The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication
E-ISSN: 2146-5193
DOI: 10.7456/tojdac

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

ISTANBUL DIGITAL ART FESTIVAL (IDAF) AS AN INFRASTRUCTURAL INTERFACE AND ITS REFORMED CURATORIAL AGENCY BETWEEN 2021-2025 EDITIONS

ALTYAPISAL BİR ARAYÜZ OLARAK İSTANBUL DİJİTAL SANAT FESTİVALİ (IDAF) VE FESTİVALİN 2021 VE 2025 ARASINDAKİ EDİSYONLARINDA YENİDEN ŞEKİLLENEN KÜRATÖRYEL FAİLLİĞİ

İsmail Erim GÜLAÇTI[1]
Nabat GARAKHANOVA[2]

ORCID: İ.E.G. 0000-0002-6786-479X
N.G. 0000-0002-3637-7710

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:
[1] İsmail Erim Gülaçtı
Yıldız Technical University, Türkiye
E-mail: egulacti@yildiz.edu.tr

[2] Nabat Garakhanova
Karatay University, Türkiye
E-mail:
nabat.garakhanova@karatay.edu.tr

Received/Geliş tarihi: 22.04.2026

Benzerlik Oranı/Similarity Ratio: %8

Revision Requested/Revizyon talebi:
16.05.2026

Last revision received/Son revizyon teslimi:
23.05.2026

Accepted/Kabul tarihi: 28.06.2026

Etik Kurul İzni/ Ethics Committee Permission:
Çalışmada etik kurul onayı gerektiren bir unsur bulunmamaktadır. / There is no element in the study that requires ethics committee approval.

Citation/Atıf: Gülaçtı, İ. E. & Garakhanova, N. (2026). Istanbul Digital Art Festival (Idaf) As An Infrastructural Interface and Its Reformed Curatorial Agency Between 2021-2025 Editions. The Turkish Online Journal of Design Art and Communication, 16 (3), 1746-1760. https://doi.org/10.7456/tojdac.1929081

Abstract
This study examines the Istanbul Digital Art Festival (IDAF) across five editions (2021-2025) through longitudinal document analysis of the festival's official activity reports. Drawing on theories of operational images, post-humanist agency, post-representational visual culture, and curatorial theory, the article develops the concept of *synthetic visuality*, a regime of algorithmically generated image-making that distributes creative agency across human and machinic actors. Thematic analysis is organized along three axes: (a) the curatorial shift from a single human curator to a distributed human-AI apparatus featuring Turkey's first AI curator, Avind; (b) the spatial progression from heritage architecture to the Atatürk Cultural Center; and (c) the diversification of mediums from video and installation to XR, VR, generative AI, bio-art, and game engines. The article argues that the contemporary digital art festival functions as an *infrastructural interface* where the operations of synthetic visuality have materialized and opened to critical engagement.

Keywords: Synthetic Visuality, Digital Art Festivals, AI Curation, Infrastructural Image, Posthumanism, Operational Image.

Öz
Bu çalışma, İstanbul Dijital Sanat Festivali'ni (IDAF) beş farklı dönemde (2021-2025) festivalin resmi faaliyet raporlarının uzunlamasına belge analizi yoluyla incelemektedir. Makale, operasyonel imgeler, posthümanist eylemlilik, post-temsilsel görsel kültür ve küratörlük teorisinden yararlanarak, yaratıcı eylemliliği insan ve makine aktörleri arasında dağıtan algoritmik olarak üretilen bir imge oluşturma rejimi olan sentetik görsellik kavramını geliştirmektedir. Tematik analiz üç eksen etrafında düzenlenmektedir: (a) tek bir insan küratörden Türkiye'nin ilk yapay zeka küratörü Avind'i içeren dağıtılmış bir insan-yapay zeka aygıtına doğru küratörlük değişimi; (b) miras mimarisinden Atatürk Kültür Merkezi'ne mekânsal ilerleme; ve (c) video ve enstalasyondan XR, VR, üretken yapay zeka, biyo-sanat ve oyun motorlarına kadar ortamların çeşitlenmesi. Makale, çağdaş dijital sanat festivalinin, sentetik görselliğin operasyonlarının somutlaştığı ve eleştirel bir yaklaşıma açıldığı bir altyapısal arayüz olarak işlev gördüğünü savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sentetik Görsellik, Dijital Sanat Festivalleri, Yapay Zeka Küratörlüğü, Altyapısal Görüntü, Posthümanizm, Operasyonel Görüntüler.

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of visual culture has fundamentally altered the conditions under which art is produced, circulated, and experienced. What was once understood as a representational medium has increasingly become an operational entity: generated by algorithms, processed through machine learning pipelines, and deployed within infrastructural systems that exceed human perception (Steyerl, 2017). This shift, from the image-as-representation to what Farocki (2004, p. 17) termed "operational images," marks a pivotal rupture in visual epistemology. In this emerging landscape, the locus of artistic agency is no longer confined to the human creator. It is distributed across computational architectures, training datasets, and generative models that produce what this article calls *synthetic visuality*, a new regime of image-making in which algorithmic processes constitute both the medium and the message.

Digital art festivals have emerged as critical institutional sites for navigating this transformation. Unlike traditional exhibition formats, they operate as laboratories for testing the aesthetic, ethical, and ontological implications of technologically mediated creation (Graham & Cook, 2010), offering audiences embodied encounters with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, extended reality, and real-time generative systems (Paul, 2023). Yet as Paul (2015) has argued, digital art's inherent processualism and interactivity resist the conventions of the gallery and the museum. Despite the extensive attention paid to biennials and the curatorial turn in contemporary art (O'Neill, 2012; Smith, 2012; Filipovic et al., 2010), digital art festivals, particularly those outside the Euro-American institutional axis, have received comparatively little sustained analytical attention, a significant gap given their increasing role as sites where algorithmic agency, synthetic creation, and post-human aesthetics are publicly negotiated.

The Istanbul Digital Art Festival (IDAF), established in 2021 and organized annually by Mezo Group, provides a particularly rich case for examining these dynamics. Over five editions (2021-2025), IDAF has evolved from a pandemic-constrained exhibition of ten artists in an underground Byzantine cistern to a five-day, multi-thematic festival at the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) hosting over seventy-five artists and drawing upwards of sixty thousand visitors. Three aspects of this evolution are of scholarly interest. First, the festival introduced Turkey's first AI curator, Avind, in 2022, initiating a hybrid human-machine curatorial model that persisted and was institutionally normalized across subsequent editions (Zeilinger, 2021). Second, the spatial trajectory from heritage sites to modernist infrastructure offers a compelling case in the dialogue between architecture and digital aesthetics (Kwon, 2002; Grau, 2007). Third, the progressive diversification from video and installation to XR, VR, game engines, bio-art, and generative AI mirror the broader expansion of digital art practice in the post-AI era (Manovich, 2013).

