


## Prompting as a New Medium: Greenbergian Medium Specificity and the Iterative Unpredictability of AI Art

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**Abstract:** This article argues that AI prompting should be understood not as a tool, technique, or accessory to image generation, but as a medium in its own right. Drawing on Clement Greenberg's theory of medium specificity, it contends that a medium becomes legible through the operations peculiar to itself, namely, the constraints, affordances, and formal procedures that distinguish it from neighboring arts. Existing scholarship has asked whether prompting counts as art, whether prompt engineering constitutes a creative skill, and whether the prompt itself can be aesthetic; however, these accounts often stop short of a sustained theory of prompting as medium. This essay addresses that gap by identifying the medium-specific property of AI prompting as an iterative exchange structured by probabilistic unpredictability. Unlike painting, sculpture, or filmmaking, where resistance may be material, embodied, and progressively masterable, prompting confronts the artist with outputs generated through opaque statistical processes that cannot be fully anticipated or reasoned with. The prompter therefore works through recursive reformulation, selection, and response, shaping the work by negotiating deviation rather than executing intention in a linear fashion. This generative interface, rather than any single prompt or isolated output, constitutes the core artistic practice of the medium. The article further argues that objections concerning prompt shareability or the instability of AI authorship mistake the art object for the process.

**Keywords:** *AI prompting, medium specificity, AI art, Clement Greenberg, new media.*

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### Introduction

The rapid normalization of text-to-image systems has produced a conceptual dispute that is still far from settled: is prompting itself an artistic practice, a merely instrumental interface, a form of curatorial selection, or only a derivative technical skill attached to a machine that does the real generative work? Recent scholarship has dispersed across these positions without resolving the ontological question that underlies them. Some accounts treat prompting primarily as a learned competence, emphasizing the acquisition of stylistic vocabulary, refinement strategies, and procedural fluency needed to guide generative models toward desired outputs (Oppenlaender, Linder & Silveennoinen, 2025). Others stress the social and aesthetic practices of prompt communities, arguing that the prompt and the generated image can together function as the artwork, thereby recasting prompting as part of a multimodal art object rather than a transparent instruction set (Chang et al., 2023). Still others remain skeptical, contending that prompt-based generation lacks the material reciprocity, embodied resistance, and transmissible craft that have historically grounded artistic media, even while acknowledging that such systems may be opening the conditions for a new artistic form (McCormack et al., 2023). More recent art-theoretical writing has moved closer to the present essay's concern by describing prompting as an iterative exchange shaped by

attention, distraction, and refinement, yet even there the question of medium remains more suggestively invoked than fully theorized (Hughes, 2025). What remains insufficiently clarified, then, is not whether prompting can involve creativity, nor whether prompt engineers possess skill, but whether prompting satisfies a coherent account of mediumhood at all. That problem matters because the answer determines how AI art should be criticized: as output, as process, as collaboration, or as the unfolding of a medium with operations proper to itself.

This article argues that AI prompting qualifies as a new artistic medium because its defining operation is an iterative engagement with probabilistic unpredictability. The claim proceeds from a Greenbergian understanding of medium specificity, according to which an art form discovers and tests the operations peculiar to itself, rather than borrowing its legitimacy from effects that belong more properly to neighboring forms (Greenberg, 1982). Read in this way, the question is not whether prompting resembles painting, photography, sculpture, or direction strongly enough to inherit their status, but whether it organizes a distinct field of artistic action through constraints and affordances unique to its own practice. The account of medium by Krajewski (2015) helps sharpen this distinction by arguing that a genuinely new artistic medium must produce works that are not merely technological

supplements to older forms, but are instead artistic and *sui generis*. The distinction made between medium and form on the part of Luhmann and Roberts (1987) further clarifies the issue, since it suggests that prompting should not be reduced either to the isolated text command or to the finished image, but understood as a dynamic field in which forms emerge through successive selections, revisions, and stabilizations. From this perspective, the peculiar property of prompting is neither the prompt string in itself nor the occasional visual error of the generated image; it is the recursive encounter with outputs whose deviations cannot be fully predicted, explained, or mastered in advance. Prompting becomes medium-specific precisely where intention must continually reconstitute itself in response to an opaque, statistical, and variational system.

The scope of this essay is therefore philosophical and art-theoretical rather than legal, computational, or policy-oriented. It does not attempt to resolve copyright disputes, adjudicate labor claims surrounding training data, or explain the internal mechanics of diffusion and transformer architectures, even though each of those domains remains important to the broader discourse on AI-generated culture. Instead, the essay asks a narrower but more foundational question: what becomes visible when prompting is analyzed as a candidate medium within the history of aesthetic theory? The discussion begins by returning to the Greenbergian concept of medium specificity and by considering how his account may be extended, with appropriate care, beyond the historical confines of modernist painting. It then places that account in conversation with later theories of medium, especially Krajewski's formulation of the new medium as *sui generis* and Luhmann's medium/form distinction, in order to establish the conceptual criteria by which prompting can be evaluated. From there, the essay reviews the current literature on prompting as skill, authorship, and artistic practice before showing that these approaches, while valuable, do not yet furnish a rigorous theory of prompting as medium. The core argument then demonstrates that probabilistic unpredictability, black-box opacity, and iterative reformulation together constitute the operations peculiar to AI prompting. In doing so, the article contributes to media theory by specifying what is medium-specific about prompt-based creation, and to AI art criticism by shifting attention away from isolated outputs and toward the recursive generative interface in which the artistic act actually occurs.

