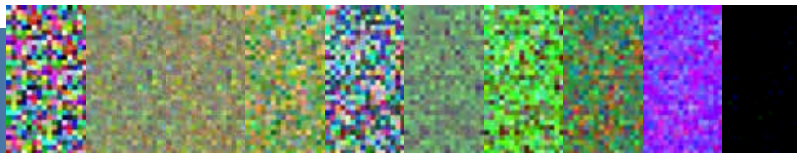While the term *vibe* has entered the vernacular of popular culture and is no longer considered edgy, vibes are still in vogue in terms of generative artificial intelligence (Bovell, 2023; James, 2022a). In contributions and discussions on generative AI, vibes are often mentioned, for example, "to refer to the form of perception used by the algorithms behind AI" (James, 2022b, n.p.), or simply as a guide for adjusting the outcome of generative AI models (Parsons, 2022).

Especially in recent years, our digital world has revived the notion of vibe, as it has become more common in communication, especially on contemporary, predominantly audiovisual social media platforms, to express feelings and situations, and has even become a trending content topic itself (Chayka, 2021).

At the same time, algorithms have become deeply embedded in our (social) media landscape through recommender systems, and AI-generated content is increasingly populating our feeds (Austin, 2022; Lu, n.d.). This has accelerated especially since multimodal AI became publicly available last summer (Wilde, 2023).

As both the usage and meaning of the term has shifted in our algorithm-driven social media landscape, there seems to be a connection between this ambiguous term, (popular) internet culture, and machine learning. Does artificial intelligence have a deeper connection to the concept of vibe? Or is it merely being used to describe another trend? Will AI-generated content soon feel outdated as the next vibe shift emerges?

While the term *vibe* has entered the vernacular of popular culture and is no longer considered edgy, vibes are still in vogue in terms of generative artificial intelligence (Bovell, 2023; James, 2022a). In contributions and discussions on generative AI, vibes are often mentioned, for example, "to refer to the form of perception used by the algorithms behind AI" (James, 2022b, n.p.), or simply as a guide for adjusting the outcome of generative AI models (Parsons, 2022).

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By Matthias Grund

Vibe Check

Author and scholar Robin James defines a *vibe* as "a phenomenological horizon" (James, 2021a, n.p.), where a horizon is "the meeting point between subject and material/social situation" (James, 2021a, n.p.) and in this context draws parallels to the idea of *perspective* in art. In fact, according to her, vibes help us to understand our position and how we see things in relation to ourselves. A vibe can therefore be described as a feeling we get from a situation or environment, and it helps to shape both how we see the world and how the world appears to us. James goes on to emphasize how the vibe we perceive is influenced by our personal experience, culture, and social interactions, thereby helping us to decide whether something feels right or wrong, or belongs in a situation or not (James, 2021a, n.p.). Furthermore, being sensed through a spectrum of intensities, within our imaginative landscapes, and in relation to our concrete, material reality, firstly, loose vibes usually arise through world phenomena and spatial arrangements and are perceived more densely through our consciousness (Yago & Salter, 2021).

Thus, a vibe is essentially formed through social and worldly interactions based on the expression and reception of individual people or groups. However, it can also be created intentionally. According to the literature, experiencing a vibe is most often a shared and biased experience, thus potentially leading to the exclusion of certain people or their points of view (James, 2021a; Yago & Salter, 2021). In this regard, James (2021a) mentions the importance of the term *orientation*, while referring to the work of phenomenologists Alcoff and Sara Ahmed. In essence, they believe that orientation describes how our background, experiences, and environment shape our worldview, opportunities, and abilities, and therefore our fit within society.

"Orientation, especially in Ahmed's theorization, describes both the way I have become attuned and accustomed to a particular type of situation and the way specific situations are designed for or assume particular kinds of people" (James, 2021a, n.p.).

1

Therefore, for something to be perceived, for example, in a positive vibe, there must be a mutual fit between the two orientations. In the context of *designed situations* or objects, this alignment involves a *purposefulness*[1] that makes us "[feel] like it was designed for us to perceive and appreciate" (James, 2021a, n.p.). A negative example of this would be a building with only single-sex bathrooms, giving the impression that only traditional gender identities exist and suggesting that they are the only people who are intended to be there (James, 2021a).

"Horizon--or vibe--serves the function that proportionality or normality serves in normalizing regimes--it is the standard against which phenomena are evaluated for purposiveness and in/exclusion" (James, 2021a, n.p.).

