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Reflexive Essay

That Which Withers in the Age of Digital Production: Towards a New Model of Authorship

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That Which Withers in the Age of Digital Production: Towards a New Model of Authorship

Elly Selby

While authorship has historically tethered individuals to works for both credit and responsibility, its foundations in originality, genius, and singular authority have eroded in the face of technological, cultural, and disciplinary disruptions. Poststructuralist critiques reframed authorship as interpretation and circulation, while digital networks and user-generated content democratized participation, only to reintroduce anxieties around ownership and protection in the era of AI. Against this backdrop, I propose a reconceptualization of authorship as a social process involving humans and nonhumans, rather than an evaluation of form. 'Relational Authorship,' a new concept introduced in this article, departs from traditional authorial criteria of style, signature, and veracity by emphasizing accountability within distributed production. This article examines these outmoded formal criteria to establish the necessity of this new model of authorship. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory, poststructuralism, and post-humanist thought, the model situates authorship as socially and materially embedded, where contributions extend across audiences, institutions, and algorithmic systems. While in disciplines such as architecture authorial hierarchies are sustained through frameworks of liability and regulations, Relational Authorship critically considers how responsibility might be reconfigured in the company of humans, machines, and the networks that bind them.

Keywords: architecture, authorship, relationality, interpretation, actor-network theory, poststructuralism, posthumanism, artificial intelligence

Is authorship necessary in our current technological, social context? This question has been asked by many generations, and in many disciplines, but always seems to reemerge as new technologies and social theories destabilize our networks and modes of making. While this question will continue to be wrestled with perhaps for as long as we have the creative impulse or necessity to make, these ceaseless reappraisals suggest that the cultural tools and processes we use to produce work effect the way in which we recognize our own agency over an output.

Authorship originated as a means of tethering an individual to a work—an idea, a text, a painting, a building—for credit, but crucially also for responsibility (Foucault 2008). Authors are responsible for the work they produce, which is made plain in architecture through professional liability. While Michel Foucault may ask 'what matter who's speaking?' (Foucault 2008), disciplines like architecture have always been able to answer: 'life safety!'—

or ideally a pithier rejoinder. Of course, professional liability is not a wholly compelling or even believable rationale for the persistence of authorship—in architecture or in any other creative discipline.

A common argument for this persistence is hubris: an inherent desire to lay claim to our creative endeavors and original ideas, not to be held liable but to garner acclaim (Barthes 2008). The Renaissance notion of the genius of the author remains a cultural undercurrent, wherein there is value in producing novelty, and claiming that novelty as one's own (Gilbert and Gubar 2008). The myth of the *singularity* of this genius has been steadily deteriorated over the last century, revealing the collective nature of artistic and architectural production (Bourriaud 2010), the widening of participation through computational means (Caplan 2022), and broadening narrow definitions of who—or what—could be an author (Haraway 1988). These social and technical shifts and reappraisals have not, however, erased the question of authorship, they have just widened the pool of potential 'authors.'

The recent ubiquity of generative artificial intelligence models represents an inflection point for the resurgence of this question but perhaps can be traced further back to the turn of the 21st century. The Internet, anonymous and open-sourced platforms like Wikipedia, and the burgeoning of user-generated content seemingly ushered in a moment of widespread democratization of authorship, and a simultaneous and resultant destabilization of authorship as a rigid cultural construct (Carpo 2013)—Foucault's polemical question coming to fruition. What was perhaps not anticipated at the time was the *capital* represented by those uploaded, unprotected works—masses of multimodal data comprising human creative endeavors. After an era of ostensibly democratized production, an anxiety to claim authorship, and the *act of authoring* reemerged. This era of open, user-generated content has birthed a new era of publicly available generative AI and 'universal' large language models, yet the ethos has flipped: what began as a culture of sharing now breeds a culture of protection, as creators guard their work from being harvested by AI or exploited through it. In automating openness, AI has severed the very spirit of the Internet commons.

