

After the Erosion of Symbolic Scarcity: A Political Economy of Aesthetic Symbols, Relational Anchoring, and Existential Encounter

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence is rapidly expanding the supply of aesthetically sophisticated images, prose, styles, atmospheres, and other symbolic forms. This development does not eliminate scarcity from aesthetic and cultural life, but it raises a political-economic question concerning where scarcity, differentiation, and value formation may become concentrated when the production of many aesthetic representations becomes increasingly accessible. This paper examines the hypothesis that, under conditions of AI-mediated symbolic abundance, some forms of aesthetic value may become more dependent upon the relational, historical, material, spatial, and institutional conditions to which symbols can be credibly anchored.

The paper develops the concept of *relational anchoring* to examine how reproducible aesthetic symbols can be coupled with less readily substitutable histories, places, forms of provenance, craft traditions, cultural memories, institutions, and situated encounters. Particular attention is given to three interrelated dimensions of this process: contingency, beauty, and existential encounter. Contingency concerns the partially indeterminate encounters through which significance can emerge within historically constituted subjects. Beauty concerns the aesthetic salience through which some encounters become affectively differentiated. Existential encounter refers more narrowly to situations in which an experience contributes to an intensified awareness of presence, situatedness, temporality, or being alive. Capital need not determine such experiences directly in order to organize access to some of their generative conditions or to alter the landscapes in which they become more or less probable.

Drawing on philosophical resources from aesthetics, phenomenology, existential thought, and theories of contingency, together with political-economic literatures on symbolic value, cultural capital, luxury, experience, authentication, and commercialization, the paper develops a conceptual account of changing scarcity conditions. Publicly observable practices in commercial, artistic, and luxury spaces are used as comparative cases rather than as evidence of a common corporate intention. The analysis asks whether established practices of cultural exhibition, heritage narration, public art, craft authentication, and experiential design can acquire different historical functions when aesthetic representation itself becomes less scarce. It also considers a recursive possibility: commercial coupling with culture can support circulation, preservation, and renewed encounter, while sufficiently extensive repetition may also contribute to symbolic saturation and declining affective salience. The paper therefore treats symbolic abundance, relational anchoring, cultural regeneration, value capture, and symbolic exhaustion as analytically distinct possibilities within an emerging political economy of the conditions of encounter.

Keywords: symbolic scarcity; generative AI; aesthetic value; relational anchoring; contingency; beauty; existential encounter; aesthetic salience; cultural political economy; luxury; provenance; experiential consumption

Discussion Paper Note

This paper is a conceptual and exploratory inquiry into changing relations among symbolic scarcity, aesthetic value, historically constituted relations, situated encounter, and commercial organization under conditions increasingly shaped by generative artificial intelligence. Its principal concern is a possible transformation in the location and function of scarcity. As aesthetically sophisticated images, prose, styles, atmospheres, and other symbolic forms become easier to generate and circulate, forms of value that previously depended partly upon difficulties of symbolic production may become more dependent upon provenance, place, material history, cultural memory, institutional authentication, embodied presence, and the conditions under which encounters occur.

The expression *erosion of symbolic scarcity* should be interpreted carefully. The paper does not claim that symbolic scarcity has disappeared, that all aesthetic symbols have become equally reproducible, or that generative artificial intelligence affects every cultural field in the same manner. Scarcity can remain operative through skill, access, authentication, distribution, legal control, reputation, institutional recognition, attention, and other conditions even when the technical production of a plausible representation becomes inexpensive. The present inquiry concerns an uneven historical tendency rather than a universal transition from scarcity to abundance.

The term *symbolic scarcity* refers provisionally to scarcity associated with the production, circulation, recognition, authentication, or controlled availability of symbolic forms. These forms can include images, styles, narratives, aesthetic vocabularies, cultural signs, prestige-bearing representations, and other forms through which aesthetic or social difference becomes perceptible. Different mechanisms of symbolic scarcity should remain analytically distinct. A rare visual form, a legally protected sign, an institutionally authenticated work, and a culturally restricted symbol can all be scarce for different reasons.

Generative artificial intelligence is relevant because it substantially alters some conditions of symbolic production. Aesthetic appearance can increasingly be generated without reproducing the material, institutional, social, or historical process with which similar appearances were previously associated. The resulting transformation is therefore examined partly through a distinction between manifest appearance and operative history. A representation can display features associated with luxury, craftsmanship, tradition, cultural depth, or artistic sophistication without possessing the historical relations through which such features acquired their earlier significance.

The paper consequently examines the possibility of *relational anchoring*. This term refers provisionally to the coupling of a reproducible symbolic form with histories, places, material practices, institutions, memories, cultural repertoires, relations, or encounters that are less readily substitutable than the appearance itself. Relational anchoring does not imply that the relevant relation is intrinsically authentic, valuable, or resistant to commercialization. It identifies an analytical process through which the credibility, distinctiveness, or salience of a symbol can depend upon relations that extend beyond its immediately perceptible form.

The relevant relations can be personal, collective, historical, institutional, spatial, material, or cultural. A brand archive, a craft tradition, a historical district, a museum, an inherited cultural repertoire, a repeated social ritual, a shared memory, or a particular place can each provide different forms of anchoring. These cases should not be collapsed into a single category of “authenticity.” Their histories, modes of recognition, conditions of access, and relations to commercial value can differ substantially.

The concept of *shared relational history* is used where a broader social history participates in the significance of a present symbol or encounter. Such a history need not have been personally experienced by every participant. A city, craft tradition, cultural repertoire, institution, or historical event can remain socially operative through archives, practices, narratives, material traces, collective

memory, education, ritual, and repeated recognition. The paper therefore distinguishes shared relational history from identical subjective experience.

Three concepts organize the philosophical movement of the paper: *contingency*, *beauty*, and *existential encounter*. These concepts are connected without being treated as stages of a necessary sequence. A contingent encounter need not become aesthetically salient, and an aesthetically salient experience need not acquire existential significance. The paper examines the conditions under which such transitions can occur and

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Statement on the use of language models. The exploratory discussions and preparation of this paper involved OpenAI’s ChatGPT. ChatGPT supported exploratory dialogue, formal reconstruction, source discovery followed by website verification, exact calculation, argumentative criticism, and drafting in L^AT_EX. The author selected the research questions, directed and approved the theoretical commitments and epistemic status of the claims, and bears sole responsibility for the manuscript, including its definitions, formal constructions, taxonomy, calculations, arguments, conclusions, and errors. Authorship credit remains with the human author. The access level and claim limit for every cited source are recorded in the accompanying literature audit.

1 Introduction

This section introduces the historical problem examined in the paper, defines the initial research question, and specifies the limits of the proposed argument. The inquiry begins from a change in the conditions of symbolic production associated with generative artificial intelligence and asks how that change may alter the relative importance of history, relation, place, materiality, and situated encounter within aesthetic and commercial value formation. The argument remains deliberately conditional. Generative artificial intelligence does not remove scarcity from cultural production, and the commercial organization of aesthetic experience substantially predates its emergence. The present problem concerns whether established practices acquire different functions when some forms of aesthetic representation become easier to produce and circulate.

1.1 Research Context

Generative artificial intelligence has substantially altered the practical conditions under which symbolic products can be produced. Text, images, design proposals, stylistic variations, advertising language, and other forms of symbolic articulation can increasingly be generated through systems that reduce the time or specialized effort required for at least some production tasks. Experimental research on professional writing has demonstrated large reductions in task completion time together with improvements in evaluated output quality under generative-AI assistance [55]. Research on creative writing similarly indicates that access to generative-AI ideas can improve evaluations of individual outputs while also increasing similarity across outputs [25]. These findings do not establish a general law of aesthetic abundance. They nevertheless provide evidence that generative systems can alter the cost, accessibility, and distribution of capacities that previously contributed to differences in symbolic production.

The resulting historical situation extends beyond the possibility that more images or texts can be produced. Aesthetic sophistication itself can become less reliable as an indicator of the process through which a symbolic object was produced. A polished image need not imply prolonged artistic labor. A stylistically refined text need not imply a corresponding history of reading, writing, or conceptual development. Representations associated with luxury, heritage, craftsmanship, philosophical depth, or cultural refinement can be generated without reproducing the material and historical relations from which similar forms previously derived part of their significance.

This development belongs to a longer history of technological reproducibility. Benjamin’s analysis of mechanical reproduction already placed uniqueness, presence, authenticity, and the historical situation of the artwork at the center of a transformation in aesthetic experience [6]. Generative artificial intelligence introduces a different technical condition. Its relevance for the present paper lies less in reproduction of an existing original than in the capacity to synthesize indefinitely many new manifestations that can resemble established aesthetic grammars. The problem is therefore not exhausted by the relation between an original and its copy. It also concerns the relation between a persuasive appearance and the history, material process, institution, place, or social relation that the appearance appears to signify.

This distinction becomes politically and economically relevant when aesthetic difference contributes to value. Taste and aesthetic classification have long participated in social differentiation, cultural hierarchy, and symbolic power [14]. Commercial actors have likewise organized experiences, environments, and memorable encounters as sources of economic differentiation for decades [61]. Public art in commercial space, heritage narratives, craft demonstrations, exhibitions, flagship architecture, experiential retail, destination environments, and luxury storytelling are therefore not practices created by generative artificial intelligence.

The historical problem examined here concerns their possible change in relative function. A practice that originally contributed to value within one scarcity regime can continue to exist while becoming important for different reasons within another. If aesthetically sophisticated representation becomes more accessible, the differentiating force of appearance alone may weaken in some domains. Under those conditions, value may become more dependent upon credible relations between a symbol and a particular history, place, institution, material practice, cultural memory, or embodied encounter. The paper refers provisionally to this process as *relational anchoring*.

Relational anchoring describes the coupling of symbolic forms with relations whose histories cannot be reproduced merely by generating another plausible representation. A visual language associated with craftsmanship can be simulated, while a particular craft lineage has a historical trajectory. A luxury-like image can be generated, while the provenance of a specific object depends upon material, institutional, and documentary relations. An image of a city can be synthesized, while being present in a historically constituted urban field involves a different configuration of space, movement, memory, institutions, persons, and contingency. The distinction is one of operative history rather than an automatic hierarchy between “real” and “artificial” aesthetic value.

This shift also raises a second problem. Commercial actors can draw upon cultural histories, places, craft traditions, collective memories, and institutional forms that were not generated by a single firm. Such relations can contribute to the differentiation and authentication of commercial symbols. At the same time, commercial participation can provide resources for preservation, circulation, exhibition, interpretation, and renewed cultural encounter. The relation between commercial anchoring and cultural development therefore admits multiple trajectories. Increased circulation can sustain cultural generativity, while extensive repetition can also contribute to symbolic saturation and declining affective salience. The paper treats these possibilities as analytically distinct rather than assigning a predetermined normative direction to commercial-cultural coupling.

1.2 Research Problem

The central problem of the paper concerns the changing relation among symbolic scarcity, aesthetic experience, and the conditions of encounter. The initial hypothesis is that the erosion of some forms of symbolic production scarcity may increase the relative importance of relations that remain less readily substitutable: historical provenance, material continuity, institutional recognition, place, embodied presence, social memory, temporal uniqueness, and contingent encounter.

This formulation modifies a simpler account in which symbolic scarcity merely “moves” from representations to experiences. Symbols remain economically and culturally important under conditions of abundance. The relevant scarcity can instead arise from the credibility of the relation between a symbol and the history to which it is attached. What becomes difficult to substitute may be neither the sign alone nor the historical field alone, but the socially recognized coupling between them.

The paper develops this problem around three philosophical dimensions: *contingency*, *beauty*, and *existential encounter*. These dimensions provide the conceptual thread through the later political-economic analysis.

Contingency concerns the fact that significant encounters are not fully reducible to predetermined outcomes. A commercial or cultural environment can organize space, access, objects, routes, timing, attention, and forms of curation, yet it cannot specify in advance the complete significance that an encounter will acquire for a particular person. A person’s response depends upon memories, prior relations, expectations, cultural repertoires, bodily states, and other historically constituted conditions. The paper therefore examines the organization of the *conditions* and *probabilities* of encounter rather than assuming that significance itself can be manufactured.

Beauty enters the argument through the narrower concept of aesthetic salience. The paper does not seek to establish a general definition of beauty. Its interest lies in the process through which something encountered becomes affectively, perceptually, or reflectively differentiated. Aesthetic salience can depend upon formal properties, but it can also emerge through memory, history, materiality, atmosphere, place, interpersonal relation, cultural recognition, or temporal coincidence. This makes aesthetic experience a useful domain for examining the difference between a reproducible manifestation and the broader relational conditions through which that manifestation becomes significant.

Existential encounter identifies a further possibility. Some encounters become connected to an intensified awareness of presence, temporality, situatedness, relation, or being alive. Such experiences need not follow from aesthetic salience, and no commercial setting can guarantee their occurrence. Their relevance to political economy emerges when commercial-cultural practices explicitly organize or articulate conditions associated with feeling, presence, memory, life, authenticity, and meaningful encounter. The resulting problem concerns the extent to which economic actors can organize access to conditions under which existential salience may emerge while the event itself remains contingent.

On this basis, the paper asks how AI-mediated changes in symbolic production may alter the political economy of aesthetic differentiation. More specifically, it examines whether reproducible symbols become increasingly anchored to less substitutable historical, relational, material, spatial, and institutional conditions; whether commercial spaces can organize the landscapes in which aesthetically and existentially salient encounters become possible; and whether extensive mobilization of culture and history can eventually weaken the differentiating or affective force of the resources used for such anchoring.

The paper also considers a recursive possibility. When a layer of symbolic difference becomes easier to reproduce, economic actors operating under competitive pressures may seek differentiation through another layer, such as provenance, heritage, place, craft, social recognition, or experience. If that layer subsequently becomes extensively mobilized through similar commercial forms, its capacity to generate distinction or affective novelty can also decline. This possibility will be examined as a conditional process of recursive scarcity transformation rather than as a general law of capitalist development.

1.3 Scope and Analytical Commitments

The paper is a conceptual and interpretive study supported by comparative analysis of publicly observable commercial-cultural practices. Its primary objective is to construct and test a vocabulary for examining changing scarcity conditions. It does not attempt to estimate the aggregate economic magnitude of symbolic scarcity, measure a general decline in aesthetic scarcity, or establish a universal causal effect of generative artificial intelligence across cultural industries.

Several distinctions govern the analysis.

First, technical reproducibility, economic abundance, social accessibility, and institutional legitimacy are treated separately. Generative AI can reduce the technical difficulty of producing particular symbolic forms while access, attention, legal control, reputation, authentication, or institutional recognition remain scarce.

Second, appearance and provenance are analytically distinct. A generated object can possess aesthetic or cultural value without possessing the historical relations associated with another object that it resembles. Conversely, historical provenance does not guarantee aesthetic significance for a particular observer. The analysis therefore avoids treating history as an automatic source of superior value.

Third, observable practice, functional interpretation, and actor intention are kept separate.

Publicly available exhibitions, campaign texts, spatial arrangements, institutional collaborations, heritage narratives, and other materials can establish what an organization publicly presents. Their interpretation within a changing scarcity regime is an analytical operation. Claims about the private motives of the organizations involved require different evidence and fall outside the principal purpose of the case analysis.

Fourth, organization, governance, enclosure, capture, appropriation, and extraction are not used as synonyms. An actor can organize a cultural or commercial environment without enclosing it. Economic value can emerge from an encounter without establishing extraction. Stronger political-economic classifications require evidence concerning control, asymmetry, exclusion, appropriation, depletion, dispossession, or related mechanisms. The paper therefore begins from the more neutral concepts of organization, coupling, anchoring, authentication, and value formation.

Fifth, commercial-cultural coupling is allowed both regenerative and exhaustive possibilities. Commercial resources can increase public access to art, sustain craft practices, support exhibitions, preserve archives, and generate new cross-cultural encounters. Repetition can also contribute to saturation, standardization, or declining affective salience. The paper investigates the conditions under which these trajectories become plausible rather than presuming either outcome.

The contemporary examples considered later in the paper are used as interpretive cases rather than representative samples of entire industries. They include practices in luxury, department-store galleries, public art, heritage-oriented exhibitions, and urban commercial-cultural space. Their purpose is to make visible different relations among aesthetic symbols, history, materiality, institutions, place, cultural memory, and encounter. The analysis remains directed toward the structure of the practices rather than toward evaluation of particular firms.

Finally, the phrase *erosion of symbolic scarcity* remains a hypothesis with specified limits. The paper does not claim that symbolic scarcity is disappearing or that relational and experiential scarcity will replace it. The working proposition is narrower: changes in the production conditions of some aesthetic symbols may alter the relative weight of different sources of scarcity and thereby change the historical functions of practices that already existed before generative AI.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of the paper proceeds in four broad movements. The first develops the philosophical and political-economic background required to distinguish aesthetic representation, situated encounter, historical presence, and existential salience. The discussion places contemporary concerns about generative AI within longer debates concerning aesthetic value, embodiment, contingency, authenticity, distinction, cultural capital, experiential consumption, and the economic organization of culture.

The second movement examines symbolic scarcity itself. It distinguishes different sources of scarcity, considers which of them generative AI can plausibly weaken, and develops relational anchoring as a way to analyze the growing importance that can attach to provenance, history, material practice, place, institutions, and socially recognized relations. Particular attention is given to the possibility that the scarce relation is an authenticated coupling between a reproducible symbol and a less substitutable historical field.

The third movement turns to contingency, beauty, and existential encounter. It examines prepared susceptibility, curated environments, aesthetic salience, embodied and situated experience, and the limited sense in which the probability landscape of encounter can be organized. This part also considers the growing capacity of computational systems to model preference, affect, and behavior, while maintaining a distinction between such modeling and a stronger capacity to predict the historically constituted susceptibility through which an event becomes personally significant.

The fourth movement uses publicly observable cases from commercial-cultural and luxury contexts to examine how these processes appear in practice. The cases are compared according to the forms of anchoring they make visible, including historical and cultural anchoring, material and craft provenance, institutional authentication, situated encounter, and explicit articulation of aesthetic experience with temporality or living. The final sections return to the broader political economy of changing scarcity regimes and consider cultural regeneration, symbolic saturation, value formation, recursive scarcity transformation, and the limits of the proposed framework.

2 Philosophical Foundations of Encounter

This section establishes the philosophical vocabulary required for the later analysis of changing scarcity conditions. Its purpose is limited. The paper does not attempt to resolve the general philosophical problems of beauty, aesthetic judgment, embodiment, contingency, authenticity, or existence. Instead, it identifies a set of distinctions needed to understand why an aesthetic representation cannot be treated as equivalent to the encounter through which that representation becomes significant for a historically situated subject. The discussion proceeds from aesthetic judgment and experience toward embodiment, situated existence, contingency, temporality, and presence. These resources provide the basis for the paper's later distinction among symbolic manifestation, relational anchoring, aesthetic salience, and existential encounter.

2.1 Aesthetic Value and the Location of Beauty

The political economy developed later in this paper depends upon a prior philosophical difficulty: aesthetic value cannot be located straightforwardly either in a symbolic object considered independently of experience or in an arbitrary subjective response detached from what is encountered. Modern aesthetics has repeatedly confronted this tension. Kant's analysis of the judgment of taste is especially important because it places aesthetic judgment within subjective feeling while retaining a claim that exceeds private preference [43]. A judgment of beauty is grounded in a subject's feeling of pleasure and cannot be demonstrated through a determinate concept in the manner of an ordinary cognitive judgment. At the same time, it is presented with a demand for a form of communicability or agreement that distinguishes it from merely idiosyncratic liking.

This tension matters for the present inquiry because it already makes aesthetic value difficult to reduce to possession of a visible property. A symbol can be described in terms of color, composition, linguistic style, material form, or other perceptible characteristics, yet such description does not by itself exhaust the conditions under which the symbol is judged beautiful. The aesthetic relation includes a perceiving and judging subject, while the subject's response remains directed toward something encountered. The paper therefore begins without assuming either an objectivist model in which beauty is simply stored inside an object or a voluntarist model in which any response becomes aesthetically equivalent by virtue of being felt.

Kant's emphasis on disinterested judgment also establishes a productive tension with the commercial contexts examined later. In the Kantian account, a pure judgment of beauty is distinguished from pleasure grounded in possession, utility, appetite, or other interests [43]. Commercial aesthetic environments, however, frequently place aesthetic experience in direct proximity to objects of desire, purchase, prestige, institutional recognition, or social differentiation. The purpose of invoking Kant is not to classify such experiences as aesthetically impure and thereby philosophically inferior. His account instead clarifies that aesthetic pleasure and economic interest can be analytically distinguished even when both participate in a single empirical encounter.

This distinction becomes particularly useful under conditions of generative symbolic abundance. A generated image may possess formal characteristics that support aesthetic appreciation without carrying the material history, provenance, social recognition, or institutional position associated with a different object. Conversely, an authenticated historical object may possess strong provenance without becoming aesthetically salient to a particular observer. Aesthetic quality, historical reality, economic value, and institutional authentication should therefore remain analytically separable.

The paper consequently uses *aesthetic value* as a broad term for forms of value arising through aesthetic judgment or experience, while *aesthetic salience* denotes a narrower phenomenon. Aesthetic salience occurs when something becomes perceptually, affectively, or reflectively distinguished within an experiential field. Salience does not establish beauty in any universal sense. It identifies a transition through which an object, event, atmosphere, relation, or moment becomes capable of sustaining attention and further experience. This narrower concept allows the paper to investigate beauty without requiring a complete theory of what beauty ultimately is.

2.2 Aesthetic Experience, Relation, and Situatedness

A second philosophical movement becomes necessary once aesthetic experience is treated as something that occurs rather than as a property inspection. Dewey's *Art as Experience* provides an important resource because it situates the aesthetic within the temporal organization of experience rather than confining it to a separate class of art objects [22]. An aesthetic experience develops through interaction between an organism and an environment. Its elements acquire unity through temporal accumulation, tension, response, and fulfillment. The resulting experience has a trajectory.

This approach is especially relevant to the present paper because the difference between representation and encounter becomes structurally visible. Encountering an image, walking through a building, listening to music, moving through an exhibition, or seeing evening light in a familiar city involves successive phases through which later moments can acquire significance from earlier ones. The aesthetic event is therefore capable of depending upon relations distributed across time rather than solely upon the immediately present sensory configuration.

Dewey's account also emphasizes the reciprocal structure of doing and undergoing [22]. A subject participates actively in perception, attention, interpretation, and movement while simultaneously being affected by features of the environment that are not reducible to deliberate choice. This reciprocity is important for the paper's later treatment of contingency. Commercial or institutional actors can organize an environment, yet the experience that develops within it includes forms of undergoing whose significance depends upon the participant's own history and the events that occur during the encounter.

Berleant's account of aesthetic engagement further challenges a model in which the appreciator stands at a stable contemplative distance from an isolated art object [7]. Aesthetic engagement emphasizes participation within an experiential field. Architecture, landscape, performance, urban space, and environmental art make this particularly visible because the appreciator's location, movement, orientation, and sensory participation can become constitutive dimensions of aesthetic experience.

This participatory orientation is useful for analysing commercial-cultural spaces. A work suspended in an atrium, a temporary installation encountered while walking through a district, a historical object viewed within a curated exhibition, and an artwork encountered in a department store all involve more than transmission of a detached representation. Spatial organization, proximity, movement, other visitors, surrounding architecture, sound, materiality, and the possibility of unplanned juxtaposition participate in the encounter.

Böhme's theory of atmosphere provides another vocabulary for this distributed structure of

aesthetic experience [11]. Atmosphere directs attention toward the felt quality of a spatial situation and toward the relation between environmental qualities and bodily presence. This approach is particularly relevant to designed commercial and cultural environments because lighting, scale, sound, architecture, material surfaces, spatial openness, density, and movement can participate in an aesthetic field without being reducible to a single symbolic object.

These approaches do not establish that aesthetic value is wholly relational. Formal qualities, techniques, objects, and representations continue to matter. Their relevance to the present paper lies in demonstrating that aesthetic experience can depend upon configurations in which object, perceiver, environment, temporality, and participation are mutually consequential. This provides a philosophical basis for asking why the economic significance of situated environments may change when aesthetically persuasive symbolic representations become easier to produce elsewhere.

2.3 Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Lived Experience

Phenomenology deepens the preceding argument by questioning the picture of a subject who first exists as a detached observer and subsequently receives information from an external world. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception places the lived body within the perceptual field and treats bodily orientation as a basic condition through which a world becomes available [52]. Perception is consequently situated from the beginning. Position, movement, bodily capacity, habit, and prior engagement participate in what can appear and how it can matter.

This perspective is central to the distinction between symbolic access and situated encounter. A representation of a place can transmit visual, linguistic, or auditory information about that place. It does not reproduce the bodily relation involved in standing somewhere, moving through an environment, encountering resistance, turning toward an unexpected stimulus, or sharing a spatial field with other persons. The difference does not imply that mediated experience lacks reality or aesthetic significance. It identifies different structures of access.

Merleau-Ponty's account of the habit body is equally important for the paper's historical orientation. Previous actions and experiences become sedimented in bodily capacities and orientations [52]. The past therefore participates in perception without needing to be explicitly recalled at every moment. A familiar street can be perceived differently from an unfamiliar one. A material, gesture, melody, scent, or architectural form can activate associations formed through earlier experience. The present encounter occurs within a subject whose capacity to perceive has itself been historically formed.

This structure supports the paper's provisional notion of *prepared susceptibility*. Prepared susceptibility does not designate a fixed preference profile. It refers to historically accumulated conditions through which a subject becomes differentially capable of being affected. Education, language, memory, bodily habit, cultural familiarity, interpersonal history, earlier places, and repeated practices can all participate in such susceptibility. Their operation can remain partly tacit.

The phenomenological account therefore complicates any attempt to infer experiential equivalence from observational similarity. Two environments can present similar visible forms while entering differently into a subject's lived world. Conversely, an artificial or mediated environment can become deeply significant when it participates in an operative personal history. The relevant distinction is consequently not between a supposedly genuine physical reality and an inherently deficient representation. It concerns differences among the relations through which an experience becomes situated, embodied, and historically operative.

This point will later constrain the political-economic argument. The scarcity of physical presence cannot automatically be equated with greater aesthetic or existential value. Embodiment and situatedness describe conditions of experience. Their commercial restriction or institutional

authentication can make them economically scarce, while their actual significance remains dependent upon the encounter.

2.4 Existential Thought and Situated Existence

The paper's use of *existential encounter* requires further clarification. The term draws selectively from existential phenomenology while making a more limited claim than a general theory of human existence. Heidegger's *Being and Time* develops an account of human existence through being-in-the-world rather than through the model of an isolated subject facing an external collection of objects [40]. The world in this sense is already structured through involvement, practical significance, relations, possibilities, and temporal orientation.

This perspective matters because existential awareness need not begin with explicit philosophical reflection. Ordinary involvement can be interrupted, intensified, or disclosed in ways that alter how one's situation becomes apparent. Places, objects, other persons, moods, absences, and temporal relations can participate in such disclosure. The present paper takes from this tradition the weaker proposition that a subject's awareness of being situated can vary in intensity and form.

Sartre's phenomenological ontology provides a related vocabulary through the concepts of facticity, situation, temporality, and embodied existence [69]. A person finds himself or herself within conditions that were not simply chosen: a body, a past, a social world, existing relations, and concrete circumstances. These conditions do not mechanically determine the meaning of future action. They nevertheless participate in the situation within which possibilities are encountered.

