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Emotional Depth in Generative Imagery: Memory, Trauma, and the Aesthetics of AI

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the rapid expansion of the generative art market and the associated avalanche-like growth of visual content, there is an intensified demand for updated theoretical foundations for its critical interpretation. The aim of the study is to formulate and substantiate an aesthetic paradigm that shifts the focus from technological novelty to the affective richness of the work and human intentionality. The methodological framework combines a systematic review of academic research on artificial aesthetics and authorship theory, a philosophical analysis of key concepts, and an in-depth case study of an artistic practice that explores themes of memory and trauma using Artificial Intelligence (AI). Based on the analysis, the concept of hybrid authorship is proposed, treating AI as a higher-order instrument and foregrounding affective depth and aesthetic resonance as central evaluative criteria. The study demonstrates that AI can function as an apparatus for the aesthetic materialization of personal and collective experience, particularly in the logic of algorithmic postmemory. The main conclusion confirms the decisive role of authorial intent and the artist's emotional engagement as necessary conditions for creating meaningful generative art that is distinct from superficial decorative generativity. The findings presented in this work will be of interest to other researchers in the field of art, practicing artists, as well as authors in the areas of digital humanities and the philosophy of technology.

Keywords: Generative Art; Artificial Intelligence; Aesthetics; Emotional Depth; Authorship; Memory; Trauma; Affective Computing; Algorithmic Postmemory; Digital Humanities

1. Introduction

The contemporary cultural landscape is undergoing a radical transformation under the influence of generative Artificial Intelligence. Algorithms that produce images, texts, and audio have reached a level of maturity at which creative tools move beyond professional studios and become an everyday resource for the broader public. This technological emancipation is accompanied by notable economic dynamics and a rise in academic attention. According to analytical reviews, the global market for generative art amounted to 298.3 million US dollars in 2023 and, according to forecasts, will grow to 8.6 billion dollars by 2033, with a compound annual growth rate of about 40% [1]. The catalyst is applied commercial practices primarily advertising and marketing which together account for over 35% of the segment [1].

Behind this impressive quantitative expansion, however, there emerges a qualitative deficit a crisis of critical judgment. The massification of visual production has generated the phenomenon of decorative generativity: a stream of formally striking yet conceptually and affectively shallow images. Established art-historical and aesthetic models, oriented toward the analysis of traditional media, prove insufficient for describing the hybrid products of human–machine coauthorship [2]. Professional discourse is often reduced either to the examination of technical parameters (prompt configuration, model selection) or to uncritical enthusiasm for novelty, bypassing key questions concerning the meaning, content, and value of such works. As a result, a gap is forming between the rapid commercialization of the technology and the lagging cultural, critical, and philosophical frameworks for its comprehension.

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The scholarly gap manifests in the absence of a coherent theoretical framework that would rigorously distinguish genuine art, in which AI serves as a means for deep existential and emotional inquiry, from mass-produced generative output.

The aim of the study is to develop and substantiate an analytical framework for evaluating generative art, grounded in the categories of affective depth and aesthetic resonance. The proposed approach deliberately shifts the focus from technological novelty to human intentionality and the existential meaning of the work.

The scientific novelty of the work lies in the initial proposal of a comprehensive aesthetic model that synthesizes the philosophy of authorship, affect theory, and artistic practices that engage memory and trauma, for the interpretation of the phenomena of generative art.

The author's hypothesis proceeds from the view that genuine art created with the involvement of AI is distinguished not by the degree of algorithmic complexity nor by the originality of prompt formulation, but by the depth of the authorial conception and the richness of emotional content. These properties result from the artist's purposeful engagement with personal and collective experience, in which AI functions not as a coauthor but as a high-powered instrument for the visualization and transformation of that experience.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological foundation of the study is interdisciplinary and is built on three mutually complementary components that provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of generative art. It combines rigorous work with sources, conceptual-philosophical argumentation, and empirical testing of the proposed model.

First, a systematic literature review was conducted. Material was extracted from leading scientometric platforms (Scopus, Web of Science) and specialized digital libraries (IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library). The review focused on the issues of artificial aesthetics, affective computing in artistic production, theories of digital memory and trauma, as well as on questions of the transformation of authorship in the era of AI.