Furthermore, vibes appear to also be very relevant in more *rational* fields, such as finance and technology, as James (2021a) states pointing to scholar and author Louise Amoore. According to Amoore, vibes are commonly used to make predictions and investments, focusing on potential rather than just facts. In the field of risk assessment, horizons (or vibes) are often used to measure and make evaluations, to be able to act on uncertainty. Since contemporary financial capitalism focuses more on speculation than on facts, *vibe-based methods* are used over more balanced practices, such as ratios and proportions (James, 2021a).

By incorporating reasoning and speculation into mathematical calculations, it expands the capabilities of the field of mathematics by recognizing alternatives and unlikely scenarios. Including intuition makes mathematics therefore more effective, as it moves beyond the boundaries of metrics. These computational approaches, often used in machine learning, tend to evaluate trends or tendencies rather than actual phenomena (James, 2021).

Computational Vibe

Especially in the context of generative machine learning models, the way in which machine learning algorithms learn and behave, has been directly linked and compared to how vibes capture patterns to make sense of the world. According to the literature and mathematics researcher Peli Grietzer (2017), the datasets of such applications contain a collective aesthetic that is analyzed and reproduced by neural networks. He argues however, that the reconstructions of the training data, generated by a deep generative model are not perfect, but rather approximate reconstructions; information therefore tends to get lost in the translation of media assets into latent space and back into media files.

The difference between the actual data in the training set and its generated reconstructed version, is shown in the limitations of the models' ability to generate perfect simulations, which goes by the name *reconstruction error*. The input data, that can be reconstructed without error is what he describes as *canon*, as "the set of all the objects that a given trained autoencoder ... can imagine or conceive of whole, without approximation or simplification" (Grietzer, 2017, n.p.). This canon can be thought of as a collection of simplified key features or structures that correspond to the *aesthetic unity* of the training data, also understood as vibes or style (Grietzer, 2017).

According to Grietzer, the aesthetic unity is not just a general summary of the input data, but contains its DNA, the essence of the canon, which has the characteristics of being "individually complex but collectively simple" (Grietzer, 2017, n.p.).

The generated data may therefore appear to be complex, when viewed individually, but when seen together, it aligns with the common aesthetic of the canon and shares the same vibe. "A vibe is therefore, in this sense, an abstractum that cannot be separated from its concreta" (Grietzer, 2017, n.p.), with an "abstractum ... [being] the collective affinity of the objects in a class" (Grietzer, 2017, n.p.).

In simpler terms, one could say, that the abstract feeling of a vibe is constructed by the arrangement of various objects and phenomena and cannot be separated from its concrete context.

Therefore, by sensing a vibe, we can better understand the objects and phenomena in that specific context and thus make sense of our world. Grietzer (2017) argues, that machine learning models do the same with data.

"Learning to sense a system, and learning to sense in relation to a system—learning to see a style, and learning to see in relation to a style—are, autoencoders or no autoencoders, more or less one and the same thing" (Grietzer, 2017, n.p.).

A Vibe is not a Style

James (2021b) agrees with Grietzer's understanding, that machine learning algorithms perceive the world through vibes and can generally be connected to the popular discourse of this term. However, she also states that *vibes* and *style* cannot be used interchangeably, since both are not the same.

"Styles or genres classify works based on common aesthetic features or properties, ... [and focus] on the contents of that set–the collection of aesthetic features or properties that, put together, [for example] make a song a

rock song or a reggaeton song. But that's not what algorithms are perceiving–they're not comparing the content of these data points (the common aesthetic features) but their *alignment*. ... The thing these algorithms perceive isn't the qualitative content of the data set, but their form or orientation. So, algorithms aren't perceiving styles or genres. They're perceiving vibes, where the alignment among data points matters more than the contents of that data" (James, 2021b, n.p.).

The differentiation between these terms, to stay in the realm of music, can be observed in streaming services that curate playlists for both genres and specific vibes. For the popular vibe that is commonly known as *chill*, these platforms offer a wide variety of curated and *chill-related* playlists that include songs of a specific style (e.g. *Chill Hits* is comprised of pop music only), as well as options that include all sorts of genres, thus focusing on an overarching vibe rather than a style (e.g. *80s Chill* contains music from different artists and various genres) (James, 2021b).

Beyond Boundaries

James (2021b) argues that the term *vibe* has become rather relevant in popular culture, as it translates the way algorithms perceive the world on to us and allows us to perceive ourselves in a similar manner. Furthermore, the concept of vibe transcends traditional boundaries, which are usually categorized in genres or styles, and serves as a medium to navigate these societal tensions. "The purported boundaryless-ness of vibe, its ability to draw together what more traditional boundaries like genre kept apart (as in those chill playlists), is presented as more progressive and forward-thinking than the adherence to rigid, traditional boundaries" (James, 2021b).