For the purposes of this paper, these traditions help distinguish *existential salience* from ordinary preference satisfaction. An experience can be pleasant, entertaining, prestigious, or aesthetically impressive without making one's situated existence especially salient. Other encounters can unexpectedly intensify awareness of presence, temporality, finitude, relation, memory, or being alive. A familiar landscape associated with a lost relation, an unexpected piece of music, an encounter with an historical object, or an unplanned event in a city can become significant in this stronger sense.

The term *existential salience* is therefore used descriptively rather than normatively. It does not imply that an experience reveals an authentic inner essence. It also does not imply that experiences lacking existential salience are shallow or inferior. The term identifies a mode in which the fact of one's situated participation in a world becomes unusually prominent within experience.

This qualification is particularly important once commercial practices enter the analysis. Commercial actors can invoke life, authenticity, presence, memory, time, self-discovery, or meaningful experience in public discourse. They can construct environments intended to support sensory or affective engagement. Neither practice establishes control over existential experience. The analytically relevant possibility is narrower: organized environments can participate in the conditions under which awareness of presence or situatedness becomes salient.

The distinction protects the paper from treating existence itself as an economic object. Existence is not the commodity under examination. Commercializable objects include access, location, temporal organization, curation, material objects, institutional authentication, narratives, and other conditions surrounding an encounter. Their relation to existential salience remains mediated by the history and susceptibility of the person who encounters them.

2.5 Contingency, Event, and Encounter

Contingency introduces a limit to the organization of experience. Existential thought emphasizes that human beings find themselves within conditions whose presence cannot be reduced to prior

choice or necessity [69, 40]. The present paper adopts a modest concept of contingency derived from this problem. An encounter is contingent when its concrete occurrence or significance is not fully determined in advance by the immediate intention of the participant or by the organization of the surrounding field.

This definition separates contingency from pure randomness. A person can encounter something unexpectedly while responding through highly structured histories of language, memory, habit, cultural recognition, desire, and prior experience. The contingency lies partly in the conjunction. A particular event occurs at a particular moment to a subject who has become susceptible to it through a history that the event itself did not create.

The resulting structure can be represented schematically as

$$u_t + \Gamma_i(t) \longrightarrow A_i(u_t), \quad (1)$$

where u_t denotes an event encountered at time t , $\Gamma_i(t)$ denotes the historically constituted organization of subject i , and $A_i(u_t)$ denotes the salience that the event acquires for that subject. Equation (1) is not a deterministic model. Its role is to make explicit that the significance of an event cannot be read from the event in isolation.

The same nominal event can therefore produce different experiential trajectories:

$$A_i(u_t) \neq A_j(u_t) \quad (2)$$

when the relevant histories and present organizations differ. A melody associated with a past relation can be deeply moving for one person and unremarkable for another. An urban installation can interrupt one person's ordinary movement while remaining peripheral to another's attention. A historical artifact can activate cultural memory for one visitor and appear as an unfamiliar object to another.

This account creates an important boundary for later claims concerning commercial organization. An institution can curate objects, control access, design routes, arrange lighting, schedule events, recommend destinations, or construct a setting in which unexpected conjunctions become more likely. Such interventions alter the landscape within which encounters occur. They do not specify the complete experiential result.

The distinction can be expressed through the probability of encounter under an organized landscape $\mathcal{L}$:

$$P(u \mid \mathcal{L}), \quad (3)$$

while the significance of the encounter additionally depends upon the historically constituted subject:

$$P(A_i \mid u, \Gamma_i, \mathcal{L}). \quad (4)$$

These expressions do not claim that subjective significance is presently measurable with such precision. They distinguish two analytical objects: the conditions affecting whether an encounter occurs and the conditions affecting what the encounter becomes for a particular subject. The distinction will later support the paper's analysis of curated serendipity and the possible modeling of susceptibility.

Contingency therefore remains compatible with partial organization. A field can be highly designed while containing events whose concrete conjunction and subjective significance remain open. This is the sense in which the paper later speaks of the governance or organization of encounter conditions without treating contingency itself as a manufactured commodity.

2.6 Temporality, Memory, and Affective Salience

The preceding accounts converge on temporality. Dewey describes aesthetic experience as developing through phases whose later moments accumulate and transform what preceded them [22]. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the sedimentation of past activity within bodily orientation [52]. Heidegger places temporality at the center of the structure of existence [40]. Across these otherwise different projects, present experience cannot be understood as a sequence of self-contained instantaneous states.

This is especially important for the paper’s treatment of relational anchoring. A present object can become aesthetically salient through a relation whose formative event lies elsewhere in time. The person connected with that relation may be absent. The original place may have disappeared. A promise, ritual, material trace, melody, object, photograph, or cultural narrative can nevertheless keep an earlier relation operative within present experience.

A simple representation of this structure is

$$E_i(t) = F(u_t, \mathcal{H}_i^{<t}, \Gamma_i(t)), \quad (5)$$

where $E_i(t)$ represents the present experience, u_t the present encounter, and $\mathcal{H}_i^{<t}$ the relevant prior history. The expression does not imply that the entire past determines present experience. It marks the possibility that presently absent relations remain causally or interpretively operative.

The distinction between social absence and relational absence follows from this structure. A person no longer present in one’s life can remain operative in memory. A historical community that no longer exists in its earlier form can remain present through language, architecture, archives, ritual, and material practice. A craft object can acquire significance through a history of production that is not perceptually visible in its entirety. A district can be experienced through personal memory together with public histories accumulated across generations.

The term *affective salience* is used in this paper for the degree to which an encounter becomes capable of interrupting indifference, attracting attention, or producing an affectively differentiated response. The concept is intentionally broader than beauty. Fear, grief, nostalgia, awe, estrangement, tenderness, or surprise can all produce affective salience without being reducible to a judgment of beauty.

Aesthetic salience is consequently treated as a more specific domain within this broader field. An encounter can become aesthetically salient when its perceptual, formal, atmospheric, relational, or temporal configuration becomes a focus of aesthetic attention or appreciation. Existential salience describes a further possible development in which the encounter contributes to a heightened awareness of one’s presence or situated existence.

The paper therefore does not assume a necessary progression from event to beauty to existential significance. The relation is better understood as a set of possible transitions:

$$\text{encounter} \longrightarrow \text{affective salience} \longrightarrow \text{aesthetic salience} \longrightarrow \text{possible existential salience}. \quad (6)$$

Any transition can fail to occur, and aesthetic salience can arise without a preceding consciously recognized affective interruption. The analytical value of Equation (6) lies in distinguishing the objects whose conditions are later examined politically and economically.

2.7 Aura, Presence, and Authenticity

Benjamin’s analysis of technological reproducibility provides a final bridge between the philosophical discussion of encounter and the paper’s political economy of symbolic scarcity. His account of

the artwork under mechanical reproduction connects questions of uniqueness, historical existence, tradition, presence, and reproducibility [6]. The concept of aura is valuable for the present inquiry because it draws attention to forms of significance that depend upon the historically situated existence of an object rather than upon perceptible content alone.

Generative AI changes the technical problem in an important respect. Mechanical reproduction can multiply access to an existing work. Generative systems can additionally synthesize new objects whose manifestations reproduce, combine, or approximate aesthetic grammars associated with existing cultural forms. The resulting problem concerns a growing separation between persuasive manifestation and the historical process that the manifestation may appear to index.

The paper nevertheless avoids treating Benjamin’s aura as interchangeable with *relational anchoring*. Aura belongs to a particular theory of art, modernity, technology, and historical experience. Relational anchoring is used here as a narrower analytical term for the dependence of a symbol’s credibility, differentiation, or significance upon recognizable relations to history, provenance, place, institution, material practice, culture, or encounter. An object can possess strong relational anchoring without being described adequately through aura.

The same caution applies to *authenticity*. Existential philosophy uses authenticity in relation to modes of existence and self-relation, while commercial and cultural discourse often uses the term to refer to provenance, genuineness, continuity, sincerity, heritage, or freedom from imitation. Conflating these senses would create a false passage from authenticated commodities to authentic existence.

The paper therefore distinguishes at least three issues. *Material or provenance authentication* concerns whether an object or practice has the history attributed to it. *Relational authentication* concerns whether a claimed connection among symbol, history, place, institution, or practice is socially recognized as credible. *Existential salience* concerns what an encounter becomes for a situated subject. None of these dimensions guarantees the others.

This distinction becomes especially important in luxury and heritage contexts. A historically authenticated object may be commercially valuable because its material and documentary trajectory cannot be reproduced by generating a visually similar object. The generated object can nevertheless possess aesthetic value of its own. The relevant difference lies in the relations each object can credibly sustain.

The philosophical background developed in this section therefore yields a specific conceptual result for the remainder of the paper. Aesthetic manifestation, historical relation, situated encounter, and existential salience should be analysed as distinct dimensions:

$$\mathcal{M} \neq \mathcal{H} \neq \mathcal{E} \neq \mathcal{X}, \quad (7)$$

where $\mathcal{M}$ denotes manifestational form, $\mathcal{H}$ historically operative relations, $\mathcal{E}$ situated encounter, and $\mathcal{X}$ existential salience. The inequality signs indicate analytical non-equivalence rather than mutual independence. A single aesthetic event can connect all four dimensions.

This distinction prepares the political-economic problem developed in the following sections. If generative technologies alter the scarcity of $\mathcal{M}$, economic differentiation can become increasingly dependent upon credible couplings with $\mathcal{H}$, controlled or curated access to conditions of $\mathcal{E}$, or representations promising the possibility of $\mathcal{X}$. Whether such developments support cultural regeneration, produce new forms of value, contribute to saturation, or enable stronger forms of capture remains an open question for the analysis that follows.

3 Political Economy of Aesthetic and Experiential Value

This section situates the paper’s argument within established accounts of commodification, distinction, aesthetic production, experience, luxury, authenticity, affect, attention, and algorithmic mediation. Its purpose is partly constructive and partly delimitative. Many practices examined later in the paper are not historically new. Art has long been incorporated into commerce, luxury has long depended upon distinction and provenance, brands have long attached commodities to cultural meanings, and firms have deliberately organized experiences for economic purposes. The present inquiry therefore does not derive its contribution from demonstrating that aesthetics, culture, or experience can enter economic value formation. It asks whether these established mechanisms acquire different relative functions when the technical production of aesthetically persuasive symbolic forms becomes substantially easier.

3.1 Commodity, Fetishism, and Symbolic Value

A political economy of aesthetic symbols must begin by distinguishing several forms of value that can become entangled in a commodity. Marx’s analysis of the commodity distinguishes use value from exchange value and develops commodity fetishism to describe a social form in which relations among producers acquire the appearance of relations among things [51]. The importance of this argument for the present paper does not lie in treating aesthetic symbols themselves as fetishes. Its more limited relevance is that the commodity form can obscure the historical and social relations through which an object becomes economically possible and socially intelligible.

This point matters whenever a commodity appears to possess value autonomously. A luxury object can appear to contain prestige, a cultural artifact can appear to contain authenticity, and a branded object can appear to contain a social identity. Such appearances do not imply that the relevant values are unreal. They indicate that values operating through commodities can depend upon wider relations of production, recognition, classification, memory, institution, and circulation.

The distinction becomes more complicated when the signifying capacities of commodities themselves become economically consequential. Baudrillard’s critique of the political economy of the sign extends analysis beyond utility and exchange toward the differential operation of signs in consumption [5]. His account is theoretically distinct from Marx’s analysis and should not be treated as a straightforward continuation of the labor theory of value. It is nevertheless relevant to the problem of goods whose social effectiveness depends upon recognizable differences encoded through style, prestige, fashion, and signification.

For the present argument, *symbolic value* is therefore used cautiously. The term does not designate a homogeneous third substance added to use value and exchange value. It refers more broadly to socially operative value arising through what an object, image, brand, place, or practice signifies within a field of recognition. Such value depends upon interpretable differences. A symbol that cannot be recognized as differing from another cannot perform the same classificatory or differentiating work.

This creates an immediate connection to scarcity. Symbolic differentiation can depend upon scarcity in several ways. The represented object can be materially rare, the skill required to produce a recognizable aesthetic form can be rare, access to the sign can be institutionally restricted, or the social authority to authenticate the sign can be concentrated. Symbolic scarcity therefore cannot be reduced to the number of visible images in circulation.

The emergence of generative AI potentially affects only some of these conditions directly. It can make certain appearances easier to synthesize without automatically reproducing the social relations through which those appearances acquire recognized provenance, institutional authority,

or historical continuity. The distinction between a reproducible sign and the relations that support its social efficacy will become central in subsequent sections.

3.2 Taste, Distinction, and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu’s analysis of taste provides a second indispensable background because it rejects an account of aesthetic preference as socially unconditioned individual choice. In *Distinction*, judgments of taste are situated within relations among class position, education, cultural competence, habitus, and fields of social differentiation [14]. Cultural consumption can therefore function simultaneously as appreciation and social classification.

This account complicates any simple equation between symbolic abundance and the disappearance of distinction. If distinction depended only upon possessing visual forms that others could not reproduce, technical democratization of image production might straightforwardly dissolve it. Bourdieu’s framework suggests otherwise. The capacity to recognize, classify, contextualize, legitimate, and appropriately mobilize cultural forms can itself remain unequally distributed.

Aesthetic scarcity can consequently persist at the level of competence and recognition even when symbolic production becomes abundant. A generated image can reproduce stylistic features associated with an artistic movement without granting its producer or viewer the cultural capital through which those features acquire a specific position within an established field. Likewise, access to an image of a culturally prestigious object does not automatically confer access to the institutions, rituals, social networks, or classificatory authority associated with it.

Bourdieu also provides a warning against treating aesthetic value as something formed only between an isolated subject and an object. Fields of cultural production involve institutions, critics, producers, intermediaries, educational systems, markets, and audiences that participate in defining what counts as legitimate culture. The scarcity relevant to aesthetic value can therefore be institutional and relational rather than merely material.

This perspective will later help distinguish symbolic abundance from *relational abundance*. Generative systems may multiply the availability of recognizable forms while leaving intact, or in some circumstances increasing the relative significance of, the social structures through which those forms are classified and authenticated. The paper’s concept of relational anchoring consequently operates within a field already structured by unequal capacities for recognition and legitimation.

3.3 Aesthetic Capitalism and Cultural Economy

A substantial body of work has already examined the growing integration of aesthetic processes into economic production. Lash and Urry’s account of economies of signs and space emphasizes transformations in which information, images, cultural content, mobility, and spatial organization become deeply interwoven with economic processes [47]. Their analysis is important for the present paper because it makes implausible any claim that an AI-era economy has only recently begun to depend upon signs, culture, or aesthetic differentiation.

Entwistle’s analysis of the aesthetic economy of fashion modelling provides a more empirically focused account of how aesthetic judgments enter economic calculation [26]. Her analysis shows that aesthetic value does not simply exist prior to market organization and subsequently receive a price. Cultural knowledge, institutional relations, professional judgment, selection, and market processes participate in producing and stabilizing what counts as a valued aesthetic form.

Böhme develops a broader critique under the heading of aesthetic capitalism. His account emphasizes the increasing economic significance of staging, atmosphere, and aesthetic enhancement once production exceeds the satisfaction of narrowly construed material needs [12]. Commodities

and environments acquire value through their contribution to the staging of life, while aesthetic labor extends into marketing, design, urban environments, entertainment, and other domains.

The present paper shares with these approaches an interest in aesthetic value as economically organized rather than externally added to an otherwise self-contained economy. It nevertheless addresses a different historical question. The existence of an aesthetic economy does not tell us what happens when technologies capable of synthesizing aesthetically persuasive forms substantially alter the supply conditions of one component of that economy.

A distinction is therefore required between the *aestheticization of economic life* and a *change in the scarcity regime of aesthetic production*. The former long predates generative AI. The latter concerns whether particular forms of visual, linguistic, stylistic, and atmospheric production lose some of their earlier differentiating force when their technical production becomes widely accessible.

Under such conditions, aestheticization need not decline. It may become more extensive while simultaneously depending more heavily upon other sources of difference. Material provenance, institutional authorization, historical continuity, place, embodied access, and cultural specificity can acquire greater relative importance precisely because aesthetic appearance remains economically important while becoming easier to imitate.

The paper therefore does not propose a transition from an industrial economy to an aesthetic economy. It asks about transformations *within* already aestheticized economies.

3.4 Experience Economy and Experiential Consumption

The experience-economy literature presents an especially important novelty boundary for the present argument. Pine and Gilmore argued in the late 1990s that firms could differentiate themselves by staging memorable experiences rather than limiting their offerings to commodities, goods, or services [61]. Their framework explicitly treats experience as an economic offering and emphasizes forms of engagement extending across emotional, physical, intellectual, and other dimensions.

The commercial organization of experience is therefore not a consequence of generative AI. Retail environments, tourism, hospitality, entertainment, theme parks, exhibitions, flagship stores, and destination consumption have long been designed around participation, atmosphere, memory, and staged encounter. Any argument that contemporary capital has newly “discovered” experience would ignore a mature literature and several decades of practice.

The present paper asks a different question. An established experience-oriented practice can remain formally similar while its relative economic function changes. A commercial space that incorporated art in 2000 and a commercial space that incorporates art after widespread generative image production may both be described within the experience economy. Yet the latter can operate within a different relation between symbolic availability and situated encounter.

The distinction can be represented conceptually as

$$\text{same observable practice} + \text{different scarcity regime} \longrightarrow \text{possible change in relative function.} \quad (8)$$

Equation (8) does not imply that the function must change. It identifies the historical question guiding the empirical cases later in the paper.

The experience-economy literature also tends to begin from the perspective of the firm’s offering. The present inquiry gives greater attention to what remains outside direct production by the firm. A company can design a setting, arrange an exhibition, control admission, select objects, or construct a route through a space. It cannot fully specify the memories, relational histories, associations, or contingent events through which the resulting experience becomes significant for a particular visitor.

This difference motivates the later distinction between *staging an experience* and *organizing conditions of encounter*. The first term is well established. The second is introduced to preserve the indeterminacy that arises when experience depends upon historically constituted subjects and contingent relations.

3.5 Luxury, Scarcity, and Symbolic Consumption

Luxury provides an especially revealing domain because scarcity and differentiation have long been explicit components of luxury value. Veblen’s analysis of conspicuous consumption showed that goods can participate in visible social differentiation through their association with pecuniary capacity and status [74]. Although contemporary luxury cannot be reduced to conspicuous consumption, Veblen remains important for demonstrating that the social efficacy of goods can exceed their practical utility.

Contemporary luxury management literature likewise emphasizes controlled distribution, heritage, symbolic differentiation, selectivity, brand history, craft, and forms of restricted accessibility [44]. These mechanisms show why the scarcity of luxury has never depended solely upon the physical rarity of raw materials. Luxury can be scarce through distribution, institutional recognition, production method, provenance, price, social access, or the continuity of an established name.

This multidimensionality prevents an overly simple AI argument. Generative systems can create *luxury-looking* images, language, packaging concepts, and stylistic environments. Such capacities may reduce scarcity at the level of recognizable aesthetic appearance. They do not automatically reproduce the controlled distribution of an object, its material composition, craft history, documented provenance, institutional recognition, or the historical continuity of a maison.

The relevant transformation is therefore unlikely to be

$$\text{symbolic luxury} \longrightarrow \text{experiential luxury}. \quad (9)$$

Luxury already contains symbolic, experiential, material, historical, and relational dimensions. A more defensible hypothesis concerns a change in their relative weighting:

$$\text{Importance (provenance, history, materiality, recognized access)} \uparrow \quad \text{when appearance becomes easier to reproduce} \quad (10)$$

The upward relation in Equation (10) is a hypothesis rather than an empirical result. It identifies what later case analysis should examine.

Luxury is also relevant because aesthetic association itself can affect product evaluation. Hagtvedt and Patrick identify an “art infusion” effect in which the presence of visual art can generate favorable spillover in perceptions of consumer products, including perceptions associated with luxury [35]. This finding establishes another important novelty boundary. The present paper need not demonstrate that art can enhance commercial value. It asks whether the function of such association changes when art-like appearances become easier to produce and when greater differentiation may depend upon the historical, institutional, or situated relations attached to the art encounter.

3.6 Heritage, Provenance, and Authentication

The literature on authenticity comes particularly close to the paper’s concept of relational anchoring and therefore requires careful comparison. Grayson and Martinec distinguish between iconic and indexical forms of authenticity in consumer judgment [34]. An offering can be perceived as authentic because it resembles an expected model or because it is understood to possess a factual or causal

connection to an origin. The distinction is highly relevant to generative AI. Generative systems can become increasingly capable of producing iconic resemblance without thereby reproducing the indexical history associated with a particular artifact.

Beverland’s studies of luxury wine similarly show that consumer perceptions of authenticity can depend upon heritage, place, production method, stylistic consistency, commitment to quality, and narratives concerning the producer [9, 8]. These findings demonstrate that commercial actors were coupling products to history, place, craft, and provenance long before contemporary generative AI.

Relational anchoring therefore should not be presented as the discovery that brands use heritage or that consumers value authenticity. Its proposed analytical role is different in three respects.

First, relational anchoring is broader than perceived authenticity. A symbol can be anchored to a place, institution, shared history, cultural repertoire, or situated event even when no explicit authenticity claim is made.

Second, relational anchoring does not assume that stronger anchoring produces greater value. A historical connection can be ignored, contested, negatively evaluated, or affectively inert.

Third, the concept is introduced within a specific historical problem: technical abundance at the level of symbolic manifestation may alter the relative economic importance of relations that support provenance, authentication, or situated presence.

The distinction between iconicity and indexicality is particularly useful for formulating the problem. If generative AI increases the supply of convincing iconic forms, the ability to establish recognized historical or indexical relations may become relatively more important in domains where provenance matters. The resulting scarce resource can be the authenticated coupling between symbol and history:

$$S \longleftrightarrow \mathcal{H}, \quad (11)$$

where S denotes a symbolic manifestation and $\mathcal{H}$ denotes a socially recognized historical or relational trajectory.

The paper does not assume that this coupling is inherently resistant to commodification. Authentication itself can become an industry, an institution, a legal regime, or a source of rent. The purpose of the distinction is to identify an object of scarcity that cannot be described adequately by counting the number of similar-looking representations in circulation.

3.7 Affect, Attention, and Commercial Experience

Aesthetic and experiential economies also depend upon scarce capacities of the subject. Attention is one such capacity. Davenport and Beck explicitly frame attention as a scarce resource within information-rich economic environments [20]. This problem becomes increasingly relevant when symbolic production expands. An increase in the number of available images, texts, recommendations, and aesthetic propositions does not produce a corresponding increase in the time or attention available to encounter them.

Symbolic abundance can therefore coexist with attentional scarcity:

$$\text{Supply(symbols)} \uparrow, \quad \text{AvailableAttention} \nmid \text{proportionally}. \quad (12)$$

This asymmetry creates incentives to organize not only symbolic production but also visibility, placement, recommendation, temporal interruption, and spatial presence.

Affect introduces another dimension. Ahmed’s account of affective economies emphasizes that emotions should not be understood only as private possessions located inside isolated subjects; affective relations circulate among signs, bodies, objects, and collectivities [2]. Her argument is not a

theory of marketing, and the present paper does not use it as one. Its relevance lies in challenging a model in which the affective significance of a symbol can be explained solely by an intrinsic property of the symbol or an internal state of an individual consumer.

Brands similarly operate through relations extending beyond product functionality. Arvidsson analyzes brands as institutions capable of organizing meaning and transforming dimensions of everyday social and cultural life into economic value [3]. This literature substantially anticipates any broad claim that capital can attach commodities to identity, lifestyle, affect, or social meaning.

The present inquiry therefore focuses more narrowly on a possible change in the objects through which affective differentiation is sustained. When aesthetically persuasive symbolic material becomes abundant, the capacity to command attention or produce affective interruption may depend increasingly upon temporal uniqueness, bodily presence, recognized history, spatial encounter, or personal relevance.

This possibility also creates a bridge between attention and the paper's concept of prepared susceptibility. Attention can be captured through salience, but the same stimulus does not possess identical salience for every person. A history-sensitive system capable of predicting what is likely to affect a particular subject would therefore operate differently from a system that merely maximizes generic visibility. The stronger possibility will be examined later under susceptibility modeling rather than assumed at this stage.

3.8 Art, Retail Space, and Cultural Consumption

The relationship between art and commerce is sufficiently established that it should function as background rather than as the principal contribution of the paper. Visual art can influence consumer evaluation, commercial architecture can acquire cultural functions, galleries can coexist with retail activity, and brands can draw symbolic value from artistic association. The art-infusion research discussed above demonstrates experimentally that visual art can produce favorable evaluative spillovers toward consumer products [35].

Likewise, the experience-economy and aesthetic-economy literatures already make clear that commercial environments can be designed as aesthetic and experiential fields [61, 26, 12]. Accordingly, the later analysis of public art in commercial complexes, department-store exhibitions, luxury exhibitions, and historically embedded retail environments does not ask whether art can support commerce.

The relevant question is historical and comparative:

- What additional function can accessible art, cultural exhibition, historical narration, or craft presentation acquire when sophisticated aesthetic representation itself becomes increasingly abundant?

One possibility is that physical cultural programming provides something that a stream of generated representations does not reproduce automatically: situated co-presence, institutional authorization, material encounter, temporal specificity, and participation in a socially recognized event.

This does not mean that physical exhibition is intrinsically more authentic or valuable than digital experience. It means that its scarcity structure differs. A non-ticketed artwork situated within a commercial building can be visually accessible without being infinitely spatially reproducible as the same event. Its economic relevance may consequently arise indirectly through the place, the institution, repeated visitation, brand association, or a broader field of urban encounter rather than through a direct price charged for viewing the work.

The distinction will matter for the case studies. A freely accessible artwork within a commercial environment should not automatically be described as a commodity sold to the visitor. It can instead function as one component of a larger experiential and relational infrastructure whose economic effects are distributed across attention, place identity, visitation, institutional recognition, and surrounding commercial activity.

This wider structure is one reason the paper prefers the concept of *conditions of encounter* to a model in which every cultural experience must be assigned a direct transaction price.

3.9 Platform Governance, Personalization, and Algorithmic Culture

A final body of literature concerns the computational organization of cultural visibility. Gillespie emphasizes that algorithms embedded in search, recommendation, and information systems participate in determining what is presented as relevant and visible [28]. Algorithms therefore mediate cultural encounter before generative AI enters the problem of content production.

Striphas develops the related concept of algorithmic culture to describe the increasing delegation of cultural processes of sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing to computational systems [73]. This perspective is important because the AI-era political economy examined here is not produced by generative models alone. Generative systems enter an already algorithmically mediated environment in which platforms organize discovery, ranking, recommendation, circulation, and attention.

Two computational transformations should therefore be distinguished:

$$\text{generation of symbolic possibilities} \neq \text{selection of encountered possibilities.} \quad (13)$$

A system can greatly increase the supply of symbolic forms, while a platform or recommender system determines which small subset becomes visible to a particular user. Symbolic abundance can thus coexist with highly concentrated control over encounter pathways.

Personalization adds a further dimension. Recommender systems can use traces of past behavior to alter the future informational environment presented to a user. The resulting process is already more than passive measurement of preference because recommendation participates in constructing the sequence of available encounters. Yet preference prediction should remain distinct from the stronger notion of susceptibility introduced in this paper.

