Essay

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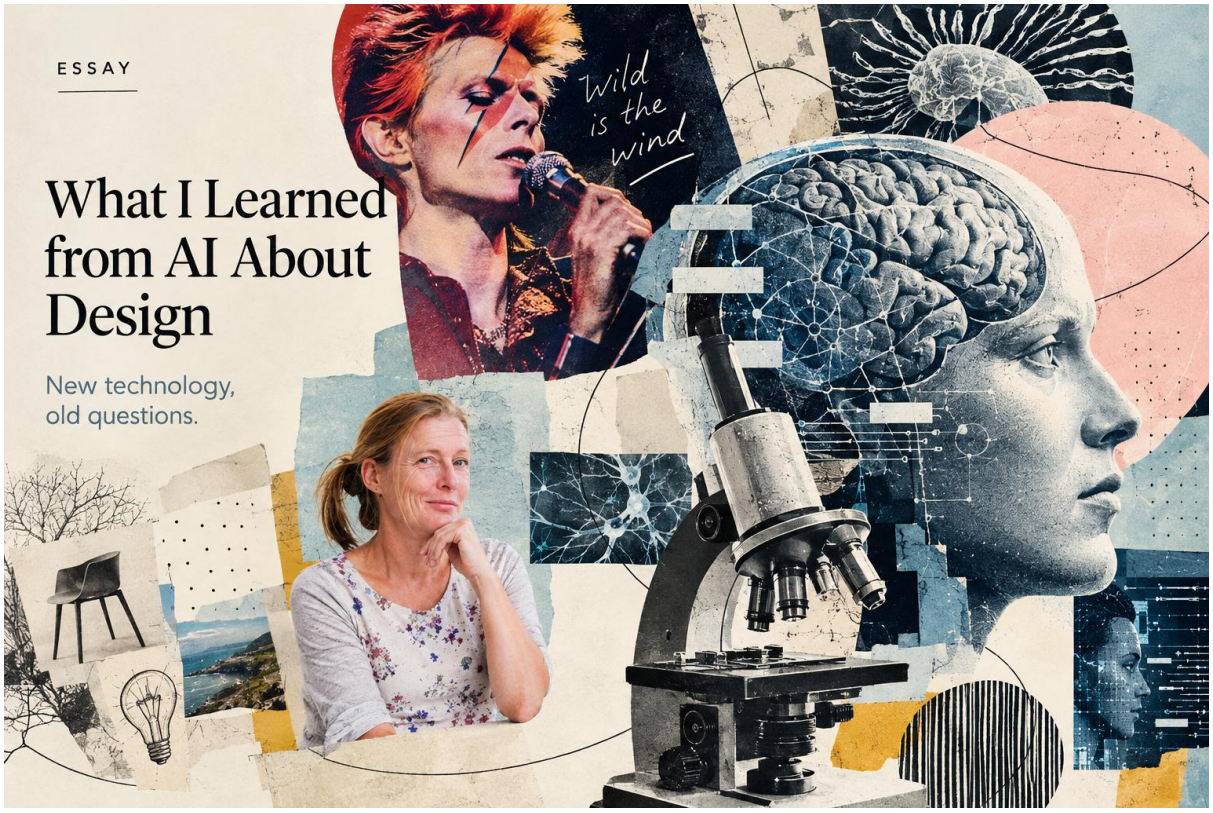

Beeld met dank aan Artificial Intelligence (AI)

What I Learned About Design Through AI

AI is everywhere, and naturally, it dominates the media as well. We hear and read warnings that AI could one day take over humanity, or even wipe us out. That the enormous data centres powering AI could destroy our planet through their insatiable appetite for energy, whether supplied by power plants that emit vast amounts of CO_2

or cause other forms of environmental harm. And that a handful of tech companies could gain unprecedented control over our lives.

What are people in the creative industries concerned about?

There is a great deal of discussion about the impact of AI on design. Will AI soon become a serious competitor to human designers? Is it already? Can AI produce high-quality design? Will designers eventually become obsolete? How can AI and human designers collaborate in ways that create real value? And what effect does the use of AI tools have on our own creative skills?
These are all legitimate questions. By now, it has become clear that AI is changing the field of design. The question is no longer whether AI will influence design, but how.
Let's take a closer look at where this influence is harmful and where it isn't.
But first, let's step back and ask some more fundamental questions:

- What actually happens when we design?
- How does a human being design, and how do machines do it? Where do the differences lie?
- What is at the heart of a creative process?
- When do we consider a design successful?
- What is originality?

