

Title

Visible Borrowing, Hidden Sources: Appropriation and Legibility in Martha Rosler and Refik Anadol

Abstract

This paper examines how the ethics of appropriation change when acts of borrowing become less visible to the viewer. By contrasting Martha Rosler's explicit use of appropriated imagery with Refik Anadol's AI-based transformation of archival datasets, it asks whether ethical appropriation depends, at least partly, upon the legibility of borrowing.

Appropriation is understood here as the reuse, incorporation or transformation of pre-existing images or cultural works within a new work. The paper is not concerned primarily with questions of copyright, although it acknowledges the significant legal debates surrounding the use of protected material in AI training. Instead, its focus is on ethical legibility: the extent to which the sources, conditions and processes of borrowing remain available to scrutiny.

Rosler's *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* makes appropriation materially apparent through visible seams, juxtaposition, and the collision of distinct image contexts.

Anadol's *Unsupervised*, by contrast, transforms archival material through machine-learning systems into immersive visual environments in which individual sources are no longer discernible. Although Anadol openly acknowledges his use of data, understanding how that data is gathered, processed, and transformed depends more heavily upon explanations provided by the artist and institution.

Drawing on Derrida, Steyerl, and Debord, the paper argues that generative AI does not invent appropriation but alters its scale, infrastructure, and visibility. Derrida complicates the idea of pure origin, Steyerl situates images within systems of circulation and transformation, and Debord helps explain how spectacular form can make those systems harder to perceive.

The paper argues that visible appropriation is not necessarily ethical, nor is generative opacity necessarily unethical. What changes is the viewer's ability to recognise, question, and evaluate the conditions under which borrowing takes place.

Introduction

"What a good artist understands is that nothing comes from nowhere. All creative work builds on what came before. Nothing is completely original." (Kleon, 2012, p.8)

By contrasting Martha Rosler's explicit use of appropriated imagery with Refik Anadol's AI-based transformation of archival datasets, this paper examines how the ethics of appropriation change when acts of borrowing become less visible to the viewer.

In this paper, appropriation refers to the deliberate reuse, incorporation or transformation of pre-existing images or cultural works within a new work. This can involve directly identifiable images, as in collage and photomontage, but also source imagery absorbed into a larger technical process

and no longer visibly intact. The term is therefore used more broadly than simple copying. What matters is that the new work depends upon prior material and that this dependence remains ethically significant.

Questions of appropriation inevitably overlap with copyright, particularly in relation to the use of protected works in AI datasets. These issues remain legally and politically contested (Doctorow, 2026, p.106-136). They are not, however, the primary concern of this paper. Rather than asking whether particular acts of reuse are legally permissible, the discussion focuses on their ethical and visual legibility: how borrowing is made visible, how its conditions can be understood, and how those conditions are presented to the viewer.

Artists have long borrowed, quoted, copied, and recontextualised existing images for reasons ranging from homage to critique (Evans, 2009, p.15). Collage and photomontage make appropriation particularly explicit because their meaning often depends upon recognising that existing images have been removed from one context and inserted into another. Generative AI complicates this history. Machine-learning systems may also depend upon large bodies of pre-existing imagery, but the relationship between source and output is often far less obvious. Source images can be incorporated into datasets and transformed through computational processes until their origins become difficult to trace.

This paper does not argue that generative AI is simply a new form of collage. Instead, it asks how appropriation changes when borrowing moves from visible montage to generative transformation. If ethical appropriation is possible, does it depend, at least partly, upon the borrowing being legible? Martha Rosler and Refik Anadol provide contrasting case studies. Rosler's photomontages foreground their dependence upon existing images, while Anadol's immersive AI installations transform large archival datasets into fluid visual environments in which individual sources largely disappear. This does not make Rosler's appropriation automatically ethical or Anadol's unethical, but it changes how easily viewers can recognise and assess the conditions of borrowing.

Here, legibility does not mean that every appropriated fragment must remain visually identifiable. It refers more broadly to the degree to which the sources, conditions and processes of borrowing remain available to ethical scrutiny.

Rosler and visible appropriation

Martha Rosler's *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, made between 1967 and 1972, provides a clear example of appropriation operating as both technique and argument. Rosler combined photographs of Vietnamese civilians affected by the war, mostly published in *Life*, with images of affluent American interiors from *House Beautiful*. The publications occupied very different positions within American visual culture: *Life* brought war reportage into domestic circulation, while *House Beautiful* presented idealised images of consumption and middle-class domestic life.