The conventional problem can be represented approximately as

$$P(c \mid \mathbf{p}_i), \quad (14)$$

where c is a predicted choice and $\mathbf{p}_i$ is an inferred user profile. The stronger possibility considered later concerns something closer to

$$P(A_i \mid u, \hat{\Gamma}_i), \quad (15)$$

where A_i denotes an affectively or experientially salient response, u a possible encounter, and $\hat{\Gamma}_i$ an inferred model of the user's historically constituted susceptibility.

Equation (15) describes a conceptual extension, not an empirical claim that contemporary AI systems possess such a complete model. Its purpose is to identify a political-economic threshold. The organization of commercial encounter would change qualitatively if systems could infer not only what a person is likely to click, purchase, or rate positively, but which combinations of place, narrative, history, timing, social context, and aesthetic form are likely to become personally significant.

The literature reviewed in this section therefore establishes a demanding novelty boundary for the remainder of the paper. Commodities have long carried social relations; taste has long produced distinction; economic production has long been aestheticized; firms have long staged experiences;

luxury has long depended upon scarcity and provenance; brands have long mobilized culture and affect; art has long contributed to commercial valuation; and algorithms have long organized cultural visibility.

The paper’s proposed contribution must consequently be located elsewhere. It concerns the conjunction of these established mechanisms with a changing technical condition of symbolic production. The central question is whether AI-mediated symbolic abundance changes the relative importance of authenticated history, relation, materiality, place, contingent encounter, and subject-specific susceptibility, and whether this transformation modifies the political economy through which aesthetic and potentially existential salience are organized.

4 Analytical Approach and Case Selection

This section specifies how the paper moves from its philosophical and political-economic framework to the interpretation of contemporary commercial-cultural practices. The study combines conceptual reconstruction, historical interpretation, and a structured comparison of a small number of publicly observable cases. The cases are used to examine the plausibility and scope of the proposed mechanisms. They are not treated as a representative sample of firms, luxury markets, retail institutions, or cultural industries.

The principal unit of analysis is consequently a bounded *commercial-cultural practice*: an exhibition, public-art program, campaign, spatial intervention, heritage presentation, or comparable arrangement through which symbolic forms are publicly connected to history, culture, material practice, place, or encounter. The corporation or institution hosting the practice provides its organizational context, but the paper does not infer an organization’s overall strategy or intention from an individual case. This distinction permits identifiable and verifiable public materials to be analyzed while keeping the explanatory focus on structures of symbolic and relational organization.

The methodological design is compatible with the broader use of case studies for theoretically informed inquiry, while remaining more limited than a full-scale causal case-study design [?, ?]. The cases are selected because they make theoretically relevant relations unusually visible. Their role is closer to analytical exemplification, comparison, and concept refinement than to statistical estimation. Case-specific knowledge can contribute to theory development without implying population-level representativeness [?].

4.1 Conceptual Reconstruction

The first component of the method is conceptual reconstruction. The paper begins with a proposition concerning changing scarcity conditions:

increasing symbolic reproducibility $\longrightarrow$ possible change in the relative importance of other scarcity conditions. (16)

Equation (16) is intentionally weak. It does not specify which forms of scarcity decline, which forms become more important, or whether any particular commercial practice arises because of generative artificial intelligence. Those questions are separated and examined individually.

The reconstruction proceeds through a series of analytical distinctions developed in the preceding sections. Symbolic manifestation is separated from historical provenance. Aesthetic salience is separated from institutional authentication. Situated encounter is separated from representation of an encounter. Existential salience is separated from ordinary preference or pleasure. Organization of experiential conditions is separated from determination of subjective experience.

These distinctions allow several mechanisms that might otherwise be conflated to be considered independently. The first concerns *symbolic abundance*: the increased technical availability of aesthetically persuasive symbolic forms. The second concerns *relational anchoring*: the connection of symbolic forms to histories, places, institutions, material practices, cultural repertoires, or other relations whose trajectories are not reproduced merely by generating a similar appearance. The third concerns *encounter organization*: the arrangement of spatial, temporal, material, institutional, or attentional conditions under which subjects can encounter particular objects, persons, places, or events. The fourth concerns *salience*: the contingent process through which such an encounter becomes affectively, aesthetically, or existentially significant for a historically constituted subject.

The analysis therefore avoids treating the following sequence as an already established causal chain:

$$\text{AI} \rightarrow \text{symbolic crisis} \rightarrow \text{relational anchoring} \rightarrow \text{existential experience.} \quad (17)$$

Each relation in Equation (17) requires a different kind of evidence. Evidence that generative systems reduce the production cost of some symbolic forms does not demonstrate that a particular organization responded strategically to that development. Evidence that a commercial practice invokes heritage does not demonstrate that the invocation successfully produces aesthetic salience. Evidence of aesthetic salience does not establish existential significance. The paper consequently treats the proposed mechanism as a layered analytical problem rather than a single causal assertion.

A further objective of conceptual reconstruction is to identify the point at which established terminology is already sufficient. Heritage branding, experiential marketing, aesthetic capitalism, authenticity, public art, cultural capital, attention economy, and algorithmic recommendation already describe substantial portions of the empirical field. A new concept is retained only where it identifies a relation that remains analytically useful after comparison with these literatures. *Relational anchoring*, for example, is useful only if it captures more than the established observation that commercial actors invoke heritage. Its proposed function is to identify a changing dependence of reproducible manifestations upon credible relations to less readily substitutable historical, material, institutional, spatial, or cultural trajectories.

The conceptual analysis is therefore revisionary in a limited sense. The paper does not seek to replace established theories with a comprehensive new framework. Concepts are introduced provisionally, compared with existing vocabularies, narrowed where overlap is substantial, and abandoned where they do not add analytical resolution.

4.2 Historical Interpretation of Changing Scarcity Conditions

The second component of the method concerns historical interpretation. Commercial art, experiential retail, heritage narration, aesthetic branding, flagship architecture, museum collaborations, and luxury exhibitions existed before the contemporary diffusion of generative artificial intelligence. The mere observation of these practices in the present therefore cannot establish that generative AI caused them.

The historical claim examined by the paper is different. An established practice can persist across technological periods while changing in its *relative function* within a broader regime of scarcity. The relevant analytical structure is:

$$\mathcal{P} \mid \mathcal{S}_{t_1} \quad \longrightarrow \quad \mathcal{P} \mid \mathcal{S}_{t_2}, \quad (18)$$

where $\mathcal{P}$ denotes an observable practice and $\mathcal{S}_{t_1}$ and $\mathcal{S}_{t_2}$ denote different surrounding scarcity conditions. The practice can remain recognizable while its relation to differentiation, authentication,

attention, or value formation changes.

This approach requires particular caution with historical causality. The paper does not infer a post-AI transformation merely because a contemporary case fits the proposed theory. Where possible, present practices are interpreted against evidence of their pre-existing institutional and commercial forms. Evidence of continuity is analytically important because it prevents the contemporary appearance of a familiar practice from being mistaken for technological novelty.

Three different historical propositions are therefore kept separate.

The first is a proposition of *technical change*: generative artificial intelligence alters the production conditions of some aesthetic and symbolic forms.

The second is a proposition of *relative functional change*: established forms of heritage, authentication, cultural association, material presence, or situated encounter may acquire greater relative importance when comparable manifestational forms become easier to produce.

The third is a proposition of *organizational response*: particular firms or institutions deliberately modify their strategies because of that technical change.

The present study can investigate the first proposition through external research on generative AI and symbolic production. It can assess the plausibility of the second through conceptual reasoning, historical comparison, and contemporary cases. The third proposition requires stronger evidence, such as internal documents, longitudinal strategy materials, interviews, or explicit public statements connecting organizational decisions to generative AI. In the absence of such evidence, the paper does not attribute this intention to the organizations examined.

This distinction also applies to the proposed recursive crisis of cultural symbols. Contemporary use of heritage, craft, culture, memory, and historical language cannot by itself demonstrate cultural saturation. The paper can identify conditions under which extensive repetition might weaken differentiation or affective salience, but establishing a long-term decline in cultural responsiveness would require longitudinal audience research beyond the present design.

The historical analysis is therefore directed toward a more modest problem: whether the transformation of symbolic production makes previously established forms of historical, cultural, material, and situated differentiation newly important to the interpretation of contemporary commercial-cultural practice.

4.3 Comparative Case Logic

The empirical component adopts a structured comparative logic. Comparative case analysis is useful when the same theoretically specified questions are applied across heterogeneous cases in order to identify similarities, differences, and limits of a proposed mechanism [?]. The present comparison does not seek to isolate a single causal variable. It asks whether different practices exhibit distinct forms of relational anchoring and encounter organization, and whether those differences clarify the conceptual framework.

Each case is therefore examined through the same analytical dimensions. Table 1 summarizes the principal questions.

The final row is methodologically important. A case is not taken as support for the paper merely because it can be described through the vocabulary of relational anchoring. The analysis also asks whether established theories offer a sufficient explanation. If an observed practice can be understood fully through conventional heritage marketing or experiential retail without any additional relevance from changing symbolic production conditions, the case does not provide strong evidence for the proposed historical extension.

The comparison consequently operates at several levels. Within each case, the paper reconstructs the relation among symbolic manifestation, historical or cultural anchoring, spatial organization,

Table 1: Analytical dimensions used in the comparative case analysis

Dimension	Analytical question	Primary empirical trace
Symbolic manifestation	What aesthetic, cultural, or prestige-bearing forms are publicly presented?	Images, texts, exhibition design, campaign language, objects, and visual programs.
Relational anchoring	To which histories, places, cultural repertoires, institutions, materials, or practices are the symbolic forms connected?	Heritage narratives, archives, provenance, craft descriptions, cultural references, institutional partnerships, and place-based narratives.
Authentication	How is the connection between symbol and history made publicly credible?	Documented provenance, institutional authority, named artists or craftspeople, historical objects, curatorial structures, and recognized locations.
Situated encounter	Which forms of bodily presence, movement, temporal participation, or spatial access are organized?	Exhibition sites, public-art locations, routes, installations, schedules, physical objects, and access arrangements.
Aesthetic and existential articulation	Does the public discourse explicitly connect the practice to feeling, beauty, memory, temporality, presence, life, or comparable experiential categories?	Official descriptions, curatorial statements, campaign texts, and artist or institutional statements.
Commercial relation	How is the cultural or aesthetic practice situated in relation to commercial activity?	Retail setting, product availability, sponsorship, brand association, commercial venue, hospitality, or surrounding consumption infrastructure.
Historical continuity	Which relevant elements clearly predate the present generative-AI period?	Earlier exhibitions, heritage practices, institutional history, archived programs, established forms of experiential retail, and secondary literature.
Alternative interpretation	Which established explanation can account for the practice without invoking a change in symbolic scarcity?	Experience economy, art infusion, brand heritage, authenticity, cultural capital, urban place-making, public relations, or other established mechanisms.

and commercial context. Across cases, it examines whether different kinds of anchoring recur. At the theoretical level, the comparison evaluates whether these practices become more intelligible when situated within a changing scarcity regime.

The cases also differ deliberately in the degree to which art is directly commodified. Some settings contain artworks or cultural programs embedded in a broader commercial environment. Others involve works explicitly offered for sale. Still others involve exhibitions organized by luxury brands within cultural institutions. This variation is useful because it prevents *commercialization* from being treated as a single transaction form.

A further distinction concerns the location of economic value. A visitor may encounter an artwork without purchasing it. The surrounding institution can nevertheless obtain value through place identity, visitation, attention, institutional association, brand recognition, or longer-term relational effects. The comparative method therefore does not assume that every commercially relevant cultural encounter must have a direct ticket price or immediate commodity transaction.

4.4 Selection of Ginza and Luxury Cases

Case selection is theoretically purposive. The cases were chosen because they make different components of the proposed mechanism observable within a relatively concentrated empirical field. Purposeful selection of information- rich cases is compatible with exploratory and theory-refining case research, provided that the resulting cases are not presented as statistically representative [?, ?].

Ginza provides a particularly useful field for this purpose because commercial activity, luxury retail, department stores, architecture, galleries, public art, historical identity, pedestrian movement, and cultural programming coexist within a geographically compact urban environment. This concentration permits several different relations among commerce and aesthetic experience to be examined without treating each example as belonging to an entirely unrelated social setting.

The analysis does not treat Ginza itself as a homogeneous actor. It is approached as a historically constituted urban-commercial field containing multiple organizations, publics, institutions, buildings, streets, memories, and cultural practices. The significance of a particular site therefore cannot be attributed to a single corporate producer. This characteristic makes Ginza especially useful for examining the distinction between privately organized symbolic activity and socially accumulated relational history.

The focal Ginza materials represent three different configurations.

The first configuration concerns a heritage retailer’s cultural project in which public language explicitly connects aesthetic feeling, temporality, continuity, and living. Its analytical importance lies primarily in *discursive articulation*: existential vocabulary becomes publicly connected with aesthetic and commercial-cultural practice.

The second concerns public art integrated into a large commercial complex. Its importance lies in *spatial encounter*: art operates within circulation space and can be encountered as part of movement through a commercial environment rather than only through a separately bounded art institution.

The third concerns a department-store gallery in which exhibition, aesthetic experience, cultural mediation, and the sale of artworks coexist. This case is useful for examining the continuum between accessible aesthetic encounter and direct commodity circulation.

These cases are supplemented by a luxury exhibition situated outside Ginza. The inclusion of an international luxury maison’s exhibition in Shanghai provides variation in scale, institutional context, and mode of anchoring. The case places brand history, material craft, archival or heritage objects, contemporary art, and cross-cultural interpretation within an exhibition environment. Its principal analytical relevance concerns historical and cultural authentication rather than the spatial organization of Ginza.

The resulting case set is therefore heterogeneous by design. The cases do not represent four instances of the same corporate behavior. They make visible four different analytical configurations:

$$\begin{aligned} C_1 : & \text{ aesthetic articulation } \leftrightarrow \text{ temporality and living,} \\ C_2 : & \text{ art } \leftrightarrow \text{ commercial spatial encounter,} \\ C_3 : & \text{ exhibition } \leftrightarrow \text{ commodity circulation,} \\ C_4 : & \text{ commercial symbol } \leftrightarrow \text{ heritage, craft, and cultural history.} \end{aligned} \tag{19}$$

These formulations identify the analytical reason for selection. They do not state conclusions about the organizations concerned.

The unit of comparison also remains narrower than the firm. For example, the analysis of a public-art program cannot establish the overall cultural strategy of the commercial complex in

which it appears. An exhibition organized by a luxury maison cannot establish the general political economy of that brand. The relevant case consists of the specific publicly observable arrangement, together with the institutional and historical context necessary to interpret it.

The selection also avoids treating the cases as evidence that generative AI caused contemporary firms to turn toward art, heritage, or experience. Every case is evaluated for continuity with pre-existing practices. The theoretical interest arises from the possibility that old practices can operate within new conditions of symbolic abundance.

The source base prioritizes publicly verifiable materials. These include official exhibition pages, institutional descriptions, curatorial statements, campaign texts, public-art documentation, gallery programs, archival materials, and relevant secondary scholarship. Corporate and institutional sources are treated as evidence of *public articulation*: they establish what an organization publicly says, displays, or associates. They do not independently establish the effectiveness of the practice, its reception by visitors, or the private intention that produced it.

Where Japanese or Chinese materials are quoted in the final case analysis, the original wording should be preserved where analytically important, accompanied by an English translation. Translation is treated as interpretation, and conceptually consequential terms such as “feeling,” “living,” “beauty,” “encounter,” “history,” or “culture” should not be silently strengthened into the paper’s own theoretical vocabulary.

Dynamic webpages also create a documentation problem. Event pages can be revised or removed after an exhibition ends. The final manuscript should therefore record publication or event dates where available, access dates, and archival copies where practicable. Screenshots and personal observations can assist in locating or contextualizing materials, but factual claims in the published argument should rely whenever possible upon stable and independently verifiable sources.

4.5 Limits of the Empirical Material

The empirical design imposes several limits upon the conclusions that can be drawn.

The first concerns selection. The cases were chosen because the relations among art, history, culture, commerce, and encounter are unusually visible. This selection makes them useful for concept development, but it prevents inference about the prevalence of the proposed mechanism across firms or sectors. The study cannot estimate how common relational anchoring has become or whether its frequency has increased after the diffusion of generative AI.

The second limitation concerns public-facing sources. Corporate websites, campaign texts, exhibition descriptions, and curatorial statements are themselves forms of strategic or institutional communication. They provide high-quality evidence concerning public articulation, but they are weaker evidence concerning internal motives, financial effects, audience reception, or organizational decision-making. The paper consequently avoids inferring private intention from public discourse.

This evidentiary distinction can be summarized as:

$$\text{public articulation} \neq \text{organizational intention} \neq \text{audience effect}. \quad (20)$$

The third limitation concerns consumer experience. The present research does not include interviews, surveys, physiological measures, behavioral tracking, or experimental observation of visitors. It therefore cannot establish that a particular exhibition actually produced aesthetic salience, existential salience, increased attachment to a brand, or subsequent consumption. When the paper discusses the *conditions* of encounter, it describes an organized possibility rather than an observed psychological result.

The fourth limitation concerns historical inference. Demonstrating that a practice can acquire a different function under changed scarcity conditions is more difficult than documenting the practice

itself. A robust causal claim would require longitudinal evidence comparing organizational behavior, audience response, and economic value before and after changes in symbolic production. The current study instead develops a historically informed interpretive hypothesis whose stronger implications remain open to later empirical testing.

The fifth limitation concerns geographical and sectoral concentration. Ginza provides an analytically rich urban field, and luxury offers an unusually clear domain in which scarcity, heritage, authentication, and symbolic distinction interact. These advantages also restrict generalization. Cultural institutions, mass-market retail, digital-native brands, entertainment platforms, religious tourism, hospitality, and other domains can organize symbolic and experiential value differently.

The sixth limitation concerns the paper’s use of *existential salience*. The empirical cases can document public language concerning feeling, living, time, memory, presence, or encounter. They cannot establish that existential experience occurred in the philosophical sense developed in Section 2. The cases are therefore used to study the commercial and cultural *articulation* and *organization* of conditions associated with existential salience.

The seventh limitation concerns normative inference. Commercial involvement with art, history, craft, or cultural memory does not by itself demonstrate appropriation or extraction. The cases may involve preservation, financing, public access, cultural circulation, artistic production, or cross-cultural exchange alongside commercial value formation. Normative categories must therefore be supported by additional evidence concerning asymmetry, exclusion, depletion, control, or distribution of generated value.

Finally, the proposed historical interpretation remains vulnerable to rival explanations. Increased investment in physical experience could arise from post-pandemic changes in urban consumption, competition among retail spaces, tourism, shifts in luxury strategy, institutional cultural policy, demographic change, or other developments independent of generative AI. Heritage and authenticity may become economically important for reasons unrelated to symbolic abundance. The case analysis therefore asks whether AI-mediated changes in symbolic production add explanatory value after these established mechanisms are considered.

These limitations define the appropriate evidentiary ambition of the paper. The cases can reveal structures, refine concepts, identify tensions, and test the internal plausibility of a proposed political economy of changing scarcity. They cannot by themselves establish a universal historical transition. The strongest defensible contribution at this stage is consequently conditional: if some forms of aesthetic manifestation become substantially more reproducible, the cases help clarify why historically authenticated relations, material provenance, situated encounter, and subject-specific salience may become increasingly important objects of economic and cultural organization.

5 Generative AI and the Erosion of Symbolic Scarcity

This section specifies the form of scarcity whose possible transformation motivates the paper. The phrase *erosion of symbolic scarcity* does not refer to the disappearance of rarity from cultural or aesthetic life. Symbols can remain scarce because they are difficult to produce, difficult to access, legally controlled, institutionally restricted, socially unrecognized, costly to authenticate, or dependent upon histories that cannot be reproduced by generating another perceptually similar artifact. Generative artificial intelligence directly alters only some of these conditions.

The central proposition of this section is therefore narrower. Generative systems can substantially reduce the technical and economic difficulty of producing some aesthetically persuasive manifestations while leaving other sources of scarcity intact. In some domains, this can weaken the extent to which aesthetic sophistication itself functions as evidence of scarce skill, labor, access, or historical

process. The resulting problem is not a generalized end of symbolic value. It is a possible change in the relation between *appearance* and the scarce conditions that appearance previously helped to indicate.

5.1 Forms of Symbolic Scarcity

Scarcity is often discussed as though it were a property of an object considered in isolation. For symbolic goods, however, several analytically distinct forms of scarcity can coexist. A painting can be unique as a material artifact while its image circulates globally. A design language can be technically easy to imitate while its authorized use remains legally restricted. A cultural symbol can be ubiquitous in visual circulation while the competence required to interpret it remains unevenly distributed. A luxury object can be visually imitable while authenticated examples remain scarce.

The term *symbolic scarcity* is used in this paper for scarcity affecting the production, availability, recognition, authorization, or credible historical attachment of symbolic forms. At least six dimensions are relevant.

Production scarcity concerns the difficulty of producing a symbolic form. It can arise from scarce technical skill, artistic competence, labor time, equipment, specialized knowledge, or access to production resources.

Circulatory scarcity concerns restrictions upon whether and how a symbol can reach an audience. Distribution infrastructure, publication, physical location, platform access, institutional selection, and legal control can all restrict circulation independently of production difficulty.

Attentional scarcity concerns the limited capacity of audiences to notice, interpret, and remain engaged with symbolic materials. An increase in the supply of symbols does not produce a proportional increase in available human attention [20].

Institutional scarcity concerns recognition conferred through museums, galleries, schools, critics, archives, professional organizations, cultural institutions, luxury houses, and other actors possessing classificatory or authenticating authority. Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural fields makes clear that the social value of cultural forms cannot be inferred from their material availability alone [14].

Authentication scarcity concerns the difficulty of establishing a credible connection between an artifact or symbol and a claimed origin, producer, material history, institution, place, or tradition. The distinction between iconic resemblance and indexical connection developed by Grayson and Martinec is especially important here [34]. A form can resemble an expected model without possessing the historical connection that another object possesses.

Finally, *relational-historical scarcity* concerns relations whose particular histories are not freely reproducible. These can include provenance, a craft lineage, the history of a place, participation in a specific event, shared experience, institutional continuity, or a socially recognized cultural history.

These dimensions can reinforce one another, but they need not move together. The central analytical mistake would therefore be to infer

$$\text{greater symbolic supply} \implies \text{disappearance of symbolic scarcity.} \quad (21)$$

A decline in production scarcity can coexist with greater competition for attention, stronger reliance upon authentication, or continued concentration of institutional recognition. The question posed by generative AI concerns the changing configuration among these forms of scarcity.

5.2 Production Scarcity and Circulatory Scarcity

Generative AI most directly alters production scarcity. Text-to-image systems, large language models, audio generators, and related tools allow users to produce symbolic artifacts through

interfaces that automate substantial parts of execution. The resulting change can affect both the cost per artifact and the number of variants that can be generated within a fixed period.

Empirical studies already demonstrate this effect in several bounded domains. Zhou and Lee analyze more than four million artworks produced by over fifty thousand users of an art-sharing platform and find substantial increases in creative productivity following adoption of text-to-image generative AI [77]. Their results also show increased peer-evaluated value among adopters, while average content novelty and visual novelty decline over time. The study therefore supports a change in the volume and organization of creative production without supporting the stronger conclusion that generative AI simply produces more novelty. 0

The economic transformation is particularly visible in visual marketing. Hartmann, Exner, and Domdey compare contemporary text-to-image systems with professionally produced marketing imagery and report that high-performing generated images can compete with, and in their experiments sometimes outperform, human-produced alternatives across aesthetic and marketing measures. Their cost comparison is especially relevant to production scarcity: in one comparison, a DALL-E 3 image costing approximately four cents was set against a nine-dollar professional stock photograph, while freelancer-produced images in another study cost substantially more [37]. 1

These findings provide stronger grounds for speaking of an erosion of *production* scarcity than for speaking of a generalized erosion of symbolic scarcity. They concern particular tasks, systems, periods, and evaluation settings. Production costs can also include prompting, selection, editing, rights management, quality control, integration with other work, and the expertise required to identify useful outputs. The marginal cost of generating an additional candidate image is therefore distinct from the total organizational cost of producing a commercially deployable artifact.

Production abundance also does not imply circulatory abundance. If ten thousand images can be generated where ten images were previously affordable, a user still encounters only a small subset of them. Search systems, recommender systems, social platforms, advertising markets, editorial selection, retail space, and cultural institutions continue to structure which symbolic forms become visible. As discussed in Section 3, generation and selection constitute different economic processes.

The distinction can be represented as

$$C_{\text{generation}} \downarrow \not\Rightarrow C_{\text{attention}} \downarrow \quad \text{OR} \quad C_{\text{recognition}} \downarrow, \quad (22)$$

where the terms denote, respectively, the costs or constraints associated with symbol production, obtaining attention, and securing socially consequential recognition.

Indeed, an increase in production can intensify downstream scarcity. Larger volumes of symbolic content increase the importance of filtering, discovery, ranking, curation, reputation, and attention. The economic significance of a symbol can consequently depend less upon whether it can technically be produced and more upon whether it can enter a consequential relation with audiences, institutions, histories, or places.

5.3 Generative AI and Aesthetic Symbolic Abundance

The phrase *aesthetic symbolic abundance* refers to an increase in the availability of symbolic forms capable of meeting a nontrivial threshold of aesthetic plausibility or sophistication. It does not require every generated artifact to be original, valuable, or beautiful. Nor does it imply that the highest levels of artistic achievement become commonplace. The economically important change can occur at a lower threshold: forms that once required meaningful expenditures of specialized labor can become available to far more producers at far lower marginal cost.

This threshold effect is important because commercial differentiation often depends on comparative rather than absolute aesthetic quality. If polished visual composition, luxury-like imagery,

atmospheric prose, culturally coded design, or stylistically coherent branding were once difficult enough to produce that their presence itself contributed to distinction, expanding access to such capacities can reduce that particular source of difference.

Research on generative AI and creativity provides evidence for precisely this combination of expanded individual capacity and altered aggregate differentiation. Doshi and Hauser find that access to generative-AI ideas improved evaluations of short stories, particularly for less creative writers, while AI-assisted stories became more similar to one another [25]. Their result is important because abundance and homogeneity are compatible. Greater individual ability to reach a satisfactory creative threshold need not produce greater collective diversity. 2

Zhou and Lee identify a related pattern in visual production. Text-to-image AI increased productivity and expanded some dimensions of peak content novelty, while average content novelty and both average and peak visual novelty declined among adopters [77]. The resulting environment is therefore better characterized as a large and rapidly accessible generative possibility space containing substantial convergence than as an unlimited expansion of distinctive aesthetic forms. 3

This distinction prevents the paper from equating abundance with diversity:

$$\text{Abundance}(\mathcal{M}) \neq \text{Diversity}(\mathcal{M}), \quad (23)$$

where $\mathcal{M}$ denotes manifestational forms.

The distinction also matters for scarcity. Generative AI can erode scarcity at the level of competent execution while simultaneously increasing the relative scarcity of highly distinctive ideas, recognized authorship, credible provenance, or sustained attention. A large quantity of aesthetically competent material can therefore coexist with intense competition over the conditions that allow one artifact to matter more than another.

Aesthetic symbolic abundance should consequently be understood as *threshold-specific*. The paper does not argue that masterpieces, historically consequential works, or highly original styles become non-scarce. It proposes that the supply of symbolic forms capable of producing an initial appearance of aesthetic sophistication can increase sufficiently to alter the economic information previously carried by that appearance.