Let's start with that last question: what is originality?

I used to think originality was the great divide between humans and machines. Only humans, I believed, could truly create something new. AI, at best, could only cut, paste, combine, and endlessly repeat. This idea became hard to uphold when I attended the first AI Film Festival at Eye in June 2024. I saw more than fifteen short films. Some were technically impressive, others strange, moving, or funny. But above all, I saw images and stories I could never have imagined myself. What surprised me most was that they weren’t just remixes or imitations of existing films. Some had strange associations and wondrous visual languages I’d never seen before. I found them original.

This was uncomfortable.

How can a machine, which only processes, copies, and combines patterns, create something I genuinely find innovative?

Well, what do we actually mean by “original”? If originality means producing something that has never existed before, then AI is already quite good at it. But maybe originality is something else. Maybe it’s not just about producing something new, but also about being aware that you’re seeing something that didn’t exist before and is valuable. Valuable because it adds something positive to the world because it creates a beautiful experience, moves or surprises people, or perhaps offers a solution to a problem.

At the AI Film Festival, it became clear to me that the human creator still plays a crucial role in the design or creative process. During a panel discussion, the new generation of filmmakers spoke about AI’s impact on filmmaking. They highlighted two key points: on the one hand, anyone can now make a film with minimal resources, which is a positive development no longer are expensive Hollywood studios a prerequisite. On the other hand, this accessibility has led to an explosion in the number of films being produced, and not all of them are of high quality. As a result, the pressure on creators to make thoughtful selections and curate their work has become more important than ever. AI filmmaker **Odair Faléco**, who was on the panel at the AI Film Festival, explains it in his podcast zero1cast in which he asks himself another big question ‘what is creativity?’

“*Anyone can create anything, but not everyone is able to craft like orchestrate something meaningful than just a creating e a series of images. The professional filmmaker or photographer who works for 20 years in the field and some teenager who just started his creative career will create a very different output using AI” “They use the same tools, but they don’t have the same abilities.” “Human intention, talent and meaning are still behind the tool, prompting the AI creating and editing the results, connecting all the dots.*” (Faléco 2026)

The director selects, guides, makes choices, and ultimately decides what remains in the final edit. Without that human direction, the films I saw at the AI Film Festival

would likely have been largely meaningless. The personal handwriting of the film maker remains crucial. In the end it is the filmmaker who makes the film, not AI. AI is a tool, not a creator.

I spoke with another speaker on the panel for this essay, artist and creative technologist **Geoffrey Lilleman**. It turned out that he shared my views on this. He used the term 'slop' to describe AI in the sense of something messy, sloppy or carelessly produced.

"Slop is not necessary a result of using AI, but more a lack of reflection and criticism on the output. Just because the output of AI is fast it doesn't mean we have to send it to print fast." "There many ways of making sure that the output of AI aligns with your intention. Look at the output and read it. Reflect on what you see and ask yourself the question "is this really me?" (Lilleman 2026).

This brings me to another, perhaps even more uncomfortable question:

How original are human designers, really? After all, no human designer starts with a blank slate. We all build on what others have created before us. We borrow, combine, vary, cite, imitate, and transform. An idea rarely emerges in complete isolation. This applies to design, but also to art, fashion, and music. The line between inspiration and plagiarism is often far from clear. When is something a creative reinterpretation of existing material, and when is it simply copying? When do we speak of appropriation, and when of innovation?

AI makes these questions more urgent, because generative systems can combine and transform existing material on an unprecedented scale and speed. But the problem itself is not new.

Look at contemporary *interior design*, for example. Open any design magazine, and you're likely to find page after page of the same gray and beige sofas, sleek spaces, herringbone floors, and concrete kitchens. It's a style that seems to appear everywhere. In an article by Jannetje Koelewijn in NRC, I read about the man behind it all. She interviews **Piet Boon**: "*the contractor and interior designer who taught the Netherlands to love natural tones, steel-framed doors, the kitchen island,*

and the freestanding bathtub" (Koelewijn, 2022). His success shows that a design doesn't need to be original to be widely appreciated and commercially successful.

Originality is also relative in other forms of design. Fashion is largely herd behaviour. Novels and TV series rely on familiar formulas. Blockbusters are often successful precisely because they are predictable: a clear struggle between good and evil, spectacular visuals, and ultimately a happy ending.

So, originality is not the most important quality of a good or successful design. So why did I believe it is?