The combination of television and widely circulated photojournalism brought the Vietnam War directly into American homes, contributing to its description as the "living-room war" (Deutsche, 2018). Rosler explicitly connects the series to this experience of encountering distant violence within domestic life (Hubber, 2017). Her photomontages literalise that collision by placing images of war inside representations of American comfort.

Their political force lies not only in what they depict but in how they are constructed. In *Balloons* (c. 1967-72), for example, a Vietnamese woman carrying a child appears inside a spotless modern American home. The two visual worlds never fully merge. The interior remains recognisable as an image of domestic prosperity, while the inserted figure belongs to a radically different context. The impossibility of the space is not concealed; it is central to the work's effect.



Figure 1. Martha Rosler, *Balloons*, c.1967-72

For Rosler, the visible join is vital. Interviewed in 2005, she described preferring cut-and-paste to digital techniques because of the “subtle traces of the seams between images, which remind us of the photos’ origins in the popular press” (Rosler, 2005, cited in Stoops, 2009, p.61). The viewer therefore knows that the work is constructed from distinct sources. More importantly, its political meaning depends upon recognising the ideological difference between them. Rosler forces two image systems into confrontation while allowing the borrowed imagery to remain legible as material taken from elsewhere.

This does not make the appropriation ethically uncomplicated. Reusing photographs of vulnerable civilians raises questions of consent, representation, and the circulation of images of suffering (Kaplan, 2023, p. 10). Critical intention does not automatically resolve those issues. Visible borrowing is not the same as ethical borrowing.

Nevertheless, visibility makes the reuse available for judgement. The viewer can recognise that Rosler has taken imagery from elsewhere and ask whether that transformation is justified, exploitative, or politically effective. The conditions of appropriation are, to a significant degree, embedded in the image itself.

Anadol and generative archival transformation

Refik Anadol offers a very different relationship between source and image. His installations frequently use machine learning to process extensive archives of images, sounds and data. In *Unsupervised* (2023) at the Museum of Modern Art (figure 2), Anadol used AI to interpret and transform 138151 pieces of metadata drawn from more than two hundred years of the museum's collection. The result was a continuously shifting computational environment displayed on a monumental screen. Reactions to the work were mixed. The prominent art critic Jerry Salz declared it to be nothing more than a "a massive techno lava lamp" (Lawson-Tancred, 2023) but MOMA reported the piece as a huge success citing data that showed an average dwell-time in front of the piece of 38 minutes (Ness, 2026).



Figure 2. Refik Anadol, *Unsupervised*, 2023



Figure 3. Refik Anadol, *Unsupervised*, 2023

Anadol is not secretive about his use of data. Archives and machine learning are central to how the work is presented. The more precise question is therefore where and how that borrowing becomes legible.

In Rosler, appropriation is visible within the work. In Anadol, it is often legible through supporting information: wall texts, interviews, technical explanations, and institutional framing. A viewer who knows that *Unsupervised* derives from MoMA's collection encounters it differently from someone who sees only a field of colour, movement, and computational complexity. Even with explanatory material, however, the relation between source and output may remain unclear. Davis (2023) notes that despite the supporting information and "a screen that appears as punctuation between sequences displaying dense graphics and data about what you are seeing, the exact operation is never really clarified."

This difference affects how the viewer understands the work's construction. Rosler's dependence on prior images is apparent before any explanation is encountered. In Anadol's work, much of

what can be known about the dataset, training process, and relation between source and output comes from the artist, studio, or institution. These accounts are not necessarily misleading, but they become important intermediaries. They shape which parts of the process are disclosed and how those processes are framed. Legibility therefore depends not only on disclosure, but on who controls that disclosure.

The source image no longer appears as a discernible quotation within the finished work. It remains essential, but its presence has shifted away from the visible surface. This kind of borrowing can be described as infrastructural: it operates within the systems that produce the image rather than being staged within its composition.

This is not equivalent to conventional copying. Machine-learning systems do not simply cut and paste fragments from a database. The relationship between training material and output is more diffuse. But that diffusion creates the ethical problem. If source images are necessary to the process but difficult to recognise in the result, how can the viewer evaluate the terms under which they were used?

A counterargument is that borrowing does not need to remain visually identifiable in order to be ethically legible. Anadol names his archives and works within institutions where source material is publicly described. If those conditions are disclosed, why should individual sources remain visible?