### **Greenberg and the Problem of Medium Specificity**

Greenberg's account of medium specificity remains indispensable because it offers a precise way to ask what, exactly, makes an artistic practice distinct from adjacent forms. In "Modernist Painting," he argued that each art advances not by imitating the achievements of another, but by discovering the "operations peculiar to itself," that is, the conditions and procedures proper to its own practice (Greenberg, 2018). In the case of painting, the art critic famously identifies flatness as the condition that painting cannot disavow without becoming something else, because the painted surface is not incidental to the art but constitutive of its logic. Yet medium specificity, properly understood, is not merely a static inventory of material properties. It is an account of how an art becomes conscious of its own conditions and turns that consciousness into a principle of formal development. Greenberg, therefore, links medium specificity to self-criticism: modernism, in his formulation, uses the characteristic methods of a discipline to interrogate the discipline

itself, rather than relying on external standards for justification. Artistic development follows from that reflexive turn, since a medium discovers its future not through eclectic borrowing alone, but through testing the possibilities and limits internal to its own operation. What matters here is less the evaluative preference for purity than his stronger theoretical claim that a medium becomes legible through the constraints it cannot escape and the formal resources it alone can activate. That premise remains highly productive for any inquiry into whether prompting is simply a technical convenience or a medium with a logic of its own.

At the same time, Greenberg poses an obvious historical problem for contemporary readers, because he writes from within the discourse of modernism and often in defense of painting's autonomy. If his theory were inseparable from that specific historical moment, then its usefulness for AI-generated art would be sharply limited. The more compelling reading, however, treats Greenberg less as a legislator of modernist taste than as an early theorist of medium logic, one whose central insight can survive the decline of the modernist teleology with which it was initially associated. Krajewski is particularly useful here, since he identifies Greenberg as foundational for the art-critical use of "medium" while also arguing that a genuinely new medium must be artistic and truly *sui generis*, not merely a sculpture, installation, or performance supplemented by digital technology (Krajewski, 2015). That formulation makes it possible to extend Greenberg beyond the historical problem of modernist painting and into the contemporary problem of computational art. Luhmann's distinction between medium and form deepens the point further, because it shifts the discussion away from medium as a rigid essence and toward medium as a field of possible relations out of which forms are selected and stabilized (Luhmann & Roberts, 1987). Read together, these accounts suggest that medium specificity need not be bound to a single historical style, nor to a purist rejection of hybridity. Instead, it can function as a conceptual method for asking whether an emergent practice organizes a distinctive set of formal operations that cannot be reduced to preexisting media categories. On that reading, Greenberg remains useful not because he gives the final word on art after modernism, but because he helps clarify the criterion by which novelty becomes aesthetically meaningful rather than merely technologically fashionable.

This clarification also requires distinguishing medium from several related but nonidentical terms that are often collapsed in contemporary AI discourse. A tool is an implement used within a practice, but a medium names the broader field of constraints and affordances within which formal decisions become possible; a camera, brush, or prompt box may function as tools, yet none automatically defines the medium in which it operates. A support is the material or technical substrate that carries the work, such as canvas, paper, film stock, or a digital interface, but support alone does not exhaust medium because it does not explain how forms emerge or why certain operations become constitutive. A genre refers to historically sedimented conventions of subject matter, mood, or structure, while a technique refers to a localized procedure or skill, such as glazing, montage, masking, or keyword refinement. Medium is the more foundational category because it concerns the conditions under which such techniques and genres become intelligible as artistic acts in the first place. This distinction matters acutely for prompting, because many current discussions treat it either as a tool for using AI systems or as a technique for producing outputs, which obscures the stronger possibility that prompting organizes a distinct regime of artistic decision-making.

Greenberg's framework remains valuable precisely because it asks the right prior question: what operations does this practice discover as peculiar to itself, and how do those operations shape artistic form? Once stated in those terms, emergent practices such as AI prompting can be evaluated neither by dismissing them as derivative nor by celebrating them as novel on sight, but by examining whether they exhibit a medium-specific logic robust enough to sustain criticism, development, and aesthetic judgment. The sections that follow take up that task by moving from Greenberg's theory of medium specificity to contemporary accounts of new media and then to the specific operations through which prompting may be understood as a medium in its own right (Greenberg, 2018; Krajewski, 2015; Luhmann & Roberts, 1987).