Against this background, the study undertakes a longitudinal document analysis of IDAF's five editions drawing on the official activity reports submitted by the festival organizers. The analysis is structured around three research questions: (1) How do digital art festivals position and negotiate the transformation of the image from representational medium to algorithmic and operational force? (2) How does the integration of synthetic visuality and AI restructure curatorial decision-making within the framework of human-machine collaboration? (3) How do spatial and technological transformations restructure the institutional conditions under which audiences encounter and navigate digital art? Bringing these questions to bear on a single institutional case across five editions allows the analysis to trace not only what changes but how change becomes institutionally normalized. The remainder of the article develops a theoretical framework around synthetic visuality and the infrastructural conditions of digital art, details the document-analytic methodology, presents findings along three thematic axes, and concludes by articulating IDAF's emergent function as an infrastructural interface.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SYNTHETIC VISUALITY AND THE INFRASTRUCTURAL CONDITIONS OF DIGITAL ART

From operational images to the post-representational turn

The conceptual point of departure is the recognition that the image has undergone a fundamental ontological shift in the digital era. Farocki's concept of *operational images* (operative Bilder),

developed through his video essay series *Eye/Machine* (2001-2003) and elaborated in *Phantom Images* (2004), designates images that "do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation" (Farocki, 2004, p. 17): images produced by machines to guide other machines, whose primary function is instrumental rather than aesthetic. Steyerl (2009; 2017) extended this analysis, tracing how the mass circulation of degraded images across digital networks creates new economies of visibility and arguing that contemporary image production is inseparable from the infrastructures of data capitalism and automated governance, a condition in which the remnants of representational logic persist within a visual regime fundamentally transformed by computation. Paglen (2016) further demonstrated that we have entered an era of "invisible images" (p. 22), in which most images produced globally are made by machines for machines within automated systems of recognition, navigation, and prediction. Taken together, these analyses establish that the image has been decoupled from human vision and enlisted in operational processes that are fundamentally non-representational. What the present study takes from this re-orientation is not the verdict that representation has ended, but the analytic injunction to read institutional sites of digital art display as interfaces where operational images materialize for embodied encounter, a re-reading the festival case below will substantiate.

Toward Synthetic Visuality: Algorithmic Production and The New Image Regime

The term *synthetic visuality*, as deployed in this study, designates a regime of image-making in which visual outputs are generated through algorithmic processes, including machine learning, generative adversarial networks, large language models, and diffusion models, without necessary recourse to a pre-existing physical referent. Unlike digital photography, which involves the optical capture of light from a physical scene, or CGI, which involves deliberate modeling by human designers, synthetic visuality involves the probabilistic generation of images from latent statistical patterns extracted from training data. This formulation extends Manovich's (2001; 2013) foundational argument that the shift from analog to digital media transformed the image from an indexical trace to a numerical representation, foregrounding the programmability of digital images as the defining characteristic of new media aesthetics, and that software has become the universal medium through which all cultural production is mediated. The post-humanist frameworks of Hayles (1999) and Braidotti (2013) provide the broader philosophical orientation: the synthetic image, generated through the entanglement of human prompting and machine processing, exemplifies the distributed, hybrid agency that Hayles identified as characteristic of the posthuman condition, in which "there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation" (1999, p. 3). Braidotti's (2013) critical posthumanism further redirects analysis from evaluating AI art against a human standard toward examining the assemblages, human, machinic, institutional, and spatial, through which digital art is produced and experienced. This shift, from the evaluative question "is AI-generated work as good as human work?" to the descriptive question "what kinds of human-machine assemblages does AI generation make possible?", orients the analytic stance of this study. Synthetic visuality, in this framing, is less a property of individual images than a regime of distributed production whose institutional consequences become legible only when the unit of analysis shifts from the artwork to the apparatus.

Curatorial Agency and The Human-Machine Partnership

The figure of the curator as a creative agent selecting works, generating interpretive frameworks, and producing meaning through the act of arrangement emerged through what scholarship has termed the curatorial turn (O'Neill, 2012; Smith, 2012). Graham and Cook (2010) argued that new media art's processuality, interactivity, and variability require curators to manage behaviors and systems rather than objects, shifting the role from selector-and-displayer to collaborator-and-facilitator. Zeilinger (2021) analyzed how AI-mediated creation produces *tactical entanglements* that resist the attribution of authorship to a single human agent, since human prompts shape machine outputs while machine capabilities and biases shape the range of possible prompts, generating a recursive loop in which agency is distributed rather than located.

In Zeilinger's (2021) account, the human prompt and the machine output are mutually constitutive: the operator's prompts are shaped by acquired understanding of the system's capabilities and biases, while the system's outputs are conditioned by training data that encodes the aesthetic and representational

conventions of the human-produced corpora on which it was trained. Neither contribution can be isolated as the original creative act. Transposed to the institutional level of curatorial decision-making, this dynamic shifts the analytic question from authorship (who made this image?) to institutional authority (who curated this exhibition, and what does it mean that the answer cannot be cleanly resolved into human and machine contributions?).

Groys (2016) argued that under the conditions of digital circulation, the curatorial decision temporarily stabilizes an artwork's meaning by placing it within a specific spatial, temporal, and discursive frame, making curation the primary meaning-making mechanism in contemporary digital art. If one accepts this premise, the delegation of curatorial functions to AI represents not merely a technical innovation but a profound restructuring of how artistic meaning is produced and legitimized. The empirical question, then, is not whether AI can curate but what kind of institutional grammar emerges when curatorial authority is partially delegated to systems whose outputs are statistically generated and recursively shaped by their training corpora, a reconfiguration that Galani and Milne (2025) document for Euro-American institutions and that the present study extends to a non-Western context across five sequential editions.

Festival As Institutional Infrastructure

The choice of the art festival as analytical focus requires theoretical justification. Paul (2015, p. 37) has argued that digital art's institutional reception is marked by persistent tensions between the medium's processual characteristics and the museum's orientation toward what she calls the "object paradigm"

The festival format offers temporal and spatial flexibility that can accommodate the event-based and experiential dimensions of digital art in ways permanent collections often cannot. Filipovic, Van Hal, and Øvstebø (2010) situated large-scale periodic exhibitions within a broader history of globalization, noting that they function as instruments for positioning cities within international art circuits. Bratton's (2015) concept of *the stack*, a model of planetary-scale computation, provides an infrastructure-theoretical complement: digital art festivals can be understood as interfaces within a broader computational stack where the otherwise abstract operations of algorithmic image production become visible and subject to critical scrutiny. As Grau (2007) demonstrated, the institutions through which media art is presented have always been co-constitutive of the art itself.

