Beyond Generation: How Creative Practitioners Use GenAI to Articulate, Evaluate, and Preserve Creative Judgement

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Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is increasingly integrated into creative workflows, raising questions about its impact on human cognition and authorship. This exploratory qualitative study examines how experienced creative practitioners engage with GenAI across creative and educational contexts. Our findings suggest that participants did not experience GenAI as simply reducing or preserving critical thinking. Instead, they described critical judgement as occurring across the creative workflow: *before generation, as practitioners articulate intent and translate tacit criteria into prompts; after generation, as they compare and interrogate outputs; and across iteration, as they verify uncertain material and decide whether outputs should be accepted, refined, rejected, or reframed*. We identify five design opportunities for practitioner-led GenAI: *intent articulation, prompt formulation, output comparison, verification, and boundary decisions*. By shifting attention from automated production to reflective creative judgement, this work offers a design-oriented account of how participants used GenAI to support, rather than replace critical thinking.

Generative Artificial Intelligence. Creative Practice. Art.

1. INTRODUCTION

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has recently become a much-discussed topic in the creative fields, both among educators and professionals. GenAI has been shown to support creative motivation and content creation [17] . GenAI tools such as DALL-E 2 and Midjourney [9] play a significant role in helping users convert text into images, reshape the creative landscape, make creative production more accessible to broader audiences.

Existing discussions of GenAI often frame the issue as a tension between automation and human creativity [3] . This framing is useful, but incomplete in the context of human-AI collaboration. Prior work suggests that, for experienced creative practitioners, GenAI may not simply replace thinking; it may change where thinking occurs [10] . Critical judgement may appear before generation, when practitioners translate tacit aesthetic criteria into prompts; after generation, when they compare and question outputs; and at decision points, when they accept, refine, reject, or verify AI-generated material [18] . The research problem, therefore, is not whether practitioners use GenAI, but how they remain critically in control while using it.

This study addresses that problem by examining how experienced creative practitioners understand and preserve critical thinking in GenAI-mediated workflows. Through interviews with practitioners across creative and educational domains, the study investigates how participants described critical thinking across articulation, evaluation, verification, and boundary-making. This research answers two research questions:

- RQ1. How do experienced creative practitioners exercise and redistribute critical thinking across GenAI-mediated creative workflows?
- RQ2. How can GenAI systems be designed to support practitioners' critical thinking through intent articulation, prompt formulation, output comparison, verification, and boundary decisions?

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2. RELATED WORKS

2.1 Creativity, Critical Judgement, and Human-AI Co-Creativity

Creativity is the process of synthesising knowledge and life experiences into artistic products [19] . This creative process often does not occur alone; as studied by Kuhlmann et al. [14] , it involves many factors, characteristics, and human collaboration. This creativity is considered as a unique element of human critical thinking that no tool can replace in conveying it. Creativity also involves forms of human critical thinking through which practitioners consider aesthetics, processes, people, and ethical values in the work they create [2] .

Current AI is effective at synthesising information and generating varied outputs, but qualitative skills remain important for understanding community needs and values [11] . Creative practitioners all understand that the value of creativity lies in connecting their unique values with social reality and integrating ethical values, hence enhancing the accessibility of their products to the public. Prior work has examined GenAI as a tool for creative production and human-AI co-creativity [15] , but less attention has been paid to how critical judgement is operationalised across GenAI-mediated creative workflows.

Recent qualitative studies have similarly examined evolving roles and workflows among creative practitioners [5] and the implications of GenAI for professional competence among digital creative professionals [20] . The present study complements this work by focusing specifically on how experienced practitioners describe critical judgement within creative workflows.

2.2 Critical Thinking and AI Literacy in Creative Practice

Critical thinking provides a useful lens for examining this form of control. Halpern describes critical thinking as involving skills, dispositions, structure, and metacognitive monitoring [8] , while AI literacy research emphasises the capacity to understand, evaluate, communicate with, and collaborate with AI systems [5] . In creative practice, these capacities are not abstract competencies; they are enacted through concrete decisions about intent, prompts, comparison, evidence, and authorship. Recent work also warns that uncritical delegation to GenAI may weaken authentic human engagement or encourage over-reliance on plausible outputs [12] . These risks are especially salient in educational and early-career contexts, where users may lack the domain knowledge needed to recognise hallucinated sources, weak conceptual fit, or superficial aesthetic fluency.