In his 1967 essay, *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, Italo Calvino gleefully anticipates his own literary supplantation by machines. Imagining a literature machine that can produce text in much the same way as any human author, he posits: 'the author vanishes—that spoiled child of ignorance—to give place to a more thoughtful person, a person who will know that the author is a machine, and will know how this machine works' (Calvino 1997: 16). This premonition is remarkable today, where we are grappling with this 'vanishing' and the reinforced role of readership anew. Of course, what Calvino does not seem to anticipate in the pronouncement of his replacement is that *machine* authorship is built on *human* authorship—that new norms of production will require the authorship of existing works, creating a tension between old claims to intellectual property and current glibness or nihilism around human production. A new model for authorship is needed that examines this disruptive destabilization of human attribution

frameworks but also recognizes the reality and potential agency of machine learning-enabled production.

The modern emphasis on aesthetic or formal originality—long central to definitions of authorship (Burke 2008)—sits uneasily with the mechanics of machine learning. While I contend that machine learning models are capable of more than mere mimesis, contrary to some ongoing debates (Carpo 2025), I also reject the idea that originality, as it can be perceived and recognized by human faculties, constitutes the essence of authorship. Visual resemblance and acts of copying remain insufficient grounds for authorship because they tether authorship to aesthetic or formal paradigms rather than relational or social ones.

This article advances an alternative: a model of authorship as a social process, constituted through the network of its interactors (authors), which I term 'Relational Authorship.' Such a model departs from formalist understandings of authorship that have historically underpinned attribution, remuneration, copyright, and interpretation in art, literature, and architecture since the Renaissance. To prepare the ground for this reconceptualization, the article interrogates three enduring formal notions of authorship—signature, style, and veracity—demonstrating their incompatibility with contemporary media and production methods.

Signature

The emergence of a signature on artworks signaled an end—or for the sake of this argument, a long pause—of anonymity in making. The signature on a work, visual or literary, signified that an author was staking a claim to it, thereby accepting any praise or censure of the ideas expressed therein (Foucault 2008: 236). A signature is both a form of authentication of a work's origins, and an ethical contract (Burke 2008: 289). According to literary theorist Seán Burke, the signature 'acts as the trace or track between a discourse and its departed subject,' (Burke 2008: 290) allowing for an idea or representation to be tethered to its author, for 'accountability and enquiry' (Burke 2008: 290), extending beyond a literal, indexical trace.

Plato resisted the notion of a signature, arguing that the dialectical forum of speech guaranteed the perpetual presence of a discourse's author to its audience, whereas written signatures were performative and allowed for irresponsible interpretation (Burke 2008: 285). While Plato could not have anticipated the wide dissemination of texts and images facilitated by the printing press, let alone by the advent of the Internet, his concerns of ethical discord, in a context where discourse circulates without a speaker and without the immediate relationship of the speaker to the content, resound today. This untethering of the author from their work is illustrated in Figure 1, wherein this relationship is destabilized as cultural technologies emerge.

In the context of architectural and art history, the emergence of signed work in the Renaissance incited a distinction between artisans and

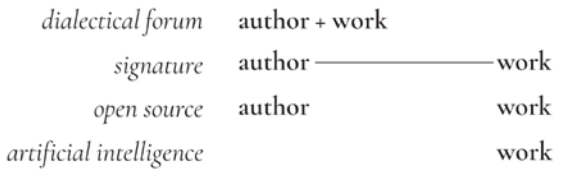

Figure 1. The untethering of author and the work, courtesy of the author.

artists, craft and art (Keizer 2015: 372). According to Renaissance art historian Joost Keizer, this hierarchical split establishes the myth of the singular genius of the author or artist, who possesses innate talent—*ingenium*—beyond technical ability—*ars* (Keizer 2015: 372). Signature then lent itself to the durability and memory of a name; the canonization of specific authors. The individualized status of a signatory facilitated the recollection and significance of the author to endure time and represent whole eras of making.

Production under the signature of a single author was essentially Leon Battista Alberti's notion of the architect: Alberti claimed the singular genius of the architect was superior to the technical skill of masons and trades, determining that the concept of a work of architecture was conceived of by the architect, channeled through the authorial act of drawing, and should be built by trades in its exactitude (Carpo 2011: 26). This act of translation from idea to image was intended to be the true likeness of the built work and was to be followed precisely by trades to execute the intention of the architect—the author. This concept conferred the architect as the singular author of a work of architecture, resulting in a similar valorization to that of the Renaissance painter, allowing for the name of that author—architect, artist—to be canonized and publicized.

