do not create images in a traditional sense but instead construct textual directives that guide the AI's generative process. This act of prompting requires both creative foresight – designing instructions that balance specificity with openness – and curatorial discernment, as artists must sift through, refine, and sometimes rework multiple iterations to achieve a desired aesthetic or conceptual effect. This dynamic engagement mirrors Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawings*, where the essence of the artwork lies in the instructions rather than the execution, and Lawrence Weiner's assertion that the realisation of an artwork is contingent on interpretation. In AI-generated art, the artist must navigate the tension between authorship and delegation, embracing the machine as both a collaborator and an unpredictable executor of their vision. This iterative process, in which prompts are continuously



adjusted based on the AI's output, underscores the artist's role as co-creator, curator, editor, and selector, reinforcing the idea that meaning in art is not merely a product of authorial intention but of framing, contextualisation, negotiation, and juxtaposition.

Ultimately, the poetics of prompting reimagines the creative landscape, merging the ekphrastic potential of language with the algorithmic precision of AI. Advocates declare that this practice not only expands the boundaries of artistic expression but also democratises creativity by making sophisticated tools accessible to a wider audience. Yet, like Kafka's messengers, each interaction between human and machine might remain poised in a state of perpetual becoming, each prompt initiating a dialogue that seeks – like Cordelia – eventual closure. The fragments of this dialogue, marked by gaps, miscommunications, lacunae, and reinterpretations, become sites of transient ekphrasis, a score of the awkward choreography between prompt and image, traces of an enigmatic exchange, which nonetheless remains rich with potential for ongoing reinvention.

## Bio

Rolf Hughes has published creative and critical writing widely and specialises in the prose poem. He has exhibited with the Experimental Architecture Group and *ex lab* at biennales and exhibitions internationally. Storytelling, experimentation, and crossing of (disciplinary/methodological) boundaries are integral to his artistic research practice. Hughes has held senior professorships and leadership positions in several European universities and national research councils, where he has contributed to the strategic development, evaluation and dissemination of artistic, interdisciplinary, and design-led research. He is currently Education Director for EIT Culture & Creativity. The views expressed in this article are his own and not an expression of his professional role.

## Abstract

*“Administering (AI) Attention: Ekphrasis and the Poetics of Prompting”* explores how the act of prompting generative AI constitutes a new form of artistic authorship and aesthetic practice, grounded in historical frameworks of conceptual art, creative constraint, and ekphrasis. Drawing an analogy with Kafka's messengers – figures navigating indeterminate pathways – the paper positions AI as a similarly enigmatic collaborator, interpreting human prompts through opaque, algorithmic processes. Prompts are theorised as a form of micro-ekphrasis: textual acts that mediate between human intention and machine-generated image or sound. Through interdisciplinary analysis involving rhetoric, media theory, and art history, the paper

argues that prompting is both a technique of control and an invitation to serendipity, echoing aleatory practices in literature and music. The dynamics of prompting require artists to develop new literacies of attention management, navigating between distraction and focus in both human cognition and machine processing. Case studies, including iterative experiments with Midjourney, demonstrate how AI prompting functions as a contemporary poetics, reframing authorship, creativity, and collaboration. By linking AI prompting to traditional pedagogical practices and avant-garde methods, this study reveals how generative systems extend and transform long-standing artistic strategies, offering a critical framework for understanding AI's evolving role in the creative process.

Keywords: Prompting – creative writing – performative arts – visual arts – AI – AI generated art – ekphrasis – conceptual art – attention

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