Creativity has gradually become an activity that demonstrates a high level of multi-stakeholder involvement. *AI literacy* includes the ability to evaluate, criticise, communicate, and collaborate effectively with AI tools [5] [6] . Therefore, critical thinking has become an important supporting skill that enables people to interact effectively with AI and systems [13] . In addition, with flexible critical thinking, users can leverage GenAI's fast response speed and diverse response results to deliver connected, seamless, and creative solutions. In the AI era, uniqueness may depend less on algorithmic novelty than on specialised judgement and rich personal experience [16] ; including values grounded in cultural context and practical needs.

3. METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research is to explore the perspective of creative practitioners when using AI in their work. In this study, we define GenAI as a tool that can support users at several stages of the artistic creation process, including ideation, idea organisation, and idea synthesis. Ethical approval has been granted by the School Research Ethics Committee.

We recruited eight creative practitioners (6 female, 2 male) from diverse domains including visual design, fine arts, and design education (Table 1). All participants had over 20 years of professional experience and prior exposure to generative AI tools (e.g., Midjourney, ChatGPT). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure domain expertise and active engagement with creative workflows involving AI.

We conducted semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes. The interview protocol was designed to explore (1) participants' creative workflows, (2) their experiences using GenAI tools, and (3) their reflections on critical thinking during AI-assisted creation. Questions included:

- Can you describe a recent project where you used GenAI?
- How do you create your innovative products with the impact of GenAI so that your critical thinking ability is not affected?
- As a major influencer of students' creative behaviour, how do you usually guide students to use AI responsibly while still developing their critical thinking skills?

Interview data were transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis followed a three-stage coding process:

- Open coding: Initial codes were generated to capture recurring concepts of decision-making.

- Axial coding: Codes were grouped into higher-level categories reflecting patterns of interaction and cognitive strategies.

Selective coding: Core themes were refined to articulate how critical thinking operates within human-AI co-creation.

Table 1: *Participants information*

Participant	*Gender*	*Professional occupation*
PE1	*Male*	*Professional Photographer*
PE2	*Female*	*Lecturer in Multimedia Design and Communication*
PE3	*Male*	*Owner of a studio and teaching product design*
PE4	*Female*	*Artistic director of the museum*
PE5	*Female*	*Fashion design lecturer*
PE6	*Female*	*Fashion design lecturer*
PE7	*Female*	*Design and history lecturer*
PE8	*Female*	*Author, artist, design lecturer*

4. RESULTS

Across the interviews, practitioners did not simply position GenAI as useful, risky, or collaborative. Instead, they described forms of judgement that appeared at different moments in the workflow: before generation, during prompt construction, after output production, and across decisions to accept, refine, reject, or set boundaries around generated material. The findings therefore suggest how critical thinking is redistributed across the creative process rather than located only in post-hoc evaluation.

4.1 Prompting as the Externalisation of Tacit Criteria

The first mechanism concerns the work that takes place before an AI output is generated. Participants described prompting as a process of making tacit creative judgement explicit. To guide GenAI meaningfully, practitioners had to articulate aesthetic preferences, material sensitivities, project goals, and contextual constraints that are often implicit in expert creative practice:

> "It's hard to define your own preferences in some aspects and yes to find a really good and I suppose that why I attracted because they tend to be pretty good at articulating why making a choice and why they're attracted to certain things. I don't have a way to describe material properties on a more abstract level why those material properties are interesting in the context of that project." (PE3)

Whether they work independently or collaboratively, creative practitioners prioritise using creative materials from their own lives rather than relying on AI tools to generate ideas. The interview data from PE1 showed that creators control the value their art products bring:

> “I don't always enjoy working on my own so I'll often work with collaborators instead of completely independent and we might start from a point of view of talking about literature and talking about different theorists and different kind of sociologists and thinkers and what they're saying about technology and then work out our interpretation […].” (PE1)

These quotations do not merely indicate that prompting is difficult. They suggest that prompt construction can require practitioners to externalise professional judgement that is normally tacit: why a material quality matters, how it relates to a project, and what kind of output would be considered appropriate. These findings position prompting as an early site of critical thinking within GenAI-mediated creative work.