Maybe because of the value of the first design? The term "originality" also refers to the original, the source, as opposed to a copy. Is the first design, the original, always more valuable than the copies? *Not always*.

This became clear to me when I listened to music. Both **Nina Simone** and **David Bowie** recorded *Wild Is the Wind*. Both versions give me chills. When I searched for the original, I discovered that the song was written in 1957 by **Dimitri Tiomkin** and **Ned Washington** for the film of the same name. I'd never heard of Tiomkin and Washington, nor of **Johnny Mathis**, who was the first to record it. I listened to his version on Spotify. It was special to hear. Yet, the original version moves me less than Nina Simone's. Bowie was also deeply moved by Simone's interpretation. So much so that, as a tribute, he recorded his own version of her performance in 1976 on the album *Station to Station*. It's one of my favourite songs. **Rand Richard Cooper**, a Bowie fan and writer, calls Bowie's version a "masterpiece of mournful longing and desire" (Cooper, 2016). I agree.

The beauty is that every musical performance of this song builds on a previous one and adds something unique. For me, the first version is not automatically the best. The origin of a musical work does not inherently determine its value.

Does the same apply to design and art?

Marcel Duchamp, **Jeff Koons**, and **Damien Hirst** have all played with the boundary between original and existing material, between art and appropriation. Their work is innovative and original, but not necessarily because they created something that

had never existed before. Their originality lies precisely in what they choose, how they use existing material, and what new meaning they give it**.** As philosopher **Sherri Irvin** argues in her analysis of appropriation art, authorship does not necessarily depend on producing every element of a work oneself (Irvin 2005). It can instead lie in the choices, intentions, and meaning an artist brings to existing material.

Originality, then, does not simply mean *making something that did not exist before*. It can also mean looking at, combining, selecting, recontextualising, and giving new meaning to what already exists. In this sense, these artists were undoubtedly innovative.

A work can be completely new and yet banal. Another can build heavily on existing material and still genuinely add something. This brings us to a more important question than that of originality:

When is a design successful?

A chair is a good design if it is both beautiful and comfortable. A building can be successful because it is functional, but perhaps also because it stimulates our senses or makes us see the world differently. Music can move us. And when is a solution to a societal problem successful? When the problem is solved? Or must the solution also be just?

A design is never simply good or bad. What is considered successful arises in the relationship between the design and the person who views, uses, or experiences it.

The Difference Between Human and Machine

If originality is not the decisive difference between human and machine, what is? For me, it's about experience, imagination, moral awareness, aesthetic judgment, and feeling. Humans can experience what they create. A machine cannot.

Humans have bodies, histories, desires, memories, expectations, and emotions. We can love something, be annoyed by it, be moved, doubt, feel shame, or get excited.

We never look at a design completely objectively. We judge it from a lived experience.

AI can convincingly talk about feelings. It can recognize patterns, make connections, generate variants, and create surprising combinations. It can even produce things we find beautiful, moving, or brilliant. But AI doesn't feel anything itself. It has no body, no memories, no desires, and no lived experience of the world.

This raises a philosophical question for me:

Can something be a successful design if the creator cannot experience why it is successful?

After all, a design's meaning is not solely determined by its creator. It only truly becomes something when someone encounters it: when someone looks at it, uses it, lives in it, wears it, or is moved by it.

The German philosopher **Hans-Georg Gadamer** uses the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Gadamer, 1960). In short, his thesis is that you can never understand a work of art or text from a neutral, timeless perspective. Your own historical background influences what you see in it.

For example: If you look at a Duchamp piece today, you see it differently than someone in 1917. You know the history of conceptual art, ready-mades, the debate about what art is, and so on. That history influences your interpretation. You bring that historical baggage with you, often without being fully aware of it. But it also works the other way: the artwork can change your existing expectations. There's a kind of interaction between the work and the viewer.

In other words: a design's meaning is not entirely contained within the design itself. The meaning arises in the encounter between the design and the person experiencing it. But that experience is never neutral: what we find beautiful, innovative, or successful is also determined by our own historical and cultural horizon.

AI can predict which designs people will likely find beautiful or appealing, but it has no *Wirkungsgeschichte* in the human sense. It has no lived history of experiences from which it approaches a design.

From Making to Judging

The human designer does much more than just produce a final product. During the design process, constant choices are made: what should be kept, what should be discarded, which direction is interesting, what feels wrong, what suits the user, what is ethically responsible, and when is it good enough?