This makes a wider definition of legibility necessary. What matters is not only whether borrowing can be seen, but whether its conditions remain available to informed scrutiny. Who provided the material? Under what permissions or agreements? How was it transformed? What technical and institutional systems enabled that transformation?

The distributed nature of AI production complicates these questions. The artist is only one part of a larger structure involving datasets, machine-learning systems, computing infrastructure, and development teams. This does not remove authorship, but it makes the conditions of production less singular and less immediately visible.

Anadol's practice is also closely connected to large technology companies, with his studio listing organisations including Google, NVIDIA and Microsoft among its partners (Refik Anadol). Ochigame (2022) details the lengths that the large tech companies have gone to in their desire to control the discourse around 'AI ethics' and there are those that would argue that Anadol functions as little more than "Silicon Valley's court painter" (Norman, 2025). Grba (2022) argues that Anadol's installations contribute to a "platform aesthetics" in which technological spectacle is used as a tool for encouraging political deference rather than scrutiny. The value of this critique here is not to prove that Anadol's work is unethical, but to ask whether spectacular presentation can make the infrastructures behind data processing harder to perceive.

Derrida and the instability of origin

This paper began with a quote that questions whether any art is truly original. Whilst the point is fundamental to the positions taken in this paper, it is probably best that a more theoretical framework is employed to make the point. Jacques Derrida provides a way of moving beyond a simple opposition between original and copy. His ideas of trace, repetition, and the critique of self-presence suggest that neither collage nor AI image-making begins from a completely pure or self-sufficient origin. In different ways, both depend upon what has come before.

The first useful idea here is the trace. For Derrida, what appears to be present is always marked by what is absent and by the contexts that precede it (and the “ghosts” of future contexts) (Derrida, 1994). Applied to images, this suggests that source material can persist without remaining fully present. In Rosler’s photomontages this persistence is comparatively easy to see: the appropriated photographs retain recognisable traces of their previous lives in the popular press. In Anadol’s work those traces are much more dispersed. Individual source images are no longer identifiable, but the archive continues to exist as a condition from which the work is produced.

The second idea is repetition. For Derrida, repetition never simply preserves an original unchanged. To repeat or reuse something is also to place it within a new context, and that new context alters how it functions. A photograph taken from *Life* and inserted into one of Rosler’s montages remains recognisable, but its meaning changes through juxtaposition. The same principle can be applied, more diffusely, to AI transformation: prior images enter a system in which they contribute to new relationships and outputs rather than simply being reproduced. Reuse therefore both preserves and transforms what it repeats.

Finally, Derrida’s critique of self-presence challenges the idea that an image might be entirely self-contained or possess a completely identifiable origin. Images are produced within existing languages, conventions, histories and visual cultures. Seen in these terms, appropriation begins to look less like an exceptional act performed by particular artists and more like an intensified or explicit version of something already present within image-making. Taken to its logical conclusion, this might suggest that all art involves some form of appropriation, insofar as no work emerges independently of prior forms and meanings.

This does not mean that all forms of appropriation are equivalent, or that the instability of origin collapses ethical distinctions. Rather, it shifts the ethical question. If trace, repetition, and dependence upon prior material are constitutive conditions of image-making, the issue is not simply whether borrowing occurs. It is how that borrowing occurs, and how visible or assessable its traces remain.

This is where Derrida becomes particularly useful to the comparison between Rosler and Anadol. Both works depend upon prior images, but Rosler allows their earlier contexts to remain materially legible, while in Anadol those traces become distributed across datasets, models, and institutional explanations. The ethical distinction therefore lies less in the presence or absence of appropriation than in the different conditions under which that appropriation can be recognised and scrutinised.

Steyerl and the circulation of images

Hito Steyerl extends this question into the political and material life of images. In *In Defense of the Poor Image* (2009), she describes the poor image as a “copy in motion”: uploaded, downloaded, compressed, reformatted, redistributed, and detached from any easily identifiable authorship. Her argument shifts attention away from a stable original and towards the conditions under which images circulate.

This is useful because generative AI does not introduce image instability from nowhere. Digital images already move between platforms, acquire new contexts and become detached from stable authorship or ownership (see Chateau, 2022, p. 177-180, on the life cycle of a meme). This helps

avoid a nostalgic argument in which collage belongs to an earlier world of stable originals while generative AI suddenly introduces copying. Image circulation was already unstable long before contemporary AI. The more useful argument is that AI operationalises and intensifies these conditions by incorporating large numbers of images into computational processes in which individual acts of reuse become difficult to follow (Steyerl, 2025, p.94).