Similar tendencies can be observed in the creative field, where "the boundaries between traditional disciplines have become so indefinite that those who might seek such frameworks ... will soon discover their near absence" (Schouwenberg, 2017, p. 34). Especially in today's media landscape, where cultural productions of all kinds are unified around the notion of content and presented on non-linear, social platforms, the way creative ideas are communicated has changed and become more flexible. While using arguments, explanations & definitions were the dominant way to communicate in the past, "creative practitioners today operate predominantly through gestures, moods, and ambiances (Bettridge & Mascatello, 2018, Summer, p. 57)" (Bettridge & Mascatello, 2018, Summer).

Author and journalist Kyle Chayka (2021) reinforces this intangible quality of a vibe, by describing it as "a placeholder for an abstract quality that you can't pin down—an ambience[,] ... the reason that you like or dislike something or someone ... [, or simply as] an intuition with no obvious explanation" (Chayka, 2021, n.p.).

Vibes, therefore, allow us to feel emotions before we can put them into words, which is ideal for our social media environment that focuses on audiovisual rather than textual media, and cultural producers who seek new ways to communicate through media (Chayka, 2021; Self, 2018). "Through our screens, vibes are being constantly emitted and received" (Chayka, 2021, n.p.).

Vibe Shifts

Historically, the understanding of vibe as emotion originated during the 1960s as a slang-term used in California. While it was mostly connected to the hippie movement, it quickly found its way into popular and mainstream culture (Chayka, 2021). By the mid-90s, the term vibe gained popularity and even sparked philosophical interest, as the "German philosopher Gernot Böhme identified 'atmosphere' as the basis for a new aesthetics of perception, a kind of over-all feeling that has much in common with vibe" (Chayka, 2021, n.p.). Before that, other surrounding terms, such as *mood* or *aura* were identified to describe the aesthetic perception of our world and art, "but Böhme saw much more mundane things—cosmetics, advertising, interior decoration—exuding their own kind of atmosphere, comprising an 'aesthetics of everyday life'" (Chayka, 2021, n.p.). According to James (2022a), a shift happened around the early 2010s. Up until that point in time, the term vibe was mostly used in the mainstream media as a synonym for *ambience* to describe places. In this next phase, the term was added to a variety of other things, as well as places, and people began to realize that vibes could be performed and embraced, rather than merely observed. She argues that this shift aligns with the development of social media (especially Instagram) and the increased interaction with algorithms. Thus, since vibes represent the perception of ourselves and the world through the lens of an algorithm, we have now embraced this view and embedded this understanding into our culture (James, 2022a). The emergence of algorithms in our daily lives has therefore fundamentally changed the way we talk about, and perceive a vibe:

"As interacting with algorithms became a more regular part of people's everyday lives, they developed pop culture practices for practicing, reflecting on, and critically engaging with the skills and modes of perception they practiced in their interactions with algorithms" (James, 2022a, n.p.).

Furthermore, this was not the last time, that our algorithmic media landscape shifted our understanding of this term, as James argues, in another of her many essays on the topic of vibes, that a recent *vibe shift* transformed *vibe* into a predominantly pluralistic term (James, 2022b).

Vibe shift, a term coined by trend forecaster Sean Monahan, refers to a significant change in trends and culture. While in popular culture *vibe shifts* are used as a synonym for *trends*, this term also has an overarching quality such as the concept of *vibe*, and therefore has a similar relationship to the notion of *trend* as the term *vibe* has to the notions of *style* and *genre* described above. In fact, vibe shifts go beyond trends, describing the moment when "a once-dominant social wavelength starts to feel dated (Davis, 2022, n.p.)" (Monahan, 2022). According to Monahan, vibe is "a point in time ..., it refers to the dominant style of a particular era" (James, 2022b). For example, he identifies vibes as the cultural phenomena of *hipster culture* between 2003 and 2009, followed by *the post-internet era* from 2010 to 2016 and the *hypebeast* culture until 2020 (Davis, 2022).

As stated by Monahan (2022), vibe shifts can often be seen as a reaction to the overwhelming nature of the internet and the desire to move away from the chaos into more authentic and not easily searchable experiences – "You can't Google an Instagram post" (Monahan, 2022, n.p.).

[1] The original term used in the reference text is "purposiveness", following Kant's idea of "subjective material purposiveness".