Second, philosophical-conceptual analysis was used as the central analytical instrument.

Third, to empirically verify the proposed theory, the case study method was employed. The object was the author's own artistic practice the methodology of emotionally oriented generative art and the series Fragments of Memory. This perspective translated the discussion from the level of abstract models to a demonstration of their concrete implementation, showing how the concepts of affective depth and algorithmic postmemory are embodied in the real creative process and its results.

3. Results and Discussion

Before turning to the problematics of authorship and to aesthetic parameters, it is necessary to delineate the scale of the phenomenon under consideration. The exponential dynamics of interest in generative AI (fig.1) indicate the utmost relevance of the topic and compel the development of methodologically rigorous approaches to critical analysis commensurate with it.

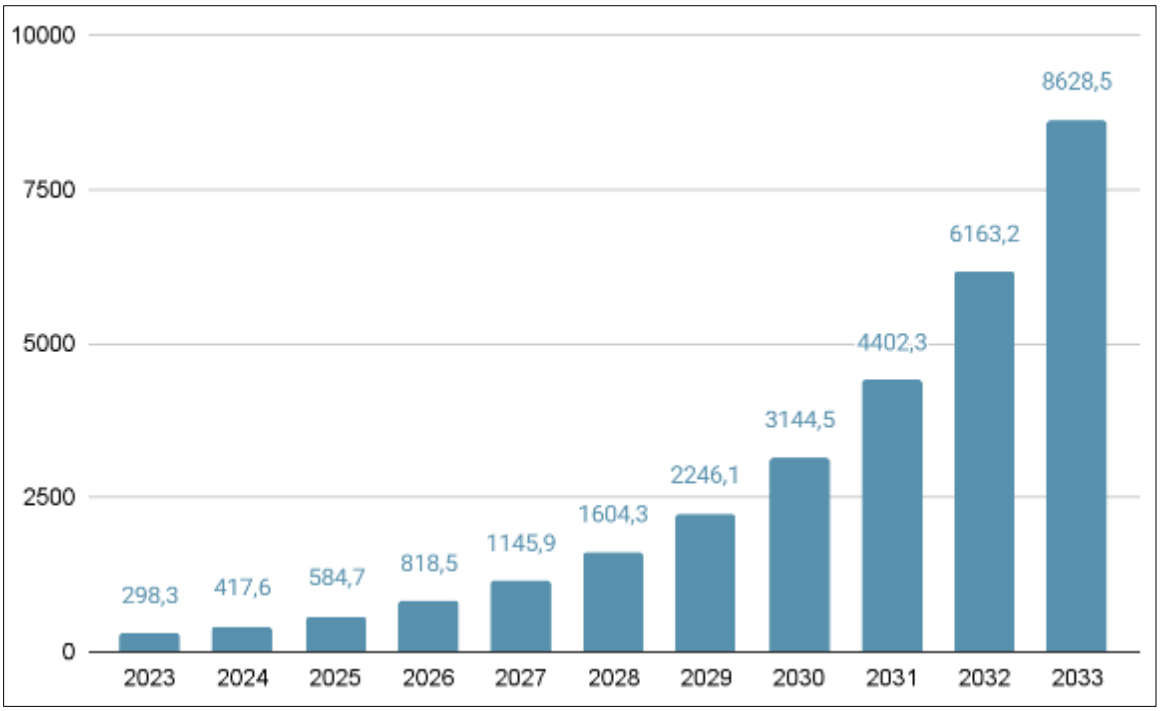

Figure 1 Projected growth of the global generative art market (US$ million), 2023–2033 (compiled by the author based on [1])

One of the most contentious and regularly distorting points in debates on generative art is the problem of authorship. Common notions that AI can act as a coauthor, that its use is equivalent to theft, and that it will inevitably replace artists not only shape a false optic but also divert the discussion from productive analysis. A correct framing of the question requires rejecting the anthropomorphization of machine systems and recognizing that authorship as an act presupposes intentionality, consciousness, and the capacity to assume responsibility properties possessed exclusively by humans.