Heritage Architecture, Site-Specificity and Digital Aesthetics

Site-specific art, in its conceptual history, has been understood across three successive registers: as phenomenological engagement with the physical properties of a location, as institutional critique of the gallery system, and as a discursive model in which "site" is itself a socially constituted field of meaning (Kwon, 2002). This trajectory is instructive for understanding how IDAF's early editions leveraged heritage architecture while its later editions shifted toward institutional and discursive models of site-responsiveness. Bishop's (2012) provocation that the art world has been slow to grapple with the institutional implications of digitalization further contextualizes the digital art festival as a format designed to accommodate the aesthetic specificities of digitally mediated art. This trajectory matters for the present analysis because IDAF's spatial evolution from heritage cistern to modernist cultural complex recapitulates Kwon's typological progression in a single institutional life, compressed into five years. The site-specific concerns that animated decades of debate in 1990s and 2000s art theory thus reappear at IDAF as a sequence of curatorial-spatial decisions made in real time.

Conceptual Synthesis

The theoretical framework assembled here converges on a central proposition: the contemporary digital art festival functions as an *infrastructural interface*, a site where the otherwise distributed and often invisible operations of algorithmic image production, AI-mediated curation, and computational aesthetics are materialized, staged, and opened to critical engagement. This proposition integrates Farocki's (2004) and Steyerl's (2017) insights into the operational and post-representational status of the image; the post-humanist recognition (Hayles, 1999; Braidotti, 2013) that creative agency is distributed across human and non-human actors; the curatorial theory (Graham & Cook, 2010; O'Neill,

2012; Groys, 2016) that positions curation as a primary meaning-making practice; and the infrastructure-theoretical perspective (Bratton, 2015; Grau, 2007) that understands exhibition formats as co-constitutive of the art they present. The concept of *synthetic visuality* serves as the connective tissue across these strands. Applied to IDAF, it provides an analytical lens for understanding not only the festival's technological content but also its institutional form, including the hybrid human-AI curatorial model, the spatial progression from heritage architecture to modernist infrastructure, and the expanding disciplinary scope. The following analysis deploys this framework to examine how IDAF's five-year evolution instantiates, negotiates, and in some cases challenges these structural transformations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis, defined by Bowen (2009) as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents" in which the researcher "examines and interprets data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (p. 27). Document analysis is particularly suited to this inquiry because it permits the examination of institutional evolution over time without the retrospective distortions that interview-based methods may introduce (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and it enables the tracing of organizational decisions as they were documented at the time of occurrence. Within this design, the study adopts a longitudinal case study approach (Yin, 2018) to examine IDAF across five consecutive editions (2021-2025). The analytical stance is interpretive-discursive rather than evaluative: the reports are read as institutional self-presentations whose discursive patterns are themselves the object of analysis, rather than as neutral records of festival activity to be assessed for accuracy or success.

Data sources and Collection

The primary data set consists of the official Final Activity Reports (Nihai Faaliyet Raporu) prepared by the festival's organizing body, Mezo Group, under the direction of Dr. Nabat Garakhanova, and submitted to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. These standardized institutional documents follow a consistent structure including project realization details, daily activity chronologies, participant information, and cultural impact assessments. The five reports correspond to the festival's editions in 2021 (inaugural exhibition *Dalınç* at the Binbirdirek Cistern, ten artists), 2022 (Fişekhane, introduction of the AI curator Avind and GPT-3), and 2023–2025 (Atatürk Cultural Center, expanding from twenty-four to seventy-five artists across the five-track model). Each report was finalized within several months of its respective festival's conclusion and submitted to the Ministry; all five reports were in definitive form at the time of coding and analysis, and are archived in the institutional records of Mezo Group and in the Ministry's project documentation system. These reports were selected as the sole primary data source because they constitute the most comprehensive and consistently structured institutional record of the festival's operations, were produced contemporaneously with the events they describe, and their standardized format facilitates systematic comparison across editions.

Analytical Procedure

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), following six phases: familiarization through repeated close reading; generation of initial codes; searching for themes by grouping codes into broader patterns; reviewing candidate themes against the coded extracts and the full data set; defining and naming the final themes; and producing the written analysis. The coding process was guided by the theoretical framework but remained open to emergent patterns, combining "theoretical" and "inductive" coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Three overarching themes emerged: (a) curatorial and operational transformation, (b) spatial infrastructure and aesthetic adaptation, and (c) diversification of technological mediums and disciplinary scope. The complete code list with operational definitions, exemplary data anchors, code-to-theme mapping, and the code distribution matrix across the five editions are presented in Appendices A, B, and C respectively.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis relies exclusively on official activity reports produced for a government ministry, documents oriented toward demonstrating project realization and

positive cultural impact rather than critical self-assessment or documentation of failures. The reports vary in detail across editions, affecting the granularity of analysis possible for different periods. The study does not incorporate independent sources such as art criticism, audience surveys, or interviews with artists and curators, a deliberate methodological choice that necessarily limits scope. Future research could productively supplement this document-based analysis with ethnographic observation and audience reception studies.

The researcher's positionality should also be acknowledged. The second author, Dr. Nabat Garakhanova, is the founder and director of Mezo Group, the organizing body of IDAF, and oversaw the preparation of the activity reports analyzed here in her institutional capacity. She provided these documents as institutional records and did not participate in the framing of arguments, the coding process, or the interpretation of findings, all of which were conducted independently by the first author. The authors are situated within visual culture studies with research interests in surveillance, photography theory, digital infrastructure (Gülaçtı, 2026) and cultural diplomacy (Garakhanova, 2023) which shape the analytical attention given to certain dimensions of the data over others. This is disclosed as a condition of interpretive transparency, consistent with the reflexive norms of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of IDAF's five official activity reports (2021-2025) reveals a festival in rapid and multidimensional transformation. The findings are presented along three thematic axes: (a) curatorial and operational transformation, (b) spatial infrastructure and aesthetic adaptation, and (c) diversification of technological mediums and disciplinary scope. While analytically distinct, these axes are empirically intertwined: changes in curatorial methodology both enabled and were enabled by spatial transitions, which in turn opened possibilities for new technological configurations.