4.2 Output Evaluation as Interrogation Rather Than Acceptance

The second mechanism appears after generation. Participants did not present AI-generated responses as finished creative products or authoritative answers. Instead, they treated outputs as provisional material that needed to be checked, compared, and interpreted through professional judgement. GenAI could accelerate feedback and widen the range of possible directions, but this also created further evaluative work:

> "Six months ago, I was thinking why should I use AI, I thought I shouldn't use it because using AI means I'm training it for free without being paid for my knowledge. However, I felt like I was being left behind because all my colleagues around me were using it and taking full advantage of its quick feedback. And I started using GenAI for text and image content generation. I felt like it wasn’t that bad, and I was contributing to human civilisation through conversations. However, what GenAI responded to me was somewhat untrue, so it trained me to triple-check all the information I received from different sources.” (PE8)

PE8's statement shows a shift from resistance to use, but the central analytical point is the evaluative practice that follows adoption. GenAI output became something to be interrogated for truth, reliability, and fit. Rather than replacing critical thinking, the output

created a new site where critical thinking had to be exercised.

4.3 Creative Agency as Boundary-Making

The third mechanism concerns the decision point after evaluation. Practitioners maintained creative agency by deciding whether an AI-generated output should be accepted, refined, rejected, or used to redirect the next iteration. These decisions were shaped by whether the output aligned with human intention, artistic value, lived experience, and the broader meaning of the work:

> "[...] A good artist in general has to absorb the world and reflect they are mirrors; they are a reflection of everything around them. […] An artist will accurately reflect what's happening out there. And it's just a mirror or what they feel should happen out there or what they see in the little gaps in the middle of the hope that they can see the seedling." (PE4)

The data indicate that creative value is not located in generation alone. The important decision is whether generated material can be meaningfully connected to a practitioner's interpretation of the world. Rejection, refinement, and selective acceptance are therefore not peripheral actions; they are central practices through which creative agency is maintained.

4.4 Verification as a Condition of Responsible GenAI Use

PE5 and PE7 expressed their concerns about their current generation of students relying too much on GenAI in their creativity and research:

> "We have been open to finding ways to guide our students to use GenAI in their creativity by creating images on various themes based on their original ideas. It works quite well, but I am not sure how it will be in the future […]" (PE5)

> "My student even used AI to make material for her practice, and even though it was a non-existent source, she did not realise the seriousness of the problem when using GenAI so carelessly." (PE7)

Based on years of experience working in the creative and artistic fields, PE3 has more time than his students to be exposed to a wide range of knowledge and art genres from humanity and can easily understand whether an AI-generated product is effective or not, he shared:

> "And I think one of the big challenges that we face is around critical thinking and evaluating that outcome and not just being attracted to the real thing."

The data from participants show that responsible GenAI use depends on the ability to recognise when verification is necessary and when delegation becomes uncritical dependence. In this sense, critical thinking operates as boundary-setting around trust, evidence, and responsibility.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The positive impact of AI feedback changes the perspective of users

Kallia [12] reports concerns that completely delegating decision-making power to AI could contribute to an erosion of cognitive abilities. For participants in this study, however, long experience in art and design appeared to shape how they used technology as a supporting tool. They described GenAI as helping them handle some processes more efficiently and obtain rapid feedback on aspects of their work.

The results collected from experts show that personal experience is the solid foundation for all their thinking. Despite the use of GenAI, participants unanimously agree that human processes are necessary for creating artistic products. Participants consider the complex analysis and feedback process of the GenAI system to be a catalyst that accelerates creativity and provides more materials for artistic expression.

Since the introduction of AI, human interaction and creative behaviour have changed, reflecting the impact of technology on user behaviour. However, the nature of creative activity is to convey information through the unique perspective of the artist and the harmonious connection between artists. During this process, GenAI enables creative practitioners to express themselves more clearly by synthesising their thoughts [1] . The accounts from our participants further emphasise personal experience as an important foundation for creative judgement.

5.2 Critical Thinking is the core of creativity

Our analysis reveals that long-time creative professionals consistently place people at the centre of the creative process rather than relying entirely on technology. Technology has been around for a long time, but it has never completely replaced their unique way of thinking. Participants described critical engagement not only as scepticism toward AI but also as evaluating the structure and reliability of AI responses [8] . This understanding helps them sort out when to trust, when to doubt, when to ignore, and when to exploit creativity. Across the interviews, participants described systematic evaluation, using AI to support their work, and a desire for greater control.

Participants emphasised that the essence of creativity should come from the unique materials

they have, and be drawn from their own knowledge and experiences. They therefore framed human experience and judgement as central to creative work, even when GenAI was used. Accepting the value of GenAI in creative work is a way for practitioners to broaden their understanding and gain a clearer perspective on the nature of critical thinking in their creative process.