Alberti's notion took hold and has roughly remained the nature of architectural practice until the present. Some key aspects have changed—the drawings of a building are now typically produced by a team of architectural designers and technologists, using very different tools—but the architect maintains authorship, authority, of that drawing, and the drawing persists as the method of translating an idea to an image, and from and image to a building (Evans 1986: 3-18). Art historians have attempted to place this practice of drawing into an ontology of fine arts to discern the authenticity of its copies—therein establishing the position of its authorial agency. Nelson Goodman and Gerard Genette have each described this act of producing an architectural drawing for construction as an 'allographic' art. In *Languages of Art*, Goodman distinguishes between artforms based on their ability to be forged: 'Let us speak of a work of art as *autographic* if and only if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine...Thus painting is autographic, music nonautographic, or *allographic*' (Goodman 1968: 113). While architectural plans conform to notations, and when constructed are carried out by many people, they retain 'autographic' qualities in the form of a sketch by a singular architect translating their

ideas to drawing. Goodman clarifies that the notational systems employed by architectural plans remain allographic, stating 'although a drawing often counts as a sketch, and a measurement in numerals as a script, the particular selection of drawing and numerals in an architectural plan counts as a digital diagram and as a score' (Goodman 1968: 219). He goes on to specify that 'insofar as its notational language has not yet acquired full authority to divorce identity of work in all cases from particular production, architecture is a mixed and transitional case' (Goodman 1968: 221), between autographic and allographic, in that it does not readily fit into either category—the authenticity of a copy and the authorship of the final product is more ambiguous than a painting or a music score. While the discipline does not sit squarely into one of these two categories of artistic authenticity, the notational nature of architectural drafting and the authority of the architect conveyed by that of the architectural plan resists to some extent the incorporation of co-authors in the design of a building, including those that carry out the drawings, and those that occupy the building after construction.

The allographic distance of an architect's signed drawing from the built work inherently challenges an architect's authorial grasp on its products, hence the necessity of Alberti's claims. While cornerstones and mason's marks represent an attempt at asserting this signatory trace into the process of architecture, architecture's inherent lack of this signatory criterion on the artifact itself has long made it a discipline that is susceptible to authorial erasure—at least phenomenologically. In a digital context, this susceptibility is intensified by the generation of architectural drawings using computer-aided design (CAD), building information modelling (BIM), and machine learning—to which the notational nature of allographic works such as plans are particularly adaptable.

The signature overrode narratives of authorial collaboration. As we know from extensive existing research and documentation, many of these 'singular geniuses,' such as Rubens, operated large studios where teams of painters without authorial status would produce, at least in part, paintings in the style of the named artist, for the work to then be signed by the artist; 'only Rubens' signature could authenticate a work produced by his studio' (De Wachter 2017: 7). This silent collaboration allowed for further valorization of the artist's mastery and for a wider reach of the artist's work (De Wachter 2017: 7).

The anonymizing nature of Web2.0, Open Source, and platforms like Wikipedia demonstrate the deterioration of signature as a form of authentication, canonization, and dominance of the author. In 1969, Foucault seemingly foretells the transformation of authorship via anonymization, imagining a future where authorship is obscured. He posits a series of possibilities for a future without specific, individual authorship, which reads as a premonition for open-source media, asking: 'What matter who's speaking?' (Foucault 2008: 246). Foucault's disinterest in 'authenticity and originality' (Foucault 2008: 246) anticipates the erasure of signature, and therein, the singular genius of the author. What this argument presents, I conject, is however not truly an erasure of authorship in praise of anonymity, but a cry for a reframing of authorship itself. Foucault's

'who' is singular, and is imbued with valorized notions of genius, interiority, talent, and therein an onus on the reader of their discourse to unearth and revel in this latent ability. In his rejection, however, he is still concerned with 'where a work came from' and 'who controls it,' which constitute key functions of authorship (Foucault 2008: 246). He is therefore merely disinterested in evaluating a singular individual or examining a work for their indexical trace. Rather than attempting to evaluate authorship through the contents of a work—a discourse—and thereby valorizing and mythologizing an ostensibly singular author, authorship can be positioned as a relational process of multiple sources of production, and a discourse between interacting authors.