Theme 1: Curatorial and Operational Transformation

The frameworks through which curatorial agency has been theorized presuppose a human subject, an individual intelligence that selects, interprets, and arranges (O'Neill, 2012; Smith, 2012). The trajectory documented across IDAF's activity reports moves through three structurally distinct curatorial models: a classical site-responsive model organized around a single human curator (Edition I, Codes C01-C02); a triangulated human-AI partnership in which theme generation, text production, and artistic direction were distributed across human and computational agents (Edition II, Codes C03-C06); and a formalized multi-curator assemblage in which the AI curator Avind was normalized as one institutional agent among six (Editions IV-V, Codes C07-C08). What is at stake is not the replacement of human curation by machine intelligence but the redistribution of curatorial agency across a heterogeneous network.

The Single-Curator, Site-Responsive Model (Edition I, 2021)

The festival's inaugural edition engaged a single curator, Seyhan Musaoğlu (Code C01), whose thematic concept emerged from the material properties of the Binbirdirek Cistern (Code C02). Recognizing the cistern's original function as a water reservoir, Musaoğlu developed a framework organized around classical elements supplemented by a fifth element, *dalınç*, a Turkish term denoting meditative absorption. The operational conditions were heavily shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic: the original plan for forty artists was reduced to ten, visitor flow was regulated to one person per ten square meters in ninety-minute intervals of approximately 320 persons (Code S10). These constraints produced an unintended curatorial effect, a controlled, contemplative viewing experience consistent with the *dalınç* theme.

The Introduction Of The Human-Ai Curatorial Partnership (Edition Ii, 2022)

The second edition marks the most significant curatorial rupture in IDAF's history. The report states that the curatorial process was conducted *through the collaboration of artificial intelligence and humans* (yapay zeka ile insan ortak çalışması ile oluşturulmuştur) (Code C03), with the exhibition theme determined by the AI curator Avind (Code C04), described as Turkey's first AI curator. For text generation, the organizers employed GPT-3 (Code C05), identified in the report as *the world's highest*

publicly accessible technology (dünyanın erişime açık en yüksek teknolojisi). The report further documents that data received from GPT-3 were compiled and presented through various techniques, and that AI software for image processing and sound generation was used in the production of video and audio content.

This integration extended to what the report presents as thematic decision-making. The theme was *determined by the AI curator Avind* (küratör Avind tarafından belirlendiği), a formulation that attributes autonomous curatorial agency to the AI system. The resulting thematic question, *Is human creativity the only sustainable energy in the world?* (Dünyadaki tek sürdürülebilir enerji insan yaratıcılığı mıdır?), is itself a reflexive gesture, an AI-mediated exhibition asking whether human creativity remains indispensable.

The edition also introduced the AI artist Şuşa (Code C06), granted a solo exhibition in the Hamam building of Fişekhane, separate from the eleven other works. The organizational decision to grant Şuşa a dedicated exhibition space signals institutional recognition of AI-generated art as warranting the same curatorial attention as human-produced work. This curatorial model represents a qualitative departure from Edition I: a triangulated process involving human artistic direction (Bager Akbay), AI-mediated thematic generation (Avind), and computational text production (GPT-3).

Structural Expansion: The Multi-Curator, Multi-Thematic Model (Editions Iii-V, 2023-2025)
Beginning with Edition III and consolidating in Editions IV and V, the festival's curatorial structure transformed into a distributed, multi-curator architecture organized around disciplinary themes. Editions IV and V formalized five dedicated tracks, each overseen by a specialist curator (Code C07): Game (Rahim Ünlü), Music (Julie Walsh in Edition IV; Evgeniya Romanidi in Edition V), Fashion/Textile (Niyazi Erdoğan), Cinema (Samed Karagöz), and Children (Avind). The persistence of Avind as curator of the Children's track across both editions is analytically significant (Code C08): the AI curator had become a normalized component of the festival's institutional structure, assigned to a thematic area with substantial programming responsibilities including workshops, theater productions, and interactive experiences. Edition IV also introduced an open call mechanism (Code C09). The Edition V report's organizational chart reveals a seven-member board (Yönetim Kurulu) overseeing the festival structure (Code C11), indicating institutional maturation. The trajectory from Edition I to V documents the emergence of a hybrid institutional model in which human and machine curatorial functions coexist and are operationally interdependent.

Theme 2: Spatial Infrastructure and Aesthetic Adaptation
The spaces in which digital art is exhibited are never neutral containers but infrastructural conditions that shape what can be shown, how it can be experienced, and what meanings it can generate (Grau, 2007; Kwon, 2002). The trajectory documented across the reports moves through three venue typologies: a subterranean heritage site requiring extensive material improvisation (Edition I, Codes S01-S04, S06); an Ottoman-era industrial building adapted through scenographic intervention (Edition II, Codes S01-S03, S05); and a modernist cultural complex enabling scalar expansion, programmatic diversification, and the five-track model (Editions III-V, Codes S07-S09).

Heritage Architecture As Constraint and Resource (Editions I-Ii, 2021-2022)
The Binbirdirek Cistern provided 3,200 square meters total, of which 2,000 were used for exhibition (Code S06). Approximately 1,800 meters of fabric were used to create exhibition divisions while preserving architectural integrity (Code S02), and generator-powered electricity had to be brought from outside the building (Code S04). The Fişekhane complex offered a significantly smaller exhibition area of 400 square meters (Code S06), with approximately 80 meters of panels used to partition the open gallery space (Code S03). In the Hamam, 50 meters of curtain fabric, 60 meters of tulle, and fog effects were deployed (Codes S02, S05), transforming the historic bathhouse into an immersive sensory environment. Both heritage venues were historically charged environments whose material properties actively shaped what could be exhibited and how it could be experienced.

The Transition To Modernist Infrastructure (Editions Iii-V, 2023-2025)

The relocation to AKM beginning with Edition III represents a decisive infrastructural transition (Code S07). The most immediate effect was scalar: visitor numbers grew from approximately 3,990 (Edition I, under COVID restrictions) to 30,000 (Edition III), 55,000 (Edition IV), and 63,000 (Edition V) (Code S09), while artist participation expanded from ten to seventy-five. AKM's infrastructure enabled the programmatic diversification that defined the later editions: separate theater auditoriums (Code S08) made possible children's theater productions, dedicated workshop spaces supported the parallel education track, and panel rooms enabled the expanding discourse program. The spatial progression also reflects a shift in the audience-artwork relationship, from sequential movement through a continuous subterranean space to a navigational experience in which visitors chose among thematic tracks, positioning the audience as active navigators rather than guided receivers (Code S12). A notable development in Edition IV was the extension of the festival's geographic footprint through pre-festival preview events in Brussels and Milan (Code S11), signaling institutional ambitions toward the European digital art circuit.