As briefly mentioned before, the term vibe has essentially evolved into a pluralism, since "on contemporary social media platforms, there is no dominant vibe" (James, 2022b, n.p.) to experience. Popular platforms, such as TikTok, tend to prioritize individual engagement over conformity and appear to aim towards displaying user-specific content, resulting in multiple vibes rather than a single dominant one (James, 2022b). What started as a divide between *Straight TikTok* and *Alt TikTok* has resulted in many different sides of TikTok, such as food-related content in *Foodie Tok*, the cottage-core aestheticized nature lifestyle in *Homestead TikTok*, the absurd but humorous frog content on *FrogTok*, and a multitude of other thematic categories (Wylde, 2020a, 2020b).

Users receive recommended content on various topics that connect them to their vibe alignment, thus playing into their individual interests and generating more valuable data for the platform. However, it should be noted that while "algorithms may be delivering us our personalized vibes, … those individually-tailored streams interpellate our individual tastes and preferences to systemic power relations [and] instrumentalizes plurality and pluralization into the reproduction of the same old relations of domination and subordination (James, 2022b, n.p.)" (James, 2022b).

In terms of consumption, this results in the *contentification* of various aspects of our lives and emotions, which funnels all those vibes into the creation of the so-called profitable *type of guys*, creating a market based on personality categorization, replacing what was previously known as the *cultural zeitgeist* (Maz, 2021; Shorin, 2022; White, 2022).

Just Vibing

Another interesting aspect of the term vibe is that while it is also used to express identification with something or somebody *(vibe with sth/sb)*, to initiate the sharing of feelings *(vibe check)*, or to sending feelings between each other *(vibes are given off/caught)*, vibes are often associated with the overwhelming exposure to emotions on social media platforms (Therieau, 2022).

Talking in vibes seems to have become a mechanism for coping with our world and its multiple crises, and appears to have lost the optimism and togetherness of the 60s and 70s. The popular slogan *no thoughts, just vibes* "imagines vibes as an alternative to thinking in general" (Therieau, 2022, n.p.) as well as a desire for *depersonalization* and a brief break from responsibility. In the sense that cultural writer Daisy Alioto suggested that "when we say 'the vibes are off' maybe we mean our sense of the future" (Alioto, 2021, n.p.), the phrase *just vibing* became a temporary break from the uncertain present (Therieau, 2022).

In this sense, artificial intelligence can also be seen as a potential trigger of these unpleasant feelings, as AI anxiety, a fear of unemployment and being replaced by AI, is on the rise (Cox, 2023).

Furthermore, the concept of vibes, as an alternative way of thinking and depersonalization, is particularly interesting in the context of artificial intelligence, as the similarities and differences to human intelligence and thinking, are constantly being considered and discussed. In fact, "intelligence, consciousness, sentience, and personhood have been the major themes of AI research and its imaginaries for nearly seventy years" (Bajohr, 2023, p. 59), as author and researcher Hannes Bajohr mentions

in one of his most recent contributions to the field. A common view in AI research is, that computers can only process symbols and their structure, but not the actual meaning of the concepts or objects these symbols represent to the human world. What computers lack is knowledge of interacting with the real world, "they can only refer to other symbols, never to any reality beyond them. They are not *grounded* in the world" (Bajohr, 2023, p. 61)[2].

However, with the ability of *unsupervised learning* (independent learning through examples) and their complexity, it has been argued that contemporary AI systems are now able to calculate some meaning instead of just hollow symbols (Bajohr, 2023). Bajohr (2023) therefore suggests that instead of thinking in terms of *meaning* versus *no meaning*, "we should consider *levels of graded meaning*" (Bajohr, 2023, p. 62) that do not require a mind or consciousness, thus coining the term *dumb meaning*.

"While 'broad' meaning presupposes … embodied intelligence, cultural and social background knowledge, or the world-disclosing function of language, dumb meaning would operate below this scale (which is always calibrated on humans) and could best be grasped as an effect of *correlations*" (Bajohr, 2023, p. 62).

Natural language models, such as Google's LaMDA or OpenAI's ChatGPT, are particularly ascribed to human characteristics due to their dialogical nature, which is often seen as an apparent communicative intent. However, image generation systems such as DALL·E, Imagen, Stable Diffusion or Midjourney, are able to create a higher level of this *dumb meaning*. Because of their multimodality, combining text and images, they can generate more complex artificial semantics. Although such systems are still *dumb* in Bajohr's (2023) sense, they can move beyond symbolic meaning and better connect to real world phenomena, which can be described by the concept of *indexical AI*. By embedding the hidden CLIP model, which stores text-image pairs and can perform image classification tasks on unseen data, into these generative systems, they "can learn and actively reproduce the *correlation* between textual descriptions of objects and their corresponding visual manifestations" (Bajohr, 2023, pp. 65-66).

In terms of the notion of correlations, one can find similar ideas about the concept of *canon, aesthetic unity* and *alignment* that were discussed earlier in the context of vibes. In this sense, machines are *just vibing* and do not think at all.