### What Counts as a New Medium?

If Greenberg provides the conceptual grammar for medium specificity, Krajewski sharpens the question of when novelty becomes mediumhood rather than mere technological supplementation. Krajewski argues that a "new medium" cannot be identified simply because a work incorporates computers or digital systems, since the presence of technical novelty does not by itself yield a distinct artistic form; instead, a new medium must produce works that are artistic and genuinely *sui generis*, meaning that they cannot be adequately reduced to older categories such as sculpture, installation, or performance with an added technological layer (Krajewski, 2015). This requirement is especially important in contemporary AI discourse, where the temptation is often to treat prompting as either a convenience for image production or as a digital variant of already familiar artistic acts such as writing, directing, or editing. Krajewski's intervention blocks that reduction by insisting that medium claims must be justified formally rather than rhetorically. A practice qualifies as a medium only when it organizes artistic action through operations not fully intelligible within prior media frameworks. This does not mean that the new medium lacks historical antecedents, since no medium emerges *ex nihilo*, but rather that its constitutive logic cannot be exhausted by analogy. The relevance for prompting is immediate: if prompting is to count as a medium, the claim cannot rest on the fact that it uses AI systems, nor on the fact that its outputs may resemble paintings, photographs, or illustrations. It must instead be shown that prompting establishes a distinct mode of artistic production, one structured by a particular set of constraints, decisions, and formal possibilities. In that sense, Krajewski extends Greenberg's concern with medium specificity into the terrain of technological art without reducing mediumhood to technological innovation alone. His account provides the threshold condition for the present essay: prompting must be shown to be artistically *sui generis*, or it remains only an interface for repackaging older forms (Greenberg, 2018; Krajewski, 2015).

Luhmann's distinction between medium and form helps specify how that threshold should be evaluated, because it shifts the analysis away from the mistaken search for medium in any single object or substrate. For Luhmann, a medium is not identical with a finished form, but is instead a relatively loose field of elements out of which forms may be temporarily selected, arranged, and stabilized (Luhmann & Roberts, 1987). Form is thus what emerges when relations are fixed within that field, while medium names the broader condition of relational possibility itself. Applied to AI prompting, this distinction immediately clarifies several recurrent confusions. The prompt alone is not the medium, because it is only one moment within a broader generative process;

the output alone is not the medium either, because it is a stabilized result rather than the field from which results emerge. Nor is the model itself sufficient, since the computational substrate does not explain the artistic operations through which selections, revisions, and reformulations occur. What better fits Luhmann's account is the iterative structure that binds prompt, output, revision, rejection, and renewed prompting into an ongoing field of possible form-making. Within that field, each generated image is a provisional formal stabilization, while the medium lies in the recursive space of variation through which such stabilizations are pursued, evaluated, and replaced. This is why current scholarship that emphasizes either the prompt as artwork or the output as artwork remains only partially satisfying, even when it captures something important about the multimodal nature of AI art (Chang et al., 2023). Luhmann makes it possible to argue more precisely that prompting is not exhausted by any one textual command or visual artifact, because its structure is fundamentally processual and relational. The medium, on this view, is the generative field in which forms are produced through iterative engagement with a system whose responses remain only partially governable (Hughes, 2025; Luhmann & Roberts, 1987).

Taken together, theories of new media create a bridge between modernist art criticism and contemporary computational practices by preserving the central question of formal specificity while loosening it from the historical limits of modernist painting. Greenberg's account asks what operations are peculiar to a medium; Krajewski asks whether a technologically inflected practice is truly *sui generis*; and Luhmann clarifies that medium is a field of possible formation rather than an isolated object or support. These frameworks allow the present essay to test prompting without either romanticizing it as unprecedented or dismissing it as derivative on sight. The criteria that follow from this synthesis are fourfold. First, prompting must organize a distinct field of artistic decision-making rather than functioning merely as a transparent conduit for preformed intention. Second, it must exhibit operations peculiar to itself, meaning formal procedures that cannot be fully assimilated to neighboring arts such as painting, photography, film direction, or digital collage. Third, it must sustain an iterative logic in which form emerges through recursive negotiation rather than direct execution alone, since mediumhood here concerns the structure of artistic engagement rather than only the appearance of the final image. Fourth, this iterative logic must be sufficiently distinctive to make prompting artistically *sui generis*, not just technically novel. These criteria establish the basis on which the rest of the article proceeds. The next section turns to the current literature on prompting, creativity, and authorship in order to show that although scholars have already identified many of the ingredients of this argument, they have rarely combined them into a rigorous theory of prompting as medium.

### Literature Review: Prompting, Art, and Creative Agency

The existing literature on prompting has clarified several indispensable features of AI-assisted image making, yet it remains theoretically uneven in how it names the artistic status of the act itself. One line of argument begins from skepticism and asks whether prompt writing can genuinely count as art when compared with historically established practices of craft, embodiment, and transmissible technique. McCormack et al. (2023) frame the issue sharply by noting that natural language description often fails to secure precise control over the output, that black-box generation

places crucial stages of production beyond the artist's interpretive grasp, and that prompt-based making does not easily transmit tacit craft in the communal, accumulative way associated with more traditional media. Their critique is important because it identifies exactly those features that make prompting unstable as an artistic category: linguistic insufficiency, machine opacity, and the weak social durability of shared prompt practices. Casacuberta and Guersenzvaig (2025) intensify this objection from the standpoint of embodied creativity, arguing that prompting risks displacing the sensory, motor, and tacit dimensions through which creative expertise ordinarily develops, thereby rendering generative practice disembodied, instruction-dependent, and stochastically mediated rather than materially negotiated. Yet the critical force of these arguments does not finally foreclose artistic agency in prompting; instead, it relocates agency into a more complicated field of distributed action. Studies of artist-AI collaboration increasingly describe the process as coagency rather than unilateral execution, emphasizing that artists work not only by issuing instructions but by curating data, selecting from outputs, and adapting to machine behavior that is neither fully autonomous nor fully submissive (Nordström et al., 2023). Bomba and De Angeli (2025) similarly argue that AI art unsettles inherited notions of authorship by producing what they call entangled authorship, in which prompting, curation, and machine fallibility become part of a relational creative assemblage. Taken together, these works establish that prompt-based creation cannot be dismissed as mere button-pressing; however, they still tend to frame the problem through creativity, expertise, and authorship rather than through a sustained account of medium specificity.