5.3 The risk of AI taking over and relying too much on it

Based on the interview data, we identified concerns and uncertainties about over-reliance on AI in design and art creation. In many creative fields, work is increasingly supported by AI. At the same time, participants did not describe AI use itself as necessarily undermining creativity; instead, they emphasised the importance of active judgement and guidance, particularly in educational contexts. This suggests a need to examine how GenAI can support proactive exploration while maintaining critical thinking.

The interviews also revealed opposing views about how AI can be used while retaining critical thinking as a core part of creativity. One concern was that excessive reliance on AI could make users more passive in finding solutions. In contrast, participants described themselves as continually criticising and adjusting AI-generated material. Co-creation between users and AI was frequently mentioned as a way to maintain control over creative decisions while using GenAI as a partner in the ideation process.

6. DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

The central contribution of this study is to suggest that, within this sample, critical thinking is not simply diminished or preserved by GenAI; it is redistributed. In this study, critical thinking refers to the situated practices through which practitioners articulate criteria, evaluate possibilities, verify uncertain claims, and make accountable decisions about whether generated material belongs in their creative work.

The five design opportunities translate this empirical pattern into a design-oriented approach to GenAI-mediated creative work. Analytically, the design opportunities clarify how practitioners' judgement is enacted through the ongoing work of defining criteria, interpreting outputs, checking uncertainty, and determining whether generated material belongs in the creative process. Its design value lies in identifying where systems could support reflective creative judgement rather than only accelerate production.

These opportunities are not intended as claims that the individual interface features are entirely novel; rather, they connect existing design possibilities directly to the judgement practices described by participants in this study.

From the findings of this study, we propose *five design opportunities for practitioner-led GenAI'*. The design opportunities respond directly to the study's central question: how GenAI interactions might catalyse creative practitioners' critical thinking. Across the interviews, critical thinking did not appear only after outputs were generated. It appeared before generation, during prompt formulation, through output evaluation, in verification practices, and in decisions about whether generated material should be accepted, refined, rejected, or reframed. The design implication is therefore to move GenAI systems from automated production toward support for reflective creative judgement.

First, systems should support *'intent articulation'* before generation. The findings show that practitioners must clarify what they want the work to do before they can meaningfully evaluate AI-generated material. GenAI tools could therefore help users define project aims, audiences, aesthetic values, contextual constraints, and exclusion criteria before prompting begins.

Second, systems should support *'prompt formulation'* as the translation of tacit judgement into explicit criteria. Participants suggested that creative preferences about material, tone, style, and meaning are often difficult to verbalise. GenAI systems could support this process by helping practitioners specify examples, constraints, references, and evaluative criteria.

Third, systems should support ***'output comparison'***. The findings show that practitioners treated AI outputs as provisional material rather than finished answers. Interfaces should therefore allow outputs to be compared against the practitioner's original intent and criteria, making evaluation more visible and less dependent on implicit judgement.

Fourth, systems should support ***'verification'***. Participants' concerns about inaccurate or non-existent sources show that critical thinking also involves checking uncertainty, provenance, and claims that may enter the creative work. GenAI tools should therefore surface possible hallucinations, source risks, and material requiring further scrutiny.

Finally, systems should support ***'reflection and boundary decisions'***. Practitioners maintained creative agency by deciding whether outputs belonged in the work. Systems could support this by preserving why outputs were accepted, refined, rejected, or reframed across iterations.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This study is exploratory and based on interviews with eight experienced creative practitioners; the findings should not be read as generalisable to all GenAI-mediated creative work. Because the study relies on participants rather than direct observation, future research should examine how these mechanisms appear in situated creative workflows.

Observational studies could examine how practitioners move between intent-setting, prompting, evaluation, verification, and refinement in real projects. Longitudinal studies could investigate how critical thinking changes as practitioners gain experience with GenAI, as tools evolve, and as educational norms around responsible AI use develop.

8. CONCLUSION

This study asked how AI interactions might catalyse creative practitioners' critical thinking. The findings suggest that participants described creative judgement becoming more explicit across the workflow: when practitioners formulate intent, translate tacit criteria into prompts, interrogate outputs, verify claims, and make boundary decisions about acceptance or rejection.

The central contribution is to suggest, within this sample, that critical thinking is not simply diminished or preserved by GenAI; it is redistributed. For experienced creative practitioners, agency is maintained through the repeated movement between articulation, interrogation, verification, rejection, and reflection. Future GenAI systems should therefore be designed not only to generate material, but also to support the forms of judgement through which creative work becomes meaningful.

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