This philosophical line receives substantial support in legal doctrine. Thus, the authorship theory design execution developed by Ginsburg and Budiardjo assigns authorship to the person who formulates a detailed creative project (design) and exercises control over its materialization (execution) [9]. In the field of generative art, an artist who sets the idea, establishes the conceptual framework, constructs or selects prompts, curates' datasets, and then selects, interprets, and refines the results satisfies both criteria in full. AI in this case functions as nothing more than a mechanism of execution a reliable agent of human will. Consequently, AI should be conceived not as a passive instrument like a brush or a camera and not as a coauthor, but as a higher-order instrument a complex system that accelerates and expands the creative amplitude of the artist [4, 7].

A historical perspective also dispels the aura of mystery surrounding AI art. It is appropriately understood as another link in the long history of contested media. Just as photography in the XIX century and digital art at the turn of the XX century were initially rejected as mechanical and inauthentic, generative practices encountered skepticism at an early stage. However, as historical experience shows, such technologies are eventually incorporated into the artistic canon and enrich it with new aesthetic lexicons [19].

To precisely describe the specific dual role of AI in the artistic process, the Epistemic Archive Experiment model is introduced. Within it, AI is conceived simultaneously as a colossal epistemic reservoir of cultural memory that accumulates the traces of countless visual practices, and as an experimental platform where previously unthinkable symbolic configurations are constructed and tested. The artist remains the locus of meaning-making the source of intent, interpretation, and responsibility whereas AI functions as a powerful yet subordinate mediator. This perspective makes it possible to grasp the novelty of the technology without succumbing either to alarmism or to the hyperbolization of its autonomy.

The mass generation of images by means of AI demonstrates the exhaustion of classical evaluative norms grounded in authenticity. Historically tied to the author's hand, the uniqueness of the material artifact, and its provenance, the category of authenticity loses its explanatory efficacy under conditions of digital reproducibility and algorithmic

productivity. To continue to judge digital works by analogy with material objects is to ignore their ontological specificity as works existing in regimes of copyability, variability, and parametric assembly [5, 10].

Instead, it is advisable to redirect attention to criteria relevant to contemporary artistic practice. The value of a work, including one created with the involvement of AI, is determined by two interrelated dimensions: novelty and depth. Novelty is responsible for the emergence of new forms, ideas, and languages that expand the range of cultural expression. Depth ensures that these innovations do not remain superficial but are saturated with conceptual and affective significance. It is precisely emotional depth, arising from authorial intentionality and inscribed personal experience, that constitutes the basic criterion separating genuine art from the stream of easily digestible and just as quickly forgotten decorative generativity.

For a rigorous formalization of this approach, two foundational concepts are introduced.

- Affective depth, understood as the degree of emotional-existential saturation intentionally embedded by the artist in the work and transmitted to the viewer. This construct aligns with the body of work in affective computing that investigates how specific visual parameters induce reproducible human emotional and physiological responses [4]. Affective depth arises not as an effect of random generation but as the result of deliberate authorial calibration, the tuning of the work to a specified spectrum of affective responses.
- Aesthetic resonance, understood as the capacity of a work to sustain meaningful engagement with the viewer, creating a prolonged emotional and philosophical dialogue. Such a work is not reducible to a first impression but compels repeated contemplation and reflection. This idea aligns with the framework of artificial aesthetics, which shifts the focus from object recognition to the perception of the affective properties of an environment — not to what is depicted, but to how, for example, warm lighting organizes a holistic experience of the scene [3].

The proposed paradigmatic shift in evaluation criteria is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparative analysis of paradigms for art evaluation (compiled by the author based on [3-5; 10])

Criterion	**Traditional paradigm (authenticity-based)**	**Proposed paradigm (affect-based)**
Source of value	Uniqueness of the object, hand of the artist, provenance.	Affective impact, conceptual depth, capacity for dialogue.
Role of the artist	Master craftsperson, creator of a unique artifact.	Conceptual author, conductor of affective experience, interpreter.
Key question	Who made this? Is it an original?	What do I feel? What does it lead me to think about?
Example for AI art	Focus on the complexity of the prompt or the uniqueness of the seed (seed).	Focus on how the work employs AI to explore universal themes (memory, loss).

The proposed coordinate framework moves the discussion beyond the sterile debate about the artificiality of AI art and shifts the focus to its potential to generate meaningful human experience.

