

Teaching Generative AI Imagery

The title of my project links to an online exhibition that my students created with AI-generated imagery. The purpose of their assigned exhibition was to transform superficially generated AI pictures into more *generative* and meaningful images. The exhibition acts as the culmination of our spring 2024 art history capstone seminar, Photography and Political Violence, which aimed throughout the semester to explore the theoretical and practical implications of AI-fashioned imagery in the public sphere. As a researcher and educator, I wished to reflect with my class on how AI-generated imagery intersects with pressing artistic and ethical questions regarding political violence (e.g. in light of many false TikTok, Instagram, or X footage circulating around images of war; or the unethical, cheap “ghost work” of OpenAI employing laborers in Kenya to filter out violent images and text). As falsified visuals become increasingly common in the public sphere, faculty and students in Art & Art History are particularly compelled to investigate and analyze the ramifications of their public circulation among broader audiences. I hoped that as I developed ways to think through and with AI-based images in my class, that I could also help spark a broader conversation in my department about the growing prevalence and importance of such technologies in the visual-social field. Thus our class organized both a digital and physical exhibition of their generative AI images for diverse audiences.

I have taught this course twice before as a more traditional art history seminar with final research papers, but for this version, the students collectively organized the exhibition *Waging Peace Through AI* (titled in honor of the touring exhibit, [*Waging Peace in Vietnam*](#), hosted in fall 2023 at Norlin Library), including AI-based images geared toward countering political violence and advocating “peace” in a general, creative sense. Beyond the digital exhibition linked above, the Art & Art History [Visual Resources Center](#) supported the students in crafting the exhibition of their AI-generated “photographs” in physical space in the Visual Arts Complex. Together, the on-site and online exhibitions combined students’ critical thinking and creativity, synthesizing their accumulated knowledge about representations of political violence discussed in the classroom, and then went beyond that, offering a visual proposal about how to ethically engage AI technologies in the public sphere in order to address such violence.

The course was structured into three units to help prepare students for this final project. In the first unit, we read interdisciplinary writings by art historians, artists, photography theorists, visual culture thinkers, etc. to think through the ethics of documenting and representing political violence. I also brought my knowledge from an NEH-funded workshop that I attended at the University of Pittsburgh in January 2024, “Teaching Art History with AI,” to help facilitate students’ experimentation with different image-generating AI technologies such as DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and Gemini. Each week the students practiced creating an AI-based image that related to the readings for that week, and we discussed these images as a group. In the second unit of the course, we continued our readings but also produced and selected final images for the exhibition. Each student generated three final digital images related to the exhibition’s theme, and their peers voted them up or down (in the social-media style of Reddit). Each student then contributed their top-voted image to the exhibition with a 250-word caption explaining the content of the image and their stylistic choices. In the third unit of the course, we physically hung their images and supplementary texts with the help of the VRC. The students decided on the ordering of images in the installation so that the visuals could better speak to and cohere with each other, despite the diverse assortment of subject matter. We also held an in-class writing workshop for a couple of weeks, to help students develop more in-depth, 5-page critical essays that contextualized their images within the historical and theoretical materials of the course. We then added these more substantive essays to our Google Site exhibition. The aim of the online exhibition is to draw in larger public audiences with compelling AI-generated imagery, and then to simultaneously engage them about the ethics of AI representational technologies with polished student essays that are accessible, concise, and historically informed.

Overall, the students did transform their AI-generated pictures into more *generative*, meaningful images for the public sphere. I am very proud of the work that they put into the exhibition and their essays, and I believe the scaffolded assignment was successful in helping them to think both critically and creatively about the kind of visual world that they would want to live in, and to help actively build, amid our rapidly changing AI technologies. The greatest challenge of the course, in fact, was the swiftness with which such AI technologies developed or altered during just a few months of the semester. As one example, Google’s AI platform Bard rebranded itself as Gemini and then stopped producing images of people altogether because of a public scandal regarding BIPOC representation. Students who had become used to the platform

could not then develop more images of people that they had already begun in their creative process. Additionally, some software was free, and some was not. And when I paid small fees for those platforms that charged, some of them allowed many users to work simultaneously and/or collectively, while some did not. Despite these minor technological obstacles, however, the students always enthusiastically debated and discussed the larger lessons of the course about political violence and the generation of AI images.

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to conceptualize and implement this project in my course as a CTL/ASSETT Faculty Fellow. In the fall, we had the chance to explore many different topics in-depth with a supportive cohort, such as critical digital pedagogy, AI in the classroom, high impact practices, inclusive pedagogy, and best grading practices. Then we could choose an area to focus on with a specific project in the spring. The fellowship allowed me the time, space, and support to think with a new visual technology that is quite daunting and problematic, but one which, urgently, our students also need to learn how to think with. I am deeply thankful to have been able to develop my pedagogy with AI through this year-long, practical and meaningful experience as a Faculty Fellow.

Please view our [exhibition!](#)