A second body of scholarship approaches prompting less as deficient craft than as a generative practice whose very instability becomes aesthetically productive. Hughes (2025) offers one of the most suggestive formulations by describing prompting as an iterative, attention-based, and ekphrastic process in which the artist repeatedly recalibrates intention in response to outputs that deviate from expectation. In this account, distraction is not merely noise or failure; it is a productive interval through which the prompter learns to work with indeterminacy, treating the generated image not as a passive illustration of a command but as a provocation that reshapes subsequent prompting. Bajohr (2024) extends this line of thought by arguing that multimodal AI destabilizes the traditional boundary between text and image, such that prompting becomes an "operative ekphrasis" in which language does not simply describe an absent image but causally participates in its emergence. This is a crucial advance because it helps explain why prompting cannot be reduced to verbal preface or metadata; the prompt acts within the technical process rather than merely alongside it. Chang et al. (2023), working from interviews with experienced prompt practitioners, move further toward an explicitly aesthetic account by reporting that many users regard the prompt itself as part of the artwork, even as part of its aesthetic identity, so that prompt and output together form a multimodal object rather than a cleanly separable instruction and result. Here the literature comes very close to the present essay's claim, because it recognizes that prompting is processual, selective, and materially consequential in a way that exceeds conventional notions of tool use. Even so, these studies generally stop short of asking the stronger art-theoretical question: whether the iterative relation among prompt, output, and revision constitutes not simply a novel practice, but the formal logic of a medium.

A third and increasingly influential strand of research treats prompt engineering as a learned creative skill, thereby shifting the debate from ontological legitimacy to competence and expertise. Oppenlaender et al. (2025), through a sequence of empirical studies, argue that prompting is nonintuitive and must be acquired through practice, especially because successful prompting depends on descriptive precision, stylistic vocabulary, and iterative refinement rather than on spontaneous intuition alone. This is an important contribution because it rebuts the simplistic claim that anyone who can type can therefore make AI art well; prompt-based production requires learned discrimination, evaluative judgment, and the ability to modify textual input strategically across successive outputs. Related work on co-creative processes likewise suggests that human-AI artmaking unfolds through evolving relations of selection, adjustment, and negotiated control rather than through one-step generation, which reinforces the sense that prompting involves a structured artistic competence rather than arbitrary command issuance (Nordström et al., 2023). Yet even the skill-based literature leaves unresolved the central theoretical gap that structures this article. To show that prompting is difficult, learned, collaborative, or aesthetically rich is not yet to show that it is a medium. The scholarship reviewed here has illuminated the limitations of linguistic description, the opacity of black-box generation, the iterative and ekphrastic nature of prompt practice, the multimodal relation between prompt and output, and the distributed character of agency in AI art. What it has not yet done, at least not rigorously, is synthesize these insights through Greenberg's problem of medium specificity and ask whether probabilistic unpredictability and recursive reformulation are the operations peculiar to prompting itself. The next section advances that claim directly by moving from literature review to formal analysis, arguing that the defining property of prompting is not simply creativity, coauthorship, or skill, but a medium-specific mode of artistic action grounded in iterative negotiation with an opaque generative system.

### **The Peculiar Operations of AI Prompting**

If AI prompting is to qualify as a medium rather than a mere access point to computational image production, then its specificity must be located in an operation that is not simply borrowed from older arts. I argue that this operation begins with unpredictability. Not every medium is predictable in practice, of course; painters misjudge color relationships, photographers confront contingent light, and sculptors discover resistance in matter. Yet prompting introduces a different kind of resistance, because the artist is not primarily negotiating a stable material substrate but a probabilistic system whose responses remain only partially anticipatable in advance. McCormack et al. (2023) approach this indirectly when they identify the limitations of linguistic description as a constitutive difficulty of prompt-based art, since the artist cannot simply state a desired result and expect transparent execution. Hughes (2025) makes the point more directly by describing the AI system as an unpredictable non-human interlocutor whose responses force the prompt to become an evolving medium rather than a fixed command. Bomba and De Angeli (2025) reinforce this line of thought by characterizing AI art through "fallible machines" and "entangled authorship," thereby locating creativity not in flawless execution but in a relation whose outcomes remain difficult to predict and therefore artistically negotiable. The crucial point, then, is that unpredictability is not an incidental flaw in prompt-based practice. It is the condition that makes prompting formally distinct, because

it reorganizes artistic intention around response, deviation, and recalibration rather than around direct realization alone.