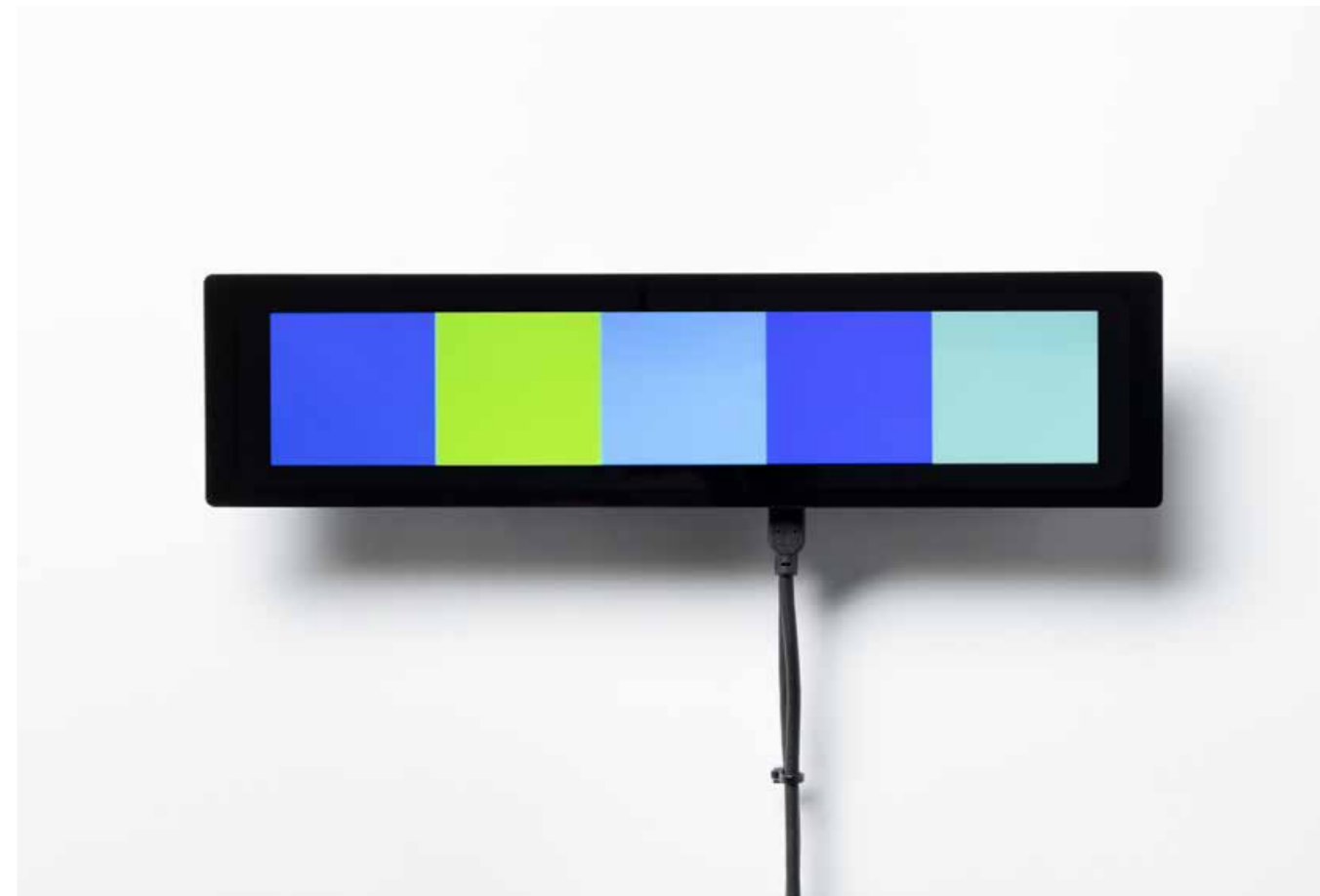Figure 1. *Computational Colors*, installation view.

Matthias Grund
Computational Colors, 2023
00:09:30, 320 x 1480 resolution

Bypassing the distinctive aesthetics of AI-generated imagery, the work *Computational Colors* offers a monochromatic view on the capabilities of generative AI, while also addressing the transition from one era of (generative) AI art to another.

A *Generative Adversarial Network (GAN)* was trained on a dataset of the *Web Safe* color palette, which is a list comprised of 216 colors that could be consistently displayed on monitors with the 8-bit color system in the early days of the internet. During training, where the GAN attempts to mimic the given dataset, the generative model generates colors that are outside the dataset's color range, thus computing a new color space.