Ted Chiang emphasizes in his essay *Why A.I. Isn't Going to Make Art* the importance of choice, intention, and meaning in the creative process. "*Art is notoriously hard to define, and so are the differences between good art and bad art. But let me offer a generalization: art is something that results from making a lot of choices*" (Chiang, 2023).

Elizabeth Goodspeed makes a similar point in her work on design and AI: as technical skills become more accessible, it becomes less important whether you can make something and more important whether you can determine what is good. She talks about the importance of taste, the lack thereof, and its significance. "*Taste is what enables designers to navigate the vast sea of possibilities that technology and global connectivity afford, and to then select and combine these elements in ways that, ideally, result in interesting, unique work*" (Goodspeed, 2021).

This, to me, is the real shift that AI is causing in design. AI makes it increasingly easy to produce images, texts, objects, and variants. As a result, we are flooded with possibilities. When almost anything can be made, the ability to select, judge, and assign meaning becomes more important than ever. The role of the designer is thus shifting more and more from making to judging.

This capacity for judgement goes beyond personal taste, in the sense of the debatable claim that "there's no accounting for taste." Taste is something we develop as individuals; it is constantly evolving under the influence of opposing

forces and counterforces. And that is precisely why it is something we can, and should debate. Gladly, even. Can machines do this too?

According to Goodspeed, developing taste is the result of a profound process. She writes: "*Developing taste is not so unlike going to therapy; it's an inefficient, time-consuming process that mostly entails looking inward and identifying whatever already moves you. It's the product of devouring ideas, images, and pieces of culture not because someone you respect likes them, but because you simply can't look away. Developing taste is an exercise in vulnerability: it requires you to trust your instincts and preferences, even when they don't align with current trends or the tastes of your peers*" (Ibid).

I would like to add that "good taste" is not just about aesthetics. It's also about ethics. A designer must not only see what is attractive or innovative, but also what is meaningful, desirable, and responsible. This requires life experience, imagination, empathy, contextual awareness, and moral judgment.

AI can create images, generate texts, produce variants, recognize patterns, and combine ideas. But AI has no taste. AI has no reason of its own to choose one design over another. It can produce possibilities, but it cannot determine which of them matter. Only a human can ask: Why do we actually need this? For whom? What does it add? And what are the consequences?

Epilogue: The Future of Design: Making Choices in a World of Ever-Expanding Possibilities

Machines may not be original. But neither are most people. The difference between human and machine does not lie in the ability to produce something new. The origin of an idea is not sacred, either. A design doesn't have to emerge from nothing to be special or valuable. A good design can improve over the years because others add to it.

The essence of design lies elsewhere: in the ability to experience, to judge, and to take responsibility for what we create.

Now that AI can produce more and "better" designs, the question of what we actually want to create, and why, becomes all the more important.

In my view, the future of design is not a struggle between human and machine. It's about the fact that, as machines get better at making, humans must get better at choosing. Not just based on what is technically possible, but on what is aesthetically convincing, meaningful, and socially and ethically responsible.

This, to me, is the most important human design skill in the AI era: not the ability to make something, but the ability to determine what is worth making.

A Personal Note on AI, my editor and This Essay

In writing this essay, I made extensive use of AI, specifically **Mistral Vibe** (formerly LeChat) and **ChatGPT**. I dictate most of my texts in **Word**, which then produces a rather peculiar phonetic rendition of what I actually said. I feed this linguistic soup into ChatGPT and ask it to turn it back into proper sentences. What follows is a steady stream of instructions, examples, arguments and ideas that I want to incorporate into the essay.

I suspect that if you were to run this essay through an AI detector, the result might well be 100% AI-generated.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

AI did not write this essay. I did. The text is mine. My final editor, **Jeroen Deckers**, has also had a hand in polishing it. A pleasant collaboration! The arguments are entirely mine. The questions are mine. The ideas are mine.

AI and Jeroen have helped me structure, formulate, translate and refine my thoughts, and occasionally rescue a sentence that had suffered badly from my dictation frenzy. To me, AI and Jeroen are nothing less than very patient and sophisticated word processors, who never tire of hearing me say: "No, that's not quite what I mean. Try again."

Now, where else would you find that?

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Ellen ter Gast:

Trained as a medical biologist and philosopher, with a background in neuroscience and hermeneutics, she earned her PhD in bio-philosophy through research into the genetically modified mouse. This research led her into the world of art and culture, where her curiosity about the intersection of science, art and society regularly draws her into the role of moderator and, occasionally, that of activist.

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