5.4 Uneven Persistence of Symbolic Scarcity

The erosion of production scarcity is uneven across media, tasks, institutions, and forms of value. This unevenness is central to the argument because a generalized claim that “AI makes art abundant” would obscure the scarcity mechanisms that remain operative.

First, technical generation remains heterogeneous. Different symbolic forms require different levels of control, continuity, factual precision, material realization, and iterative coordination. Producing a single plausible image differs from maintaining a coherent visual identity across a complex campaign, producing an architectural environment, fabricating jewelry, restoring an artifact, staging a performance, or creating a materially durable object.

Second, abundance at one quality threshold does not remove scarcity at another. Generative systems can make competent production accessible while exceptional conceptual originality, difficult technical integration, or sustained artistic judgment remain scarce. Zhou and Lee’s finding that human ideation and filtering continue to matter for successful exploration illustrates this point [77].

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Third, symbolic scarcity can be socially produced. A museum can restrict what enters its collection. A luxury house can restrict authorized distribution. A gallery can select which works receive exhibition space. A cultural institution can certify provenance. Intellectual-property regimes

can restrict authorized use even when visual imitation is technically easy. Scarcity can therefore be maintained institutionally after technical reproducibility increases.

Fourth, recognition remains uneven. Bourdieu’s account of cultural production suggests that access to symbolic forms does not dissolve differences in the capacity to classify, legitimate, and mobilize them [14]. An abundance of images associated with an aesthetic tradition need not democratize authority over the tradition’s interpretation.

Fifth, generated abundance can itself create scarcity downstream. When the number of available symbolic forms increases rapidly, credible filtering, trusted recommendation, attention, reputation, and recognizable provenance can become more consequential. The scarcity problem is therefore capable of moving within a chain of production and recognition without disappearing from it.

This suggests that the relevant historical transformation should not be represented by a binary opposition between scarcity and abundance. A more useful representation is a change in a vector of scarcity conditions:

$$\mathbf{S} = (S_{\text{prod}}, S_{\text{circ}}, S_{\text{att}}, S_{\text{inst}}, S_{\text{auth}}, S_{\text{rel}}), \quad (24)$$

where the components represent production, circulation, attention, institutional recognition, authentication, and relational-historical scarcity.

Generative AI can produce a substantial decline in S_{prod} for a class of symbolic forms without implying comparable declines in the remaining components. In some environments, the relative importance of S_{auth} or S_{rel} may consequently increase. This proposition provides a more precise basis for the later analysis of relational anchoring than the claim that scarcity simply migrates from one object to another.

5.5 Appearance, History, and Authentication

The most consequential transformation for the present argument concerns the relation between manifest appearance and production history. Historically, aesthetic sophistication could function, imperfectly, as evidence of scarce conditions behind a symbolic artifact: artistic training, labor time, specialized equipment, professional design, access to skilled production, or participation in an established cultural institution. The inference was never reliable. Copying, industrial reproduction, imitation, and stylistic appropriation long predate generative AI. Generative systems nevertheless increase the scale and ease with which manifestational form can be separated from the specific history an observer might conventionally associate with it.

The relevant distinction is

$$\mathcal{M}(x) \not\approx \mathcal{H}(x), \quad (25)$$

where $\mathcal{M}(x)$ denotes the observable manifestation of x and $\mathcal{H}(x)$ denotes the historical trajectory attributed to it.

A generated image can manifest visual features conventionally associated with expensive photography without having undergone a photographic event. A synthetic image can display motifs associated with painstaking craft without having been materially crafted. A generated text can adopt the linguistic surface of heritage discourse without belonging to the institutional history it describes. None of these facts makes the generated artifact aesthetically valueless. They indicate that appearance alone provides weaker evidence about the process behind the appearance.

Empirical work on the reception of AI-assisted art supports the importance of this distinction. Messer finds that participants evaluated artworks less favorably when they were informed that generative AI had participated in their production, despite the central experimental comparison

holding the visible artifact constant. Perceived authenticity and perceived human effort played important roles in the resulting evaluations [54]. The effect also varied with the role AI played in the creative process and with whether the output was understood as high art or commercial illustration. 5

The result is important for this paper because it demonstrates that evaluation can depend upon attributed genesis in addition to manifestation. Aesthetic response is therefore not exhausted by what can be extracted from pixels considered independently of their history.

Grayson and Martinec’s distinction between iconic and indexical authenticity provides an established conceptual vocabulary for part of this problem [34]. A generated artifact can become increasingly capable of iconic correspondence with culturally recognizable forms, while an indexical claim concerning origin requires a different relation. The paper’s concept of relational anchoring extends this problem beyond authenticity to connections with place, institution, material practice, collective history, or situated encounter.

Under conditions of increasing manifestational abundance, the economically relevant scarce object can therefore become a credible relation:

$$\mathcal{A}_{SH} = \text{Auth}(S, \mathcal{H}), \quad (26)$$

where S is a symbolic form, $\mathcal{H}$ a claimed historical or relational trajectory, and Auth denotes the social and institutional processes through which their connection becomes credible.

Equation (26) does not imply that authentication is objective, politically neutral, or immune to commercialization. Authentication can itself be contested, monopolized, institutionalized, and sold. The point is narrower: technical capacity to produce another similar manifestation does not automatically reproduce an authenticated relation to history.

5.6 The Symbolic Crisis of Differentiation

The expression *symbolic crisis* requires particular restraint. The paper does not suggest that symbols lose meaning, that aesthetic experience disappears, or that generative AI makes cultural distinction impossible. The relevant crisis is one of *differentiating capacity*. A symbolic form can continue to be attractive and meaningful while becoming less effective as evidence of rare production conditions or as a reliable marker separating one producer from many others.

Suppose that aesthetic sophistication once required a sufficiently costly combination of labor, skill, and institutional resources that its visible presence carried information about those scarce conditions. If comparable manifestational sophistication becomes broadly accessible, the informational content of that visible distinction can weaken:

$$\text{Signal}(\mathcal{M}; \text{scarce production history}) \downarrow. \quad (27)$$

The expression is conceptual rather than an empirical measure. It identifies a possible decline in the reliability with which appearance differentiates the history behind appearance.

This possibility is especially plausible in commercial domains where aesthetic quality operates comparatively. Hartmann, Exner, and Domdey’s findings indicate that contemporary text-to-image models can already produce marketing imagery that competes strongly with professional alternatives at dramatically lower generation costs [37]. In such a setting, visual polish alone can become a weaker barrier to entry even while brands, campaigns, and institutions remain highly unequal in recognition and economic power. 6

The resulting pressure does not require firms consciously to identify a “symbolic crisis.” Competitive differentiation can persist through other dimensions that are less easily reproduced. Provenance,

craftsmanship, institutional authority, recognized history, material continuity, access, location, cultural specificity, and embodied participation can all continue to support difference when appearance becomes easier to synthesize.

The provisional historical proposition is therefore:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{declining scarcity of aesthetic manifestation} \\ &\longrightarrow \text{increased potential importance of credible} \\ &\quad \text{historical, institutional, material, and relational difference.} \end{aligned} \tag{28}$$

The arrow in Equation (28) denotes an analytical hypothesis rather than a necessary causal transition. Some markets may continue to differentiate successfully through symbolic form alone. Generative production may itself create new scarce styles. Legal restrictions, technical advances, changing tastes, and institutional innovations can alter the trajectory. The case studies later in the paper therefore cannot be interpreted as evidence of organizational response merely because they display heritage, culture, art, or experiential design.

A further complication concerns cultural saturation. If many actors respond to competitive differentiation by attaching their symbols to heritage, craft, history, place, authenticity, or existential language, those modes of anchoring can themselves become symbolically repetitive. The relation may then develop recursively:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{manifestational abundance} \longrightarrow \text{relational or historical differentiation} \\ &\quad \longrightarrow \text{repeated symbolic mobilization of relation/history} \\ &\quad \longrightarrow \text{possible saturation.} \end{aligned} \tag{29}$$

The final transition remains particularly speculative and will be examined later rather than assumed here. Its importance lies in showing why the paper’s problem cannot end with the discovery of a new scarce resource. If scarcity is socially produced and economically mobilized, the use of one layer of difference can alter the conditions under which that layer remains differentiating.

The main conclusion of this section is consequently more modest than the language of symbolic crisis might initially suggest. Generative AI provides credible evidence of a substantial erosion of production scarcity for some aesthetic symbolic forms. It does not erase symbolic scarcity in general. Instead, it can loosen the historical association between sophisticated appearance and scarce production, while leaving attention, recognition, authentication, provenance, place, materiality, and relational history unevenly scarce. The next section examines the possibility that symbolic forms become increasingly dependent upon these remaining relations through processes of *relational re-anchoring*.

6 Relational Re-Anchoring under Symbolic Abundance

The preceding section argued that generative artificial intelligence can weaken some forms of production scarcity without eliminating scarcity from symbolic life. Aesthetic manifestation can become easier to produce while provenance, institutional recognition, material continuity, place, collective memory, and historically specific relations remain unevenly substitutable. This section develops the concept of *relational re-anchoring* for analysing the resulting configuration.

Relational re-anchoring refers to the process through which a symbolic form derives part of its credibility, differentiation, or salience from a recognized connection to histories, materials, places,

institutions, cultural repertoires, or relations extending beyond the manifest form itself. The prefix *re-* does not imply that every symbol once possessed such an anchor and subsequently lost it. It indicates a possible historical change in relative weight: when manifestational sophistication becomes easier to reproduce, pre-existing relations to history, materiality, place, and institution can acquire renewed or intensified importance.

The concept is deliberately descriptive. Relational anchoring can arise through long institutional continuity, consumer memory, material provenance, cultural association, spatial attachment, curatorial authority, or deliberate commercial practice. It can support cultural transmission, commercial differentiation, public access, exclusion, or several of these simultaneously. The existence of an anchor therefore does not establish authenticity in an existential sense, nor does it establish appropriation or extraction.

The novelty claim is correspondingly limited. Marketing and consumer research have long shown that heritage, authenticity, place, art, memory, and social recognition can strengthen brands and commercial environments. Brand heritage has even been theorized explicitly as a dynamic relation to inherited or borrowed pasts [57]. Research on corporate heritage brands further demonstrates that childhood memories, prior consumer experiences, expectations, shared conventions, and perceived continuity over time participate in judgments of authenticity [66]. The present argument therefore does not claim to discover that commercial symbols can be attached to history. It asks whether such attachment acquires a different political-economic significance when the manifestational layer becomes increasingly reproducible.

6.1 From Scarce Symbols to Scarce Relations

The simplest version of the paper’s hypothesis would describe a movement from symbolic scarcity to relational scarcity. That formulation is useful as an initial intuition but too strong as a description of the underlying process. Symbols do not cease to matter when relations become economically important, and relations do not become scarce merely because symbolic production becomes abundant.

A more precise account concerns the *relative weighting of scarcity*. Suppose that a symbolic form once carried differentiating value partly because producing it required scarce skill, labor, institutional access, or technical resources. If comparable manifestations become easier to generate, the same visual or linguistic form can carry less information about those underlying conditions. Differentiation can then depend more heavily upon features that are not reproduced through manifestational similarity.

This relation can be represented schematically as

$$S_{\text{prod}} \downarrow \not\Rightarrow S_{\text{rel}} \downarrow, \quad (30)$$

where S_{prod} denotes production scarcity and S_{rel} denotes scarcity associated with historically specific relations.

Relational scarcity is not simply numerical rarity. A relation can be non-substitutable even when many formally similar relations exist. Millions of people can visit the same city, yet one person’s history with that city cannot be replaced by another person’s visit. Thousands of objects can be produced by the same craft tradition, yet the provenance of a specific historical object remains path dependent. A cultural practice can be widely shared while its particular historical development remains irreducible to a newly generated representation of the practice.

The relevant property is therefore closer to *path dependence* or *historical non-substitutability* than to rarity in a simple numerical sense. A relation becomes economically significant when

its recognized history cannot be obtained merely by producing another symbol with comparable appearance.

This point modifies the language of scarcity migration. Rather than assuming

$$\text{symbolic scarcity} \longrightarrow \text{relational scarcity}, \quad (31)$$

the paper adopts the weaker relation

$$\text{Weight}(S_{\text{rel}}, S_{\text{auth}}, S_{\text{inst}}, S_{\text{situated}}) \uparrow \quad \text{relative to } S_{\text{prod}}, \quad (32)$$

under conditions in which the production scarcity of relevant manifestations declines.

Equation (32) remains a hypothesis. Its value is analytical: it directs attention toward the sources of difference that can continue to operate after manifestational imitation becomes inexpensive.

The distinction also prevents a misleading opposition between “symbol” and “relation.” Relations are themselves frequently represented symbolically. A historical narrative, museum label, archive, certificate, logo, photograph, or curatorial statement can mediate the relation between an artifact and its history. The important distinction concerns the relation between the representation of a history and the operative trajectory that makes the historical claim credible.

A generated narrative can state that an object belongs to a century-old tradition. Such a statement does not by itself create the century of institutional continuity, material practice, documentation, social recognition, and accumulated memory to which the narrative refers. Relational anchoring therefore concerns the conditions through which symbolic claims become connected to socially recognized trajectories.

6.2 Historical and Cultural Anchoring

Historical anchoring occurs when a present symbolic form is connected to a recognized temporal trajectory. The relevant history can concern a firm, a product, a craft practice, a building, a city, an institution, a community, a cultural tradition, or a wider social formation. Such histories differ substantially in ownership, scale, and mode of transmission.

Brand heritage research provides an important existing vocabulary. Pecot and De Barnier characterize brand heritage as a dynamic construct through which an inherited or borrowed past can support present brand identity and future transmission [57]. This formulation is particularly important for the present paper because it already recognizes that the past mobilized by a brand need not be reducible to events generated entirely within the firm.

Rindell and Santos further demonstrate that authenticity judgments concerning a corporate heritage brand are socially and temporally constituted. In their study, consumer memories, experiences, expectations, and shared conventions participate in perceived authenticity, while uniqueness, credibility, and consistency over time become relevant dimensions of assessment [66]. These findings significantly narrow the space in which relational anchoring can claim novelty. The relation among history, consumer memory, and brand authenticity is already well established.

The present paper extends the question in a different direction. It is concerned with what happens when historically anchored symbols coexist with a technical environment capable of producing large quantities of heritage-looking, culturally coded, or aesthetically sophisticated manifestations. Under these conditions, the distinction between *representing history* and *possessing a recognized relation to history* can become economically more consequential.

Cultural anchoring introduces an additional layer. A commercial symbol can be connected to traditions, languages, rituals, artistic repertoires, regional histories, national narratives, religious forms, craft practices, or other cultural resources whose formation extends far beyond the organization

making use of them. The resulting relation can contribute to recognition and differentiation because cultural forms carry accumulated histories of use, interpretation, conflict, transmission, and memory.

The term *culture* requires caution here. The paper does not treat a national or regional culture as a homogeneous object with a single owner, meaning, or historical trajectory. Cultural repertoires are internally heterogeneous, contested, and continuously transformed. A commercial practice that invokes “Japanese tradition,” “Italian craftsmanship,” “Chinese culture,” or another broad category necessarily selects from a much more complex field.

Historical anchoring therefore involves acts of selection. Certain pasts become visible while others remain peripheral. Particular materials, techniques, events, personalities, places, or narratives can be elevated as representative. This selection does not automatically make the resulting account false. Historical representation always involves framing. The political-economic question concerns how such framing enters value formation and who possesses the institutional capacity to stabilize particular relations as credible, prestigious, or culturally significant.

This problem becomes especially visible when commercial symbols are attached to cultural histories generated collectively rather than internally. A brand can finance an exhibition concerning a craft tradition, collaborate with an artist working within a recognized cultural repertoire, or situate a product within a historical district. In each case, commercial value can arise partly through relations whose generative history exceeds the firm.

The important distinction is therefore

$$\mathcal{H}_{\text{firm}} \subseteq \mathcal{H}_{\text{anchoring}} \quad \text{in some cases,} \quad (33)$$

where $\mathcal{H}_{\text{firm}}$ represents history generated within the organization and $\mathcal{H}_{\text{anchoring}}$ represents the broader historical field mobilized in the present association.

The inclusion relation in Equation (33) is not universal. Some brands rely primarily upon their own archives and institutional continuity. Others draw more extensively upon place, national culture, historical craft, or collective memory. This variation will later become important for distinguishing different forms of relational anchoring.

6.3 Provenance and Material Anchoring

Provenance provides one of the clearest cases in which manifestational reproducibility and historical reproducibility diverge. Two objects can be perceptually similar while possessing different production histories, chains of ownership, material trajectories, makers, institutional records, or relations to a particular event.

Grayson and Martinec’s distinction between iconic and indexical authenticity provides an established framework for analysing this difference [34]. Iconic authenticity can arise from resemblance to a culturally expected form. Indexical authenticity depends upon a perceived factual or causal connection to an origin. Generative AI can strongly affect the supply of iconic resemblance while leaving indexical relations dependent upon historical processes of production, documentation, and recognition.

Material anchoring concerns the role of physical constitution and production history within this relation. Material, technique, labor, maker, place of production, repair, aging, and documented continuity can participate in the identity of an artifact. Their significance varies by domain. A digital work, performance, architectural site, handmade object, historical document, and piece of jewelry each establish material continuity differently.

Luxury research has long emphasized craft, heritage, provenance, and controlled production as components of perceived authenticity [9, 8]. The relevant AI-era problem again concerns relative function. A generated visual representation can simulate signs conventionally associated with craft,

including irregularity, texture, patina, manual detail, or archival visual language. The simulation does not thereby acquire the material trajectory conventionally indexed by those signs.

This creates a separation between

$$\text{Appearance}(\text{craft}) \quad \text{and} \quad \text{History}(\text{craft}), \quad (34)$$

without implying that the first is aesthetically inferior.

The distinction is relevant because consumer evaluation can respond to attributed genesis in addition to visible form. As discussed in Section 5, experimental evidence indicates that information about generative-AI involvement can alter evaluations of otherwise identical visible artworks, partly through perceived authenticity and perceived human effort [54]. Such findings suggest that production history can remain economically and aesthetically operative even when manifestational comparison is held constant.

Material anchoring should nevertheless be distinguished from a metaphysics of the “real object.” Physical materiality does not automatically produce aesthetic value, authenticity, or existential significance. A historically important artifact can leave a visitor indifferent, while a fully synthetic image can become deeply meaningful through a personal relation. Material anchoring concerns a type of historical continuity that can support claims about provenance. It does not rank the resulting experiences.

Authentication institutions become important precisely because historical relations are rarely perceptually self-evident. Archives, certificates, curators, museums, historians, experts, conservation practices, technical analysis, legal records, and established organizational reputation can participate in making provenance credible. Material history therefore enters economic value through a relational infrastructure of verification.

This infrastructure can itself become scarce. Expertise, institutional authority, archival access, trusted documentation, and the capacity to establish a recognized chain of provenance can be unevenly distributed. The scarcity of an object can consequently become inseparable from the scarcity of the institutions capable of authenticating its history.

6.4 Spatial and Institutional Anchoring

Relational anchoring can also occur through place. A symbolic object presented within a particular building, district, museum, gallery, flagship store, or historical site enters a spatial relation that can affect its interpretation. The same object encountered elsewhere can retain its material identity while participating in a different institutional and experiential field.

Commercial research has already demonstrated that places can acquire emotional and relational significance. Debenedetti, Oppewal, and Arsel show that consumers can develop strong attachment to commercial settings through familiarity, authenticity, security, and experiences of homeyness [21]. Place attachment therefore cannot be restricted analytically to homes, sacred sites, or noncommercial environments.

Luxury retail research provides an even closer precedent. Dion and Borraz develop the concept of the *heritage store* to describe locations closely connected to a luxury brand’s identity and history. Their analysis shows how such sites can be sacralized in ways that support the brand’s value proposition [24]. Earlier work by Dion and Arnould likewise demonstrates how luxury retail can mobilize art, aesthetic ideology, charisma, and forms of symbolic staging within and beyond the store [23].

Joy and colleagues extend this literature by examining luxury flagship stores that consumers experience partly through the institutional codes of galleries and museums. Their concept of

“M(Art)Worlds” describes hybrid environments in which luxury retail adopts characteristics associated with art institutions [42]. These studies establish clearly that the spatial and institutional coupling of luxury and art is historically prior to generative AI.

The present paper therefore treats physical space as another strong novelty boundary. It does not claim that brands have recently discovered the value of place, museum-like presentation, or cultural institutions. The question is whether situated and institutionally authenticated environments can become relatively more important when comparable aesthetic imagery can be accessed or generated without entering those environments.

Spatial anchoring operates through several mechanisms. A place can possess its own historical continuity. It can structure bodily movement and sensory orientation. It can bring different persons and objects into co-presence. It can impose temporal limits upon access. It can carry institutional authority. It can also generate opportunities for events that were not fully specified in advance by either visitor or organizer.

These mechanisms should remain distinct. A site can be historically important without being exclusive. A temporary exhibition can be spatially scarce without possessing deep historical continuity. A public artwork can be openly accessible while remaining tied to a particular architectural and urban configuration. Spatial scarcity therefore cannot be equated with artificial restriction.

Institutional anchoring likewise differs from spatial anchoring. A museum, gallery, university, archive, cultural foundation, department-store gallery, or luxury maison can provide classificatory authority even when the relevant object circulates across multiple locations. Institutional recognition can alter how the same manifestation is interpreted because institutions participate in the social production of legitimacy.

The resulting relation can be represented as

$$S \longleftrightarrow (P, I, \mathcal{H}), \quad (35)$$

where S denotes the symbolic form, P a place, I an institution, and $\mathcal{H}$ the histories connecting them.

The importance of Equation (35) lies in the combination. A work displayed in a historically recognized location under the authority of an established institution participates in a relation that cannot be reproduced simply by generating an image resembling the work or the location. Digital mediation can create a different and potentially valuable encounter, but the historical-spatial configuration remains a distinct relational object.

6.5 Shared Relational Histories

The concept of shared relational history is required because many economically mobilized histories cannot be reduced either to individual memory or to the internal biography of an organization. Cities, cultural traditions, institutions, craft practices, languages, rituals, artistic repertoires, and historical events persist through relations distributed across generations and social groups.

The sociology of collective memory provides an important background. Halbwachs’s work emphasizes that memory operates within social frameworks and that groups reconstruct the past through collectively available categories, relations, and practices [36]. Assmann further distinguishes forms of cultural memory sustained through interhuman communication and external systems of representation capable of transmitting memory across generations [4]. These traditions make clear that historical significance need not depend upon identical personal experience.

The term *shared* should therefore be interpreted carefully. It does not mean that every member of a society possesses the same memory, agrees upon the same interpretation, or stands in an equivalent relation to the past. Collective memories can be plural, contested, selective, and institutionally

unequal. Shared relational history indicates that a present symbol or encounter draws upon a historically constituted field whose existence depends upon many actors and forms of transmission.

Consider an urban district. Its present significance can depend upon architecture, commercial history, public policy, transport, artistic activity, war, reconstruction, migration, local rituals, media representation, tourism, family memories, and accumulated social recognition. No single organization produces the entire field. A firm located within the district can nevertheless derive value from being associated with it.

The same structure applies to cultural repertoires. A motif, craft technique, religious symbol, artistic language, or historical narrative can carry significance because generations of practitioners, communities, institutions, writers, artists, teachers, workers, and audiences have participated in its transmission. A contemporary organization can contribute new resources and interpretations to this field while also drawing value from a history it did not independently generate.

The relevant relation can be represented as

$$\mathcal{H}_{\text{shared}} = G(a_1, a_2, \dots, a_n; t_1, t_2, \dots, t_m), \quad (36)$$

where the a_i denote heterogeneous social actors and the t_j denote historical periods or phases of transmission. The expression is schematic. Its purpose is to mark distributed genesis.

A commercial actor entering such a field therefore encounters a pre-existing stock of socially generated relations. The actor may preserve, reinterpret, finance, extend, narrow, publicize, standardize, or otherwise transform those relations. The political-economic significance cannot be determined from the fact of commercial participation alone.

This distinction is especially important for avoiding an overly simple account of cultural appropriation. Use of a shared cultural history can involve exploitative asymmetry, but it can also involve collaboration, preservation, financial support, reciprocal visibility, or generative reinterpretation. Determining which relation applies requires evidence concerning authority, participation, distribution of benefits, representational control, and effects upon the relevant cultural field.

Shared relational history therefore functions in this paper primarily as a descriptive category. It identifies a source of significance whose genesis is socially distributed and whose present economic mobilization can be asymmetrical without being necessarily extractive.

6.6 Commercial Symbols and Socially Generated Value

The preceding distinction creates the central political-economic problem of this section. A privately controlled commercial symbol can become coupled to a historical or cultural field whose value was generated through a much wider set of social relations.

Let S_C denote a commercial symbol and $\mathcal{H}_{\text{shared}}$ a socially generated historical field. A commercial practice can construct or strengthen a publicly recognizable relation

$$S_C \longleftrightarrow \mathcal{H}_{\text{shared}}. \quad (37)$$

The existence of this coupling can contribute to differentiation because the commercial symbol gains access to meanings, memories, legitimacy, or historical depth that would not arise from manifestational form alone.

This process is not historically new. Branding research has long examined the capacity of brands to organize and capture meanings circulating through social and cultural life [3]. Heritage research similarly recognizes that firms can make strategic use of inherited or borrowed pasts [57]. The present question concerns the possibility that such couplings become more important when aesthetically sophisticated surface manifestations become easier to produce.

The political-economic significance lies in the difference between *generation* and *control*. The cultural or historical field can be generated through distributed social processes while a particular commercial actor controls the symbol attached to it, the venue through which it is presented, the products through which it is monetized, or the narratives through which the relation is framed.

This structure does not itself prove value capture. A commercial organization can also contribute substantial resources to the field. Funding an exhibition, maintaining an archive, commissioning artists, preserving a craft practice, supporting conservation, or providing public access can increase the generativity of cultural relations.

Two possible trajectories should therefore be distinguished.

A *regenerative coupling* occurs when commercial involvement contributes resources or relations that expand the capacity of the cultural field to be preserved, interpreted, encountered, contested, transmitted, or recreated.

An *asymmetric coupling* occurs when commercial value derived from a shared historical field becomes concentrated while participation in defining, accessing, or benefiting from that field remains substantially unequal.

These two categories can overlap. A commercially successful exhibition can support artists and archives while simultaneously concentrating brand value. Economic benefit to the commercial actor and cultural benefit to the wider field are not mutually exclusive.

For this reason, the paper avoids treating

$$\Delta V_C > 0 \tag{38}$$

as sufficient evidence of

$$\Delta G_{\text{culture}} < 0, \tag{39}$$

where V_C denotes value accruing to the commercial actor and G_{culture} denotes the generative capacity of the relevant cultural field.

Both quantities can increase. The political-economic problem concerns the conditions under which their trajectories diverge.

This distinction will become particularly important when the paper later examines symbolic saturation. Increased commercial circulation of a cultural form can initially expand recognition and public encounter. Repetition can eventually standardize the form into a narrow set of easily recognizable signs. The same process can therefore support cultural visibility while altering the range of relations through which the culture continues to generate new interpretations.

The analytical object is consequently broader than commodity appropriation. It includes the organization of relations through which socially generated histories become attached to privately differentiated symbols.

6.7 Scarcity of Authenticated Symbol-History Coupling

The strongest result of the present section concerns the location of scarcity. If a symbolic manifestation becomes easy to reproduce while its historical relation remains consequential, the scarce object may be neither the symbol nor the history considered independently. Scarcity can become concentrated in the *authenticated coupling* between them.