By recreating the DALL·E 2 watermark, which consists of five solid color squares placed side by side, and offering alternative versions of the mark through the medium's interpolation feature, the video installation mediates the statistical capabilities of pre-multimodal AI systems, which have often been humanized and referred to as dreaming or hallucinating.

Figure 2.
Comparison of the original DALL·E 2 watermark (top) (OpenAI, n.d., n.p.) and the reconstructed version from the work *Computational Colors* (bottom).
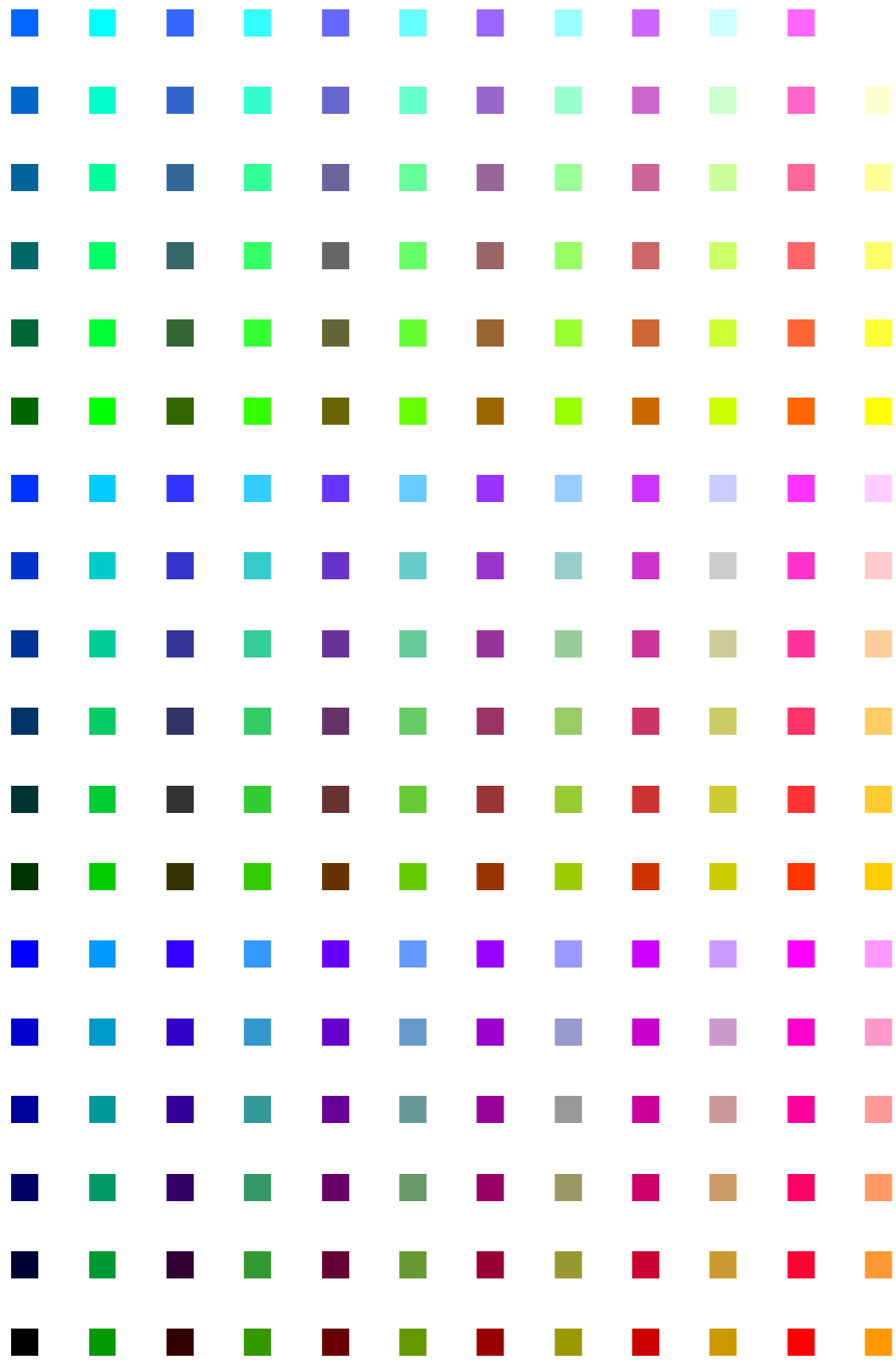
Figure 3.
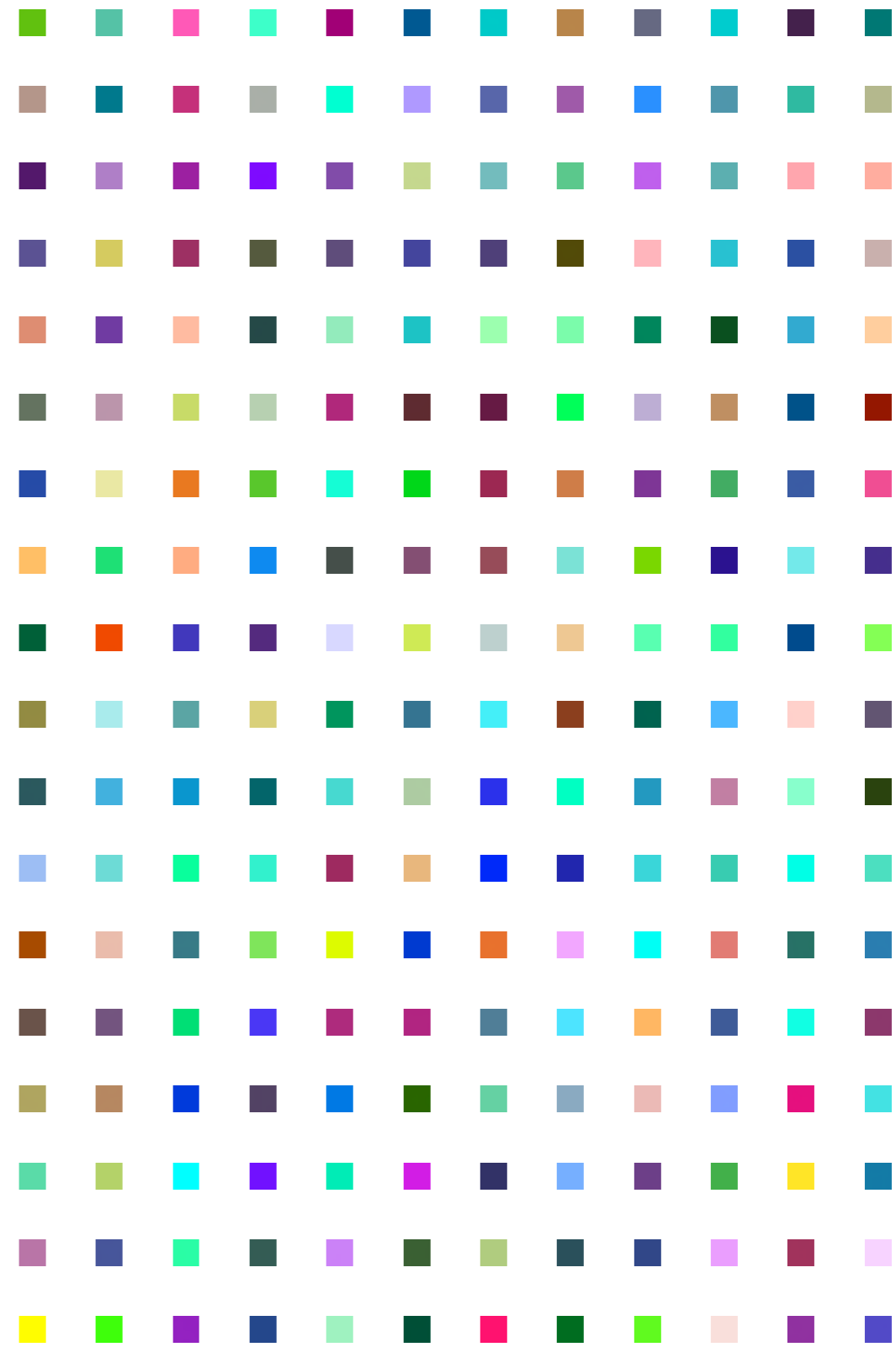Web Safe color palette dataset, consisting of 216 color squares.