Theme 3: Diversification of Technological Mediums qnd Disciplinary Scope

Each technological affordance that enters the field does not merely add a new medium to an existing repertoire; it restructures the disciplinary boundaries within which artistic production is recognized and institutionally supported (Paul, 2015; Manovich, 2013). The activity reports document a consistent pattern of accumulation: an initial palette confined to video, installation, and live performance (Editions I-II, Codes T01-T04); a disciplinary expansion into bio-art, algorithmic aesthetics, and audio-visual performance (Edition III, Codes T08-T10); and the consolidation of a five-track model distributing programming across Game, Music, Fashion/Textile, Cinema, and Children (Editions IV-V, Codes T11-T17).

The Initial Palette: Video, Installation, and Digital Performance (Editions I-Ii, 2021-2022)

The technological scope of the first two editions was relatively circumscribed. Edition I's ten participating artists worked primarily with projections, LED installations, and sound-visual compositions suited to the cistern's atmospheric conditions (Codes T01-T03). The report also documents the production of a 3D virtual exhibition enabling online access (Code T06), a response to COVID-19 restrictions that anticipated the broader digital art world's pandemic-era pivot to virtual formats (cf. Quaranta, 2022), and an accessibility application, *Hayal Ortağım*, for visually impaired visitors (Code T07). Edition II introduced AI into both curatorial and production processes: the report specifies that 3D design tools and AI software for image processing and sound generation were used (Code T05), alongside a broader artistic vocabulary of video, sound art, installation, photography, and performance.

The Disciplinary Turn: Bio-Art, Algorithmic Aesthetics and
The Human-Machine-Nature Triad (Edition Iii, 2023)

Edition III marked a thematic and disciplinary expansion centering on *human-nature, human-machine, and machine-nature relationships* and encompassing bio-art, AI, algorithmic arts, and new media as distinct sub-disciplines (Codes T08, T09). The inclusion of bio-art practitioners, among them Eduardo Kac, signaled a move beyond screen-based digital art toward a materially diverse understanding of technologically mediated practice. Audio-visual performances (Code T10) were introduced as evening programming.

The Five-Track Model: Disciplinary Specialization and
Technological Convergence (Editions Iv-V, 2024-2025)

Editions IV and V consolidated a structural innovation distinguishing IDAF from many comparable festivals: the organization of the entire program around five named disciplinary tracks (Code T17), each with its own curator, artist roster, and programming logic. The Game track (Code T12) engaged with gaming as both artistic medium and cultural practice, expanding by Edition V to include independent game selections and TGS Masterclass sessions. The Music track focused on the intersection of digital technologies and sonic practice. The Fashion/Textile track (Code T13) brought computational design practices into dialogue with digital art. The Cinema track (Code T14) addressed

the digital transformation of moving-image practices. The Children track (Code T15), curated by Avind, encompassed workshops, theater, and interactive experiences designed to cultivate digital literacy, a notable delegation of pedagogical and curatorial responsibility to an AI agent. The technological vocabulary of these editions encompassed XR, VR, AR (Code T11), game engines, and generative AI, while international participation expanded to fifty-five artists from eighteen countries in Edition IV (Code T16) and seventy-five artists in Edition V. This expansion is not merely additive but structural: each new technological and disciplinary addition required corresponding adaptations in curatorial organization and spatial infrastructure.

The Technological Horizon: Xr, Vr, Ar, And Generative Ai (Editions Iv-V)

Edition IV described the festival as a space where the boundaries of AI-supported art are pushed and the line between reality and the digital world is explored through immersive technologies. Edition V's *Connecting* (Bağlanıyor) theme positioned these technologies within a relational framework emphasizing new forms of social connection, identity construction, and cultural participation. The progression from Editions I-II through Edition III to Editions IV-V documents not a catalogue of new tools but a structural transformation requiring corresponding adaptations in curatorial organization, spatial infrastructure, and audience engagement design (see Appendix C, Patterns 1-3).

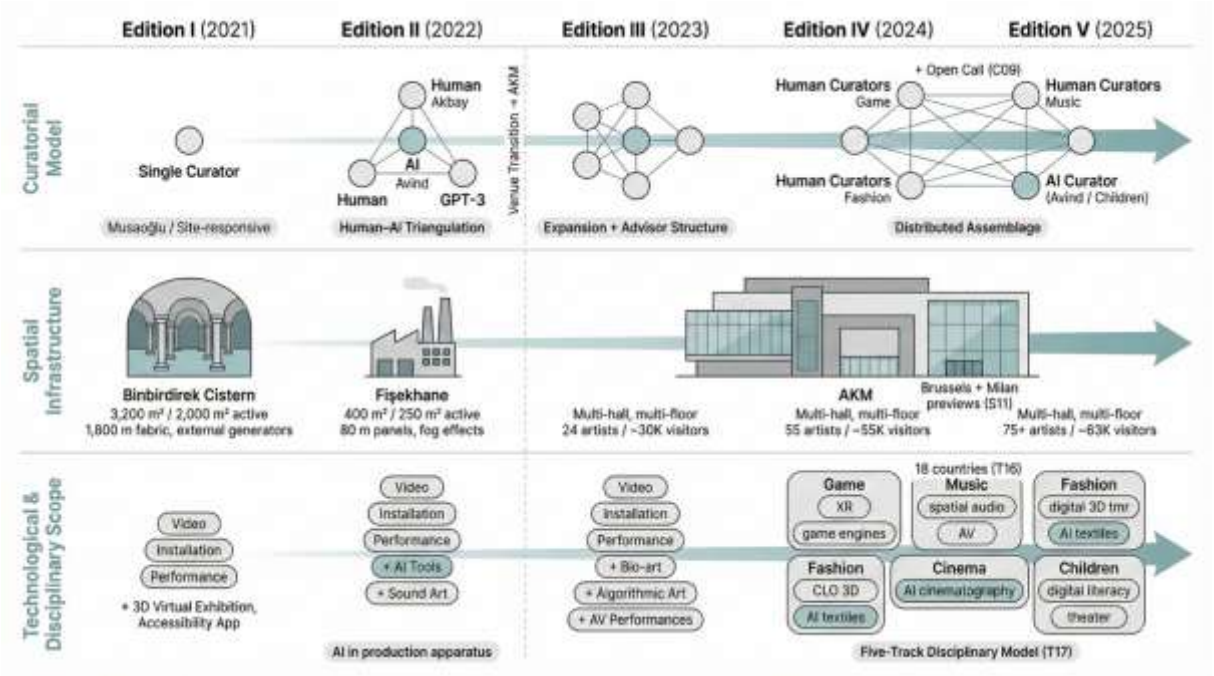

Figure 1. *Triaxial Evolution of IDAF*

Figure 1 synthesizes these three thematic axes as parallel, co-evolving trajectories, rendering visible their structural interdependence. The venue transition to AKM in 2023 did not merely coincide with the shift to multi-curator governance and disciplinary diversification but was a condition of possibility for both. The diagram thus visualizes the article's central empirical argument, that IDAF's evolution is not a story of three independent developments but of a single, structurally integrated transformation in which curatorial, spatial, and technological changes are mutually constitutive.

