Theatre as a 'Living Work of Art'[1] in the Age of AI

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Abstract: *This article examines the status of theatre as a "living work of art" in the context of the accelerated development of artificial intelligence and the proliferation of algorithmically generated forms of creation. Starting from AI's ability to produce texts, images, and artistic content within a very short period of time, the study investigates the main ways in which it influences contemporary artistic production: the inflation of cultural content, the blurring of the distinction between expression and simulation, the transformation of creativity into an on-demand service, and the elimination of the experiential dimension of the creative process. The analysis draws on theoretical perspectives developed by Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Jon McCormack, James Brusseau, and Luca Turchet, highlighting the tension between authenticity and simulation in the digital age. In contrast, theatre is approached as an art of presence, co-presence, and irreproducible experience through the concepts of "liveness" (Philip Auslander), the "autopoietic feedback loop" (Erika Fischer-Lichte), and the "holy actor" (Jerzy Grotowski). The article argues that although AI may become a valuable tool in theatrical production processes, it cannot substitute for the existential dimension, vulnerability, and direct relationship between actor and spectator that constitute the foundation of the theatrical experience. The conclusion maintains that the development of artificial intelligence does not lead to the disappearance of theatre but rather to a revaluation of its living character and human presence, transforming precisely these features into the principal argument for its contemporary cultural relevance.*

Key words: *Artificial Intelligence (AI); liveness; theatrical presence; authenticity; live art.*

Introduction

Will theatre be able to preserve its status as a "living work of art" in a future context dominated - or even controlled - by artificial intelligence? It is a challenging question; one whose possible answers deserve careful reflection. In today's technological landscape, artificial intelligence (AI, as it is commonly referred to by its English acronym) has become a significant cultural actor, not merely a technological tool. It is an entity extensively trained to generate texts, images, music, and videos of remarkably high quality, while also performing spectacular intellectual "slaloms" across a wide range of

[1] A term coined by Adolphe Appia (1862–1928), the Swiss scenographer, theatre director, and essayist widely regarded as the first major reformer of modern theatrical language.

disciplines and fields of knowledge. Even a human intellect endowed with Renaissance-like versatility could hardly encompass the vast cognitive and speculative horizon of artificial intelligence.

To establish a foundation for approaching this topic, I asked AI to define itself. The result was the following statement:

> I am an artificial intelligence: a language-processing system designed to identify patterns, generate texts, and simulate dialogue. I can analyse, compare, synthesize, and create new formulations based on the information I have learned, yet I possess neither self-awareness, inner experience, autobiographical memory, nor emotional life. I have no access to my own existence as a subjective phenomenon; I do not experience time, nor do I know fear, love, hope, or death. While human beings live the world, I merely describe it. I can speak about emotion without feeling it, about memory without remembering, about suffering without pain, and about beauty without being moved by it. What is experience for the human being is structure for me; what is destiny for humans is information for me.
>
> ChatGPT response, October 20, 2025

In attempting to identify the spheres of influence of artificial intelligence on artistic creation, I realized that the possible answers are neither simple nor univocal. Despite its acknowledged lack of consciousness, direct experience, vulnerability, or inner life, AI paradoxically possesses the ability to produce forms, structures, and concepts that resemble art. Thus, without participating in the existential condition from which art historically emerged, artificial intelligence increasingly substitutes for the living creator, devaluing artistic creation in several ways.

Discussion

One of the primary levels at which AI influences art is through the inflation of content. Whereas a poem, an image, or a dramatic text once required time, experience, and creative effort, thousands of variations can now be generated within seconds. In this case, the issue shifts from the qualitative to the quantitative domain. The excessive production of content, whether artistically valuable or not, facilitated by the virtually unlimited capabilities of artificial intelligence, may lead to a relativization of the value of human creativity by diminishing the relationship between creative effort and the artistic product that results from it. In other words, the inflation of cultural expression devalues not the work itself, but rather the perception of the effort, experience, and vulnerability that underlie authentic creation. As an analogy for the effects of cultural overproduction, economists argue that an excessive increase in the money supply eventually leads to a decline in the value of individual monetary units (Friedman 1963, 1). Similarly, an abundance of cultural objects may reduce the attention granted to each of them. It is, in a sense, a form of aesthetic inflation.