Briefly considering the role of the signatory in the context of generative AI, a machine learning model cannot, of course, enter an ethical contract with its audience, staking a claim to the ideas expressed within a work, but it *can* generate images and text. Beyond the anonymizing momentum of digital computation, machine learning adds to the contemporary 'ecology of production'—borrowing Susan Sontag's concept of an 'ecology of images' (1977), here referring to the networked, saturated, interconnectedness of digital modes of production—not merely the *concealment* of a signature, but a lack of a signatory entirely. The fugitive nature of the signature is embedded in the formal characteristics of an output which reinforces the deterioration of models of authorship that are predicated upon such aesthetic properties. This is made more explicit in the examination of the quintessence of formal evaluation: style.

Style

Prior to digital computation, stylistic individuality—expressed aesthetically, linguistically, spatially—asserted authorship. According to Contemporary Art theorist and historian Sherri Irvin, 'style' can be understood through Immanuel Kant's definition: '[Kant] suggested that the genius of an artist consists in nature's acting through the artist to create works governed by a new rule, or an organizational principle that has never been seen in earlier artworks. This organizational principle, or rule, is what we would call the artist's style'(Irvin 2005: 130).

This notion of an 'organizational principle' is similarly expressed by Keizer as the set of transformations experienced in the translation of nature to art: 'Style allows the artwork a double origin, both in the thing or person depicted and in the person depicting. It puts a new kind of emphasis on the authorship of images. Style names the transformation nature undergoes when it is translated into art' (2015: 380). Keizer goes on to characterize style as the deliberate choices made by an author: 'Authorship and style are presented as some thing controlled, the result of careful considerations on the part of the maker' (2015: 381). Style as the *choices* of an author, through an algorithmic set of principles—deliberate or intuitive to the author—emerges as a form of interpreting authorship in the Renaissance. Connoisseurship then arises, wherein authorship is determined through the analysis of a work's

characteristics which exemplify these principles—its style (Berenson 1996: 132).

The concept of relative consistency in style was maintained by Michel Foucault in his criteria for determining authorship, outlined in *What is an Author?* in 1969. According to Foucault, an author—here referring specifically to literary authors—can be determined through a 'stylistic uniformity,' which is allowed to alter through maturity, evolution, or outside influence (Foucault 2008: 238). While this text by Foucault essentially concedes Roland Barthes' 1967 claim of the 'Death of the Author,' (Barthes 2008: 130)—wherein Barthes challenged the social significance of authorship and hierarchical dominance over audiences or 'readers'—Foucault confirms that style persisted as a means of determining a source, at least until this poststructuralist rejection of authorship.

It is this algorithmic, consistent nature of style which makes it susceptible to deterioration today. Its capacity to be reduced to a set of rules—aesthetic choices, linguistic cadence, formal tendencies—allows for latent clustering by machine learning models or codification by programmers into algorithms to generate new works 'in-the-style-of' an author. Prior to digital computation and specifically the emergence of transformer and diffusion model-based machine learning (such as ChatGPT, DALL-E, and Midjourney), 'autographic' works—those whose copies are considered forgeries, such as paintings (Goodman 1968: 113)—were an easy target for style-based imitations, with the practice of connoisseurship as an attempted foil. In the contemporary context, digital imitations can be made by any Internet user in a matter of seconds and shared globally simultaneously. Generative AI instantiates a new sociological phenomenon via the tenuous authorial involvement of the users of these programs. Autographic and allographic forms alike can be imitated at a rate which bypasses questions of authenticity. Instead, 'style transfer' suggests that style is now unrelated to contemporary authorship, as it is untethered to the deliberate or intuitive choices of the author. Whether using machine learning to emulate known styles, or to reveal stylistic patterns invisible to human cognition (Steinfeld 2021: 7), style becomes an operative site of machine learning. If authorship is dependent on the specificity style and therein choice, then ceding choice to AI or reducing human agency to selection within a finite set of options—akin to an 'optometrist algorithm' (Bridle 2019: 101)—erases style as a criterion of authorship.

In the digital, individuality of work itself is undermined by its basis in binary code, allowing for infinite copies, while the Internet and social media platforms allow for ideological copying and encourage mimetic behavior and generation through visual and aural memes; a new practice of imitation (Carpo 2023). The singularity of a style is replaced with an expectation of replicability, while authorial singularity itself is challenged by the simplification or predilection of collective authorship through the Internet (Simone 2019). While formal mimesis has problematized attribution through practices of reproduction, the mimesis of 'truth' has paradoxically constituted authorship through the final outmoded aesthetic criterion: veracity.