This relation can be represented as

$$\mathcal{R}_{SH} = (S, \mathcal{H}, A), \tag{40}$$

where S denotes the symbolic manifestation, $\mathcal{H}$ its claimed historical or relational trajectory, and A the social, institutional, material, or documentary processes through which the connection between them becomes credible.

Generative AI can produce another S' with a high degree of manifestational similarity:

$$\mathcal{M}(S') \approx \mathcal{M}(S). \quad (41)$$

It does not follow that

$$\mathcal{R}_{S'H} = \mathcal{R}_{SH}. \quad (42)$$

The second object lacks the same relation to $\mathcal{H}$ unless such a relation is established through an actual historical process.

This formulation helps explain why provenance, archives, craftsmanship, location, museums, named makers, institutional continuity, and historical documentation can remain economically salient under conditions of symbolic abundance. They participate in establishing a relation between appearance and history.

The relevant scarcity can therefore be expressed provisionally as

$$S_{\text{auth-rel}} = \text{Scarcity} [\text{Auth}(S, \mathcal{H})]. \quad (43)$$

This is not a claim that authentication itself is naturally scarce. Institutions can manufacture artificial scarcity, monopolize certification, restrict access, or create new proprietary forms of legitimacy. Conversely, distributed technologies and open archives can reduce authentication costs. The equation identifies the relation whose scarcity should be investigated.

The concept also clarifies why relational anchoring cannot be reduced to a return to material authenticity. Historical relations can be institutional, cultural, spatial, interpersonal, or experiential. A particular event can become non-substitutable because it occurred at one time with particular persons. A place can acquire value through accumulated social memory. A museum can authenticate a relation through curatorial authority. A commercial symbol can be anchored to a craft tradition whose significance depends upon continuing practice rather than upon the age of a single object.

Under conditions of AI-mediated symbolic abundance, the differentiating question can therefore shift from

Can this appearance be produced?

toward

What history, relation, place, material process, or institution can credibly stand behind this appearance?

The shift is partial and domain specific. Many aesthetic markets remain oriented toward novelty of manifestation itself. Generated symbols can acquire new histories of their own. Artificial systems can also become participants in persistent cultural and relational trajectories. The paper therefore does not reserve historical depth for human-made objects.

The central distinction concerns genesis rather than biological authorship. Any artifact, institution, place, or artificial system can acquire relational history if it persists through time and participates in consequential relations. What generative abundance weakens is the inference that a persuasive manifestation by itself reveals such a history.

Relational re-anchoring can thus be understood as a response at the level of value structure rather than necessarily at the level of conscious corporate strategy. When manifestational signals become easier to reproduce, credible relations to less substitutable histories can carry greater differentiating weight. Existing practices of heritage narration, museum collaboration, craft authentication, place-making, and cultural exhibition can consequently acquire new significance without having been invented for the AI era.

The argument now reaches a further boundary. Historical and institutional anchoring can explain why one symbol is treated as more credible or distinctive than another, but it does not yet explain why a person becomes affected by an encounter. A fully authenticated object can remain experientially inert. An unexpected event involving an ordinary object can become personally transformative. The next section therefore moves from the authentication of relations to the contingency of encounter and asks how organized environments can alter the conditions under which significance emerges without fully determining the event itself.

7 Contingency and the Governance of Encounter

The preceding section examined how reproducible symbolic forms can become anchored to histories, places, institutions, materials, and cultural relations whose trajectories remain comparatively difficult to substitute. Relational anchoring, however, does not explain why an authenticated object or historically significant place becomes meaningful to a particular person. An encounter can possess extensive provenance and remain experientially negligible. Conversely, an ordinary object, an incidental sound, an unexpected person, or an unanticipated change in a familiar environment can become unusually salient.

This section therefore moves from the history of the symbolic object to the contingency of encounter. Its purpose is to distinguish three analytical questions. The first concerns whether an encounter occurs. The second concerns whether the encounter is noticed and becomes significant for a historically constituted subject. The third concerns how institutions, commercial actors, platforms, or spatial arrangements can alter the conditions under which such encounters become possible without determining their eventual significance.

The distinction is central to the paper's use of *governance*. The term does not imply that contingency itself can be manufactured or that an organization can deliver serendipity as a determinate product. Research on serendipity already provides a more careful vocabulary. Serendipitous processes typically combine unexpectedness with some form of recognition, insight, agency, or subsequent value, while environmental conditions can facilitate encounters without fixing their outcome [49, 50, 10, 15]. The argument developed here builds upon this distinction and applies it to the political economy of aesthetic and existentially salient encounters.

7.1 Contingent Encounter

Serendipity has a long conceptual history whose meanings have ranged from fortunate accident to a more complex conjunction of chance and discernment. Merton and Barber's historical study of the concept traces its development from Walpole's eighteenth-century coinage through scientific and sociological uses, showing that serendipity has rarely been reducible to passive luck [53]. Later empirical and conceptual work similarly emphasizes a conjunction between an unexpected event and a subject capable of recognizing or developing its significance.

Makri and Blandford's empirical study of researchers' experiences provides an especially useful formulation. Their process model identifies unexpectedness and insight within encounters that can lead to valuable, initially unanticipated outcomes [49]. Their companion classification framework

further treats unexpectedness, insight, and value as dimensions along which serendipitous experiences can vary [50]. This work is important for the present paper because it separates an unexpected occurrence from the process through which the occurrence becomes consequential.

The same distinction appears in organizational research. Cunha, Clegg, and Mendonça describe serendipity as an accidental discovery that becomes valuable through processes of association and exploratory learning [59]. Later work emphasizes preparation, openness to novelty, and doubt as conditions through which organizations can respond to unexpected observations [60]. Busch’s systematic review similarly identifies agency, surprise, and value as central conditions distinguishing serendipity from mere luck or targeted innovation [15].

The present paper uses *contingent encounter* more broadly than serendipity. A contingent encounter need not produce a valuable outcome and need not retrospectively be judged fortunate. It refers to a conjunction whose concrete occurrence, salience, or experiential development was not fully specified by the immediate intention of the participant or by the organization of the surrounding field.

This broader category is necessary because aesthetic and existential significance can emerge from encounters that would not satisfy conventional definitions of serendipity. An unexpected memory activated by a familiar building may be painful rather than fortunate. A chance encounter with an artwork may produce estrangement rather than useful discovery. An ordinary evening can become existentially significant through an event whose value remains ambiguous.

Contingency therefore concerns openness in the relation among event, subject, and trajectory. It does not imply the absence of causes. An encounter can be causally produced by a highly organized environment while remaining contingent with respect to the significance it acquires for the participant. A commercial complex can commission an artwork, determine its location, illuminate it, maintain the surrounding architecture, and direct pedestrian circulation. It cannot thereby specify which passer-by will notice the work at a particular moment, what memory the work will activate, or whether the resulting encounter will become aesthetically or existentially salient.

The relevant distinction is between the generation of an encounter condition and the generation of its significance. Let u denote an encountered event, $\mathcal{L}$ the surrounding landscape of possible encounters, and $\Gamma_i(t)$ the historically constituted organization of subject i . The occurrence and significance of the encounter can then be separated as

$$P(u \mid \mathcal{L}) \quad \text{and} \quad P(A_i \mid u, \Gamma_i(t), \mathcal{L}), \quad (44)$$

where A_i denotes the salience acquired by the event for the subject.

Equation (44) is not proposed as an empirically estimated psychological model. Its function is analytical. An institution can modify the first probability by altering what can be encountered, where, when, and under which access conditions. It can also affect the second indirectly by framing the event, supplying historical narratives, arranging attention, or personalizing recommendations. The final significance, however, remains dependent upon a subject whose history exceeds the immediate organization of the field.

7.2 Prepared Susceptibility

The contingency of encounter becomes intelligible only when the subject is understood historically. An unexpected event does not act upon an empty receiver. It encounters a person whose habits, memories, language, relationships, education, cultural repertoire, bodily dispositions, expectations, prior questions, and earlier experiences structure what can become noticeable or significant.

This point has strong precedents in the serendipity literature. Björneborn conceptualizes serendipity through relations between environmental affordances and personal factors, emphasizing the

coupling of environmental possibilities with curiosity, mobility, and sensitivity [10]. Organizational scholarship similarly emphasizes prior knowledge, preparation, openness, and the capacity to notice or develop weak cues [60, 15]. Serendipity is consequently neither a property of the environment alone nor a purely internal capacity of the individual.

The present paper uses the term *prepared susceptibility* for this historically constituted capacity to be differentially affected. The term *prepared* does not imply conscious preparation for the particular event. A person may have no intention of encountering it. Preparation can result from years of prior relations that become operative only retrospectively.

A visitor who encounters a musical performance in a street, for example, may respond through a history involving childhood lessons, a previous relationship, a familiar language, a recent loss, or a philosophical problem that was already occupying attention. None of these conditions needs to have been consciously activated before the encounter. Their historical accumulation can nevertheless make the subject particularly susceptible to the event.

Prepared susceptibility differs from preference. A preference model attempts to infer what a person tends to like or choose. Susceptibility concerns a broader question: which encounters possess the potential to interrupt the person's existing trajectory, become salient, form an unexpected connection, or generate a question whose content did not exist in completed form before the encounter?

The distinction can be expressed through the historically constituted organization

$$\Gamma_i(t) = G_i(\mathcal{H}_i^{<t}), \quad (45)$$

where $\mathcal{H}_i^{<t}$ denotes the heterogeneous relations and events participating in the subject's history before time t .

The equation does not assume that $\Gamma_i(t)$ is stable, fully observable, or computationally reconstructable. It identifies a dependence relation. What can become significant at time t depends partly upon a history that has already transformed the subject.

Prepared susceptibility also prevents contingency from being mistaken for arbitrariness. If two persons encounter the same event, their different responses need not indicate randomness:

$$P(A_i \mid u, \Gamma_i) \neq P(A_j \mid u, \Gamma_j). \quad (46)$$

The difference can emerge because the event enters distinct relational histories.

This formulation has an important consequence for the political economy developed later. A commercial actor seeking to organize meaningful encounters does not confront only a heterogeneous market of preferences. It confronts historically constituted subjects for whom the same object, place, narrative, or event can acquire radically different salience. The stronger the capacity to infer these histories, the more organization of encounter can potentially move from generic staging toward differentiated susceptibility.

Prepared susceptibility should nevertheless remain distinct from a claim that subjects are fully predictable. Historical formation creates differentiated possibilities without fixing a unique response. A memory can remain dormant. A familiar object can acquire an unexpected meaning. A previously irrelevant cultural form can become significant through a new conjunction. Susceptibility is therefore a condition of responsiveness rather than a deterministic map of future experience.

7.3 Emergent Significance

The concept of emergent significance describes the transition through which an encounter becomes more than an encountered stimulus. The distinction is necessary because access, exposure, attention,

and significance are not equivalent. A person can pass through an exhibition without forming a memorable relation to any work. Another can become deeply affected by an object that occupies only a peripheral position within the curatorial design.

Makri and Blandford’s serendipity model provides an empirical analogue. Their participants described processes in which an unexpected encounter was followed by recognition of a connection, assessment of its potential value, and action that developed the connection further [49]. The significance of the encountered information therefore did not exist solely as a property of the information item. It was generated through an interaction among unexpectedness, insight, prior concerns, and subsequent activity.

The present paper extends this structure beyond information discovery. An aesthetic encounter can similarly acquire significance through relations that were not fully contained in the encountered object. An image can evoke a person, a material can activate knowledge of craft, a building can reopen a historical memory, and a piece of music can transform the meaning of the place in which it is heard.

The resulting significance can be represented schematically as

$$\Sigma_i(u, t) = F_i(u, \Gamma_i(t), \mathcal{L}_t, \mathcal{R}_t), \quad (47)$$

where $\Sigma_i(u, t)$ denotes the significance acquired by encounter u , $\mathcal{L}_t$ denotes the relevant environmental configuration, and $\mathcal{R}_t$ denotes relations activated or generated through the encounter.

The function F_i should not be interpreted as a closed psychological law. Its purpose is to show why significance cannot be attributed to the symbol alone. A symbol can participate in significance while the experienced value emerges through a larger configuration.

This distinction is particularly important when commercial discourse attributes value directly to objects or places. A slogan, exhibition, architectural environment, or luxury artifact can invite visitors to experience beauty, memory, authenticity, presence, or cultural depth. Such an invitation can organize interpretation and attention. It cannot guarantee that the proposed meaning becomes operative for the participant.

Emergent significance also clarifies the relation between beauty and contingency. Aesthetic salience can arise because a formal or sensory quality is immediately striking. It can also arise because the present event intersects with an unexpected memory, relation, or temporal configuration. The same manifestation can therefore become beautiful under one historical conjunction and experientially neutral under another.

This claim does not reduce beauty to autobiography. The object and environment continue to constrain the encounter. Aesthetic form, materiality, scale, composition, atmosphere, and technique can participate directly in experience. The analytical point is that their significance can be generated through relations whose relevant history extends beyond the immediately observable form.

Emergent significance is therefore the hinge connecting contingency to the later discussion of existential salience. A contingent event becomes politically and economically interesting when institutions can organize some of the conditions under which encounters occur while the experienced significance remains partially open.

7.4 Curated Encounter Landscapes

The fact that significance cannot be determined does not imply that encounters occur in an unstructured world. Cities, museums, department stores, luxury flagships, exhibitions, platforms, tourism infrastructures, transport systems, festivals, recommendation interfaces, and commercial complexes all organize fields of possible encounter.

The term *encounter landscape* denotes such a structured field. An encounter landscape includes the objects made available, their spatial relations, visibility, sequence, timing, access conditions, institutional framing, social composition, and pathways through which participants can move. Its organization can increase the probability of some conjunctions while reducing or eliminating others.

Curatorial practice provides an obvious example. Selecting artworks does not determine what a visitor will experience, yet it alters which relations become possible within the exhibition. Spatial arrangement affects what can be seen together. Labels provide interpretive resources. Lighting changes perceptual salience. Pathways alter sequence. Opening hours structure temporal access. Institutional reputation changes expectations before the encounter begins.

Retail and luxury spaces perform analogous forms of organization even when their purposes differ from those of museums. Artworks can be placed within circulation routes. Historical objects can appear alongside contemporary commodities. Architecture can create visual interruptions. Material surfaces, sound, scent, scale, and lighting can structure atmosphere. A visitor can encounter these arrangements without having entered the space with an explicit intention to seek art.

The resulting landscape can therefore be designed for *possibility* without fixing a singular result. Björneborn's affordance framework is particularly useful here because it explicitly rejects the proposition that serendipity itself can be engineered while maintaining that environments can be designed with affordances that facilitate it [10]. His categories of diversifiability, traversability, and sensoriability identify different ways in which physical and digital environments can expand opportunities for unplanned discovery.

This distinction substantially precedes the present paper and narrows its novelty claim. The idea that environments can be organized to facilitate unexpected encounters is already established. Organizational studies likewise show that structures can be arranged to increase opportunities for accidental discoveries and subsequent development [27, 15].

The present contribution concerns the political economy of these affordances under changing symbolic scarcity. If representations themselves become abundant, economic differentiation may depend increasingly upon control over, or participation in, environments where particular combinations of art, history, materiality, place, institution, and co-presence can occur.

The scarce resource can then become access to an encounter landscape rather than exclusive access to a representation. This does not require direct ticketing. A public artwork within a commercial complex can remain openly accessible while contributing to the distinctiveness of a physical site. A heritage exhibition can require no purchase while strengthening relations among brand, place, history, and visitor. The economic value can be distributed through the broader environment.

The organization of an encounter landscape can therefore operate through several different forms:

- selection of what can be encountered;
- spatial arrangement of possible conjunctions;
- temporal organization of access;
- institutional framing and authentication;
- control or modulation of visibility;
- integration of cultural and commercial objects;
- management of routes and points of interruption;

- recommendation of possible destinations or activities.

These mechanisms do not constitute a single form of governance. Some expand access while others restrict it. Some increase diversity while others narrow choice. Some are commercially organized while remaining publicly accessible. The term *encounter governance* is used only when the organization of these conditions becomes sufficiently systematic to alter the field of available trajectories.

7.5 Designed and Staged Serendipity

The possibility of deliberately facilitating unexpected encounter produces an apparent paradox. If an encounter is designed in advance, can it remain serendipitous?

The literature suggests that the paradox can be resolved by distinguishing the designer’s intention from the participant’s experience. Björneborn argues explicitly that serendipity itself cannot be designed, while affordances for serendipity can be designed in both physical and digital environments [10]. The environment can intentionally increase opportunities for an encounter that remains unplanned from the perspective of the user.

Organizational research reaches a similar conclusion through a different vocabulary. Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani develop the idea of *serendipity arrangements* for structures that facilitate the exaptation of scientific discoveries [27]. Busch conceptualizes the cultivation of serendipity partly through enabling a latent space of potentiality in which trigger events are more likely to occur and be noticed [15]. These accounts demonstrate that purposeful organization and unanticipated outcome need not be mutually exclusive.

This distinction is crucial for commercial and cultural settings. A curated space can be designed to generate surprise. A route can conceal and reveal objects sequentially. A temporary installation can interrupt habitual movement. A recommendation interface can deliberately introduce an unexpected item. An exhibition can juxtapose objects that visitors would rarely encounter together.

The resulting experience can be *staged* without being fully determined. The staged component consists of the arrangement. The serendipitous component, if it occurs, consists of an unplanned conjunction becoming significant to the participant.

The distinction can be formulated as

$$\text{Design}(\mathcal{L}) \neq \text{Determine}(\Sigma_i), \quad (48)$$

where $\mathcal{L}$ denotes the encounter landscape and Σ_i the significance eventually generated for subject i .

The concept of *staged serendipity* should therefore be used cautiously. At one extreme, a commercial environment can simply label a highly scripted event “serendipitous.” Such rhetoric does not establish contingency. At another extreme, a designed environment can genuinely increase opportunities for unscripted encounters whose consequences remain unknown to organizers and participants alike.

Several intermediate configurations are possible. An organizer can know which object a visitor will encounter without knowing what the encounter will mean. A recommender can intentionally select an unexpected item while remaining uncertain whether the user will value it. A museum can curate an unusual juxtaposition while leaving visitors free to ignore it. A city can create spaces supporting multiple possible uses without specifying which interactions will occur.

The analytical problem is consequently not whether serendipity is either designed or undesigned. It concerns the distribution of determination across different layers of the event.

An organizer may determine:

availability, location, sequence, access, and framing,

while leaving open:

attention, association, affect, interpretation, and trajectory change.

This layered account is especially important for the paper’s normative neutrality. Facilitating serendipity need not be manipulative. A library, university, park, museum, or public street can all support accidental discovery. The political-economic question begins when the organization of such possibilities becomes connected to control over attention, commercial differentiation, access, or value capture.

7.6 Probabilistic Governance of Encounter

The distinction between determining outcomes and organizing conditions allows a more precise account of encounter governance. Capital need not manufacture a specific meaningful event in order to influence the landscape in which such events occur. It can operate probabilistically.

Suppose an actor controls or influences an encounter landscape $\mathcal{L}$. Through curation, architecture, recommendation, access rules, temporal programming, cultural partnerships, or platform ranking, the actor can alter

$$P(u_k \mid \mathcal{L}), \quad (49)$$

the probability that a participant encounters event or resource u_k .

This capacity can be economically important even when

$$P(\Sigma_i \mid u_k, \Gamma_i) \quad (50)$$

remains highly uncertain.

The first relation concerns exposure. The second concerns significance. Commercial organization can become powerful through the first without mastering the second.

Digital recommender systems make this distinction particularly visible. Serendipity has become an explicit design objective within recommender-system research because highly accurate systems can become predictable or overspecialized. Reviews of the field show that serendipitous recommendation is usually treated through combinations of relevance, novelty, and unexpectedness, although definitions and metrics vary substantially [46, 41]. Recommender systems can therefore intentionally introduce unexpected items into a user’s informational environment.

This practice demonstrates that algorithmic systems can already optimize a limited operationalization of “serendipity.” It also demonstrates why the paper should not equate recommender-system serendipity with the richer existential phenomenon under examination. A system can select an item that is statistically unexpected and relevant without knowing whether the encounter will activate a personally significant memory, generate a new question, alter the user’s relation to a place, or contribute to an intensified awareness of being alive.

The political-economic significance nevertheless remains substantial. Recommendation systems can alter which cultural forms, places, products, artists, exhibitions, narratives, or experiences enter a user’s field of possibility. When these systems operate across long interaction histories, they can also become increasingly sensitive to patterns that exceed explicit preference statements.

The transition can therefore be represented as one from generic organization

$$P(u \mid \mathcal{L}) \quad (51)$$

toward increasingly subject-conditioned organization

$$P(u \mid \mathcal{L}, \hat{\Gamma}_i), \quad (52)$$

where $\hat{\Gamma}_i$ denotes an inferred approximation of historically relevant characteristics of the user.

The stronger the approximation, the more the platform can potentially organize encounters around inferred susceptibility rather than merely around broad population-level popularity.

This does not require a system to possess a complete psychological model of the subject. Even partial inference can alter the encounter landscape. Past travel, music, purchases, searches, photographs, interactions, locations, reading, social relations, or conversational history can provide signals concerning what kinds of events are likely to become salient.

The present paper therefore uses *probabilistic governance* for interventions that systematically alter distributions of possible encounters without determining their final subjective outcomes. The concept applies to physical and digital environments, although their mechanisms differ.

A commercial district can increase exposure to public art through spatial placement. A luxury exhibition can connect brand objects to historical and cultural materials. A platform can rank destinations according to inferred preferences. A persistent AI assistant could, in principle, integrate a much richer interaction history and recommend an event because it detects a relation to an unresolved question or earlier memory.

These are different degrees of informational and organizational capacity. They should not be collapsed into a claim that contemporary systems already possess a complete model of human susceptibility.

7.7 Limits of Contingency Governance

The concept of probabilistic governance requires clear limits. Without them, the paper would risk converting every organized environment into a system of control and every meaningful encounter into an economic effect.

The first limit is ontological and conceptual. Organizing conditions does not eliminate contingency. An organizer can increase the likelihood that two elements appear together while remaining unable to determine the significance of their conjunction. If every relevant aspect of an event and its meaning were fully fixed in advance, the encounter would no longer exhibit contingency in the sense used here.

The second limit concerns subject history. A person's generative organization is not created by the immediate commercial environment. Family, language, education, friendship, loss, migration, prior cultural encounters, bodily history, personal questions, and innumerable other relations can participate in prepared susceptibility. The organizer of the present encounter therefore depends upon histories it did not generate.

This dependence produces an important political-economic asymmetry. Commercial actors can potentially benefit from salience generated through histories whose formation occurred elsewhere. Yet the same fact also limits their control. The relations from which significance emerges exceed the commercial field.

The third limit concerns prediction. Behavioral traces can support increasingly sophisticated inference, but successful prediction of choice does not establish prediction of existential significance. A person can repeatedly choose an artist without being deeply affected by the next work. An

apparently irrelevant event can become transformative. Historical susceptibility is itself dynamic because every encounter can alter the conditions governing later encounters.

The fourth limit concerns reflexivity. Subjects can recognize attempts to organize their attention and can resist, reinterpret, ignore, parody, or appropriate the arrangement for different purposes. A curated environment can generate meanings contrary to its official framing. A visitor can treat a luxury exhibition as an art-historical resource without developing stronger attachment to the brand. A commercial district can become valuable through social practices that exceed the intentions of property owners.

The fifth limit concerns collective contingency. Encounter landscapes contain other persons whose actions create events unavailable to centralized design. Street musicians, visitors, workers, protesters, tourists, children, artists, weather, transport disruptions, temporary architecture, and ordinary urban activity can all alter the field. Situated encounter consequently includes relations produced laterally among participants rather than only vertically by the organizing institution.

The sixth limit concerns value. Serendipity literature commonly includes some form of positive or valuable outcome [50, 15]. Commercial actors, however, cannot assume that an unexpected encounter valuable to a participant will generate commercial value. A cultural experience can be meaningful while weakening attachment to consumption, questioning the surrounding institution, or directing attention elsewhere.

The seventh limit concerns normative classification. Encounter governance is not equivalent to enclosure or extraction. A museum can curate a space to increase discovery. A public library can arrange collections to facilitate unexpected information encounters. A city can create public spaces that support unplanned interaction. A commercial complex can provide openly accessible art. The fact that an environment is organized does not establish a harmful political-economic relation.

Stronger classifications require additional evidence. *Enclosure* requires some meaningful restriction or appropriation of access to resources or relations. *Capture* requires an account of how value generated through the field becomes appropriated or concentrated. *Extraction* requires a further argument concerning asymmetry, depletion, dispossession, or comparable conditions. These categories are therefore reserved for later analysis where the relevant evidence is available.

The final limit concerns the concept of serendipity itself. If every unexpected event is deliberately optimized according to a detailed user model, the language of serendipity can become unstable. An event can remain unexpected to the user while being highly expected by the system. This creates a distinction between *subjective unexpectedness* and *systemic predictability*.

Let

$$U_i(u)$$

denote the degree to which encounter u is unexpected for the subject and

$$Q_O(u)$$

the degree to which its occurrence is predictable to the organizer. It is possible for

$$U_i(u) \gg 0 \quad \text{while} \quad Q_O(u) \approx 1. \quad (53)$$

The encounter can then feel accidental to the participant while being a highly probable output of the organizing system.

This possibility introduces a more difficult political-economic problem than ordinary curated serendipity. The issue is no longer only whether environments can facilitate unexpected encounter. It concerns how informational asymmetry changes the structure of contingency when an institution increasingly knows which supposedly unexpected encounter is likely to affect a particular person.

The paper does not assume that contemporary commercial AI has reached this condition. Equation (53) identifies a boundary toward which increasingly persistent and personalized systems could move. It also explains why the next stages of the analysis must distinguish aesthetic salience from mere recommendation relevance and susceptibility from ordinary preference.

The central result of this section is therefore a constrained account of encounter governance. Contingency is compatible with organized conditions. Serendipity can be facilitated without being directly manufactured. Commercial, cultural, spatial, and computational actors can reshape encounter landscapes and modify the probability of particular conjunctions. The significance of those conjunctions remains dependent upon historically constituted susceptibility, emergent interpretation, other actors, and relations extending beyond the organizer.

This distinction provides the bridge from contingency to beauty. Once an encounter occurs, the next problem is not simply whether it was expected. It is how an encountered form, place, object, atmosphere, memory, or relation becomes aesthetically salient under conditions in which aesthetically persuasive representations themselves are increasingly abundant.

8 Beauty under Conditions of Symbolic Abundance

The previous section examined how contingent encounters can occur within organized landscapes without their significance being fully determined by the organizer. This section turns to the second philosophical term organizing the paper: *beauty*. Its objective is deliberately narrower than the construction of a general theory of beauty. The relevant problem is how something becomes aesthetically salient when aesthetically persuasive symbolic forms are increasingly abundant.

This distinction matters because symbolic abundance does not imply aesthetic indifference. An increase in the availability of polished images, stylistically coherent texts, atmospheric designs, or culturally recognizable forms can alter the conditions of aesthetic differentiation without eliminating the capacity for aesthetic experience. Beauty also cannot be inferred directly from scarcity. A rare object can remain aesthetically insignificant, while a widely reproducible form can become deeply beautiful within a particular encounter.