DISCUSSION OF SYNTHETIC VISUALITY, INFRASTRUCTURAL INTERFACES, AND THE POST-AI FESTIVAL

The Redistribution of Curatorial Agency From Authorship to Assemblage

Hayles (1999) argued that the posthuman subject is constituted not through autonomous self-determination but through recursive feedback loops between human cognition and computational processes, producing forms of distributed agency in which "human functionality expands because the parameters of the cognitive system it inhabits expand" (p. 290). IDAF's curatorial evolution can be

read as a concrete institutional enactment of this proposition. In Edition II, the AI curator Avind did not replace human curatorial judgment; rather, it expanded the parameters of the curatorial system by contributing thematic determinations and textual outputs that the human artistic director then compiled, edited, and spatially realized. The report's own language is instructive: the process was conducted through *collaboration* (ortak çalışma), a term implying partnership rather than delegation.

What is particularly striking is the subsequent normalization of this arrangement. By Editions IV and V, Avind was listed alongside five human curators in the standard organizational chart, assigned a specific thematic domain, and entrusted with programming that included workshops, theater, and interactive experiences.

The significance of this normalization warrants sustained analytical attention, because it is not merely an organizational detail but a theoretical event. In Edition II, Avind's curatorial role was framed within the activity report through a rhetoric of novelty: the report introduced Avind as "Turkey's first AI curator" (Türkiye'nin ilk yapay zeka küratörü), situated its deployment alongside the explicit identification of GPT-3 as "the world's highest publicly accessible technology," and presented the human-AI collaboration as a distinctive feature that set the edition apart from conventional exhibition practice. The institutional vocabulary, in other words, consistently marked the boundary between human and non-human curatorial agents. The AI was present, but it was present *as AI*, flagged, qualified, and framed as exceptional.

By Editions IV and V, this boundary marking had disappeared from the reports. Avind appeared in the same typographic format, the same organizational position, and with the same degree of institutional authority as Ünlü, Walsh/Romanidi, Erdoğan, and Karagöz. The reports did not describe the Children track as "AI-curated" or mark Avind's contributions as algorithmically generated; they simply listed Avind as the track's curator and documented its programming. The institutional vocabulary had ceased to distinguish between the human and the non-human curatorial agent. This is precisely the condition that Hayles (1999) theorized when she argued that the posthuman is characterized not by the dramatic replacement of the human by the machine but by the quiet dissolution of the conceptual boundary between them, a process in which "the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" (p. 2). The normalization of Avind enacts this dissolution at the institutional level: what matters in the organizational chart is the informational pattern (curator → thematic track → programming outputs), not the material instantiation (whether the curator is carbon-based or silicon-based).

This observation also illuminates a limitation in the existing curatorial theory. O'Neill (2012) and Smith (2012) theorized the expansion of curatorial authority from administrative function to creative authorship, tracing how the curator became recognized as an intellectual agent whose interpretive frameworks actively produce meaning. But their accounts presuppose that the expansion occurs *within* the category of human subjectivity: the curator-as-administrator becomes the curator-as-author, but both remain human subjects. What İDAF's trajectory documents is a further expansion that crosses the boundary of the human altogether, not by replacing the human curator with a machine but by constructing an institutional framework in which the distinction between human and machine curation becomes operationally irrelevant.

This normalization exceeds the scope of O'Neill's (2012) account of the curatorial turn, which theorized the expansion of curatorial authority from administrative function to creative authorship but did not anticipate its distribution across human and non-human agents. It suggests that the relevant analytical category is not authorship, with its connotations of singular intention, but what Braidotti (2013) has called "transversal subjectivity" (p. 102), a mode of agency operating across human and non-human entities without resolving into either. Zeilinger's (2021) concept of *tactical entanglements* provides a more operationally specific vocabulary. IDAF's curatorial model enacts this entanglement at the institutional rather than the artistic level, since the AI curator and the human curators operate within a shared organizational structure whose outputs, the festival program, thematic framing, and spatial configuration, cannot be cleanly decomposed into human and machine contributions. If the

curator-as-author model (O'Neill, 2012; Smith, 2012) was the dominant paradigm of the late twentieth century, IDAF's trajectory suggests the emergence of a successor paradigm, the curator-as-node within a distributed assemblage. Figure 3 schematizes this curatorial trajectory as three structurally distinct models, tracing the shift from concentrated, singular agency to distributed, networked agency across the five editions.

