

The 2023 Creative Aristocracy: Introducing the New Kings and Queens of Culture

Artificial intelligence is calling into question the legitimacy, and economics, of human ingenuity. The talent on this year's list is keeping it regally, outrageously alive.

BY CARL SWANSON | PUBLISHED: SEP 28, 2023



Jacoby Satterwhite: Artist provocateur taking over the Met's Great Hall with performance, video, and music.
XAVIER SCOTT MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH NEW YORK

How do you succeed as a young creative person today? How do you make it? What does it even mean to make it now?

The old models, pathways, and rules—some not even that old—have been scrambled and upended in the past few years, as the traditional gatekeepers and arbiters are replaced by the herky-jerky algorithmic democracy of social media. In place of the lowbrow-highbrow divide, we spend much of our lives immersed in one of several competing popular cultures—*Oppenheimer vs. Barbie?*—that demand that you pick sides to participate. The question is no longer so much whether you should sell out, but how to sell at all, and to whom.

For much of 2023 Hollywood has been on strike because of the fear that the suits, who always found the creatives the least reliable part of their business, would replace them with artificial intelligence, which presumably operates autonomously, like those creepily polite Waymo cabs scurrying about San Francisco. The studios—especially those owned by tech companies, which understandably have an ingrained sympathy for robots—would love it if ChatGPT could just rustle up a new script in the style of something that succeeded in the past at little or no cost. Maybe starring the digital avatars of actors who have been uploaded to the cloud without asking about their character's motivation. *M3GAN*, but starring an all-CGI cast.

It's not likely to stop there: The legitimacy, or at least the economics, of human creativity itself is being called into question by AI and the math-nerd moguls who own and hype it even as they blithely warn us of its dystopian consequences. (What do they care? The drones will protect them, after all.) As Open-AI's Sam Altman wrote in July on what used to be called Twitter, "everything 'creative' is a remix of things that happened in the past, plus epsilon and

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

times the quality of the feedback loop and the number of iterations. People think they should maximize epsilon, but the trick is to maximize the other two.”

Is that the trick? To leave cultural innovation to hallucinating machines? Except all AI really does is try to fool us, predicting the next most likely thing based on having ingested massive quantities of what has come before. And yet, as the talent in these pages shows, it’s the unpredictable that moves the culture forward.

“You can’t manufacture cool,” says the Farrar, Straus and Giroux book editor Jackson Howard, pointing to 100 Boyfriends, the singularly outrageous book he nurtured and edited by the punk musician, performance artist, and author Brontez Purnell. Safety-pinned by Purnell’s candor and humor, the scrapbook of filthy freeform essays is in its fifth printing and was longlisted for a 2022 Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Award. “AI can’t find someone like that and unleash them on the world.”

It’s why Whitney Mallett created the *Whitney Review of New Writing* to give space to the daring, the smutty, the inimitable, and the frankly weird. “Everybody is so bored with the standardized voice of journalism that AI is good at” (or, one imagines, will be soon), she says. “Everybody wants to read a personality. All I wanted were strong voices.”

Taking things too far requires courage, though. Like when Jacolby Satterwhite was asked to be the second artist ever to do a takeover of the Beaux-Arts Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

When I get him on the phone, he’s been busy, having spent the day scanning Solange Knowles, who had to zip herself into a motion-capture suit so she could co-star in the multichannel video installation that will be on view at the museum this fall. She’ll join a digitized posse of his scanned pals, including the artist Raúl de Nieves and the musicians Serpentwithfeet and Moses Sumney, who will scamper around the hall’s walls (“each wall a different film genre”) and spiral up into the three domes. It wasn’t easy.

“I had to fight tooth and nail and turn into Azealia Banks,” he says, referring to the stunt-queen rapper. “All the bureaucracies are at war with each other.” AI, for Satterwhite and other artists, is just a tool to exploit; it’s interesting because it has such potential to create cultural mayhem. “AI is a scarier thing than climate change,” Satterwhite tells me, half-joking. But he doesn’t seem that stressed about it. Scott Rothkopf, the incoming Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney Museum of Art, takes the long view. “Throughout history new technologies have threatened individual creativity,” such as the invention of photography. Artists, he adds, will find “something interesting and optimistic by using these new tools.” Awol Erizku, for instance, uses AI to test ideas. “The robots are only as good as the prompt,” he says. In other words, in a world where the entire history of art and culture is available on the all-you-can-eat metaverse buffet, it takes an original thinker to scramble the prompts and break through—not code.

Consider Greta Gerwig, who brought a mumble-core auteur’s sensibility to Mattel and improbably humanized an inanimate symbol of American consumerism to the tune of \$1.34 billion, Warner Bros.’ -highest-grossing movie ever. Meanwhile, *The Flash*, the studio’s focus-grouped-to-death attempt at a new four-quadrant franchise? Audiences shrugged. Who will follow in Gerwig’s footsteps? Or those of the late iconoclast William Friedkin, who cut through the crumbling studios in the 1970s, another moment of industry transition, to make such generation-defining films as *The Exorcist*? Perhaps it will be Chloe Domont, who got Netflix to cough up \$20 million for *Fair Play*, her sly update on an all-but-dead genre, the 1990s erotic thriller. Or Celine Song, whose *Past Lives* is a deeply felt adult romance in a pool of shallow superhero movies aimed at teenage boys.

Most of the people you see here are in their twenties and thirties, which means they grew up oblivious to a time when highfalutin tastemakers stingily meted out judgment or acclaim. Instead, they could choose to toy with the conventions of the establishment, or subvert them for their own purposes. It’s why a painter like the Brit Issy Wood resisted the old-fashioned come-on of Larry Gagosian, the most powerful art dealer the world has ever known, to go her own way, plot with her own crew of bandits, and define success on her own terms. “I can do both,” she sings in a recent single. Even as corporate content types try to outsource originality—make it predictable and predictably profitable through a content echo chamber of automated Mad Libs, the truly eccentric can never be replicated—they’re the first of their kind. Or as Ice Spice, the rapper who remade “Barbie World” with Nicki Minaj this summer, put it in another single, “How can I lose if I’m already chose?” “You can’t create Ice Spice in a lab,” says Howard, the book editor. “That is something that came out of distinct human circumstances. Yes, *Barbie* is corporate. But it is a wink and a nod to all humanity, our secret habits.”