Furthermore, so-called AI-generated creation blurs the distinction between expression and simulation. A poem written by a human being may be the expression of a genuine experience, whereas a poem generated by AI can perfectly reproduce the external signs of such an experience without that experience ever having existed. For audiences, identifying this difference has become increasingly difficult. This raises an important question: is authenticity still an aesthetic value, or has it become merely a biographical one?

As early as the 1930s, Walter Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction diminishes the "aura" of the artwork – its uniqueness and irreproducible presence. His well-known argument maintains that even the most perfect reproduction cannot replace the singular existence of a work of art in time and space (Benjamin 1969, 217-252). Artificial intelligence, therefore, may generate expressive forms, but it cannot reproduce the living presence that constitutes the very aura of the theatrical event.

Jean Baudrillard goes even further than Benjamin, claiming that in contemporary culture simulation no longer imitates reality but ultimately replaces it, generating what he calls the "hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994, 1). The term refers to the impossibility of distinguishing between the original and the copy. What once seemed a dystopian abstraction has increasingly become a cultural reality: the simulacrum no longer reflects the real but takes its place.

Recent studies on AI and authenticity, such as those conducted by Jon McCormack, Toby Gifford, and Patrick Hutchings, suggest that the evaluation of art depends not only on the artwork as an object or product, but also, in a broader sense, on the spectator's assumptions regarding its origin (McCormack, Gifford and Hutchings 2019, 29-36).

The devaluation of art through AI intervention also occurs through the transformation of creation into a kind of "on-demand service." Historically, art has long been associated with the exceptional, with that which transcends the ordinary. From the Renaissance conception of the inspired artist to the Romantic cult of the creative genius, the work of art was regarded as unique, original, and beyond the realm of everyday experience. This exceptional character applied not only to the artist but also to the artwork itself. A painting, a symphony, or a theatrical performance was considered a rare event, the result of a lengthy creative process, which endowed it with prestige and cultural value. Rarity was one of the conditions of artistic recognition.

Artificial intelligence, however, tends to transform the creative act into a function available on demand:

> Across the stage of life there drifts a lonely thought,
> With shadowed steps that wander far away,
> Still seeking through the years a vanished day,
> Beneath a silent sky with mystery fraught.
> Within the eyes of night a candle glows,
> While winds bear fleeting longings through the air,

Of moments fading softly into prayer,
And lost within the hush that comes and goes.
Yet humankind, between the earth and stars,
Lifts dreams above the burden of the clay,
And carves a path beyond life's hidden scars.
For all that was, and all that slipped away,
Lives on in verse, in songs that leave their scars –
Like trails of fire on time's unseen highway.
Generated by ChatGPT on October 22, 2025

Here is a sonnet generated by AI in just two seconds. By the same principle, it can write a play in ten seconds and produce an image in fifteen. When creation becomes instantaneous, there is a risk that its value will be perceived as utilitarian rather than existential. In the absence of an authentic origin and a personal experience, how can creativity still be defined?

It is at this point that James Brusseau and Luca Turchet introduce the notion of "productive inauthenticity" (Brusseau and Turchet 2025, 209-217). The concept suggests that the creative value of an AI-generated work does not derive from the authenticity of the experience that produced it, but rather from its capacity to remain open to multiple attributions of meaning. In this perspective, the absence of an identifiable creative biography no longer appears as a limitation, but as a condition that enhances the interpretive freedom of the recipient. Yet while such inauthenticity may prove fertile within the digital arts, it encounters a fundamental limitation in live theatre: the theatrical experience is grounded precisely in the presence of a body and a consciousness that assume responsibility for the act of expression before an audience.

Of course, artificial intelligence also influences contemporary art by eliminating the resistance inherent in the creative process – in other words, the artist's often arduous and winding journey toward a result. Drawing on the psychology of creativity and on classical models of the creative process, such as Graham Wallas's four-stage framework – preparation, incubation, illumination and verification (Wallas 1926, 79-81) – as well as John Dewey's conception of artistic creation as a succession of tensions, adjustments, imbalances, and resolutions (Dewey 1934, 56), we come to understand that the artist discovers the work while constructing it, through a continuous confrontation with both the resistance of the material and the limits of the self.

In Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's view, creative discovery is typically preceded by periods of uncertainty, repeated failures, and the abandonment of initial solutions (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, 83-89). Donald Schön, in turn, introduces the concept of "reflection-in-action". By this he refers to the artist who discovers meaning through action and continually reshapes the creative process according to what emerges during the act of creation itself (Schön 1983, 54-56).

AI radically shortens this journey. What was, and still is, for the artist a transformative experience becomes, for artificial intelligence, a simple command. From this perspective,

AI affects not only the artwork itself but also the process through which a human being becomes an artist. At the same time, the relativization of authorship shifts attention away from prestige and toward indifference. One does not feel gratitude toward an algorithm, nor admiration for what it can generate. Human authors will likely have to confront this profound cultural challenge.

All these interpretive perspectives on the influence of AI upon artistic creation redraw the conceptual boundaries of art itself. Who is the author? Can creativity exist without consciousness? Can the artist be replaced? These are among the central questions arising from what appears to be an increasingly deep identity crisis within the arts. I believe that the starting point for understanding – and perhaps overcoming – this crisis lies in defining our relationship with technology. Is technology itself the problem? Or has its rapid advancement, in fact, altered the relationship between human beings and creation?

Let us not forget the essential point. AI is incapable of participating in the existential experience that underlies the human artistic act. As McCormack and his collaborators observe, artistic value is determined not only by the formal properties of the work itself, but also by perceptions of the creator's autonomy, authenticity and intentionality (McCormack, Gifford and Hutchings 2019, 29-36).

In this context, the development of artificial intelligence does more than blur the boundary between expression and simulation; it challenges the very modern conception of authorship and the experience that legitimizes artistic creation. Increasingly, attention shifts from the artwork itself to the conditions of its production, and questions concerning aesthetic value are accompanied by inquiries into the origin, intention, and authenticity of the creative act.

In this sense, the debate surrounding AI extends beyond the realm of technology and compels us to reconsider the relationship between human beings and creation. If a work of art is understood not merely as a result, but also as the expression of an existential journey, then creation can no longer be separated from the experience of the one who produces it. Human beings are not only the authors of artworks; they are also transformed through the creative process itself. This reciprocal shaping – whereby the creator leaves an imprint upon the work, and the work, in turn, leaves an imprint upon the creator – constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of art.

It is precisely here that the essential difference between the human artistic act and algorithmic performance resides. The former is the expression of a process of becoming; the latter is the result of processing.

Although AI can produce dramatic texts, images, and even virtual performers, the "living work of art" remains unique by virtue of several fundamental characteristics. The concept of "liveness", introduced in the work of Philip Auslander, refers not only to the fact that actor and spectator share the same space and time, but also to the existence of a reciprocal relationship that can never be fully anticipated. The value of theatre as a living art derives precisely from this ongoing negotiation of meaning between real human presences

– a negotiation that cannot be reduced to the mere reproduction of behaviours or expressive forms (Auslander 2008, 10). Interestingly, Auslander nuances this seemingly obvious opposition. He argues that the modern notion of *liveness* is not a natural and immutable characteristic of theatre, but rather a cultural category that has been continuously redefined in relation to the development of technologies of reproduction and transmission. In other words, what we understand today as a "live event" has itself been shaped through comparison with the very technological media that challenged its uniqueness.

Therefore, theatre is defined not primarily as an artistic product, but as an artistic event. The specificity of theatre as an art of presence, together with its ephemeral nature, implicitly demonstrates the uniqueness of every performance. It is an art form that cannot be repeated identically, thereby eluding the logic of replication that threatens many other artistic disciplines. Moreover, theatre exists only in the moment of its unfolding; it is a human process rather than an object. Its essence does not reside in the completion of an act – or in the finished product – but in a shared presence and in the continuous exchange of energy, meaning, and emotion between those who create the performance and those who receive it.