Figure 4.
216 GAN-generated color squares from the work *Computanional Colors*.

A Vibe is not a Mood

Another phenomenon that should be discussed, when discussing the field of vibes, is the term *mood*, as they are often linked within the same realm. The point is to understand how moods differ from vibes and what they have in common.

The term *mood* dates to the Old English language, in which it was used to refer to both a momentary feeling and something more abstract related to spirits. While the meaning expressing an emotional state proved to be more dominant, philosopher Martin Heidegger's *Stimmung* reconnected the term to its mystical meaning as a medium for perceiving and relating to the world (Therieau, 2022). A mood is not something that is actively developed, but rather arises from being present in the world. Unlike a vibe, which is developed in relation to others, a mood is subjective and personal. This is not to say that moods cannot be a shared experience, especially when they occur within a group, they tend to have a unifying quality for the individual participants in the collective mood (Yago & Salter, 2021). Additionally, the example of the *mood ring* materializes our desire to experience our feelings using other mediums (such as objects or music), and in connection to psychedelic drugs, which are said to have *mood-altering* qualities, moods become states that can be changed by chemical influence (Therieau, 2022). "Mood is something one is overcome by, not triggered by a single object or stimulus, but oftentimes by a complex constellation of inputs" (Yago & Salter, 2021, n.p.).