Veracity

Veracity as a principle of authorship has a paradoxical trajectory, wherein technology influences both the rise and fall of this criterion. The capacity of an author to render faithfully the subject of their work established their authority, and the mastery of optical tools facilitated this dominance. The advent of linear perspective, starting with Filippo Brunelleschi circa 1425, introduced mathematics to images (Payne 2015: 3). Beyond apparent accuracy, the measurability of these images signified their 'truthfulness' (Edgerton 2009). Artists *created* reality in their perspectival images, which, until this time, was a verb reserved for theological contexts (Lepenies 2018: 592). Shortly after Brunelleschi, Alberti's treatise, *De Pictura* (On Painting), disseminated the technique of linear perspective throughout Europe (Lepenies 2018: 587). Artists or those utilizing linear perspective became authorities themselves, and their creative ownership—authorship—of those images became significant, as creators and authorities of religious narratives.

While veracity in images and other artforms reinforced the supremacy of authors, optical tools facilitated the democratization of image making long before the emergence of digital computation in the mid-twentieth century. The camera obscura aided eighteenth century Venetian school painter Canaletto in his creation of both faithful and capricious, realistic depictions of Venice (Steadman 2022: 103). The apparent veracity of his images garnered acclaim for the author, however the relatively recent discovery of Canaletto's use of the camera obscura called into question his merit as an author throughout art historical discourse (Hockney 2006). This critique of Canaletto's methodology implies that, among some academics and critics, authorship resides in the veracity of the work, and that technical aids discredit his authorial supremacy. While this analysis of Canaletto's merit suggests a disinclination within academic discourse towards the use and influence of technology in the fine arts, it also foreshadows the deterioration of this authorial criterion in the age of digital computation, and the creation of space for new evaluative criteria of artistic merit.

Beyond the untethering of veracity as a trademark of authorial *skill*, it is also uncoupled as a signifier of *truth*. William J. Mitchell articulated the dissolution of photographic authenticity via digital image saturation in 1992, prior to the widespread emergence of the Internet. Looking first at film photography, Mitchell describes the existence of a 'special bond between fugitive reality and permanent image that is formed at the instant of exposure' (Mitchell 1992: 24), establishing a causal relationship with reality, much like a fingerprint. Susan Sontag describes this connection, stating that a 'photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or death mask' (Sontag, cited in Mitchell 1992: 24). As Roland Barthes claims at the outset of his 1980 publication *Camera Lucida*, 'the referent adheres'—the photograph is never distinguished from that which it is representing (Barthes, cited in Mitchell 1992: 26). Inaccuracy in

Sontag's stenciling, the exploitation of a fissure in the 'causal bond,' is where photographic representation *without* veracity is born. In digital photography, 'the referent has become unstuck' (Mitchell 1992: 23), the audience is aware of the gap between the original and the representation. Mitchell outlined a series of questions to analyze coherence in photographs, a guide for deciphering doctored, inauthentic images (1992: 36), while Barthes argued that photography's level of functionless detail proved the unfiltered quality of representation (1992: 27). These twentieth century authenticating methods are futile in the ubiquity of digital images which was unanticipated in the early 1990s, and in the context of machine learning. Barthes' analogue tell—detail and resolution—has become the illusionary toolkit of AI.

Optical devices had a paradoxical effect on veracity as a criterion of authorship. In the case of linear perspective, this cultural technology amplified the supremacy and mastery of the author, while the camera obscura and photography eroded this criterion. This paradox has parallels with the concept of the 'AI effect'—wherein the benchmark of artificial intelligence is a moving goalpost that shifts to whatever function is momentarily beyond technological capacity (McCorduck 1979): once technology was able to mimic or even improve upon the human capacity for capturing veracity in images, it no longer constituted an act of human intelligence, of authorial prowess. This contradiction suggests a possible perceived tipping point of a technology or optical device, where it transforms from a constituent part of a process to a discrediting collaborator.