That unpredictability is intensified by black-box opacity, which limits the artist's causal transparency in ways not fully analogous to traditional media. Carabantes (2020) describes powerful machine-learning systems as opaque black-box architectures, emphasizing that the problem is not merely technical complexity but the restricted ability to understand how outputs are produced from inputs. Tredinnick and Laybats (2023) likewise frame generative AI as a black-box process in which one sees the prompt and the output, while the internal mechanisms that mediate between them remain unavailable to ordinary inspection. This matters aesthetically because opacity transforms revision into a hermeneutics of inference: the prompter can observe tendencies, identify recurring distortions, and cultivate procedural intuitions, but cannot fully trace the causal path by which a given phrase, stylistic modifier, or compositional cue produced a particular image. In painting, by contrast, the medium's resistance is progressively legible through embodied repetition; in prompting, the artist faces a system whose operations must be inferred from externally visible effects. The result is not the absence of agency but its reconfiguration. Prompting becomes a practice of steering without full transparency, of acting within a system that yields signals, surprises, and partial regularities rather than openly intelligible causal sequences. For that reason, opacity does not merely accompany the medium from the outside, as though it were a regrettable technical defect. It deepens the medium's specificity by ensuring that the artist's formal labor is inseparable from uncertainty about how the system is arriving at what it produces.

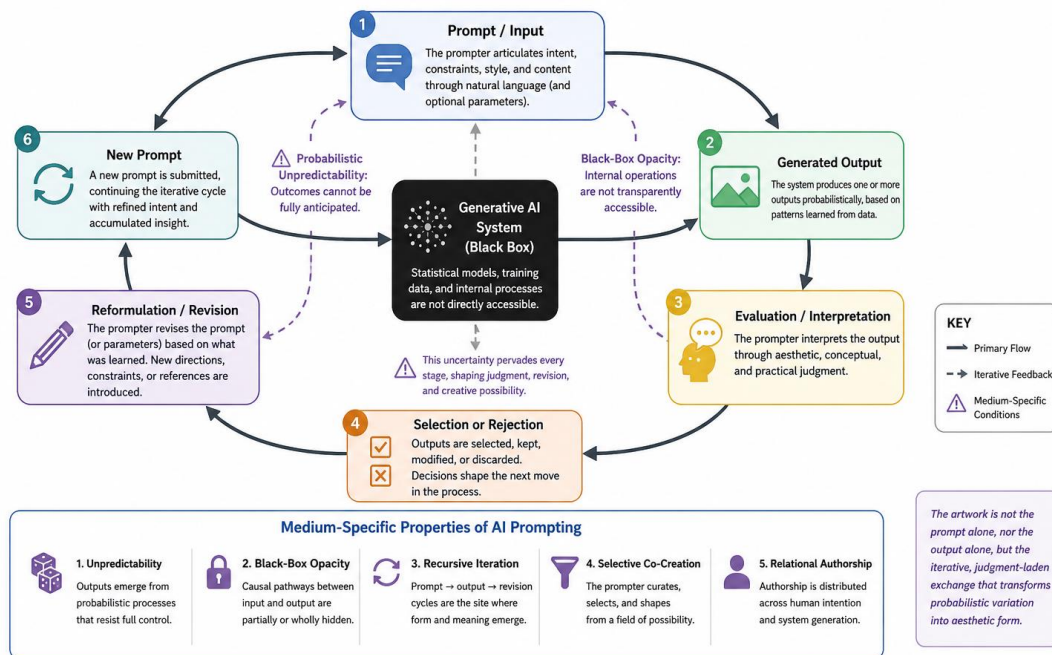
Once unpredictability and opacity are understood as constitutive rather than accidental, it becomes clear that the labor of prompting is recursive rather than linear. The work does not consist in composing a single decisive instruction and then receiving a finished object; it unfolds instead through a repeating sequence of prompting, viewing, selecting, rejecting, revising, and reformulating. Oppenlaender et al. (2025) support this point by treating prompt engineering as a learned creative skill in which users must not only evaluate prompt quality but also refine prompts through repeated adjustment. Hughes (2025) sharpens the art-theoretical significance of this process by describing feedback loops that refine the iterative exchange, enabling the artist to negotiate between vision and realization while acting as creator,

curator, editor, and selector. Chang et al. (2023) likewise show that prompt artists often regard the text prompt and resulting image collectively as the artwork, while also developing specialized vocabularies and even turning model "glitches" into stylistic resources. What emerges from these accounts is a conception of prompting in which the one-off prompt string is not the artwork's privileged core, nor even the privileged site of artistic labor. The actual site of practice lies in the unfolding exchange through which prompts are tested against outputs and reconstituted through response. In that sense, prompting resembles neither pure authorship nor mere command issuance. It is closer to a recursive formal negotiation in which every output retrospectively rewrites the meaning of the prompt that produced it and prospectively shapes the next prompt in turn.