The propositions concerning hybrid authorship and affective depth obtain empirical support in artistic practices where AI is engaged to work with memory and trauma. Historically, art has functioned as a privileged medium for comprehending, reworking, and transforming both individual and collective traumatic experiences. From this vantage, AI does not displace existing techniques but introduces an additional representational apparatus capable of visualizing shards of memory, reconstructing lost strata, and experimenting with symbolic constellations to express that which resists direct articulation.

This function of AI correlates with the concept of algorithmic postmemory [6]. Postmemory describes the experience of generations formed in the shadow of catastrophic events not lived through by themselves yet shaping their identity through narratives, visual images, and affective states. Algorithmic postmemory specifies and expands this framework by foregrounding the active role of AI in constructing and visualizing inherited mnemonic structures. Generative technologies make it possible to create hypothetical memories and affective artifacts that, while not documentary evidence, possess the quality of affective symbolic documentalism and can facilitate emotional recovery and the rearticulation of ruptured ties with the past [6].

An illustration of this approach is the authorial methodology of emotion-oriented generative art. Its foundational premise is that the parameters governing generative algorithms are defined not by randomness but by preconstructed conceptual frameworks grounded in philosophy, psychology, and art theory. The procedure entails coupling generative models with conceptual matrices organized around the themes of memory, loss, trauma, and transformation. Through iterative curation, selection, and refinement, AI is integrated into an intentional aesthetic system aimed at producing meaningful visual narratives (see Fig. 2).

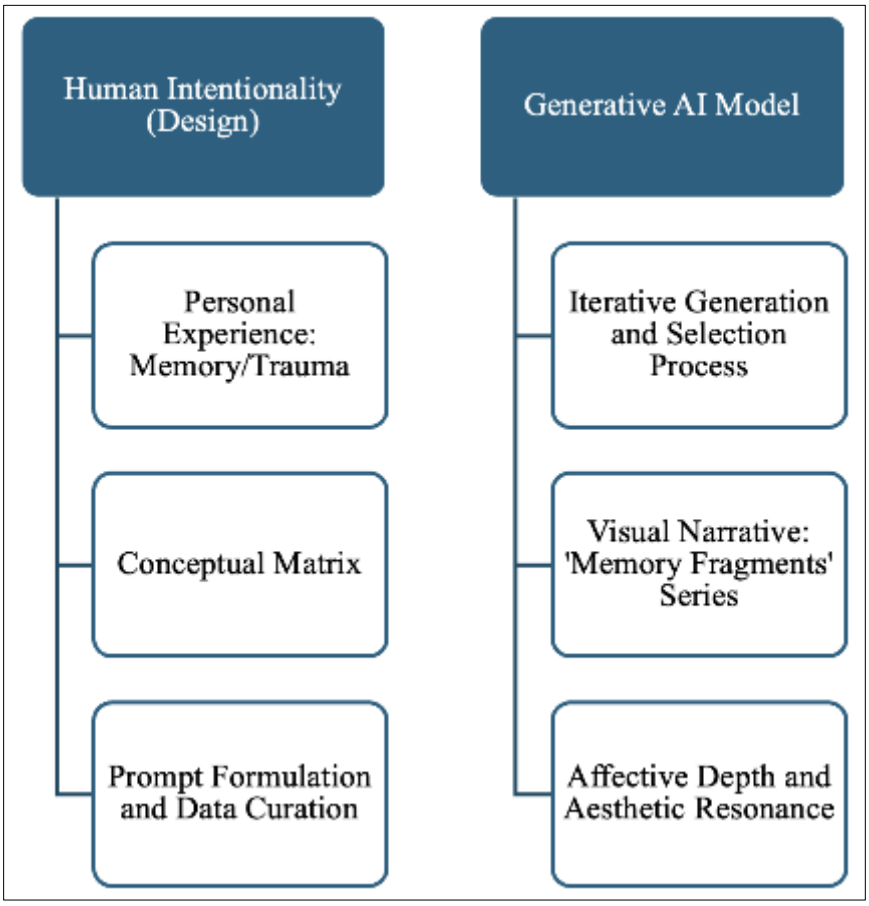

Figure 2 Conceptual diagram of the methodology of "emotionally oriented generative art" (compiled by the author based on [6, 8, 10]).