Towards Relational Authorship

The withering of these three criteria of authorship becomes clear when they are applied anachronistically to contemporary media. Despite their frequent invocation in debates today, their decline in compatibility is already visible in the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of computational and Information theory alongside poststructuralist interests in feedback and interpretation. While Cybernetics and digital media would later popularize feedback, the notion of reciprocity in production itself predates WWII. Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer* (1934) recognized writing as a chance to transform the newspaper into a bidirectional medium, where readers might also become authors. For Benjamin, authorship was not a mark of elite authority but of labor: a worker's capacity to intervene politically through form (Benjamin 2005: 772). Such reciprocity between producer and audience marks an early indication of what I call Relational Authorship.

The emergence of computation after the war accelerated this shift. By the 1960s, as computers entered popular consciousness, critical texts such as Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1967), Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* (1969), and Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) reframed authorship as less a matter of interior genius and more a question of interpretation, circulation, and meaning-making. Audiences—sometimes

quantified through data, polls, or participation—were increasingly seen as co-constructors of a work's significance. This echoed Claude Shannon's *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1948), where information is defined through transmission, reception, and noise. Poststructuralist theorists such as Barthes, Calvino, and Foucault thus repositioned authorship as a function of externality and readership, not self-contained originality.

In contrast, the humanist model of authorship had anchored itself in the interiority of the autonomous subject, a necessary response to premodern traditions where the author was merely the channel of divine discourse (Burke 2008: xviii). Poststructuralism destabilized this humanist insistence on singular agency, renewing older notions of 'scriptors' while extending them toward the audience as a constitutive force. This trajectory can now be extended further still, beyond the human, to include computational and machinic contributors—post-humanist authorship.

The rise of feedback-driven art in the 1960s and 1970s illustrates this shift. MoMA's *Information* exhibit (1970) foregrounded audience participation as a condition of artistic production, while theorists like Umberto Eco in *The Open Work* (1962) and *The Role of the Reader* (1979) emphasized the openness of interpretation. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) similarly underscored reception as meaning-making. Notational practices by artists such as Sol LeWitt and Carolee Schneemann distributed authorship further, establishing instructions, scores, or participatory structures that transformed the audience into active co-authors. Such work unsettled the authority that once secured artists' dominance since the Renaissance. Eco saw this openness as dismantling the hierarchy of artist over audience, aligning with contemporary aesthetics of contingency (Eco 1989: 4).

Yet authorship never disappeared; artists still retained attribution, canonization, and responsibility. The anxieties of this era show how relationality coexisted uneasily with the persistence of identity and control. Architecture, by contrast, demonstrates how certain disciplinary structures resist such flattening. Its regulatory frameworks, professional accreditation, and networks of liability tether authorship to legal and fiscal responsibility. Unlike a painting or text, architecture's capital requirements and client structures enforce hierarchies: the Architect (capital A) remains singular, chosen through evaluative systems of merit, reputation, or power. Patronage, whether historical or contemporary, continues to consolidate authority. This limits the possibility of flat authorship in architecture and suggests instead that authorship here must be understood as distributed yet constrained—malleable rather than effaceable.

Architecture's scale, capital intensity, and regulation sustain hierarchies, but they do not preclude participation. Goodman's hesitation in classifying architecture points to the need for a new ontology of authorship. Relational Authorship offers such a framework: a model that acknowledges the plurality of contributors, embraces the asymmetry of roles, and includes nonhuman participants in processes of design and production. Authorship thus shifts from being judged through formal outputs to being traced through the processes of conception, however opaque or black-boxed those may be.

A new model of authorship necessitates accepting the deterioration of the truth and authentication systems we have culturally in place based on a historically established hierarchy of authors over audiences. While acknowledging this shift is destabilizing in the context of accelerating uses of generative AI, this conceptualization may facilitate greater democracy in the production of media: it suggests a potential for gradation over discretization of information, knowledge, and history, that acknowledges multiple truths and perspectives—which have been suppressed since the 'Enlightenment' and the Scientific Revolution (Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

In *Latour for Architects* (2022), Albena Yaneva situates architecture within the relational networks that underpin its production, emphasizing the inherently public and social character of architectural outputs—a perspective resonant with Jeremy Till's reflections on the social life of buildings. Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Yaneva highlights how architecture is constituted through webs of human and nonhuman actors, where production is contingent upon interactions across these networks rather than emanating from a singular, autonomous author. Building upon this insight, Relational Authorship adopts ANT's relational lens while making a crucial distinction: not all actors are authors. By foregrounding a narrower, accountable notion of authorship within these networks, the model maintains the ethical imperative of responsibility while acknowledging distributed participation.

Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter' complements this framework by illustrating the potential agency embedded in material and nonhuman assemblages. Just as Bennett urges recognition of distributed agency, Relational Authorship considers how authorship—and thus responsibility—can be spread across heterogeneous networks without dissolving accountability entirely. As she asks, 'Should we acknowledge the distributive quality of agency to address the power of human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame? Or should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hopes of enhancing the accountability of specific humans?' (Bennett 2010: 38). This question foregrounds the central tension in contemporary authorship: how to distribute influence and responsibility without erasing traceable accountability.

Traditional models of authorship, oriented around formal outputs, presuppose not only singular authorship but also a form of objectivity. Relational Authorship reconceives this 'objective' ideal through the lens of accountability, drawing upon Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges: only partial perspectives can claim any semblance of objectivity (Haraway 1988: 583). In this view, accountability arises from acknowledging the limits and context of one's knowledge while remaining open to interpretation and critique. Expanding the dyad of author and audience into a network of specific, relational contributors enables us, in Haraway's terms, to 'become answerable for what we learn how to see' (Haraway 1988: 583), thus reconciling responsibility with multiplicity.

This approach is not equivalent to relativism. While relativism often implies equality of perspectives and closure, relationality emphasizes

specificity: each authorial claim is examined within its networked context, including opaque or 'black-boxed' elements such as algorithmic systems. By aligning with situated knowledges, Relational Authorship neither elevates nor diminishes particular contributors but rather structures the relational and accountable distribution of authorship across both human and machine actors.

Although untested in legal or political contexts, the framework implies that accountability should mirror the distribution of agency within a networked production process. In the context of generative AI, this distinction becomes crucial. Agency does not reside solely in the algorithm or in the human author but in the interplay between them. Drawing on Karen Barad's *agential realism*, agency 'can never "run out" ... Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity' (Barad 2006: 177). By distinguishing between 'dead' and 'living' agency—a conceptual dyad borrowed from Marx—Relational Authorship acknowledges instances where authors retain authorship without active control over their work. Accountability, in this model, is tied to living agency: recognizing our relative agency entails accepting corresponding responsibility.

Ultimately, Relational Authorship positions authorship as a social, processual phenomenon rather than a static assessment of formal outputs. By tracing the contributions, labor, and interpretive work of multiple human and nonhuman participants—and attending to their potential invisibility, marginalization, or censorship—it creates opportunities to resist traditional forms of authorial repression. This relational ontology thus reframes authorship as both a means of attribution and a mechanism for distributed accountability within the complex, networked, and increasingly AI-mediated processes of contemporary creative production.

Conclusion

The persistence of authorship cannot be explained by liability alone, nor dissolved by poststructuralist critique, nor finally displaced by computation. Each technological and cultural rupture—print, photography, cybernetics, the Internet, and now machine learning—has destabilized our networks of making and recognition, only for authorship to reemerge in altered form. If nothing else, this persistence suggests that authorship remains necessary, but not in the guise of singularity, originality, or interior genius.

The question posed at the outset—*is authorship necessary in our current technological and social context?*—answers itself through the logic of improv, where collaboration and feedback drive creation: yes, *and*. Yes, authorship is necessary, *and* it needs to be reconsidered through a new framework that recognizes authorship as a social process—not a formal characteristic—that can include a network of authors that are both human and non-human.

Relational Authorship reframes authorship as a distributed, situated, and accountable process. It acknowledges that creative work now

arises through entanglements of humans, nonhumans, and institutions; that participation, interpretation, and training data constitute contributions; and that responsibility is best understood as partial, contextual, and shared. This model resists both the hubris of genius and the nihilism of 'death of the author,' positioning authorship instead as social process.

In architecture, where liability and regulation hold fast, Relational Authorship clarifies the plurality already embedded in practice while offering a means to address the integration of machine collaborators. More broadly, it provides a framework for cultural production in an era where openness has turned to protection, and where the commons is reshaped by automation. If authorship endures, it must be because it adapts—not as a tether to singularity, but as a recognition of relationality. In this sense, Relational Authorship is not a final resolution to Foucault's provocation—*what matter who's speaking?*—but a way to keep asking the question responsibly, in the company of humans, machines, and the networks that bind them.

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