This is why selection, curation, and response must be treated as constitutive operations of the medium rather than as secondary editorial acts that occur after the "real" creation has already happened (Figure 1). Hughes (2025) explicitly aligns AI prompting with Duchamp's theory of selection, arguing that the artist's labor resides in guiding, sifting, and reworking iterations until a desired conceptual or aesthetic effect emerges. Chang et al. (2023) arrive at a related conclusion empirically, showing that prompt artists value not only distinctive outputs but also the linguistic and curatorial labor required to arrive at them. Bomba and De Angeli (2025) extend this insight by rejecting the simple opposition between AI as autonomous creator and AI as neutral tool, instead proposing a relational framework of shared authorship. The implication for medium theory is decisive. If prompting were merely a conduit, then selection would be extrinsic to the artwork, a matter of after-the-fact preference; but if prompting is a medium, then selection is internal to form-making itself, because form emerges only through the recursive act of choosing among, responding to, and redirecting generated possibilities. The medium-specific work of prompting therefore does not end when text is entered into the interface. It consists in the continuing aesthetic intelligence by which the artist frames contingency, filters abundance, and turns probabilistic variation into determinate form. Understood in these terms, prompting is not simply writing for a machine. It is an art of iterative response whose peculiar operations are unpredictability, opaque causality, recursive refinement, and constitutive selection.

**Figure 1. AI Prompting as a Medium-Specific Process**

*A recursive, iterative exchange between prompter and generative system*



### Why Prompting Is Not Equivalent to Older Media

The temptation to assimilate AI prompting to older media is understandable, because prompting appears to borrow something from many of them at once: it resembles writing in its linguistic basis, painting in its image-oriented outcome, sculpture in its relation to resistance, and photography in its reliance on a device. Yet these analogies become misleading as soon as one asks whether the resistance encountered in prompting is materially of the same kind. In painting and sculpture, the artist confronts a comparatively stable medium whose feedback, however complex, remains anchored in continuous bodily engagement with pigments, surfaces, tools, weight, pressure, and texture. Malafouris’s account of pottery is especially clarifying here because it shows how material agency emerges through reciprocal tactile exchange, in which hand, clay, and wheel form a dynamic but bodily legible system of action (Malafouris, 2008). Even when the clay resists, collapses, or surprises, that resistance belongs to a medium that becomes progressively learnable through embodied practice, because the artist can feel its response and recalibrate accordingly. Casacuberta and Guersenzvaig (2025) make a related point from the perspective of generative AI by arguing that prompt-centered creation lacks the robust hand-material feedback loop characteristic of embodied creative work. Prompting therefore differs from painting and sculpture not because it lacks difficulty or experimentation, but because its resistance is statistical rather than tactile, inferential rather than sensuous, and partially opaque rather than directly felt. The prompter does not gradually master a stable material field in the same way that a painter masters paint behavior or a sculptor learns the affordances and limits of stone, wood, or clay. What presents itself in prompting is instead an output space governed by learned distributions, model priors, and black-box transformations that can be steered but never encountered as a legible substance. For that reason, AI prompting may resemble older material arts by analogy, yet it does not inherit their mode of

resistance, and it cannot be reduced to them without losing what is formally most distinctive about it.

The pottery comparison makes the distinction sharper because clay exemplifies a medium in which resistance is reciprocal, continuous, and bodily intelligible, whereas prompting operates through contingency that remains only partly interpretable. Malafouris (2008) emphasizes that potters know through skilled immersion in action, not merely through verbal instruction, and that the clay “resists or accommodates” in ways the hands learn to negotiate over time. By contrast, prompting does not disclose its operative logic through tactile reciprocity, because the artist’s revisions are mediated by a system whose internal transformations remain inaccessible to ordinary inspection. Tredinnick and Laybats (2023) characterize generative AI precisely in these terms, as a black-box creative process in which the relation between input and output cannot be transparently reconstructed by the user. Nathan (2023) pushes the point further by arguing that disembodied AI is inherently limited in interpreting embodied interaction, which is significant here because it clarifies why prompting cannot become equivalent to bodily collaboration with material in the traditional sense. This distinction also explains why prompting is not analogous to filmmaking in any straightforward way, even though both involve iterative adjustment. A film director works with actors who possess intention, interpretive judgment, and the capacity to respond to guidance about motivation, rhythm, gesture, and nuance; prompting, by contrast, addresses a system that produces variation statistically, not a collaborator who understands direction as direction. The difference is not that one medium is dialogic and the other is not, but that the dialogism of prompting is asymmetrical: the system returns outputs that the artist must interpret, yet those returns do not arise from understanding, deliberation, or shared intention. Prompting therefore cannot be collapsed into directing performances any more than it can be collapsed into handling clay, because in both older

cases the artist confronts an intelligible partner, whether material or human, whose mode of response can be learned within a more transparent feedback ecology. What prompting adds is a generative interlocution without comprehension, and that is precisely why its iterative structure should be treated as medium-specific rather than as a variation on already familiar artistic exchange.