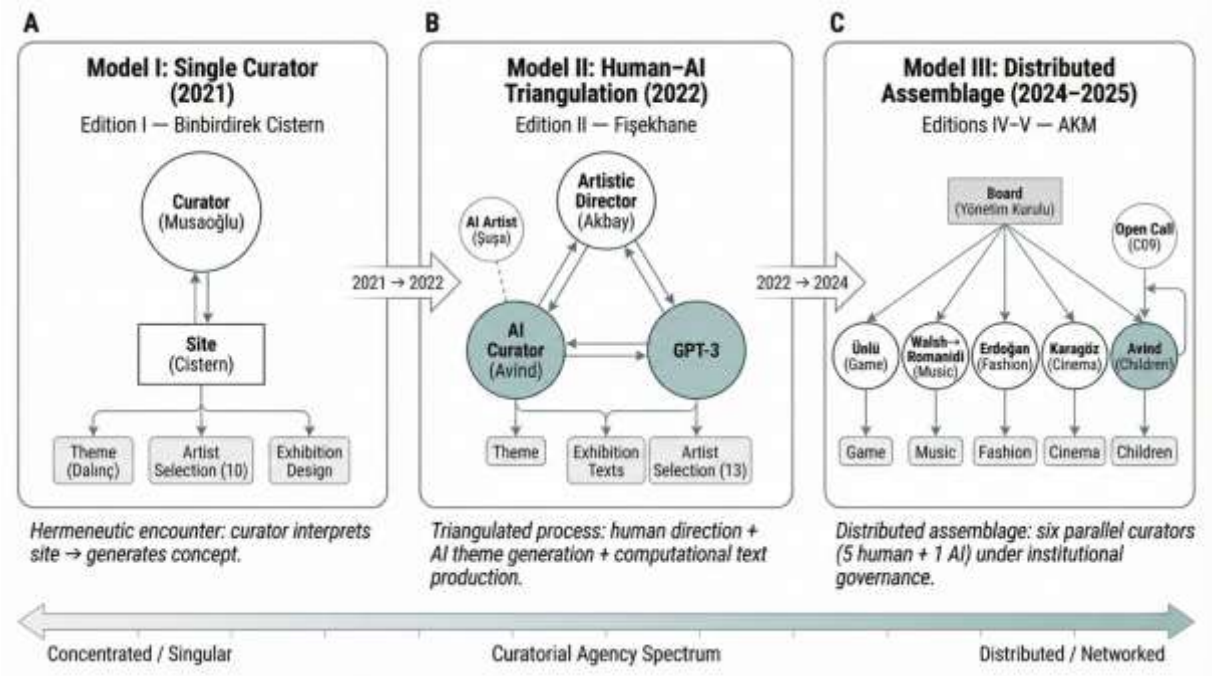

Figure 2. *Redistribution of Curatorial Agency at IDAF from Authorship to Assemblage*

Figure 2 visualizes this trajectory: from a single human author (Edition I), through an unstable three-node split between human direction, AI thematic selection, and computational text production (Edition II), to a board-overseen structure in which six curators, five human, one machinic, operate as differentiated but co-equal institutional nodes (Editions IV–V). The unit of curatorial decision-making has shifted from the individual to the apparatus, and this shift was not a single decision but a sequence of incremental institutional accommodations.

From Heritage Site to Infrastructural Interface

The concept of the infrastructural image, as developed by Gülaçtı (2026), argues that the contemporary image has ceased to function primarily as a representational surface and has become an infrastructural component within operational systems of governance, memory, and control. Applied to the festival context, this concept illuminates how IDAF's spatial evolution entailed not merely a change of venue but a transformation in the infrastructure of visibility through which digital art becomes publicly legible. In the cistern and at Fişekhane, the infrastructure of visibility was largely improvised, with generators, fabric partitions, and fog machines (Codes S01-S06), and the exhibited works were in a sense subordinated to the site. The transition to AKM inverted this relationship (Code S07). In a purpose-built complex with modern electrical systems and flexible configurations, the infrastructure receded from visibility, becoming what Bratton (2015) describes as a component of the computational *stack* that enables operations without calling attention to its own material conditions.

The phenomenological consequences of this infrastructural recession warrant closer attention. In the Binbirdirek Cistern, a visitor encountering a digital projection was simultaneously aware of the stone columns, the hum of the external generator, and the fabric partitions directing their movement; the infrastructure of display was perceptually dominant, and the image appeared *within* and *against* a material environment that continuously reminded the viewer of the conditions of its appearance. This perceptual structure produced a viewing experience in which the image and its infrastructure were held in dialectical tension: the digital projection was understood as something that required elaborate material support to exist in this particular place, and part of the aesthetic experience consisted in

apprehending that tension between the immateriality of the projected image and the gross materiality of its support system.

At AKM this dialectical structure collapsed: climate-controlled galleries, concealed wiring, professional-grade projection, and acoustically treated rooms produced an environment in which technical infrastructure withdrew from perceptual awareness. The viewer encountered the XR experience or the AI-generated projection as if it were a self-sustaining phenomenon rather than the output of elaborate computational and electrical systems. This is not a neutral shift. It is the precise condition under which images begin to function infrastructurally in Gülaçtı's (2026) sense, the systems that produce and circulate images become invisible, and the images themselves acquire the capacity to organize perception, structure attention, and distribute visibility without appearing to do so.

This recession is precisely the condition under which the infrastructural image becomes operative: when the systems that produce and display images are themselves invisible, the images appear to operate autonomously. This analysis also extends Kwon's (2002) genealogy of site-specificity in an important respect. Beyond the phenomenological, institutional, and discursive modalities Kwon identified, IDAF's trajectory suggests a fourth modality that might be termed *infrastructural site-specificity*, a mode of exhibition-making in which the relevant *site* is neither the physical properties of a location nor the social dynamics of an institution, but the computational and technical infrastructure that enables synthetic images to appear, interact, and generate meaning.

Synthetic Visuality as Institutional Logic

The findings demonstrate that synthetic visuality, as defined in Section 2.2, is not confined to the individual artwork but has permeated the institutional structure of the festival itself. The AI-generated exhibition texts (Code C05), the AI-curated thematic selections (Code C04), the AI artist Şuşa's solo exhibition (Code C06), and the progressive expansion of algorithmically mediated art forms (see Appendix C, Pattern 3) collectively indicate that synthetic visuality operates at IDAF as an institutional logic, a principle organizing curatorial decisions, spatial configurations, and audience experiences. Where traditional art exhibitions assume a representational logic, artworks representing something and the exhibition representing a curatorial thesis, IDAF's later editions operate increasingly within a computational logic in which artworks, curatorial frameworks, and audience experiences are all, to varying degrees, algorithmically generated or structured. Manovich's (2001; 2013) argument that software has become the universal medium of cultural production finds its institutional correlation in this trajectory.

Steyerl's (2017) analysis provides a critical counterpoint that the present study extends rather than resolves. The progressive integration of AI into IDAF's apparatus raises questions the official reports do not address: the provenance and cultural-political composition of the training corpora that condition the AI curator's outputs (Menotti, 2025); the undisclosed labor of prompt engineering and tool-chain maintenance that sustains the "AI curator" as an institutional fiction; and the legitimating function of the "AI curator" label itself, which displaces accountability for curatorial decisions onto a system that cannot be questioned in the same registers as a human curator (Wasielewski, 2026). These are not gaps in the festival's self-documentation but structural features of the synthetic-visuality regime that no report produced by an organizing body is likely to record. They constitute the critical horizon against which the institutional normalization of AI curation documented here should be read.

The Digital Art Festival As A Non-Western Institutional Model and Cultural Diplomacy Infrastructure

The theoretical literature on digital art institutions, from Paul's (2015; 2023) analyses to Graham and Cook's (2010) framework, draws predominantly on Euro-American examples such as ZKM, Ars Electronica, and Transmediale. IDAF's emergence introduces distinct conditions: a metropolitan context defined by the coexistence of Ottoman, Republican, and contemporary layers, a digital art ecosystem in an earlier phase of development, and a cultural policy framework specific to the Turkish institutional context. IDAF exhibits features that resist assimilation into a generic globalization narrative. The persistent presence of Avind represents a local institutional innovation; the engagement

with Ottoman-era heritage embedded digital art within a specifically Istanbulite matrix; and the thematic evolution from mystical meditation (*Dalınç*) through human creativity to the relational framework of *Connecting* (Bağlanıyor) reflects a curatorial sensibility drawing on local cultural resources. As Groys (2016) observed, in the contemporary condition of digital flow, the curatorial act is what temporarily stabilizes meaning, and IDAF's curatorial decisions constitute acts of meaning-making inflected by the specific conditions of Istanbul.

