Visible Borrowing, Hidden Sources: By comparing Martha Rosler's photomontages with Refik Anadol's AI-generated environments, this paper examines how the ethics of appropriation change when the sources and processes of borrowing become less legible to the viewer

Ben Lingard

SN: 25040395

Email: b.lingard0520251@arts.ac.uk

bl778@outlook.com

Wordcount: 3794

MA Fine Art Digital

Central Saint Martins College

University of the Arts London

Abstract

This paper examines how the ethics of appropriation change when acts of borrowing become less apparent 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. Copyright is not the primary concern, although the significant legal debates surrounding the use of protected material in AI training are acknowledged. The focus instead is on ethical legibility: the extent to which the sources, terms, and processes of borrowing remain open to examination.

Rosler's *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c.1967-72) makes appropriation materially apparent through visible seams, juxtaposition, and the collision of distinct image contexts. Anadol's *Unsupervised* (2023), 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, Heidegger, and Debord, the argument developed here is that generative AI does not invent appropriation but alters its scale, infrastructure, and legibility. Derrida complicates the idea of pure origin; Steyerl situates images

within systems of circulation and transformation; Heidegger offers a way of considering how technology structures what becomes apparent and what recedes from view; and Debord helps explain how spectacular form can make those underlying systems harder to perceive.

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 circumstances under which borrowing takes place.

Key words

appropriation, ethics, legibility, collage, AI

Introduction

“The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 1977, p.146).

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 apparent 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 here. Rather than asking whether particular acts of reuse are legally permissible, the discussion focuses on their ethical and visual legibility: how borrowing is presented, how its terms can be understood, and how those processes are made known 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.

The aim is not to argue that generative AI is simply a new form of collage. Instead, the central question is 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 terms of that 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, circumstances, and processes of borrowing remain open to ethical judgement.

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 two magazines 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) (figure 1), 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.

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 those sources. Rosler forces two

image systems into confrontation while allowing the borrowed imagery to remain legible as material taken from elsewhere.



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

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 thing as ethical borrowing.

Nevertheless, its explicitness 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. To a significant degree, the terms of appropriation are 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 in New York (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 Saltz declared it to be little more than "a massive techno lava lamp" (Lawson-Tancred, 2023), while MoMA reported it as a significant success, citing an average viewer dwell-time of 38 minutes (Ness, 2026).



Figure 2. 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 apparent within the work. In Anadol, it is often understood through supporting information: wall texts, interviews, technical explanations, and institutional framing. A viewer who knows that *Unsupervised* (2023) 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 all 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." (figure 3)



Figure 3. Refik Anadol, *Unsupervised,* 2023

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 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 circumstances are disclosed, why should individual sources remain recognisable?

This requires a wider definition of legibility. What matters is not only whether borrowing can be seen, but whether its terms 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 production process less singular and less immediately apparent.

Anadol is keen to present his use of AI as ethically distinct from commercial generative systems trained on indiscriminately gathered data. In relation to *Unsupervised* (2023), he describes the work as based on "ethical data research and analysis," using MoMA's publicly available collection data (Anadol, 2022). More recently, he has argued that ethical practice depends on working with data that he or his collaborators have collected or accessed through partnerships, training his own models, and paying attention to the environmental impact of computation (Schrader, 2025). These claims are important because they show that questions of provenance, permission, and sustainability are explicitly acknowledged within Anadol's practice. However, they also reinforce the issue of legibility raised here: much of what the viewer knows about the ethical conditions of the work depends upon accounts supplied by Anadol, his studio, and the institutions presenting it.

It is also important to note that Anadol's practice is closely connected to large technology companies (including some who are engaged in the indiscriminate scraping of data), with his studio listing organisations including Google, NVIDIA, and Microsoft among its partners (Refik Anadol, 2026). Ochigame (2022) details the lengths that large technology companies have gone to, in attempting to shape the

discourse around AI ethics, and one critic has described Anadol as “Silicon Valley’s court painter” (Norman, 2026). 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 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 by asking: if ethical appropriation is possible, does it depend, at least partly, upon the borrowing being legible? Rosler and Anadol’s practices are radically different, and it might reasonably be argued that the differences between them are too great to sustain a meaningful comparison. Before considering why the marked difference in the visibility of borrowing between the two practices might matter, it is therefore useful to establish what they share. Both begin with prior images, both remove those images from earlier contexts, and both transform them through their incorporation into something new. Derrida’s ideas of trace, repetition, and self-presence help expose these underlying similarities, while also challenging the idea that either practice can be understood through a simple distinction between original and copy.

Derrida is useful here not because he establishes that Rosler and Anadol are engaged in appropriation (that is already apparent) but because his ideas reveal a structural similarity between practices that otherwise look very different.

The first useful idea is the trace. For Derrida, what appears to be present is always marked by what is absent and by the contexts that precede it, as well as by the "ghosts" of future contexts (Derrida, 1994). Applied to images, 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 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 will always alter 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 emerge 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 in 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. Instead, it shifts the ethical question from whether borrowing occurs to how it occurs, and how readily its traces can be assessed.

Steyerl and the circulation of images

If Derrida destabilises the idea of a pure origin, Hito Steyerl shifts attention towards the political and material life of images. In *In Defense of the Poor Image* (2009), Steyerl describes the poor image as a "copy in motion": uploaded, downloaded, compressed, reformatted, and redistributed. Her argument shifts attention away from a stable original and towards the circumstances 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 avoids a nostalgic account 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 also makes the point that 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 little about

the transformations, permissions, platforms, or infrastructures through which it has passed.