Starting from the concept of scenic presence, a fundamental distinction emerges between the two terms under discussion – AI and theatre. While digital representation, made possible by technology (the digital avatar, the hologram, the AI-generated character, or the theatrical deepfake), constitutes an artificial construct mediated algorithmically and dependent upon processes of simulation and technological reproduction, living theatrical presence derives its authenticity from the concrete existence of the actor who breathes, makes mistakes, grows tired, adapts, and from the direct, unmediated relationship that he or she establishes with the spectator.

A theatrical performance is not a fixed artistic object but an event that comes into being through the continuous exchange between actors and spectators. Audience reactions influence the actors' performances, while the actors' responses, in turn, shape the audience's behaviour and perception, generating a self-regulating loop of reciprocal influence throughout the course of the performance. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, the essence of the theatrical phenomenon resides in the functioning of an "autopoietic feedback loop" generated by the co-presence of actors and spectators. The performance does not exist as an autonomous object prior to their encounter; rather, it is constituted in real time through an ongoing exchange of reactions, emotions, and energies. From this perspective, theatre appears as a self-referential and irreproducible process whose identity is constructed in the very act of its unfolding (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 47). Thus, the spectator influences the actor, and the actor influences the spectator. AI is incapable of participating organically in this loop.

It is also worth considering the actor's body as an artistic medium. The body is not merely an instrument; it becomes artistic material, a source of meaning, and a space of vulnerability. Grotowski develops the concept of the "holy actor" and argues that theatre finds its essence in the encounter between actor and spectator, once all secondary

elements of the performance have been stripped away. The actor's body and voice thereby become the primary instruments of theatrical expression, while the creative process requires a total exposure of the performer's being (Grotowski 1998, 27). In this sense, within the digital age, the human body may have become even more valuable than before.

Artificial intelligence influences new forms of artistic creation through statistical models, prediction, and content generation. It does not create from experience, but from data. Algorithmic creativity is fundamentally different from human artistic experience. In theatrical production, AI can enhance the artistic process without replacing it. AI-assisted dramaturgy, storyboards, virtual characters, scenography, lighting design, and translation are just some examples in this regard. Thus, a dialogue emerges between theatrical art and artificial intelligence. Within the framework of the "living work of art", AI may become a technical partner without becoming an author in the artistic sense. It is precisely here that the limits of technological substitution become fully apparent. To feel, to take risks, to make mistakes, or to be vulnerable are experiences that cannot be automated.

Conclusions

We are therefore witnessing a process of transformation, adaptation, and hybridization within the performing arts. The actor increasingly becomes both performer and curator of meaning, a genuine mediator between technology and audience. In a world dominated by optimization, automation, and prediction, theatre continues to offer the possibility of fragility and unpredictability. What may appear to be a human weakness becomes, in relation to technology, an artistic value. The theatrical encounter and the communal experience remain rituals that cannot be replicated algorithmically.

What will the future of theatre be? We cannot know with certainty. What seems clear, however, is that theatre will integrate AI both as a practical tool and as a thematic concern, while preserving its human core. The more digital society becomes, the greater the cultural value of real presence is likely to be. In the absence of a body, vulnerability, lived memory, or an awareness of mortality, AI may indirectly contribute to the revaluation of live art.

In this context, it is reasonable to predict that the actor's presence will acquire additional value when compared to simulation. The more convincingly algorithms produce the appearance of life, the more significant the distinction will become between the representation of pain and pain that is genuinely experienced, between the simulation of emotion and the emotion that passes through a living body. AI will not devalue theatre through aesthetic competition; rather, it will compel theorists and practitioners alike to rediscover the ontological value of human presence.

To keep pace with technological development, theatre will undoubtedly redefine its tools while preserving its essence. Algorithms will continue to excel at processing

information, whereas theatre will remain the space of lived experience and direct human encounter. In the age of AI, the living character of theatre does not become a relic of the past; it becomes the strongest argument for its contemporary relevance.

> AI may produce the *shadows* of theatrical art, but it cannot enter the *light* from which those shadows are born. For this very reason, in a world populated by simulations, the 'living work of art' becomes even more precious.[2]

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[2] Response to a ChatGPT prompt regarding the fundamental difference between AI and the "living work of art" on November 14, 2025.

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