The analysis therefore separates three questions. The first concerns the aesthetic qualities available at the level of representation. The second concerns the conditions through which a representation, object, place, or event becomes aesthetically salient to a particular subject. The third concerns whether repeated availability of similar symbolic forms can alter the affective force of those forms and thereby change the relative importance of history, relation, materiality, and situated encounter.

The central proposition is that symbolic abundance can weaken some sources of aesthetic differentiation without rendering beauty itself abundant in any simple sense. Aesthetic salience remains dependent upon relations among manifestation, perceiver, history, context, and encounter. Under these conditions, the distinction between *aesthetic representation* and *aesthetic event* becomes politically and economically consequential.

8.1 Aesthetic Representation and Aesthetic Encounter

Aesthetic representation and aesthetic encounter should first be distinguished without treating either as ontologically superior. An image can be beautiful as an image. A generated text can be aesthetically compelling. A digitally mediated encounter can become personally consequential. Nothing in the present argument requires aesthetic value to be reserved for materially unique, human-made, or physically encountered objects.

The distinction concerns the range of relations participating in the event.

A representation presents some manifestational configuration: color, shape, rhythm, language, texture, composition, sound, style, or another perceptible form. An encounter places such a configuration within a temporally developing relation involving a perceiver, an environment, a history, and potentially other persons or events. Dewey’s account of aesthetic experience is particularly useful here because the aesthetic is understood through the organization of experience across time rather than through inspection of a self-contained object [22]. Berleant’s account of aesthetic engagement similarly emphasizes participation within an experiential field rather than detached contemplation alone [7].

Empirical aesthetics provides a compatible, though methodologically different, perspective. Leder and colleagues model aesthetic appreciation as a staged process involving perceptual analysis, implicit memory integration, classification, cognitive mastering, and evaluation [48]. Their account explicitly includes prior experience, familiarity, knowledge, style, and context within aesthetic processing. The importance of such work for the present paper lies in showing that the perceptible stimulus constitutes only one component of aesthetic evaluation.

The same manifestation can consequently participate in different encounters. A generated image viewed among thousands of adjacent images, the same image selected by a close friend, and the same image encountered unexpectedly within a personally significant conversation present identical or nearly identical visual content while entering different relational configurations.

This does not imply that the surrounding relation always determines aesthetic judgment. Manifestational form continues to constrain perception. Some works can sustain aesthetic attention across radically different contexts. The analytical point is weaker: equality or similarity of manifestation does not establish equality of aesthetic encounter.

The distinction can be summarized as

$$\mathcal{M}_1 \approx \mathcal{M}_2 \not\Rightarrow \mathcal{E}_1^A \approx \mathcal{E}_2^A, \quad (54)$$

where $\mathcal{M}$ denotes manifestational form and $\mathcal{E}^A$ denotes the resulting aesthetic encounter.

Equation (54) does not deny that manifestational similarity can produce similar judgments. It identifies the additional dependence of aesthetic experience upon context, history, attention, and relation.

This difference becomes increasingly important under generative abundance. If a user can request hundreds of technically sophisticated images within a short period, the mere presence of visual sophistication can lose some of its power to distinguish one encounter from another. What becomes consequential may be why this image appears here, why it is encountered now, what relation brought it into the subject’s field, and what history becomes activated through it.

The resulting problem is therefore less about the disappearance of beauty than about the changing conditions through which beauty becomes eventful.

8.2 Aesthetic Salience

The paper uses *aesthetic salience* to designate the process through which an object, representation, atmosphere, or event becomes perceptually, affectively, or reflectively distinguished within experience in an aesthetically relevant manner. Salience is narrower than a theory of beauty and broader than a positive preference judgment.

This distinction is necessary because aesthetic experience can contain ambiguity, difficulty, melancholy, disturbance, awe, or fascination without being reducible to immediate liking. Aesthetic salience indicates that something has become capable of sustaining aesthetic attention. Whether the resulting judgment is positive, negative, mixed, or unresolved remains a further question.

Empirical research reinforces the importance of separating stimulus properties from the perceiver’s processing. Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman propose a processing-fluency account in which the ease with which a stimulus is processed can contribute to positive aesthetic response [64]. Their model does not reduce beauty to objective stimulus properties, since fluency depends partly upon the perceiver’s processing history and contextual conditions. 0

Leder and colleagues similarly treat aesthetic appreciation as an interaction between perceptual properties and successive cognitive processes [48]. Their framework includes familiarity, prototypicality, knowledge, classification, understanding, and evaluation rather than deriving aesthetic response directly from visual form [48]. 1

These approaches are useful for a political economy of symbolic abundance because they prevent a simple inference from increasing symbolic supply to declining aesthetic value. Greater exposure to a class of forms can increase familiarity and processing fluency under some conditions. It can also reduce novelty, produce habituation, intensify competition for attention, or alter the criteria through which a particular manifestation stands out.

Aesthetic salience can therefore be represented schematically as a dependence upon several interacting dimensions:

$$A_i^{\text{aes}}(u, t) = \Phi_i \left(\mathcal{M}_u, \Gamma_i(t), \mathcal{H}_i^{<t}, \mathcal{L}_t \right), \quad (55)$$

where $\mathcal{M}_u$ denotes the manifestational properties of encounter u , $\Gamma_i(t)$ the historically constituted organization of the perceiver, $\mathcal{H}_i^{<t}$ relevant prior history, and $\mathcal{L}_t$ the present encounter landscape.

Equation (55) is not intended as a measurable psychophysical law. Its function is to prevent aesthetic salience from being assigned to the representation alone.

The equation also connects this section directly to the preceding discussion of prepared susceptibility. A subject can become aesthetically susceptible to a particular form through prior learning, repeated exposure, cultural familiarity, personal memory, or previous aesthetic practice. What appears trivial to one observer can become richly differentiated to another whose perceptual and interpretive history permits distinctions that the first does not yet perceive.

This dependence creates an important distinction between the supply of aesthetic symbols and the supply of aesthetic salience:

$$\text{Supply (aesthetic representations)} \uparrow \not\Rightarrow \text{Supply (aesthetically salient encounters)} \uparrow \text{ proportionally.} \quad (56)$$

The second quantity depends upon attention, context, history, timing, and susceptibility in addition to available symbolic forms.

This distinction is central to the paper. A symbolic economy can become increasingly abundant while aesthetically consequential moments remain scarce.

8.3 Memory, Relation, and Historical Depth

Aesthetic salience can depend upon relations that are absent from the visible configuration of the present object. Memory provides the clearest example.

Consider a person who sees evening light and experiences it as unusually beautiful because it recalls an earlier moment shared with another person. The optical qualities of the present scene participate in the experience. The earlier relation also participates, even though the other person and the original event are absent.

The structure is therefore temporally distributed:

present manifestation + operative relational history $\rightarrow$ present aesthetic significance. (57)

This dependence does not imply that autobiographical memory is required for beauty. It identifies one important route through which aesthetic significance can exceed present sensory form.

The phenomenological discussion in Section 2 already established that past relations can remain sedimented within present perception. Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied habit and temporal sedimentation makes it difficult to treat perception as reception by a history-free observer [52]. Dewey's temporal account of experience similarly emphasizes how earlier phases participate in the completion and meaning of later phases [22].

Collective histories can operate in an analogous manner. A person encountering a historical object can perceive more than its immediately visible form when the object is understood through a history of production, transmission, ownership, ritual, political change, craft, or collective memory. Such history can deepen the encounter even when the entire trajectory is available only through documentary and institutional mediation.

The phrase *historical depth* is used here for this capacity of an encounter to become connected to temporally extended relations. Historical depth does not denote objective value. A long history does not automatically make an object beautiful. It denotes an additional dimension through which a present encounter can acquire significance.

This distinction becomes particularly important when generated symbols can imitate visual signs conventionally associated with age or history. Patina, archival typography, historical ornament, traditional motifs, material irregularity, and heritage-oriented language can all be reproduced at the level of manifestation. Their reproduction can evoke historical associations without possessing the historical trajectory conventionally indexed by those forms.

The aesthetic result remains open. A generated representation can become beautiful precisely because it imaginatively recombines historical forms. The problem appears when a claim concerning historical depth depends upon a relation that the manifestation alone cannot establish.

Under symbolic abundance, history can consequently operate in two different ways. It can remain a *represented aesthetic resource*, available for stylistic generation. It can also operate as an *actual relational trajectory*, supported through provenance, institutional memory, continuing practice, personal biography, or collective history.

The difference is central to relational anchoring. A symbolic form associated with a history can derive significance from representation of that history, from an operative relation to that history, or from both.

Commercial-cultural practices frequently combine these dimensions. Historical objects are displayed alongside contemporary design. Craft narratives accompany commodities. Archival photographs are integrated into retail environments. Urban locations are presented through narratives of continuity. These practices substantially predate generative AI. Their possible new significance lies in a world where the visual vocabulary of historical depth itself becomes increasingly reproducible.

8.4 Embodied and Situated Beauty

Aesthetic experience can also depend upon bodily and spatial participation. The importance of embodiment should be stated without assuming that physical presence is inherently more authentic than mediated experience.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology emphasizes that perception occurs through a lived body situated within a world [52]. Berleant's aesthetic engagement similarly directs analysis toward participatory

relations among perceiver, environment, movement, and sensory field [7]. Böhme's theory of atmosphere is particularly useful for environments in which aesthetic effect is distributed across architecture, lighting, material surface, sound, scale, spatial density, and bodily presence [11].

These accounts allow a distinction between an image of an environment and participation in an environment. The difference concerns neither factuality nor a simple hierarchy of value. It concerns the number and type of relations available within the encounter.

A photograph of an exhibition can communicate composition, color, scale cues, and curatorial arrangement. Being in the exhibition can additionally involve movement, actual scale, changing perspective, material proximity, ambient sound, temperature, other visitors, waiting, interruption, fatigue, and the possibility of noticing something outside the intended frame.

These conditions can contribute to beauty because aesthetic experience can be distributed across the total situation rather than concentrated in a single object.

The same point applies to urban space. A street cannot be reduced to its visual facades. Its aesthetic field can include weather, crowd density, rhythm of movement, storefronts, reflections, sound, seasonal events, architecture, traffic, unexpected encounters, and personal memory. A generated image can represent many of these features while entering a different structure of participation.

Situated beauty therefore introduces temporal and spatial non-substitutability. A sunset at a specific place and date is not scarce merely because sunsets are rare. Sunsets are common. The event becomes non-substitutable through its particular conjunction:

this place + this time + this body + these relations + this history.

This structure is especially relevant to the paper's analysis of commercial and cultural spaces. A commercial institution can organize architecture, artworks, access, lighting, routes, and temporal programming. It can make some encounters possible and others unlikely. It cannot reproduce the complete history through which each participant enters that field.

Embodied and situated beauty therefore provides one explanation for why physical cultural environments can retain significance under conditions of digital and generative abundance. The explanation does not require physical scarcity to be morally or aesthetically superior. It requires only that situated encounters contain relational variables that are absent from, or differently organized within, detached representations.

This is also why non-ticketed public art within a commercial environment can be economically significant. The representation itself can be freely photographed and circulated. What remains spatially specific is the possibility of encountering the work within the architecture, movement, institutional field, and surrounding urban relations of that particular site.

8.5 Symbolic Beauty and Relationally Anchored Beauty

The preceding analysis allows a distinction between two modes through which aesthetic value can become organized. The distinction is analytical rather than taxonomic. Many actual encounters combine both.

Symbolic beauty refers here to aesthetic salience that can be substantially carried by manifest form. Composition, linguistic rhythm, color, harmony, style, visual complexity, or other features can support appreciation even when little is known about the object's provenance or context.

Relationally anchored beauty refers to cases in which aesthetic salience depends substantially upon connections to a history, relation, place, person, material practice, institution, memory, or situated event.

The distinction should not be interpreted as

symbolic beauty < relationally anchored beauty.

No such ranking is proposed. A generated abstract image can produce intense aesthetic experience through form alone. An ancient authenticated artifact can remain aesthetically inert for a viewer. The distinction concerns the dependency structure of the experience.

A useful example is craftsmanship. An observer can appreciate a pattern because of its visible intricacy. Another observer can appreciate the same pattern partly because it is known to result from a difficult manual technique, regional tradition, or identifiable maker. The first experience depends more heavily upon manifest form. The second incorporates additional relations to process and history.

A similar structure applies to urban beauty. A visitor can find a district beautiful because of architectural composition. A longtime resident can find the same street beautiful because it contains memories of earlier relationships, social change, vanished buildings, repeated seasonal events, and a personal history of movement through the area.

These forms of beauty can overlap. Manifest form can activate history, while history can redirect attention toward features of form that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

The political-economic relevance arises when symbolic abundance affects the relative differentiating capacity of the first mode. If visually refined forms can be produced and circulated in large quantities, commercial differentiation may increasingly rely upon a claim that a manifestation belongs to a history, place, craft, institution, or event that cannot be reproduced through surface similarity alone.

This is where relational anchoring enters aesthetic value formation. The commercially relevant proposition is not that consumers stop responding to symbols. It is that the same symbolic sophistication can acquire different value depending upon the relations that stand behind or around it.

Luxury provides an especially clear case. An AI system can produce an image that successfully manifests visual conventions associated with high jewelry, heritage advertising, museum display, or traditional craft. A historically authenticated object can share many of those visual properties while also participating in a documented material and institutional trajectory. The difference between the two can become economically important even if both are aesthetically compelling.

A comparable process can occur through cultural association. A commercial symbol can be attached to a broader historical field through exhibitions, archives, artistic collaborations, architecture, craft presentation, or place. These practices can supply the symbol with relations exceeding its visual manifestation.

Relationally anchored beauty therefore describes one possible response to symbolic abundance at the level of value structure:

$$\text{reproducible manifestation} + \text{less substitutable relation} \longrightarrow \text{differentiated aesthetic significance.} \quad (58)$$

The arrow denotes a possible contribution rather than a guaranteed effect.

The concept also helps distinguish the present paper from theories that identify authenticity itself as the source of aesthetic superiority. An artificial system can participate in relational history. A digital artwork can acquire provenance. A generated image can become connected to a personally significant event. Relational anchoring is therefore compatible with artificial and digital objects. What matters is whether the relation exists and remains operative, not whether the originating object belongs to a privileged ontological category.

8.6 Aesthetic Saturation and Attenuated Salience

The possibility of symbolic abundance also raises a more difficult question. If aesthetic forms become extensively available, does repeated exposure weaken their capacity to produce salience?

The answer cannot be assumed. Research on familiarity and aesthetic preference does not support a simple rule according to which repetition inevitably produces boredom. Processing-fluency accounts indicate that familiarity can increase positive evaluation under some conditions [64]. Mere exposure can similarly increase liking in many contexts. At the same time, novelty, complexity, artistic experience, and stimulus type can modify or reverse these effects.

Song, Kwak, and Kim provide useful recent evidence concerning this complexity. Their behavioral and eye-tracking study found that the relation between familiarity, novelty, and aesthetic preference varied with painting content, visual complexity, and the viewer's degree of art experience [71]. Novelty was important, but its effect was dependent upon characteristics of both artwork and beholder. 2

This literature prevents the paper from asserting a general psychological law of symbolic exhaustion. Increased exposure can create familiarity, fluency, recognition, expertise, attachment, boredom, habituation, or a search for novelty under different conditions.

The concept of *aesthetic saturation* is therefore used provisionally for a narrower political-economic possibility. Saturation occurs when extensive circulation of a particular aesthetic grammar reduces its capacity to function as a differentiating or attention-generating signal within a specific field.

This definition separates saturation from dislike.

A heritage-oriented visual language can remain attractive while becoming less distinctive because many organizations use similar visual cues. Museum-like retail interiors can remain aesthetically sophisticated while losing part of their novelty. Phrases concerning “craft,” “timelessness,” “authenticity,” “culture,” “nature,” “memory,” or “the art of living” can remain semantically meaningful while becoming less capable of interrupting attention through repetition.

The relevant decline can therefore concern

differentiating salience

rather than

aesthetic value in itself.

This distinction is especially important for the paper's later discussion of cultural symbols. A historical symbol can remain factually valid and socially important even if repeated commercial deployment reduces its marginal affective force. Historical reality does not disappear when audiences become accustomed to its symbolic invocation.

The same process can generate pressure toward deeper forms of anchoring. If a generic heritage aesthetic becomes visually common, organizations can seek more specific archives, makers, places, historical objects, craft processes, local collaborations, or temporally limited events. The differentiation problem can therefore develop recursively:

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\text{symbolic proliferation} \longrightarrow \text{attenuated differentiating salience} \\
 &\quad \longrightarrow \text{more specific relational anchoring} \\
 &\quad \longrightarrow \text{possible proliferation of relational symbolism.}
 \end{aligned} \tag{59}$$

The final transition is a hypothesis rather than an established historical pattern. Its significance lies in revealing that relational anchoring does not provide a permanent solution to symbolic abundance. Relations themselves can be represented, standardized, branded, and repeatedly mobilized.

This generates the possibility of a second-order symbolic crisis. Once “heritage,” “craft,” “local culture,” “memory,” “authenticity,” and “meaningful experience” become recurrent commercial grammars, the cultural symbols used to restore differentiation can themselves become familiar forms.

The result need not be cultural decline. Repetition can create knowledge, recognition, participation, and renewed interest. Commercial circulation can finance archives, artists, exhibitions, and craft practices. The same cultural form can simultaneously become more visible and more generative.

The paper therefore distinguishes *visibility*, *salience*, and *generativity*:

$$\text{Visibility} \neq \text{AffectiveSalience} \neq \text{CulturalGenerativity} . \quad (60)$$

A cultural symbol can become highly visible while its capacity to produce affective interruption declines. It can also become familiar while generating new knowledge, participation, interpretation, or artistic production. These trajectories require separate empirical evaluation.

This distinction also prevents aesthetic saturation from becoming a nostalgic argument for scarcity. Artificial restriction of cultural access is not required to preserve beauty. Wider circulation can create new relations and new forms of aesthetic participation. The relevant political-economic problem concerns how abundance changes the mechanisms through which differentiation and salience are produced.

The central conclusion of this section is therefore conditional. Generative AI can increase the availability of aesthetically competent representations without proportionally increasing the availability of aesthetically salient encounters. Beauty remains dependent upon relations among form, perceiver, history, memory, context, embodiment, and contingency. When manifestational sophistication becomes less scarce, historically and spatially specific relations can acquire greater importance in distinguishing one aesthetic encounter from another.

The argument now reaches the third term organizing the paper. Some aesthetically salient encounters remain local to appreciation. Others become connected to a stronger awareness of presence, temporality, relation, or being alive. The next section examines this transition from aesthetic salience to *existential salience* and specifies the limits within which such experiences can enter commercial-cultural organization.

9 From Aesthetic Salience to Existential Salience

The preceding section distinguished the abundance of aesthetic representations from the availability of aesthetically salient encounters. This section examines a further transition. Some aesthetic experiences remain primarily experiences of perceptual interest, pleasure, difficulty, atmosphere, or beauty. Others become entangled with a more encompassing awareness of presence, temporality, relation, or being situated in a world. The paper refers to this second possibility as *existential salience*.

The expression requires considerable restraint. Existential salience does not designate an ontological property contained in an object, a measure of the intensity of an experience, or evidence that a person has encountered an authentic self. It also should not be confused with the proposition that commercial environments can manufacture a “meaningful life.” The concept is used for a more

limited phenomenon: an encounter can make aspects of one's situated existence unusually prominent within experience.

This formulation has substantial philosophical precedents. Existential phenomenology has long examined situated existence, temporality, mood, facticity, embodiment, and changing ways in which a world becomes available to a subject [40, 69, 52]. More recently, Ratcliffe has developed the concept of *existential feelings* for bodily ways of finding oneself situated in a world, including feelings of belonging, estrangement, unreality, familiarity, isolation, and heightened existence [63]. Rosa's theory of resonance and his subsequent analysis of uncontrollability similarly place being affected, touched by the world, and feeling alive at the center of a theory of world-relation [67, 68].

The present paper therefore does not claim that the connection among affect, world-relation, contingency, and the feeling of being alive is theoretically new. Its narrower problem concerns what happens when such dimensions of experience become increasingly visible within commercial-cultural organization under conditions of symbolic abundance. If aesthetic manifestation becomes easier to produce, the capacity to organize access to situations in which persons might feel present, affected, historically connected, or alive can acquire a different political-economic significance.

9.1 Presence and the Experience of Being Situated

The concept of presence is easily misunderstood because it can refer to several different philosophical problems. In the present paper, *presence* does not refer to metaphysical presence, objective co-location, or the mere fact that a subject occupies a physical position. A person can be physically located in a place while remaining experientially disengaged from it. Conversely, a mediated encounter can become intensely present within experience.

The relevant phenomenon is an increased salience of one's situated participation in a world.

Heidegger's analysis of being-in-the-world provides an important background. Human existence is not initially described as an isolated subject that later constructs relations to external objects. Dasein is already situated within a world of practical involvements, significances, relations, possibilities, and temporal orientations [40]. Things ordinarily appear within these relations rather than as neutral objects subsequently assigned meaning.

This perspective is useful because it relocates the philosophical problem of encounter. A street, artwork, building, landscape, or material object can become significant through its position within an already meaningful world. The encounter does not begin from a history-free observer receiving sensory data. It occurs within a subject whose concerns, relations, habits, memories, and possibilities already orient what can matter.

Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied perception further specifies this situatedness. Perception takes place through a lived body whose position, movement, habits, and capacities participate in the constitution of the perceptual field [52]. Presence therefore cannot be reduced to information concerning a location. Being somewhere involves a bodily orientation toward what surrounds the perceiver.

This distinction is particularly important for the present political-economic problem. A high-resolution image of an exhibition can reproduce many visible features of the exhibition. A virtual environment can reproduce or transform many spatial relations. Neither fact establishes that the resulting encounter is experientially equivalent to walking into a particular building at a particular time, encountering its material scale, moving among other visitors, being interrupted by an unanticipated sound, or carrying a personal history with the surrounding city.

The difference should not be formulated as

$$\text{physical presence} > \text{mediated presence.}$$

Such a hierarchy is unnecessary and often false. Digital and artificial environments can become deeply situated within a person's relational history. The relevant proposition is that different modes of access organize different sets of possible relations.

Sartre's analysis of situation and facticity provides another component of this account. Human existence unfolds within conditions that are already there: a body, a past, social relations, material circumstances, and a world that has not been selected in its entirety by the subject [69]. These conditions do not fix the meaning of the situation, yet they form part of the field within which possibilities become available.

An encounter can make these normally background conditions unusually salient. A person arriving in a city after a long absence can suddenly experience the fact of having changed. An old object can make historical distance perceptible. A familiar street transformed by demolition can disclose the passage of time. A view encountered while travelling can produce an unusually strong sense of being precisely here rather than elsewhere.

In each case, the object of experience need not contain a philosophical message concerning existence. What changes is the relation through which the subject becomes aware of being situated.

The paper therefore uses *situated presence* for experiences in which the relation among subject, world, place, body, and temporal position becomes unusually salient. Situated presence is one possible component of existential salience, but it is neither sufficient nor necessary for every form of existentially significant experience.

9.2 Affect and the Feeling of Aliveness

The language of "feeling alive" introduces an even stronger claim and therefore requires a more precise philosophical basis. Everyday expressions such as feeling alive, feeling unreal, feeling disconnected from the world, or feeling that everything has become unusually vivid indicate experiences that are difficult to classify as ordinary emotions directed toward discrete objects.

Ratcliffe's account of existential feelings is especially relevant here. Existential feelings are described as bodily ways of finding oneself in a world. They include varying senses of reality, belonging, familiarity, estrangement, possibility, significance, and connectedness [63]. Such feelings can operate as a background orientation through which more specific emotions, thoughts, and perceptions become possible.

This conception provides a useful novelty boundary for the present paper. *Existential salience* is not intended as a replacement term for Ratcliffe's *existential feelings*. The two concepts operate at different analytical levels.

Existential feelings concern comparatively encompassing ways in which the world and one's relation to it are experienced. Existential salience, as used here, concerns an event or encounter through which some dimension of situated existence becomes unusually prominent. A transient encounter can modify, interrupt, or disclose an existential feeling without the two being identical.

For example, an unexpected piece of music may momentarily interrupt a diffuse sense of estrangement. A historical place can intensify a person's sense of belonging. A sudden landscape can produce an experience of unusual vividness. These events do not prove a transformation in the subject's enduring mode of world-relation. They can nevertheless make that relation experientially salient.

Rosa's theory of resonance comes still closer to the present problem. Resonance is developed as a mode of relation between subject and world in which the subject is affected by something that is encountered, responds to it, and is transformed through the relation [67]. The value of the concept for this paper lies especially in its refusal to treat a good world-relation simply as possession of more resources, options, or controllable objects.

Rosa's later account of uncontrollability sharpens this point. The modern project of making the world increasingly available, attainable, predictable, and controllable can undermine the very forms of encounter in which a person experiences being touched, moved, or alive [68]. Resonance cannot be guaranteed because the responsive relation depends upon something that remains partly outside the subject's control.

This argument is highly relevant to the preceding discussion of contingency. The capacity to organize an encounter does not imply the capacity to guarantee that the encounter will become resonant or existentially salient. Indeed, an attempt to remove every form of unpredictability can alter the very structure that makes such an encounter possible.

The present paper nevertheless does not identify existential salience with Rosa's resonance. An existentially salient experience can be painful, disorienting, melancholic, or disturbing. A person can become intensely aware of being alive through anxiety, loss, danger, estrangement, or historical discontinuity. Resonance is therefore one possible form of an existentially significant relation rather than the general category required here.

Similarly, the expression *feeling alive* is not treated as synonymous with pleasure, excitement, physiological arousal, or consumer satisfaction. A high-intensity entertainment experience can be exciting without producing an unusually salient relation to one's existence. Conversely, a quiet and almost imperceptible event can produce a strong awareness of presence.

The analytical object is therefore not intensity alone. It concerns a change in the relation between experience and the subject's awareness of being situated within a world.

9.3 Temporality and Existential Awareness

Existential salience is deeply temporal. An encounter can become existentially significant because it alters the relation among past, present, and future rather than because it produces an unusually intense present sensation.

Heidegger's analysis places temporality at the center of existence [40]. Human existence is oriented through possibilities, inheritances, projects, and relations to finitude. Sartre likewise treats the subject as irreducible to a fixed present state, emphasizing the relation among facticity, possibility, and temporal transcendence [69]. Although the theoretical architectures differ, both make it difficult to understand situated existence through an isolated instantaneous present.

This temporal structure clarifies why historically anchored objects and places can become existentially salient.

A historical artifact does more than provide information about the past when its material presence makes temporal distance experientially available. A building can connect the observer's present to lives that occupied the same place decades earlier. A craft object can make visible a continuing process whose temporal extent exceeds the present maker or owner. A neighborhood can contain traces of earlier social relations while simultaneously undergoing change.

The resulting experience can involve a form of temporal compression:

past relations $\longrightarrow$ present encounter $\longrightarrow$ awareness of future change.

The importance of this structure is not that every historical encounter produces existential reflection. Most do not. The point is that historical depth supplies conditions through which one's own temporal situatedness can become salient.

Autobiographical memory produces an analogous effect. An ordinary object can become existentially significant when it unexpectedly reactivates a relation to an earlier self. The person does not simply remember an event. The difference between the person who once encountered the object and the person encountering it now can itself become perceptible.