Steyerl is also useful because contemporary images often give viewers little access to the histories of circulation, alteration and use through which they have passed. An image may appear complete on the screen while revealing almost nothing about the platforms, transformations, permissions, or infrastructures that brought it there.

In Anadol, the generated visual environment is highly visible while the movement of source images into the system is not. The archive remains necessary, but its individual components are difficult to recover. Steyerl therefore helps position AI appropriation within a wider economy of image circulation rather than treating it as an entirely new phenomenon.

Debord and the smoothing of appropriation

Guy Debord offers another way to sharpen the comparison. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1994) spectacle is not simply an abundance of impressive images, but a social relation mediated by images and connected to systems of production and consumption.

This is relevant to Anadol because works such as *Unsupervised* produce a powerful sensory experience through scale, motion and technical complexity. The issue is not that spectacular form is inherently empty, but that the conditions behind an image may recede as the image becomes increasingly persuasive as experience (Ross, 2026).

In Anadol's work, a historically diverse archive becomes a continuous aesthetic field. Individual objects, makers and contexts are absorbed into a unified computational flow. Massive acts of gathering and transformation are experienced primarily as colour, movement and technical wonder. The infrastructural conditions of borrowing risk becoming secondary to the intensity of the surface.

Rosler's relation to spectacle is quite different, but she should not be positioned as somehow outside it. Her source imagery comes from mass-media culture itself. *House Beautiful* appropriates the spectacular images of advertising and journalism and interrupts their normal functioning. The glossy domestic interior no longer sells comfort once it has been forced into confrontation with images of war.

Rosler therefore does not escape spectacle so much as turn its own imagery against itself.

The contrast is therefore one of rupture and continuity. Rosler preserves contradiction between sources; Anadol tends to absorb difference into generative flow. Debord helps explain why this difference may matter ethically. When mediation becomes aesthetically seamless, the systems that organise representation can become harder to perceive. Appropriation may remain fully

acknowledged at the level of description while becoming increasingly distant from the immediate visual encounter.

Conclusion: legibility as an ethical condition

The comparison between Rosler and Anadol suggests that borrowing alone cannot determine the ethical status of a work. Nor does transformation automatically resolve the problems raised by appropriation.

The more useful question is whether the conditions of borrowing remain sufficiently legible to permit ethical scrutiny.

Rosler makes appropriation conspicuous. The viewer is confronted with the fact that the image is built from prior representations. Anadol's use of archives is also acknowledged, but the relationship between source and output is much less perceptible. Ethical legibility therefore shifts from what can be seen in the image towards what can be learned about the systems and institutions around it.

Legibility should not be confused with complete visual transparency. Ethical appropriation cannot require every source to remain identifiable. Rather, the origins, terms and processes of borrowing need to remain sufficiently available to be questioned.

Derrida, Steyerl, and Debord clarify different parts of this problem. Derrida destabilises the idea of pure originality; Steyerl places images within systems of circulation and transformation; Debord helps explain how spectacular form can make those systems recede from view.

Visible appropriation does not guarantee ethical appropriation. Rosler's reuse of photographs of suffering remains open to ethical challenge, while non-identifiable source material does not automatically make Anadol's practice unethical. What changes is the viewer's position.

Where borrowing is legible, the viewer can recognise that appropriation has occurred and question its justification. Where borrowing becomes distributed across datasets, models, and infrastructures, that judgement increasingly depends upon information unavailable within the image itself and upon accounts supplied by those producing and exhibiting the work.

Anadol cannot represent all AI image production. His use of institutional archives differs significantly from commercial systems trained on vast datasets assembled from diverse online sources. Yet the comparison with Rosler identifies a broader problem: as the scale and technical complexity of image reuse increase, the relationship between source and output becomes harder to perceive.

Generative AI therefore does not invent appropriation, nor does it simply continue collage by other means. It changes the scale, infrastructure, and legibility through which borrowing takes place.

Rosler's visible seams do not make her innocent, and Anadol's seamless surfaces do not make him guilty. The important difference is that Rosler makes borrowing materially available to the viewer, while Anadol makes understanding that borrowing increasingly dependent upon technical and institutional explanation.

The ethical problem posed by generative AI may therefore lie not only in its dependence upon prior images, but in the extent to which the scale and structure of that dependence can separate

outputs from the sources and conditions on which they rely. The question is not simply whether art borrows, but whether we remain able to understand and evaluate the conditions under which that borrowing occurs.

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