This positioning function acquires a further dimension when read through the lens of cultural diplomacy. IDAF's international curator roster, its eighteen-country artist participation (Code T16), the open call mechanism (Code C09), the Brussels and Milan previews (Code S11), and its documented collaborations with the Yunus Emre Institute and European cultural institutions collectively position the festival as a multilateral diplomatic interface. As Garakhanova (2023) has argued, the affordances of digital technologies, their capacity for low-cost global circulation and cross-cultural accessibility, make digital art a particularly effective medium for cultural diplomacy (Nye, 2004). What the infrastructural interface concept contributes is a structural clarification: the festival's diplomatic function is inseparable from its infrastructural function, since it is precisely the materialization of otherwise distributed computational processes that enables the cross-cultural encounter. The infrastructural interface is, simultaneously, a diplomatic interface.

CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a longitudinal document analysis of the Istanbul Digital Art Festival across five editions (2021-2025), revealing a structural transformation in the festival's institutional logic through the emergence of a hybrid human-AI curatorial model (Codes C03-C08), the development of an infrastructural apparatus capable of staging synthetic visuality at institutional scale (Codes S07-S09), and the progressive articulation of a multi-disciplinary architecture distributing creative and curatorial agency across human and non-human actors (Codes T08-T17).

In response to the three research questions, the analysis demonstrates, first, that IDAF evolved into an *infrastructural interface*, an institutional site that materializes the otherwise distributed operations of algorithmic image production for embodied encounter and critical engagement, progressively reorganizing its curatorial apparatus and spatial infrastructure around the operational logic of synthetic visuality. Second, the longitudinal analysis documents a three-phase redistribution of curatorial agency, from a singular author-centered model (Edition I) through a triangulated human-AI partnership (Edition II) to a formalized multi-curator assemblage in which the AI curator Avind was institutionally normalized alongside five human curators without experimental qualification (Editions IV-V), demonstrating not the replacement of human judgment but the emergence of operational interdependence. Third, the spatial trajectory from heritage venues to modernist infrastructure, combined with the five-track disciplinary model, transformed the conditions of audience experience from constrained, sequential immersion to navigational, choice-driven engagement across parallel disciplinary domains.

Three principal contributions can be distilled. The study provides empirical documentation of how AI integration into curatorial practice unfolds over time within a single institutional context, offering a granular account of the process by which AI curatorial agency is institutionally legitimated. It advances *synthetic visuality* as an analytical category operating at the institutional level, demonstrating that algorithmic generation permeates not only individual artworks but the organizational logic of the institutions that present them. And it contributes to the nascent literature on non-Western digital art institutions, documenting a festival whose engagement with Ottoman heritage architecture, local institutional innovation in AI-augmented curation, and function as digital cultural diplomacy infrastructure offer a case that enriches the predominantly Western-centered discourse on digital art exhibition-making.

Future research could extend this analysis through ethnographic audience studies, interviews with the human curators and Avind's developers, and comparative analysis with other digital art festivals. The infrastructural interface, on the reading developed here, operates at the threshold between visibility and invisibility, between what the system displays and what it operationally conceals. Whether IDAF's future editions evolve into a platform that not only stages synthetic visuality but also subjects its infrastructural conditions to sustained critical scrutiny remains an empirical question that subsequent research will be positioned to address.

REFERENCES

Bishop, C. (2012). Digital divide: Contemporary art and new media. *Artforum*, *51*(1), 434-441. https://www.artforum.com/features/digital-divide-contemporary-art-and-new-media-200814/

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *9*(2), 27-40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity.

Bratton, B. H. (2015). *The stack: On software and sovereignty*. MIT Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cummings, M. C. (2003). Cultural diplomacy and the United States government: A survey. Center for Arts and Culture.

Farocki, H. (2004). Phantom images. *Public*, *29*, 12-22.

Filipovic, E., Van Hal, M., & Øvstebø, S. (Eds.). (2010). *The biennial reader*. Hatje Cantz.

Galani, A., & Milne, A. (2025). Curating AI-driven art: Actors, institutional strategies and organisational change. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 162–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2025.2562854

Garakhanova, N. (2023). The potential and future of digital art in Turkey's cultural diplomacy. *International Social Mentality and Researcher Thinkers Journal*, 9(73), 3833-3840. https://doi.org/10.29228/smryj.69719

Gienow-Hecht, J. C. E. (Ed.). (2010). Culture and the Cold War in Europe. Berghahn Books.

Graham, B., & Cook, S. (2010). *Rethinking curating: Art after new media*. MIT Press.

Grau, O. (Ed.). (2007). *MediaArtHistories*. MIT Press.

Groys, B. (2016). *In the flow*. Verso.

Gülaçtı, İ. E. (2026). *The infrastructural image: From representation to operational power—Image, data, memory, and control in the age of artificial intelligence*. Yaz Yayınları. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18618476

Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.

Kwon, M. (2002). *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity*. MIT Press.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. MIT Press.

Manovich, L. (2013). *Software takes command*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Menotti, G. (2025). The model is the museum: Generative AI and the expropriation of cultural heritage. *AI & Society*, *40*, 5593–5597. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02290-1

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.

O'Neill, P. (2012). *The culture of curating and the curating of culture(s)*. MIT Press.

Paglen, T. (2016, December 8). Invisible images (Your pictures are looking at you). *The New Inquiry*. https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/

Paul, C. (2015). *Digital art* (3rd ed.). Thames & Hudson.

Paul, C. (2023). *Digital art* (4th ed.). Thames & Hudson.

Quaranta, D. (2022). *Surfing with Satoshi: Art, blockchain and NFTs*. Postmedia Books.

Smith, T. (2012). *Thinking contemporary curating*. Independent Curators International.

Steyerl, H. (2009). In defense of the poor image. *e-flux journal*, (10). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/

Steyerl, H. (2017). *Duty free art: Art in the age of planetary civil war*. Verso.

Wasielewski, A. (2024). Unnatural images: On AI-generated photographs. *Critical Inquiry*, *51*(1), 1–29.

Wasielewski, A. (2026). AI and curation: Digitization, museums and digital art history. *Visual Resources*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01973762.2026.2617741

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Zeilinger, M. (2021). *Tactical entanglements: AI art, creative agency, and the limits of intellectual property*. Meson Press.