This structure can be especially powerful in repeated places. A street, restaurant, station, park, or building encountered across many years becomes a material reference through which changes in relationships, aspirations, identity, and social conditions can become visible. The place remains partially continuous while the subject's relation to it changes.

The resulting significance is relational rather than merely mnemonic. The past remains operative because a present configuration permits an earlier relation to re-enter experience.

This also explains why institutional and cultural histories can contribute to existential salience without becoming autobiographical memories. A person can experience a relation to a history that began before birth and will continue after death. Cultural practices, languages, monuments, archives, religious traditions, artworks, and craft lineages can situate an individual within temporal scales larger than an individual biography.

Such encounters can produce belonging. They can also produce estrangement. A historical narrative can reveal exclusion. A transformed urban environment can make discontinuity more salient than continuity. An inherited cultural symbol can become difficult to inhabit. Existential salience should therefore not be equated with affirmative identification with history.

The political-economic significance of temporality emerges when institutions organize access to these historical relations. Archives, museums, heritage spaces, luxury exhibitions, historical districts, cultural events, and commercial narratives can place temporally extended relations within the visitor's field of encounter.

These arrangements can make historical depth perceptible. They can also simplify, standardize, or selectively frame it. The same process that facilitates temporal encounter can therefore participate in cultural interpretation and commercial differentiation.

The resulting question is more specific than whether history can be commodified. It concerns how the organization of historical presence can become one of the conditions through which subjects encounter their own temporality.

9.4 Existentially Salient Encounter

The preceding discussion permits a more precise definition of *existentially salient encounter*. An encounter is existentially salient when it makes some dimension of the subject's situated existence unusually prominent within experience. Relevant dimensions can include presence, temporality, finitude, belonging, estrangement, relation, historical situatedness, or the felt fact of being alive.

The definition is intentionally event-centered. It does not require a stable transformation of personality or worldview. A brief encounter can be existentially salient even if its effect later fades. At the same time, salience can sometimes redirect subsequent attention, memory, interpretation, or action.

Existential salience should be distinguished from several neighboring phenomena.

It differs from *aesthetic salience*. A beautiful object can sustain aesthetic attention without making the subject's own situated existence especially prominent.

It differs from *emotional intensity*. Strong pleasure, fear, or excitement can occur without producing an encompassing awareness of one's relation to a world.

It differs from *authenticity*. A person can experience an institutionally authenticated object without becoming existentially affected, and an unauthenticated or artificial object can participate in a deeply significant encounter.

It differs from *meaning* understood as a general evaluative category. The paper does not require a theory of whether an experience makes life meaningful or contributes to a good life.

It also differs from *subjective preference*. The subject need not have wanted the encounter beforehand or judge it positively afterward.

A schematic representation is useful at this point. Let $X_i(u, t)$ denote the existential salience of encounter u for subject i at time t . Then

$$X_i(u, t) = \Psi_i(u, \Gamma_i(t), \mathcal{H}_i^{<t}, \mathcal{L}_t), \quad (61)$$

where $\Gamma_i(t)$ denotes the subject's historically constituted organization, $\mathcal{H}_i^{<t}$ relevant prior relations, and $\mathcal{L}_t$ the situated encounter landscape.

Equation (61) is not a claim that existential salience can currently be calculated from these variables. It identifies the dependency structure required by the argument. The encountered object or event participates in the experience without determining it independently of subject, history, and situation.

The relation to aesthetic salience can consequently be expressed without assuming necessity:

$$A_i^{\text{aes}}(u, t) > 0 \not\Rightarrow X_i(u, t) > 0. \quad (62)$$

Beauty can remain beauty without becoming existentially salient.

The reverse dependence is also not required. An existentially salient encounter need not be beautiful. Anxiety, grief, disruption, or confrontation with historical violence can make situated existence unusually salient without constituting aesthetic pleasure.

Why, then, does beauty occupy such a central position in this paper?

The reason is historical and political-economic rather than ontological. Aesthetic practices are among the domains in which commercial and cultural actors deliberately organize attention, atmosphere, materiality, history, place, and embodied encounter. They therefore provide especially visible sites for examining the transition from a designed symbolic environment to an experience whose eventual significance remains contingent.

Beauty can function as an invitation to remain in relation with what is encountered. Aesthetic salience can slow attention, interrupt habitual movement, direct perception toward a material detail, activate memory, or encourage bodily presence within a space. These effects can create conditions under which a stronger existential relation sometimes develops.

The relevant structure is therefore one of possibility:

encounter $\rightarrow$ possible aesthetic salience $\rightarrow$ possible existential salience.

Each transition remains contingent.

This distinction is important for the later empirical cases. A commercial space containing art cannot be classified as producing existential encounters merely because art is present. A campaign invoking life or presence cannot be treated as evidence that visitors actually felt more alive. Such materials demonstrate the organization or articulation of possible relations. Experience remains an empirical question beyond what public-facing materials alone can establish.

9.5 Commercial Articulation of Existential Salience

The political-economic problem becomes especially visible when commercial discourse moves beyond the language of product properties or aesthetic quality and explicitly invokes feeling, presence, time, memory, encounter, life, or forms of personal transformation.

None of these practices is unprecedented. The experience economy already treats memorable engagement as a source of differentiation [61]. Aesthetic capitalism extends economic organization into atmosphere, staging, lifestyle, and sensory environments [12]. Luxury and heritage research demonstrates the importance of history, authenticity, place, ritual, and institutional continuity to

commercial value [9, 24]. The literature on resonance similarly makes the relation between modern social organization and the quality of world-relation a central theoretical problem [67].

The present issue is consequently narrower than the observation that companies sell experiences or use existential vocabulary. The historical question is whether such practices acquire increased relative importance when aesthetic manifestation itself becomes easier to generate.

A distinction among three levels is necessary.

The first is *existential articulation*. An organization publicly connects a cultural or commercial practice to ideas such as feeling, life, presence, memory, time, belonging, or transformation.

The second is *organization of existentially relevant conditions*. The organization structures place, objects, history, bodily movement, temporality, social encounter, or other conditions that can participate in existential salience.

The third is *existential effect*. A participant actually undergoes an experience in which situated existence becomes unusually salient.

These levels should remain separate:

$$\text{articulation} \neq \text{organization} \neq \text{experienced effect.} \quad (63)$$

Public materials can provide direct evidence of the first. Observation and institutional documentation can provide evidence concerning the second. Establishing the third requires access to the participant's experience through interviews, ethnography, phenomenological reports, experiments, or other appropriate methods.

The distinction prevents a common interpretive error. If a luxury exhibition uses the language of "living," it does not follow that the visitor experiences greater existential vitality. If a cultural space invites "encounter," it does not follow that serendipity occurs. If a brand presents historical objects, it does not follow that visitors experience historical depth.

Nevertheless, public articulation remains politically and economically significant. It reveals which dimensions of experience are being made available within commercial-cultural discourse as possible sources of value.

This becomes particularly interesting under symbolic abundance. If a polished advertisement, evocative image, or philosophical phrase can be generated at very low marginal cost, the commercial force of the phrase alone can weaken. The organization can then seek to connect symbolic articulation to a physical exhibition, documented archive, historical object, recognized place, named craft practice, artist collaboration, or temporally bounded event.

The structure moves from representational assertion toward relational support:

"this signifies life"

toward

"this symbolic articulation is embedded in a place, history, practice, and encounter through which the relation ca

The second form remains symbolic, but its symbolic claim is supported by a thicker relational field.

This provides another interpretation of relational re-anchoring. Aesthetic symbols need not merely be attached to histories for purposes of authentication. They can be attached to encounter conditions through which their proposed significance might become experientially operative.

Commercial spaces can therefore become infrastructures of possible world-relation. Architecture, exhibition, material objects, archives, performances, historical narratives, public art, hospitality,

and urban location can be organized around opportunities to feel, notice, remember, encounter, or participate.

Calling these infrastructures *existential* would be too strong. Their relevance is that they organize conditions that can become existentially salient for some participants.

This distinction will guide the later case analysis. The cases are not used to show that particular companies control existential experience. They are used to identify public practices in which commercial symbols become connected to feeling, temporality, material history, culture, presence, and encounter, and to ask how those practices should be interpreted under changing conditions of symbolic scarcity.

9.6 Limits of Existential Governance

The phrase *existential governance* poses a substantial risk of overstatement. Taken literally, it could suggest governance of existence itself. That is not the claim made in this paper.

The object of organization is more limited:

conditions of possible encounter.

An actor can control a venue, restrict or expand access, curate objects, schedule an event, authenticate provenance, design an atmosphere, rank recommendations, or select which historical narrative becomes visible. These interventions can alter the landscape within which existentially salient encounters become possible. They do not establish control over the experience that results.

Several limits follow.

The first is the limit of *contingency*. The previous section showed that the significance of an encounter depends upon conjunctions that remain partly open. The organizer can control many antecedent conditions without controlling the relation ultimately generated between participant and event.

Rosa's analysis of uncontrollability gives this limit additional theoretical force. Resonant relation cannot be produced simply through greater command over the world because responsiveness includes an element that cannot be guaranteed [68]. Although the present paper does not identify existential salience with resonance, the same structural warning applies. A commercial promise of a transformative or life-affirming encounter can be undermined by the attempt to script the encounter completely.

This creates an internal tension within the commercialization of existential salience:

commercial value seeks reproducibility, existential encounter may depend partly upon non-reproducibility.

A firm ordinarily benefits when a valued offering can be delivered reliably. Yet the exact qualities that make an encounter existentially significant can include surprise, temporal uniqueness, personal history, uncontrollability, or the sense that something occurred beyond the logic of an already specified transaction.

The second limit concerns *history*. The organizer does not create the entire subject who enters the encounter. Personal relationships, family, language, education, cultural history, earlier places, grief, aspirations, prior art experiences, and many other relations participate in susceptibility. Commercial organization can depend upon histories generated elsewhere.

The third limit concerns *interpretation*. Participants can interpret the same environment in conflicting ways. A heritage exhibition can produce pride, nostalgia, indifference, historical curiosity,

criticism, or alienation. A commercially organized artwork can generate a relation entirely detached from the commercial meaning intended by its host.

The fourth limit concerns *reflexivity*. Once participants recognize that an encounter has been designed to produce a particular affective state, the recognition can alter the experience itself. A highly visible attempt to manufacture authenticity, spontaneity, intimacy, or serendipity can undermine the effect it seeks to produce.

The fifth limit concerns *commodification*. A commercial relation to existential salience does not imply that existential salience itself has become a commodity. What can ordinarily be bought is admission, accommodation, transport, material goods, access, service, spatial privilege, curation, or another organized condition. The experiential outcome remains only partially connected to the transaction.

The sixth limit concerns *authenticity*. An expensive, materially unique, or historically authenticated encounter does not possess existential privilege. A free encounter in a public street can become more existentially salient than a carefully curated luxury experience. Artificial scarcity therefore cannot guarantee existential value.

The seventh limit concerns *normative evaluation*. The commercial organization of existentially relevant conditions is not inherently exploitative. A cultural institution can create opportunities for reflection, social connection, aesthetic discovery, historical learning, or renewed attention. Commercial resources can make such opportunities possible.

The normative problem emerges when organization is combined with stronger conditions such as exclusion, asymmetric appropriation, manipulative use of personal histories, restriction of common cultural resources, systematic behavioral steering, or extraction from vulnerabilities. Those mechanisms require independent analysis.

The eighth limit concerns *epistemic access*. Even increasingly personalized artificial systems possess only representations and inferences concerning a user's history. A system can model patterns of response without thereby acquiring direct access to the subject's phenomenal experience. The difference becomes especially important once commercial prediction moves from observable preference toward affective susceptibility.

An inferred model

$$\hat{\Gamma}_i$$

remains an approximation of a historically constituted subject rather than the subject itself. Accurate behavioral prediction does not eliminate this distinction.

The final limit is recursive. If commercially organized existential language becomes ubiquitous, it can itself become another abundant symbolic grammar. Words such as "presence," "authenticity," "meaning," "connection," "journey," "feeling," or "aliveness" can lose differentiating force through repetition just as visual styles can.

Capital can then seek stronger experiential evidence behind the language: rarer places, more specific histories, temporally restricted events, deeper personalization, material provenance, or apparently more spontaneous encounters.

The resulting process would reproduce the scarcity problem at a deeper level. The attempt to respond to symbolic abundance through existential articulation can itself contribute to the symbolic abundance of existential discourse.

This possibility should not be treated as inevitable. Existential vocabulary can stimulate genuine reflection, cultural participation, or new forms of experience. Its circulation can be generative rather than exhausting. The relevant issue is whether repeated deployment remains connected to sufficiently diverse and consequential relational practices to sustain salience.

The central result of this section is therefore a constrained account of the movement from beauty to existence. Aesthetic salience can create conditions in which an encounter becomes more than an aesthetically interesting object and begins to alter a person's awareness of presence, temporality, relation, or being alive. Existing phenomenological and sociological theories already provide important accounts of world-relation, existential feeling, resonance, and uncontrollability. The contribution proposed here lies in placing those problems within a changing political economy of symbolic production.

Under conditions of symbolic abundance, commercial-cultural actors can have increasing incentives to connect reproducible symbols to less substitutable histories, places, material practices, and situated encounters. Some of these relations can become existentially salient. The experience itself remains contingent and exceeds organizational control.

The next section therefore shifts from the phenomenology of this boundary to its political-economic organization. It examines the governance of generative conditions through access, space, authentication, enclosure, value capture, and increasingly personalized models of susceptibility.

10 Political-Economic Organization of Generative Conditions

The preceding sections developed three connected distinctions. Symbolic manifestation can become increasingly reproducible without reproducing the history to which a manifestation is attributed. An organized encounter landscape can alter the probability of particular encounters without determining their significance. Aesthetic salience can, in some cases, develop into existential salience without becoming a commercially producible outcome. This section brings these distinctions together at the level of political economy.

The principal object of analysis is the organization of *generative conditions*. The term refers to conditions that participate in making certain encounters, interpretations, relations, or trajectories possible without specifying their final form. In the present context, these conditions can include access, place, temporal organization, cultural resources, material objects, institutional authentication, attention, curation, information, and the pathways through which subjects enter an encounter landscape.

This perspective shifts attention from the sale of a finished experience to the organization of conditions from which experience can emerge. Such organization is not unique to capital. Museums, libraries, religious institutions, cities, schools, families, communities, and public authorities also structure generative conditions. The political-economic question begins when control over those conditions participates in differentiation, revenue, rent, accumulation, or other forms of economic value formation.

The section therefore preserves distinctions among organization, governance, enclosure, capture, appropriation, rent, and extraction. These terms describe different relations. Their analytical separation is especially important for the cases considered later, where commercially organized cultural encounters can simultaneously expand public access, strengthen institutional visibility, generate private value, and draw upon histories that exceed the organization hosting them.

10.1 Generative Conditions of Encounter

An encounter does not occur through symbolic content alone. It requires a field within which objects, subjects, places, institutions, and temporal sequences can become related. The term *generative condition* identifies a component of this field whose presence affects what can subsequently emerge.

For a situated encounter, a useful schematic representation is

$$\mathcal{G}_t = \{\mathcal{A}_t, \mathcal{P}_t, \mathcal{T}_t, \mathcal{O}_t, \mathcal{I}_t, \mathcal{C}_t, \mathcal{R}_t\}, \quad (64)$$

where $\mathcal{A}_t$ denotes conditions of access, $\mathcal{P}_t$ spatial configuration, $\mathcal{T}_t$ temporal organization, $\mathcal{O}_t$ available objects or events, $\mathcal{I}_t$ institutional framing, $\mathcal{C}_t$ curatorial or informational organization, and $\mathcal{R}_t$ relations made available within the field.

Equation (64) is not intended as an exhaustive ontology of experience. Its purpose is to distinguish the field from the resulting encounter. The same environment can generate different trajectories for different subjects, and the same person can respond differently to a similar environment at different moments.

This distinction has a direct economic implication. An organization can invest in $\mathcal{G}_t$ even when it cannot purchase or manufacture the resulting salience. A retailer can commission art, construct architecture, maintain historical archives, organize an exhibition, invite craftspeople, curate objects, arrange lighting, or make a cultural program publicly accessible. The economic object under organizational control is therefore frequently a condition of encounter rather than the eventual experience itself.

This structure is compatible with established accounts of the experience economy [61]. It differs in emphasis. The experience economy often describes experience as an offering that firms stage for customers. The present paper places greater weight upon the incompleteness of that staging. What is organized can be a field of possible encounters whose actual significance depends upon histories, relations, and contingencies that remain partly external to the organizer.

The distinction becomes increasingly relevant when symbolic manifestation is abundant. If a visual atmosphere can be generated or reproduced at low cost, physical access to a specific archive, historical artifact, craft process, institutional setting, temporary event, or culturally recognized place can continue to provide differentiated conditions of encounter.

The politically important resource can therefore be neither an isolated symbol nor an already completed experience. It can be the capacity to determine which relations become available within a field.

This capacity has several forms. An organization can expand access by placing art in an openly accessible commercial space. It can restrict access through ticketing, membership, invitation, or physical scarcity. It can authenticate relations through archives and institutions. It can structure temporal uniqueness through limited-duration events. It can organize co-presence through festivals, exhibitions, performances, or hospitality. Digital platforms can perform analogous functions through ranking, filtering, personalization, and recommendation.

These operations differ substantially in their normative implications. The same concept of generative conditions can describe a public library, a luxury flagship, a museum, a city street, or a digital platform. Political-economic classification therefore requires attention to ownership, access, control, distribution of benefits, and the consequences of organizational intervention.

10.2 Access, Space, and Temporal Organization

Access provides the first point at which generative conditions can become economically organized. Access determines who can enter a space, encounter an object, participate in an event, receive a recommendation, or establish a relation with a cultural resource.

Access can be priced directly. Admission fees, memberships, travel costs, reservation systems, premium services, and restricted distribution can convert access into an explicit economic object. It can also be priced indirectly. A work of public art may require no ticket while remaining accessible only through a commercial building, destination district, or travel infrastructure. An exhibition

can be free while contributing to the attractiveness of a retail environment. Access and transaction therefore should not be treated as equivalent.

Physical space introduces a related form of organization. Space makes some relations proximate and others distant. It produces routes, thresholds, visibility, interruption, co-presence, and sequence. Harvey's work on the capitalist production of space provides a wider political-economic background for understanding why spatial arrangements cannot be treated as neutral containers of economic activity [38]. Commercial value can be constituted through spatial concentration, differentiated location, and the production of place itself.

The present argument applies this insight at a smaller experiential scale. Aesthetic and cultural objects situated within commercial environments participate in the production of reasons to enter, remain, move through, or return to a place. The work can therefore contribute to place value without being sold directly.

Temporal organization operates similarly. Limited duration can produce a form of scarcity that differs from material rarity. A temporary exhibition, seasonal installation, performance, opening event, or one-time collaboration creates an encounter whose availability is bounded by time.

This temporal boundary can be natural, institutional, or deliberately produced. A sunset is temporally bounded independently of commercial organization. An exhibition closing date is institutionally determined. A limited product release can create artificial temporal scarcity. These forms should not be collapsed into a single category.

What they share is an effect on substitutability. An encounter that can occur only during a particular period cannot be accessed indefinitely under identical conditions. Photographs, recordings, replicas, and generated representations can extend its symbolic circulation while leaving the original temporal configuration unrepeatable.

Spatial and temporal organization therefore creates a structure of *situated availability*. The economic significance of situated availability becomes particularly visible when representations of the relevant object or event circulate freely. A visitor need not travel in order to know what an exhibition looks like. Travel becomes relevant because being present within the particular spatial-temporal configuration remains a different relation.

This distinction does not imply that firms always benefit from restricting access. Open access can itself create commercial value. A department store can make gallery exhibitions freely available because the cultural program contributes to visitation, institutional identity, public reputation, repeated contact, or a wider urban field. A commercial complex can display large-scale art without charging for the encounter because the art contributes to the identity of the site as a destination.

The political economy of access is consequently more complex than a simple model of exclusion:

greater restriction $\neq$ greater value

in every case.

Open access can increase circulation and collective recognition, which can in turn strengthen the relational value of the place or institution. Restricted access can increase scarcity while reducing the range of relations through which the object becomes socially meaningful.

The optimal configuration for a commercial actor can therefore involve a mixture of openness and restriction: open symbolic circulation combined with scarcer material access, freely accessible cultural programming combined with premium commercial offerings, or broad digital visibility combined with temporally limited physical participation.

This combination is particularly relevant under symbolic abundance. A commercial-cultural space can allow images of its artworks, architecture, and events to circulate widely because symbolic

reproduction supports recognition. The scarce economic relation can remain the capacity to participate in the situated field itself.

10.3 Governance and Relational Enclosure

The concept of governance is used in this paper for systematic intervention in the conditions through which future relations and trajectories become possible. Governance does not require exclusive ownership. An institution can govern access, classification, curation, timing, recommendation, or authentication without owning every cultural resource participating in the field.

This broad concept should be distinguished from *enclosure*.

The literature on commons provides an important caution. Ostrom's work demonstrates that common-pool resources can be governed through heterogeneous institutional arrangements and that neither privatization nor centralized state control constitutes a universally superior solution [56]. Although cultural histories and relational fields should not be treated mechanically as common-pool natural resources, this institutional lesson remains useful. Governance and privatization are analytically different processes.

The term *relational enclosure* is therefore reserved for situations in which an actor acquires sufficiently strong control over access to, use of, or recognized participation in a relational field that previously broader possibilities become materially or institutionally restricted.

The concept should not be applied merely because a private organization participates in a shared cultural history. Sponsoring an exhibition concerning a cultural tradition does not enclose the tradition. Associating a brand with a city does not give the brand ownership of the city's history. Commissioning a craft collaboration does not necessarily restrict the wider practice.

A stronger relation is required.

Relational enclosure may become plausible when, for example, access to a historically significant site is privatized, an institution obtains exclusive rights over a cultural resource, a platform becomes an unavoidable intermediary for reaching a particular audience, or proprietary control substantially limits how others can participate in a field of relation.

This definition directs attention toward changes in feasible relations rather than toward symbolic association alone.

The distinction can be stated as:

$$\text{relational anchoring} \not\Rightarrow \text{relational enclosure.} \quad (65)$$

A symbol can become strongly anchored to a shared history while the history remains broadly accessible and generative for others.

Enclosure can nevertheless become economically attractive when control over access creates a scarce position from which revenue or rent can be obtained. The political-economic significance of such control becomes especially important when the underlying value was generated through wider social relations.

A historical district, for example, accumulates value through generations of architecture, commerce, infrastructure, public policy, residents, visitors, workers, cultural production, and collective representation. A particular property owner can acquire a strategic position within this field without having generated the entire history from which the location derives significance.

The same issue can arise digitally. Platforms can organize the routes through which cultural producers and audiences encounter one another. Srnicek's account of platform capitalism emphasizes the economic significance of platforms as intermediating infrastructures capable of collecting data and positioning themselves between different user groups [72]. Their power can therefore derive

partly from control over relations rather than production of every item circulating through the platform.

Relational enclosure is thus best understood as an institutional possibility rather than a general diagnosis of commercialization. The later cases should only be described through this concept where evidence demonstrates meaningful control or restriction.

10.4 Authentication and Value Capture

Relational anchoring becomes economically consequential when authenticated relations contribute to value. The relevant question is then how value generated through a wider relational field becomes distributed.

Authentication can increase differentiation because it stabilizes a connection between a symbol and a history. Museums, archives, experts, certificates, curators, recognized makers, institutions, material records, and established brand continuity can all participate in this process.

The economic value arising from authentication can accrue to several actors at once. An artist can gain recognition. A museum can gain visitors. A craft community can receive renewed attention. A commercial sponsor can acquire prestige. A district can experience increased visitation. Consumers can gain access to cultural resources. The presence of private value therefore does not imply social loss.

This is why the paper uses *value capture* more cautiously than the term often appears in critical political economy. At its weakest, capture simply means that an actor obtains some benefit from a field of value generation. Used this way, the term has little normative force.

A stronger concept is needed where asymmetry matters. The relevant question is whether an actor possesses a privileged position allowing it to appropriate a disproportionate share of value generated through relations whose production was substantially distributed.

Suppose a commercial symbol S_C is anchored to a shared historical field $\mathcal{H}_{\text{shared}}$. If the coupling generates commercial value V_C , the existence of $V_C > 0$ establishes only that commercial value has arisen. It does not establish that the shared field has been diminished.

A potentially regenerative configuration is

$$\Delta V_C > 0 \quad \text{and} \quad \Delta G_{\text{shared}} > 0, \quad (66)$$

where G_{shared} denotes the continuing generative capacity of the wider cultural or relational field.

For example, commercial support might finance preservation, bring new audiences into contact with a craft, support artists, maintain archival materials, or produce new interpretations. Private gain and public cultural generativity can increase together.

A more problematic configuration can arise when commercial differentiation increases while access, interpretive plurality, participation, or continued cultural generation declines. Establishing such a trajectory requires case-specific evidence. It cannot be inferred merely from the existence of a brand association.

Authentication itself can also become a site of control. Institutions capable of certifying authenticity can create or reinforce market hierarchies. A certificate, expert judgment, recognized archive, or institutional provenance can determine whether visually similar objects occupy radically different economic positions.

Under symbolic abundance, this authority may become more important because appearance alone carries less information concerning genesis. The scarcity of authentication can consequently support value even when the manifest form is easy to imitate.

The central political-economic problem becomes:

Who can establish the credible relation between symbol and history?

This question concerns authority as much as ownership. The actor who controls authentication can influence which histories become economically legible and which remain outside recognized circuits of value.

10.5 Rent, Appropriation, and Extraction

The distinction among ordinary commercial return, rent, appropriation, and extraction is especially important for the cultural cases considered later.

Harvey's analysis of monopoly rent provides a relevant precedent because it directly examines the relation among culture, uniqueness, place, collective memory, localized ways of life, and capitalist valuation [39]. The argument is particularly useful for this paper because monopoly rent can arise from claims to uniqueness while the cultural qualities supporting those claims often emerge from wider social histories.

This creates a structural tension. Commercial actors can seek differentiation through uniqueness, while the cultural field producing that uniqueness can be collective, open-ended, and difficult to reduce to private production.

The present paper does not use *rent* for every premium price associated with culture. Rent becomes analytically relevant when control over a scarce position, resource, right, location, or authenticated difference permits an actor to obtain returns that depend upon the restricted substitutability of that position.

A historically prestigious location offers an illustrative case. The current owner of a property may obtain economic benefit from a location whose cultural value was generated through public infrastructure, collective memory, architecture, surrounding institutions, earlier residents, businesses, and visitors. The owner's strategic position permits participation in value generated beyond the owner's individual contribution.

The term *appropriation* requires a different condition. Appropriation concerns the taking into a controlled economic relation of a resource, symbol, history, practice, or value generated partly elsewhere. Appropriation can occur with or without legal ownership and can have different normative consequences.

Cultural appropriation in the ordinary normative sense is more specific than this economic usage and involves additional questions of identity, power, representation, historical domination, and community authority. The present paper therefore does not use evidence of commercial cultural association as automatic evidence of cultural appropriation.

Extraction is stronger still.

Extraction should be reserved for cases where value generation is combined with sufficiently consequential asymmetry, depletion, dispossession, dependency, or transfer such that the generative field or participating actors bear costs that are not adequately reproduced or reciprocated.