In Anadol, the generated 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 an existing economy of image circulation rather than treating it as an entirely new phenomenon.

This question of circulation leads to a further problem. It is not only that the history of the image becomes difficult to follow as it passes through technological systems. The system itself may also shape the form in which that image, or archive, becomes available to us in the first place.

Heidegger: revealing and concealing

Martin Heidegger offers a way of thinking about this relationship between technology and visibility. In *The Question Concerning Technology*, technology is not understood simply as a set of tools. It is also a mode of revealing: a way in which the world becomes available and intelligible to us (Heidegger, 1977, p.3-35).

For Heidegger, modern technological revealing tends to organise things as resources that can be measured, ordered, stored, processed, and put to use. He describes this condition as “standing reserve.” Something encountered through technology is therefore not merely represented differently; it may come to be understood primarily through its availability for calculation and use.

This is particularly relevant to Anadol. MoMA’s collection consists of individual works made by different artists within particular historical and cultural contexts. Within a

machine-learning process, however, the collection can also be revealed as data: something that can be classified, analysed, and transformed computationally. The archive has not ceased to consist of individual works, but another mode of encountering it has become dominant.

For Heidegger, this revealing also entails concealment. This does not mean that technology deliberately hides information. Rather, when something becomes visible in one particular way, other ways of understanding it can recede. In Anadol's work, revealing the archive as computationally available data may make new patterns and relationships perceptible while making individual makers, objects, histories, and contexts less apparent.

This complicates the question of legibility. The problem is no longer simply whether the source material remains visible after transformation. It is also how the technological system structures what becomes visible in the first place. The archive is not simply hidden by the process; it is revealed differently.

Legibility therefore concerns not only whether sources remain recognisable after transformation, but how technology structures what can appear in the first place. In *Unsupervised* (2023), that technological transformation is then encountered by the viewer as an immersive visual experience, bringing the argument towards Debord's account of spectacle.

Debord and the smoothing of appropriation

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

This is relevant to Anadol because works such as *Unsupervised* (2023) produce a powerful sensory experience through scale, motion, and technical complexity. The issue is not that spectacular form is inherently empty, but rather that the conditions behind an image may recede as the image becomes increasingly persuasive as an 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.

Seen alongside Heidegger, this smoothing is not simply a matter of aesthetic presentation. The archive has already been technologically reformulated as something available for computational processing. Debord helps describe what happens when that transformation is then encountered as spectacle: the system that produces the image may become increasingly difficult to perceive behind the intensity of the image itself.

Rosler's relation to spectacle is quite different, but she should not be positioned as being outside it. Her source imagery comes from mass-media culture itself. *House Beautiful* (c.1967-72) appropriates the spectacular images of advertising and journalism and interrupts their normal functioning. The glossy domestic interior no longer sells comfort once it is forced into confrontation with images of war. Rosler does not escape spectacle so much as turn its own imagery against itself.

The contrast is one of rupture and continuity. Rosler preserves contradiction between sources; Anadol tends to absorb difference into generative flow. Debord helps explain why this may matter ethically: as mediation becomes aesthetically seamless, the systems organising representation can become harder to perceive. Appropriation may be fully acknowledged at the level of description while becoming increasingly distant from the immediate visual encounter. This returns the discussion to the central question of legibility.

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 terms of borrowing remain sufficiently legible to permit ethical scrutiny.

Rosler makes appropriation conspicuous. The viewer encounters the work as something constructed from prior representations. Anadol's use of archives is also acknowledged, but the relationship between source and output is much less perceptible, shifting attention towards the technological, institutional, and infrastructural systems surrounding the work.

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, Heidegger, and Debord clarify different aspects of this problem. Derrida destabilises the idea of pure originality; Steyerl places images within systems of circulation and transformation; Heidegger shows how technological systems structure what becomes visible and what recedes from view; and Debord helps explain how spectacular form can make those systems still harder to perceive.

Together, these positions complicate any simple distinction between visible and invisible appropriation. The issue is not only whether a source remains recognisable, but how images move, how they are technologically reformulated, and how the systems responsible for that transformation are encountered by the viewer.

Visible appropriation does not guarantee ethical appropriation. Rosler's reuse of photographs of suffering remains open to challenge, while difficult-to-identify 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 sources. Nevertheless, 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. Steyerl argues that, in the context of AI, “expropriation” may be the more accurate term, drawing attention to the extraction of images, data, and labour through (frequently state supported) systems in which those providing the material may have little control over how it is used (Steyerl, 2025, p.50). Whether described as appropriation or expropriation, generative AI changes the scale, infrastructure, and legibility through which prior material is taken up and transformed. Rosler’s visible seams do not make her innocent, and Anadol’s seamless surfaces do not make him guilty. The important difference is how readily the terms of that borrowing (or extraction) can be recognised and evaluated.

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 circumstances on which they rely. The question is not simply whether art borrows, but whether we remain able to understand and evaluate how that borrowing takes place.

References

List of Illustrations

Figure 1.

Martha Rosler, *Balloons,* c.1967-72. MoMA, 2026. Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/150119 (Accessed 7 September 2026).

Figure 2.

Refik Anadol, *Unsupervised*, 2023. MoMA, 2026. Available at: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5535? (Accessed 7 September 2026).

Figure 3.

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AI Use

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used during the development of this paper as a writing-support tool. It was used to assist with editing, rephrasing, and reducing repetition.