A concrete operational expression of the methodology described is the series Fragments of Memory, which demonstrates how algorithmic outputs can model the dynamics of psychological disorientation, disintegration, and subsequent reconfiguration associated with traumatic experience [20].

The heuristic productivity and cultural significance of the proposed aesthetic concept and the artistic practice built upon it can be verified through professional reception. From this perspective, external judgments—critical reviews, curatorial decisions regarding inclusion in exhibition programs, and media publications—cease to be merely biographical data and become empirical indicators of the robustness of the theoretical model. The recognition of works created within the paradigm of affective depth registers the attainment of aesthetic resonance with the expert community and the audience.

This is confirmed by assessments from leading art critics, among them Tabish Khan, known for a program of democratizing access to art [11], and Anthony Fawcett, an authoritative art historian of international standing [12]; this points to the requisite emotional and conceptual density. Exhibition on prestigious international platforms in key cultural centers—London [16], Seoul [17], and Tokyo [18]—attests to the methodology's acceptance by the global curatorial field as a legitimate and timely practice. Finally, coverage in influential outlets, including WOW WORLD Magazine [13], NY Weekly Magazine [14], and Artist Talk Magazine [15], registers expanded cultural circulation and consolidates the status of AI art as a serious domain of artistic and intellectual inquiry. Taken together, these data

constitute an objective evidentiary basis for the claim that the proposed approach enables the production of generative art possessing indisputable artistic value.

Accordingly, the entire process by which artist-directed AI becomes a mediator between the deeply personal experience of trauma and its transformation into a cultural artifact capable of eliciting empathy and collective reflection can be schematically represented in Figure 3.