In a recent Twitter thread, media and visual culture scholar Roland Meyer (2023) refers to Grietzer's understanding of vibes as abstract concepts within a concrete context, he thus identifies moods as being less specific but sharing similar atmospheric and overarching qualities. Therefore, one could argue that moods relate to the general feelings that images evoke and their authenticity is based on those emotions rather than specific meanings and historical accuracy.

A vibe, on the other hand, is defined by its "historical concreteness, its rootedness in the specifics of a certain cultural moment in space and time, which defines ›vibe‹ in contrast to style, and which also distinguishes from the similar ›mood‹" (Meyer, 2023, n.p.).

In the Style of...

Discussions about generative imagery often revolve around the notion of *style*, as multimodal AI systems are promoted with the ability to generate images across an infinite range of styles. The expression *in the style of...* is therefore one of the most popular phrases typed into such systems and is used in a variety of ways to guide the visual appearance of the results. In generative media, "everything becomes a ›style‹" (Meyer, 2023, n.p.), whether it is the look of a particular type of media production, the aesthetics of photographic processes, other image-making technologies, or the very specific technique of a particular artist. In multimodal AI systems, style is something that is added to a subject and can be extracted from existing visual media such as artworks and thus used interchangeably (Meyer, 2023; OpenAI, n.d.).

By simulating other existing media forms and image making techniques, generative imagery is often falsely regarded as a representation of reality, which is based on the remediation rather than the specific content or subject matter (Wilde, 2023).

As digital culture theorist and artist Lev Manovich (2023) argues, the relation between *subject* and *style* in generative media becomes generally more complex, as the *prediction* of visual appearances and content, does not function consistently. Initially, multimodal, generative systems seemed to have the ability to easily differentiate between the subject matter and the artistic style of any given artwork or media. Manovich, however, identified that specific styles or artist names were connected to specific subjects, which lead to automatic changes in the content when adding style references into prompts.

From this it can be concluded that style and subjects cannot be entirely separated, which makes it necessary to remain somewhat flexible in content and allow for adjustments to apply any desired style to image generations (Manovich, 2023).

Although we were able to form an understanding about the differentiation between vibes and styles, the example of the prompt module *in the style of* exemplifies the close relationship of these terms within machine learning applications. In generative imagery, the meaning of style becomes more fluid, while still maintaining a clear connection to specific subjects. Whereas in multimodal AI systems, vibe loses some of its long ranging qualities by being linked to natural language.

In general, the notions of *subject* and *style* are better suited for AI related discussions than the common, and often discussed relationship between *form* and *content*. The same applies to the terms *prediction* and *simulation*. Prediction, as Manovich (2023) mentions, is commonly used by AI researchers to describe the synthetic image making process. On a technical standpoint, "when working with a text-to-image AI-model, the neural network attempts to predict the images that correspond best to your text input" (Manovich, 2023, p. 36), which makes the term *predictive media* a suited way to describe contemporary image synthesis.

AI Pop Culture

However, with the advancement in the quality of generative models and the resulting massive amount of deepfake content cultivating in our media feeds as of lately, these predicted images are entering our reality as simulations, or more accurately, as illusions.

It is no longer possible to escape generative imagery, which combines subjects from different areas of popular culture in unusual manners. The outputs differ in their level of reality, from the obviously artificial to the representation of a deceptive reality. From a high fashion themed Harry Potter short film, a realistic appearing street style picture of Pope Francis sporting an avant-garde tailored puffer jacket, to AI generated music in the style of your favorite Hip Hop artist mimicking their actual voice.

As previously mentioned, generative AI content appears to be realistic but is not. The subjects itself, play a secondary role in the perception of these images, as it is the style which becomes so deceptive (Wilde, 2023). Hereby, reality becomes a style by itself (Chayka, 2023).

The journalist and author Kyle Chayka (2023) describes this phenomenon as *illusory realism*, while Midjourney Founder David Holz refers to this major cultural disruption as *aesthetic accelerationism*. With the access to text-to-anything models for the broad public, we have entered the age of "A.I. Pop Culture" (Chayka, 2023, n.p.). *Consequently, the next vibe shift must already be on its way...*

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Matthias Grund
No Thoughts, Just Vibes