Photography provides perhaps the most common comparison, yet here too the resemblance is partial and finally insufficient (Table 1). Hertzmann (2018) notes that new imaging technologies have often been received first as threats and later as artistically productive tools, and this historical pattern helps explain why many observers are tempted to assimilate AI image generation to the camera. That analogy captures something real, since both photography and AI alter the labor of image production by delegating important operations to a device. Even so, the comparison breaks down at the level of medium logic. A camera records light from an extant scene, however selectively framed or manipulated, whereas prompt-based generation produces images by transforming textual input through learned statistical models rather than by capturing an independently existing visual field

(Hertzmann, 2018; Mazzone & Elgammal, 2019). Chang et al. (2023) show that prompt practitioners themselves sometimes invoke the camera analogy, yet their study also demonstrates that artists experience the prompt as part of the aesthetic object and the process as one of iterative experimentation, refinement, and selection rather than simple capture. Mazzone and Elgammal (2019) likewise emphasize that AI art involves pre-curation, training choices, and evaluative intervention, all of which move the practice away from neutral recording and toward a more active generative interface. For that reason, prompting should not be understood as writing, directing, sculpting, or photographing under another name, even though it bears family resemblances to each. Its distinctiveness lies in the fact that language here does not merely describe, record, or instruct within a stable medium, but enters a probabilistic system that actively transforms that language into visual form through opaque and variable processes. Prompting is therefore best understood as a medium whose operations intersect with older arts without being reducible to any of them, because what defines it is not a borrowed tool or analogy, but a specific regime of iterative response to generative contingency.

**Table 1. Comparative Medium-Specific Properties Across Artistic Practices**

Medium	Type of Resistance	Material Legibility	Role of Embodiment	Transparency of Causal Control	Nature of Collaboration	Mode of Revision
Painting	Physical (paint viscosity, surface tension)	High, progressively learnable	Strong, hand-eye coordination	High, cause-effect largely visible	Primarily individual	Layering, correction, overpainting
Sculpture	Physical (weight, structure, material limits)	High, tactile and spatially legible	Strong, full-body engagement	High, material response observable	Primarily individual	Carving, reshaping, additive/subtractive changes
Pottery	Dynamic material resistance (clay, motion)	High, embodied and iterative	Strong, continuous tactile feedback	High, though dynamic	Human-material reciprocity	Continuous adjustment during formation
Filmmaking	Human performance variability	Moderate to high (interpretable actors)	Distributed across director and actors	Moderate, mediated by human intention	Collaborative (director, actors, crew)	Retakes, editing, direction refinement
Photography	Optical and environmental constraints	High (light, framing, exposure)	Moderate, embodied framing decisions	High, capture-based	Primarily individual	Reframing, retouching, post-processing
AI Prompting	Probabilistic, non-material resistance	Low to moderate, partially opaque	Minimal direct embodiment	Low, black-box mediation	Human-system co-creation (non-intentional system)	Iterative prompting, selection, reformulation

**Objections and Rebuttals**

One common objection is that prompts are too easily shareable to ground a meaningful artistic practice. McCormack et al. (2023) raise this concern in strong form when they argue that prompt writing lacks the kind of tacit, community-transmitted craft that has historically anchored artistic media, since prompts can be

copied, circulated, and reused with relative ease. Yet this objection only succeeds if the prompt string is taken to be the whole of the medium. That is precisely the reduction this article rejects. If the medium lies instead in the recursive process of prompting, viewing, rejecting, refining, and selecting, then the fact that one textual input may be shareable does not eliminate the medium any more than the shareability of musical notation eliminates

performance or the reproducibility of a script eliminates direction. Hughes (2025) is especially useful here because he locates prompting in iterative exchange rather than in isolated textual command, which means that the artistic labor resides in the unfolding negotiation with the system rather than in the one-off artifact of the prompt alone.

A second objection holds that AI art is distinctive only because of its errors, such as malformed hands, unstable anatomy, or visual incoherence. McCormack et al. (2023) partially open this line of thought when they suggest that such errors might reveal the limitations of the system and thereby furnish aesthetic potential. That intuition is useful, but insufficient. Errors alone do not establish a medium, because many older arts also generate meaningful work through imperfection, correction, and resistance. What matters here is not the mere presence of deviations, but the specific relation those deviations create between prompter and system: a recursive process in which unexpected outputs force reformulation, curation, and renewed response. In that sense, unpredictability is more foundational than error, because unpredictability structures the artist's practice whether the resulting deviation is grotesque, subtle, productive, or easily corrected. The medium-specific issue is therefore not that AI sometimes "fails," but that its failures and variations emerge from a probabilistic and only partly legible system that must be negotiated iteratively rather than simply commanded.

A final concern is that AI authorship displaces human agency to such an extent that the prompter no longer meaningfully counts as an artist. This objection also overstates the case. Recent scholarship increasingly argues not for the erasure of agency, but for distributed or entangled authorship, in which human intention is neither sovereign nor dissolved, but reconfigured through interaction with a generative system (Bomba & De Angeli, 2025). That position is more persuasive than either of the extremes that dominate public discourse, namely, the claim that the machine is the true artist or the claim that the human remains unchanged as sole author. Prompting involves a redistribution of artistic labor across prompting, selection, curation, and response, yet those operations still require evaluative judgment, aesthetic discrimination, and purposive redirection on the part of the human practitioner. The proper conclusion, then, is not that AI abolishes agency, but that it reframes agency as iterative and relational. Once that is granted, the objections considered here no longer undermine the medium claim. They instead help specify it, because they reveal that prompting's artistic status cannot be located in a single prompt, a single error, or a fantasy of solitary authorship, but in the recursive formal relation between human judgment and probabilistic generation (Hughes, 2025).