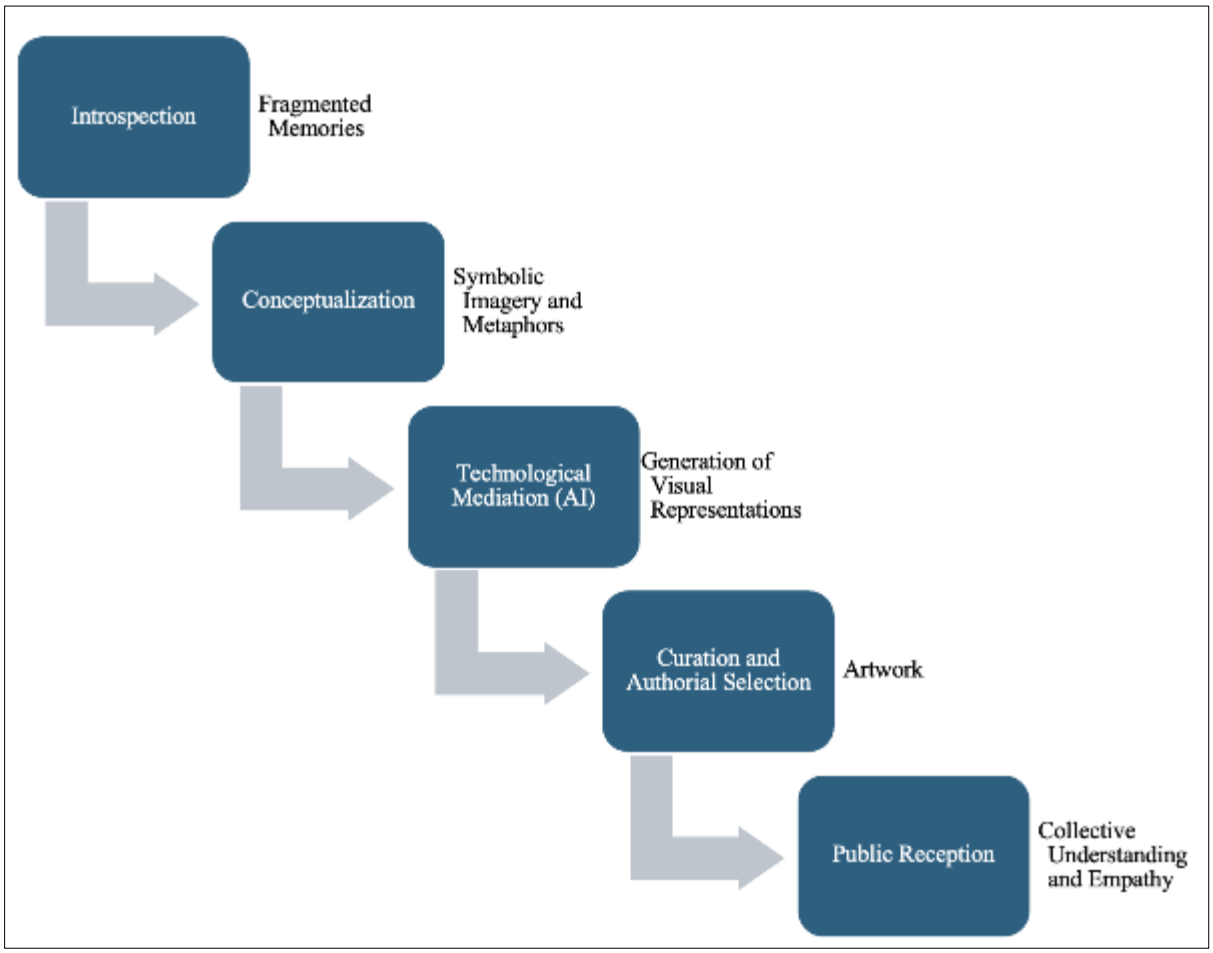

Figure 3 Scheme of transformation of traumatic experience into cultural expression through AI (compiled by the author based on [5, 8])

Thus, against the backdrop of the exponential growth of interest in generative AI, a proper analysis of art requires rejecting the anthropomorphization of machines and recognizing human authorship within the logic intention—execution: AI functions as a high-order instrument—an epistemic archive and an experimental platform that expands the amplitude of intention, yet remains subordinate to it. A shift of the evaluative paradigm is proposed from the authenticity of the material artifact to criteria of affective depth and aesthetic resonance, where value is determined by the work's capacity to initiate a sustained emotional–conceptual dialogue. This proposition is operationalized in the methodology of emotion-oriented generative art and in the concept of algorithmic postmemory, which enable the translation of personal traumatic experiences into meaningful visual narratives through artist-controlled cycles of prompting, generation, selection, and refinement. The empirical validity of the approach is corroborated by professional reception (critical reviews, curatorial inclusion, media coverage), which attests to the attainment of resonance with the expert community and a broad audience. Consequently, generative AI neither substitutes for the author nor steals creativity, but becomes a powerful mediator that transforms human intentionality and experience—including traumatic experience—into culturally significant works.

4. Conclusion

The analysis undertaken has demonstrated that the prevailing discourse, fixated on the technical parameters of AI and its market capitalization, systematically ignores key questions of artistic significance. It has been substantiated that the value of generative practices is determined not by the degree of algorithmic sophistication but by the level of conceptual-emotional articulation, whose source remains the human authorial intention that shapes the work's horizon of meaning.

The stated objective — the proposal and justification of a new aesthetic paradigm — has been achieved. The proposed framework, grounded in the categories of affective depth and aesthetic resonance, provides a more precise and nuanced analysis of works created with the involvement of AI. The presented model of hybrid authorship, in which AI is conceived as a higher-order instrument, is supported by philosophical arguments and provisions of legal doctrine. Its heuristic productivity is empirically demonstrated in a case study of an artistic practice engaging with memory and trauma; the professional recognition of this practice serves as an indicator of its cultural relevance.

The practical significance of the study is multilayered. For artists employing AI, it articulates a concrete methodological toolkit that enables the creation of works exceeding decorative generativity and oriented toward semantic richness. For curators, critics, and art historians, a conceptual apparatus and transparent criteria have been developed for the analysis, selection, and interpretation of significant works within the mass of digital content. For theorists and researchers in the humanities, the article contributes to redefining the status of art and creativity in the digital environment.

The vector of further research lies at the intersection of several disciplinary domains. In-depth study is required of the neurobiological and cognitive correlates of the perception of AI art to identify the mechanisms of aesthetic resonance. There is a need to develop updated legal regulations and ethical codes concerning issues of hybrid authorship and data handling in the creative industries. Finally, a promising direction is the quantitative assessment of the therapeutic and reparative potential of AI tools in addressing individual and collective trauma, which opens new horizons for art therapy and digital memorialization projects.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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