### **Prompting as a Sui Generis Medium**

When Greenberg's account of medium specificity is read alongside Krajewski's account of the new medium, prompting can be named more precisely: it is not simply a novel interface for producing images, but a candidate medium whose legitimacy depends on whether it organizes operations proper to itself. Greenberg's enduring insight is that an art form becomes intelligible through the operations peculiar to it, rather than through borrowed prestige from neighboring forms; Krajewski sharpens that claim for contemporary media by insisting that a new medium must be genuinely *sui generis* rather than an older art form with a technological supplement (Greenberg, 2018; Krajewski, 2015). On that basis, prompting qualifies as a medium not because it uses

computation, but because its formal logic depends on a distinctive conjunction of black-box contingency, iterative response, and selective co-creation. The artist does not simply describe an image and receive it. The artist enters a recursive relation in which outputs arrive as partially unpredictable visual propositions, each of which demands judgment, rejection, revision, or refinement before form can stabilize. What is medium-specific here is neither the text prompt alone nor the output alone, but the generative process through which form emerges under conditions of probabilistic opacity. That is why prompting is best understood as *sui generis*: it intersects with writing, direction, curation, and image-making, yet cannot be reduced to any of them without obscuring the distinct operations that define its practice.

This reframing also resolves a false binary that has distorted much of the discourse around AI art, namely, the claim that either the AI is the true artist or the human remains sole and unchanged author. Neither position adequately captures what the medium makes visible. Recent work on AI and authorship increasingly argues for distributed or entangled authorship, in which artistic agency is reconfigured rather than erased, because human judgment still governs prompting, selection, curation, and iterative redirection even when the system contributes unpredictable formal variation (Bomba & De Angeli, 2025; Goodfellow, 2024). The point is not to mystify the machine into artistic personhood, nor to preserve an older humanist model of total authorial sovereignty at all costs. It is to recognize that prompting relocates authorship into a recursive field of relations in which aesthetic agency depends on how the artist navigates contingency. Once that is admitted, criticism of AI art should shift away from judging isolated outputs as though they were self-explanatory objects and toward analyzing the generative process, the sequence of refinements, and the medium-specific operations by which a work comes to take form. Such a shift would allow criticism to ask better questions: not merely whether a resulting image is visually successful, but how prompting structured the work's emergence, what kinds of decisions were made across iterations, and how contingency was transformed into form.

For art history, the consequence is significant. Treating prompting as a *sui generis* medium expands the vocabulary available for describing post-digital artistic practice, because it gives criticism a way to talk about processual image-making that is neither simply conceptual language art, nor merely software use, nor straightforward machine automation. It also prevents AI art from being discussed only in the exhausted terms of authenticity panic, technical novelty, or output quality. If prompting is a medium, then it can be historicized, criticized, taught, and differentiated according to the operations specific to it, just as other media have been. The value of this claim is therefore not classificatory alone. It is methodological, because it reorients analysis toward medium logic and away from superficial analogies that mistake resemblance for identity. In that sense, prompting becomes one of the sites through which art theory can continue the work Greenberg began, not by preserving modernist purity, but by extending the problem of medium specificity into the post-digital present.

### **Conclusion**

This article has argued that AI prompting qualifies as a new medium when viewed through a Greenbergian account of medium specificity, because its artistic identity does not rest on novelty alone, nor on the visual appearance of its outputs, but on the

operations peculiar to its practice. Read in conjunction with Krajewski's account of the genuinely new medium, prompting emerges as more than an accessory to image production or a derivative technical procedure. Its defining logic lies in a recursive engagement with probabilistic unpredictability, intensified by black-box opacity and realized through repeated cycles of prompting, output evaluation, selection, rejection, and reformulation. In that sense, the paper's central theoretical intervention has been to relocate the question of AI art away from whether prompting is merely "creative" and toward the stronger claim that prompting organizes a distinct field of formal action. What makes it medium-specific is not the isolated prompt string, nor the occasional error in the generated image, but the iterative relation through which aesthetic judgment takes shape in response to a system that cannot be fully anticipated or transparently mastered.

The broader significance of this claim extends beyond the classification of prompt-based practice. For media theory, it offers a way to understand generative AI without collapsing it into older models of tool use, capture, or execution; for aesthetics, it clarifies how contingency, response, and selection can become constitutive of artistic form; and for criticism, it suggests that AI art should be evaluated less by isolated outputs than by the generative processes and medium-specific operations through which those outputs come into being. This shift also expands art history's vocabulary for discussing post-digital practice, because it permits critics to analyze prompting as a historically situated medium with its own affordances, constraints, and developing conventions. Future work can build on this foundation in at least three directions: first, by developing medium-specific criticism of prompt-based works that attends to iteration, selection, and reformulation as internal to form; second, by articulating pedagogies of prompting that treat it as an aesthetic discipline rather than a merely instrumental skill; and third, by extending comparative analysis across image, text, sound, and video generation in order to determine whether prompting operates identically across modalities or whether each domain discloses a different configuration of medium-specific practice

#### Data Availability

Data available upon request.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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