The following relation therefore remains central:

$$\text{governance} \neq \text{enclosure} \neq \text{capture} \neq \text{appropriation} \neq \text{extraction}. \quad (67)$$

These processes can occur sequentially, overlap, or remain entirely separate.

The distinction also protects the paper's analysis of free cultural programming. An openly accessible commercial exhibition can produce substantial private value through reputation or visitation without establishing enclosure. Likewise, a luxury brand can sponsor cultural preservation

while obtaining commercial differentiation. Such arrangements can involve asymmetric benefit, but asymmetry alone is insufficient to establish extraction.

A stronger analysis would require asking what happened to the cultural field after the intervention. Did access increase or decrease? Did the relevant practitioners gain resources? Was interpretive plurality preserved? Did the practice become more sustainable? Was the commercial actor able to exclude others from a relation that was previously shared? Did symbolic repetition reduce the field to a narrow set of commercially useful representations?

These questions make extraction an empirical conclusion rather than a rhetorical starting point.

They also create a bridge to the later problem of cultural saturation. A commercial-cultural relation can be non-extractive in a narrow material sense while still contributing over time to a symbolic environment in which the cultural resource becomes standardized or affectively attenuated. Such an effect would require a different concept from extraction and is examined later through saturation and generativity.

10.6 From Preference to Susceptibility

The preceding subsections concerned control over external generative conditions. Artificial intelligence introduces a further possibility: increasingly detailed inference concerning the subject who enters those conditions.

Recommender systems provide the established starting point. Their conventional purpose is to identify items likely to be relevant or interesting to a particular user [65]. Context-aware recommender systems extend this logic by incorporating information concerning the user's situation, allowing recommendations to vary with contextual conditions [1].

This literature already moves beyond a static preference model. A person's evaluation of a restaurant, song, destination, or cultural object can depend upon time, location, social company, activity, and other contextual variables. Personalization therefore has long involved more than identifying an invariant list of likes.

The distinction proposed here concerns a further conceptual extension.

Preference asks approximately:

Which available object is this person likely to choose, rate positively, or consider relevant?

Susceptibility asks:

Which encounter, under which relational and temporal conditions, is likely to become salient enough to affect this person's subsequent trajectory?

The difference is significant.

A person can have no prior preference for an encounter that later becomes important. A visitor might not have searched for a particular artist, place, or historical object. The encounter can become salient because it intersects with a prior relation whose relevance was not expressed as a preference.

A simple preference model can be represented as

$$P(c_i \mid \mathbf{p}_i, \mathbf{x}), \quad (68)$$

where c_i denotes a choice, $\mathbf{p}_i$ an inferred preference profile, and $\mathbf{x}$ the available options or contextual information.

A susceptibility-oriented problem is closer to

$$P(A_i(u, t) \mid u, \hat{\Gamma}_i(t), \mathcal{L}_t), \quad (69)$$

where $A_i(u, t)$ denotes the salience that encounter u might acquire, $\hat{\Gamma}_i(t)$ an inferred approximation of the subject’s historically constituted organization, and $\mathcal{L}_t$ the encounter landscape.

The second expression introduces a stronger epistemic requirement. Predicting salience can require information concerning relations among memories, questions, cultural histories, interpersonal attachments, places, and recent events rather than merely past consumption.

This distinction should remain conceptual at this stage. Contemporary systems already use extensive behavioral data, contextual inference, embeddings, cross-domain signals, and interaction histories. That does not establish that they possess a model equivalent to $\hat{\Gamma}_i$.

The value of the concept lies in identifying a possible direction of development. Persistent conversational systems, multimodal assistants, wearable devices, recommendation platforms, and connected personal data environments can accumulate increasingly heterogeneous histories. These histories potentially allow systems to infer not only stable preferences but relations among events that have become salient over time.

The political-economic consequence would be a change in the object of personalization.

Instead of selecting a product that resembles previous purchases, a system could select an encounter because it predicts that the encounter intersects with a currently active susceptibility. A travel recommendation could depend on an earlier conversation concerning grief. An exhibition could be recommended because of a recurring interest in a historical period. A cultural event could be surfaced because it intersects with a relationship, language, place, or unresolved question appearing across earlier interactions.

These examples describe possibilities rather than current generalized capabilities. Their analytical importance lies in the movement from *preference prediction* toward *salience prediction*.

10.7 AI-Mediated Modeling of Affective Susceptibility

Affective computing provides one technical lineage relevant to this transition. Picard’s foundational account defined a research program concerned with systems capable of recognizing, interpreting, modeling, and responding to affective states [58]. The field has since developed numerous methods for inferring affect from facial expression, voice, physiology, text, behavior, and multimodal signals.

Affective recognition should nevertheless be separated sharply from susceptibility modeling.

An estimate that a user is currently sad, excited, frustrated, or attentive does not reconstruct the historical relations through which a future encounter might become significant. The same affective state can arise from different histories and produce different responses to the same stimulus.

The stronger object is relational:

$$\text{current affect} \neq \text{historically constituted susceptibility.}$$

A susceptibility model would require some representation of how earlier events, persons, places, symbols, and experiences interact in shaping present responsiveness.

Persistent conversational AI makes this possibility conceptually important because interaction can itself produce longitudinal symbolic traces. A user can discuss aspirations, aesthetic preferences, memories, places, cultural interests, unresolved questions, interpersonal histories, and reactions to earlier recommendations across many interactions.

Such a history can support increasingly differentiated inference even if the system has no phenomenal access to the user.

The political-economic significance becomes clearer when inference and intervention are combined. A system that predicts susceptibility can also alter the encounter landscape presented to the subject. The same infrastructure can participate in:

observation $\rightarrow$ inference $\rightarrow$ selection $\rightarrow$ new encounter $\rightarrow$ new observation.

This feedback structure can refine personalization over time.

Existing scholarship on digital persuasion establishes an important novelty boundary. Calo’s analysis of digital market manipulation argues that technologically mediated markets permit firms to study consumers at an individual level and potentially identify or trigger individual vulnerabilities [18]. Yeung’s concept of the *hypernudge* similarly analyzes Big Data techniques as forms of design-based regulation that shape informational choice environments and channel attention or decision-making [76].

The present paper therefore does not claim that individualized behavioral steering is new. Its narrower concern lies in the possibility that AI-mediated systems increasingly infer the relational conditions under which an encounter becomes affectively or existentially salient.

This distinction matters because susceptibility is not necessarily a vulnerability.

A person’s susceptibility to a particular encounter can arise from curiosity, education, love, cultural familiarity, artistic practice, philosophical interest, or openness to novelty. Modeling susceptibility can be used to expand generativity. A system might help a person discover an artist, place, book, or community that becomes genuinely valuable.

The same capacity can also be used asymmetrically. A system might identify a moment when a user is unusually receptive to prestige, reassurance, belonging, nostalgia, or escape and organize commercial suggestions around that condition.

Normative evaluation therefore depends upon the relation among informational asymmetry, user autonomy, commercial interest, vulnerability, transparency, and the subsequent effects of intervention.

The distinction between generative assistance and manipulation cannot be settled solely by whether personalization is effective.

A recommendation that is highly responsive to a person’s relational history can support exploration when the user retains meaningful control over goals, alternatives, and interpretation. The same informational advantage can become problematic when the system strategically exploits a susceptibility that the user does not recognize or cannot reasonably contest.

The stronger political-economic issue is therefore not personalization in itself. It is asymmetry in the capacity to model and intervene upon the conditions of salience.

10.8 Boundaries of Commercial Predictability

The possibility of susceptibility modeling should not be confused with the claim that commercial systems can predict human significance with high reliability. Several boundaries remain.

The first boundary concerns *epistemic representation*. A computational system observes traces: text, behavior, location, interaction history, purchases, images, physiological signals, or other data. These traces can support inference concerning the subject. They are not identical to the subject’s phenomenal experience.

The distinction can be represented as

$$\hat{\Gamma}_i \neq \Gamma_i \quad \text{and} \quad \hat{X}_i \neq X_i, \quad (70)$$

where the hatted terms denote inferred models and the unhatted terms denote the historically operative organization and existential salience discussed earlier.

High predictive performance does not remove this distinction.

The second boundary concerns *historical incompleteness*. No commercial system ordinarily has access to every relation that has participated in forming a person. Important memories can remain unrecorded. Their significance can change. A previously minor event can acquire new relevance after another event occurs.

The third boundary concerns *endogeneity*. Personalized interventions can change the subject whose future behavior they seek to predict. A recommendation creates a new encounter. The encounter can transform preference, attention, memory, or susceptibility. The target of prediction is therefore partly altered by the predictive system's own intervention.

The fourth boundary concerns *contingency*. Other persons, accidents, weather, institutional change, bodily states, and unplanned events continue to enter the trajectory. A highly personalized recommendation can place a subject in the vicinity of a possible encounter while the most significant event that occurs there remains entirely outside the recommendation model.

The fifth boundary concerns *reflexivity*. A subject who becomes aware of personalization can change behavior in response to being modeled. Users can reject recommendations precisely because they appear too predictable. They can seek randomness, anonymity, unfamiliar environments, or deliberate disconnection from recommendation infrastructures.

The sixth boundary concerns *plural value*. Commercial prediction usually requires an operational objective: click, dwell time, purchase, return, conversion, satisfaction, or another measurable outcome. Existential salience does not map cleanly onto such objectives. An experience can be deeply meaningful while producing no commercial conversion. It can even reduce future consumption.

The seventh boundary concerns *normative ambiguity*. A system can accurately identify an encounter that a user later values highly while reaching that result through an informational relation that raises concerns about privacy, autonomy, or dependence. Outcome quality alone does not settle the legitimacy of the process.

The final boundary concerns the economic problem that motivated the paper. A perfectly predicted encounter may lose some of the contingency through which it would otherwise become salient. If commercial systems become highly capable of arranging personalized "unexpected" experiences, the asymmetry identified in Section 7 becomes increasingly important. The subject can experience surprise while the organizing system experiences prediction.

This configuration creates a paradoxical frontier of experiential capitalization. Commercial organization seeks reliable production of value, while many of the encounters capable of becoming deeply salient depend partly upon histories and contingencies that resist reliable reproduction.

The economic response can therefore remain probabilistic. Rather than guaranteeing existential salience, an actor can assemble portfolios of conditions:

place + history + art + materiality + curation + personalization

that increase the likelihood of differentiated encounters for particular audiences.

Such organization can be economically effective without conquering contingency.

The political economy developed in this section can therefore be summarized through three levels.

At the first level, organizations control or influence external conditions of encounter: access, place, time, objects, institutions, and attention.

At the second level, organizations can obtain value from positions within those fields through differentiation, authentication, restricted access, rent, or other mechanisms.

At the third level, computational systems can increasingly model the subject entering the field and personalize which encounters become available.

None of these levels establishes control over existential experience itself.

The strongest defensible proposition is consequently that value formation can move closer to the conditions from which salience emerges. Under conditions of symbolic abundance, the political-economic object can increasingly include authenticated relations, situated availability, encounter landscapes, and inferred susceptibility.

The following section turns from the conceptual mechanism to observable commercial-cultural practices. Its cases examine how aesthetic symbols are connected to feeling and living, how art becomes integrated into commercial space, how exhibition and commodity circulation coexist, and how luxury institutions connect commercial symbols to provenance, craft, history, and cross-cultural encounter. These cases do not establish the theoretical mechanisms independently. They provide concrete sites in which the distinctions developed thus far can be examined.

11 Commercial-Cultural Practices under Changing Scarcity Conditions

The preceding sections developed a conceptual account of symbolic abundance, relational anchoring, contingent encounter, aesthetic salience, existential salience, and the political-economic organization of generative conditions. This section turns to a small set of contemporary commercial-cultural practices in which these relations become publicly observable. The purpose is not to demonstrate that the organizations examined adopted their practices in response to generative artificial intelligence. Art exhibitions, heritage narration, public art, cultural collaboration, and experiential retail all predate the current generative-AI period.

The cases are used for a narrower purpose. They show how commercial symbols can be coupled to feeling, temporality, art, place, institutional authority, provenance, craft, and cultural history. The theoretical question is whether such established practices can acquire additional significance within a scarcity regime in which aesthetically sophisticated manifestations are increasingly reproducible.

The analysis maintains the evidentiary distinction established in Section 4:

$$\text{observable articulation} \neq \text{organizational intention} \neq \text{experienced effect.} \quad (71)$$

Official organizational materials are therefore treated primarily as evidence of public articulation and documented practice. They establish what was displayed, stated, spatially arranged, or made available. They do not establish why an organization adopted the practice, how every visitor experienced it, or whether the practice produced the commercial effects that the present framework makes conceptually possible.

11.1 Aesthetic Experience and the Language of Living

An unusually explicit articulation of the relation among aesthetic experience, temporality, and living appears in Wako's 2026 *GOOD LOOP* project, organized in collaboration with HERALBONY. Wako's official documentation records the project under the formulation "*kanjiru koto ↔ ikiru koto*" ("feeling ↔ living") and the theme "*kurikaesu jikan no saki ni, bi o miru*" ("seeing beauty beyond repeated time") [75].

The wording is analytically significant because the public discourse does not remain at the level of product beauty. The accompanying text explicitly connects feeling and living, repeated practices and memory, beauty and inheritance across persons, and the accumulation of time with the possibility of encountering new value [75]. The project thus provides a rarely ambiguous example of what Section 9 termed *commercial articulation of existential salience*.

This classification requires an immediate limit. The case does not demonstrate that visitors underwent an existentially salient experience. It demonstrates that a commercial-cultural project publicly articulated a relation among aesthetic feeling, temporality, human existence, and encounter.

The material organization of the project is equally relevant. The exhibition was held at Wako's Ginza main store in August 2026 and included curated works by HERALBONY-affiliated artists, installations extending into parts of the first floor and the show windows, and eighteen original works by six artists [75]. The official material also described collaboration products based on an artist's work and invited participants to relate to art through viewing, touching, wearing, and incorporating it into everyday life [75].

The resulting configuration contains several analytically distinct layers:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{artistic work} &\longleftrightarrow \text{repeated creative time} \\
 &\longleftrightarrow \text{memory and beauty} \\
 &\longleftrightarrow \text{bodily encounter} \\
 &\longleftrightarrow \text{commercial object and retail space.}
 \end{aligned} \tag{72}$$

The importance of this structure lies in the movement across levels. Artistic form is connected to the history of making. The history of making is presented through temporality and accumulated practice. The work is made available through exhibition and installation. Some aesthetic forms are then translated into objects that can be touched, worn, and incorporated into everyday life.

This is more complex than a simple transfer of an artwork's appearance onto a commodity. The official framing attempts to retain a relation between the manifest form and the temporal practice of the artist. In the terminology of this paper, the commercial object is therefore presented through a form of historical and relational anchoring.

The case also illustrates why relational anchoring should not automatically be classified as appropriation or extraction. HERALBONY is not an anonymous cultural resource invoked without visible attribution. The collaboration publicly identifies artists, describes their practices, exhibits original works, offers works for sale, and directs visitors between participating Ginza sites [75]. Determining the distribution of economic value, contractual relations, or longer-term effects upon the artists would require additional evidence beyond the official material.

The theoretically relevant point is consequently more limited. The case demonstrates that commercial aesthetic discourse can connect symbolic form to temporality, artistic practice, bodily engagement, memory, and living within a single organized field.

Under conditions of symbolic abundance, this configuration can be interpreted through the paper's central historical question. A generated image can reproduce aesthetic motifs associated with the exhibited work, and generative language can reproduce philosophical phrases concerning time, beauty, and life. The documented practice attempts to establish something thicker: a connection among named artists, accumulated production histories, original works, physical installation, specific places, and embodied participation.

This does not prove that symbolic abundance caused the practice. It identifies the kind of relational structure whose relative importance could increase when symbolic articulation alone becomes easier to reproduce.

11.2 Public Art and Situated Commercial Space

A second configuration appears in the public-art program of GINZA SIX. The institution's official art documentation presents public art as part of a proposal for a richer everyday life in which

visitors can encounter art closely, and states that works by internationally recognized artists are maintained in the complex under the supervision of Mori Art Museum [33].

This configuration differs substantially from the preceding case. Its primary analytical object is spatial rather than discursive.

GINZA SIX has repeatedly used its large central atrium and other circulation areas for installations by contemporary artists. Its documented sequence of past atrium projects includes works by Yayoi Kusama, Daniel Buren, Chiharu Shiota, Tokujin Yoshioka, Kohei Nawa, Jean Jullien, and others [33]. The continuity of the program is itself important because it confirms that public art in this commercial environment predates the recent generative-AI period.

The current and recent projects make the spatial logic especially visible. Julian Opie's *Marathon. Women.* occupies the central atrium as a suspended LED installation visible from multiple levels, while the 2026 project *20 Children / Playground* extended Opie's work to the rooftop garden and the first-floor entrance [31, 32]. The official description emphasizes movement, immersion, and integration with the surrounding architectural environment.

The artist's published interview for the project is particularly useful for the present analysis. Opie contrasted the conventional white-room structure of galleries and museums with the complexity of ordinary environments and described bringing art into a place such as GINZA SIX as a way of exposing it to a wider public [30]. The resulting object is therefore explicitly conceived in relation to the surrounding environment rather than solely as a detachable image.

The relevant structure is:

artwork+architecture+circulation+co-presence+commercial environment → situated encounter field.
(73)

The economic significance of the arrangement cannot be inferred directly from the existence of the artwork. The official materials do not establish that the installation increases purchases, dwell time, or long-term commercial value. The case nevertheless demonstrates that art can become part of the infrastructure through which a commercial place is encountered.

This distinction is important for the paper's argument about symbolic abundance. A photograph or generated representation of the installation can circulate at negligible marginal cost relative to the construction of the physical field. The situated configuration remains different because the artwork is encountered through actual scale, movement among floors, architectural perspective, other visitors, changing time, and the surrounding commercial and urban environment.

The scarce object is therefore not necessarily access to the image. The image can be widely reproduced. A different scarcity attaches to

being there under this spatial-temporal configuration.

This should not be interpreted as proof that physical experience is aesthetically superior. It demonstrates that spatial encounter possesses a different substitutability structure from symbolic representation.

The case also shows why openly accessible cultural programming can remain politically economically relevant even without a transaction attached to each viewing. The public-art encounter is embedded within a larger institution whose identity includes retail, architecture, destination value, and cultural programming. The economic relation is therefore distributed across the site rather than reducible to a direct sale of the artwork encounter.

GINZA SIX additionally illustrates relational anchoring through its permanent or continuing works. Shinji Ohmaki's *Echos Infinity - Immortal Flowers*, for example, is described through Edo-komon motifs and the historical development of Edo-period aesthetic practices, while the

artist’s statement connects the work to accumulated time, memory, culture, and human feeling [33]. The commercial space thus becomes a location in which contemporary art, historical cultural reference, and urban circulation are brought into relation.

Again, the case does not demonstrate a strategy designed to respond to generative AI. It demonstrates a longstanding spatial practice whose relative function can be reconsidered when aesthetic imagery itself becomes increasingly abundant.

11.3 Exhibition, Experience, and Commodity Circulation

The third configuration concerns the coexistence of aesthetic encounter and direct commodity circulation within a department-store gallery.

In June 2026, Ginza Mitsukoshi presented an exhibition titled “*Miru*” “*Kanjiru*” *Gendai Aato Serekushon* (“Seeing” and “Feeling”: Contemporary Art Selection) in its seventh-floor gallery [29]. The exhibition brought together works by established and emerging contemporary artists, while the same official page listed individual artworks, prices, and mechanisms through which selected works could be purchased, including online payment [29].

This case is analytically useful because aesthetic experience and commodity exchange are neither spatially nor institutionally separated.

The visitor can encounter

artwork as object of aesthetic attention

while the same object is simultaneously positioned as

artwork as purchasable commodity.

The coexistence of these two relations is hardly new. Galleries and art dealers have always operated at the intersection of exhibition and exchange. Department stores likewise possess long histories of integrating cultural exhibition with commerce. The case therefore provides no evidence of a new AI-era mechanism by itself.

Its relevance lies instead in the way that it exposes the paper’s distinction between encounter conditions and transaction. A visitor need not purchase a work in order for the exhibition to organize an aesthetic encounter. At the same time, the work remains available for direct economic exchange. The commercial-cultural field can therefore support both non-transactional attention and transactional value.

This structure complicates any binary division between “free culture” and “commodified culture.” An encounter can occur within a commercial institution without itself being purchased, while the object encountered remains a commodity.

The analytical configuration can be represented as

$$\text{exhibition} \longrightarrow \begin{cases} \text{aesthetic encounter,} \\ \text{institutional mediation,} \\ \text{commodity circulation.} \end{cases} \quad (74)$$

These trajectories can coexist.

The title’s explicit emphasis on “seeing” and “feeling” is also relevant, although it should not be strengthened into an existential claim. The official material provides evidence that sensory and affective encounter forms part of the public framing of the exhibition. It does not connect this language to existence or living in the stronger manner observed in the Wako case.

Comparison between the two therefore demonstrates why the paper distinguishes aesthetic articulation from existential articulation. Commercial-cultural discourse can foreground feeling without necessarily moving toward claims about life, presence, or being.

Under conditions of symbolic abundance, department-store galleries can also be interpreted through the problem of authenticated encounter. Images resembling contemporary art are increasingly easy to generate. A gallery provides additional relations: named authorship, material works, institutional selection, price, provenance, physical encounter, and the possibility of ownership.

The difference between a generated aesthetic manifestation and a gallery object therefore does not lie solely in visual quality. It can lie in the network of relations that identifies the work as this work by this artist within this institutional and economic context.

This case accordingly supports the paper's distinction between manifestational scarcity and authenticated relational scarcity while remaining neutral concerning the aesthetic superiority of either object.

11.4 Heritage, Craft, and Cross-Cultural Authentication

A fourth configuration appears in the Shanghai edition of *Bulgari Kaleidos: Colors, Cultures and Crafts*, presented at the Power Station of Art from September to October 2026 [62, 17].

The Power Station of Art describes the exhibition as bringing together more than three hundred objects, including high jewelry, works from Bulgari's heritage collections and private collections, and works by contemporary Chinese artists [62]. The exhibition is organized around three thematic fields concerning the science of color, color symbolism, and the power of light. Its Shanghai presentation explicitly introduces Chinese cultural, philosophical, and artistic perspectives into the interpretation of the exhibition [62].

Bulgari's own documentation similarly presents color as simultaneously a scientific phenomenon, cultural language, and field of artistic expression, and describes the Shanghai exhibition through a dialogue among cultures, traditions, jewelry, and contemporary art [17, 16].

This case differs from the Ginza examples in both scale and institutional configuration. A luxury maison is presenting its own historical and material objects inside a public contemporary-art museum while connecting those objects to Chinese contemporary artistic production and wider cultural traditions.

Several forms of anchoring consequently operate at once:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{commercial symbol} &\longleftrightarrow \text{brand archive and heritage} \\
 &\longleftrightarrow \text{material craft and jewelry} \\
 &\longleftrightarrow \text{museum institution} \\
 &\longleftrightarrow \text{Chinese artistic and cultural interpretation.}
 \end{aligned} \tag{75}$$

The first relation is internal historical anchoring. The exhibited heritage objects connect contemporary brand identity to an actual trajectory of production.

The second is material anchoring. Jewelry objects carry material, technical, craft, and provenance relations that are not exhausted by photographs or generated representations of jewelry-like appearance.

The third is institutional anchoring. Presentation inside the Power Station of Art places the objects within a recognized cultural institution rather than only within a retail store.

The fourth is cross-cultural anchoring. The Shanghai version does not simply transport an unchanged brand history into another geographical market. Its official framing explicitly places the

exhibition in dialogue with Chinese artistic production, philosophy, and cultural interpretations of color [62].

This last layer requires particular caution. The presence of cultural dialogue does not demonstrate cultural reciprocity, and it does not establish appropriation. Evaluating those questions would require evidence concerning curatorial authority, artist participation, institutional negotiation, financial relations, representation, and reception beyond what the public materials provide.

The case nevertheless exposes the structural issue identified in Section 6. A commercial symbol can derive additional depth from relations that exceed the present commercial manifestation.

In abstract form,

$$S_C \longleftrightarrow (\mathcal{H}_{\text{brand}}, \mathcal{H}_{\text{craft}}, I_{\text{museum}}, \mathcal{H}_{\text{culture}}). \quad (76)$$

These relations do not have a common origin. Brand history is generated largely within the organization and its predecessors. Craft history involves makers, materials, techniques, and production institutions. Museum authority belongs to another institutional field. Chinese cultural and artistic histories extend far beyond both the brand and museum.

The resulting exhibition therefore demonstrates the coupling of privately differentiated commercial identity to heterogeneous histories generated across multiple social fields.

This is precisely where the paper’s political-economic question begins. Symbolic abundance can make it inexpensive to generate a luxury-looking image, a museum-like visual language, or a culturally sophisticated narrative. It cannot by itself produce the documented historical trajectory of a specific object, the institutional relation represented by museum exhibition, or the actual history of a cultural tradition.

The scarce relation can consequently become the credible coupling among these domains.

Again, the case should not be read as evidence that Bvlgari adopted the exhibition in order to respond to AI-generated luxury imagery. The exhibition belongs to a longer history of luxury-art relations already documented in the literature [23, 42]. The analytical claim is that the same practice can acquire additional relevance when manifestational simulation becomes easier.

11.5 Comparative Patterns of Relational Anchoring

The four cases reveal distinct configurations rather than a common corporate strategy. Their analytical value becomes clearest when the relevant forms of anchoring are compared directly.

Three comparative results are especially important.

The first concerns the relation between *symbol and field*. In none of the cases is aesthetic value organized through a detachable symbol alone. The symbol is embedded within some combination of place, artist, material history, institution, temporal practice, cultural narrative, or bodily encounter.

This observation does not make relational anchoring historically new. It demonstrates why the practice remains economically interesting after manifestational abundance increases.

The second concerns the relation between *commercial value and direct transaction*. The cases occupy different positions along this dimension. Artworks can be displayed as part of commercial spatial infrastructure, offered for direct purchase, translated into collaborative products, or incorporated into a museum exhibition associated with a luxury maison.

Commercial relevance therefore need not take the form

$$\text{encounter} \rightarrow \text{ticket or immediate purchase.}$$

A broader configuration is possible:

Table 2: Comparative configurations of the commercial-cultural cases

Practice	Primary relation	Observable organization	Analytical relevance
Wako GOOD LOOP	Aesthetic and existential articulation	Art, temporality, named artistic practice, embodied engagement, retail objects, and language connecting feeling with living	Shows a public commercial-cultural articulation connecting beauty, time, memory, encounter, and living without establishing existential effect.
GINZA SIX public art	Situated and institutional anchoring	Large-scale art integrated into atrium, entrance, rooftop, circulation space, and continuing museum-supervised public-art programming	Shows how aesthetic value can be embedded in the spatial infrastructure of a commercial site rather than confined to a separately transacted object.
Ginza Mitsukoshi gallery	Exhibition–commodity continuity	Named artworks, physical exhibition, aesthetic framing, pricing, and purchase channels within one institutional setting	Shows the coexistence of aesthetic encounter, institutional mediation, and direct commodity circulation.
Bvlgari Kaleidos Shanghai	Historical, material, institutional, and cross-cultural anchoring	Heritage objects, high jewelry, contemporary Chinese art, museum presentation, craft, and cultural interpretation	Shows how a commercial identity can be connected simultaneously to brand history, material provenance, institutional authority, and wider cultural fields.

cultural encounter $\longrightarrow$ attention, place relation, institutional association, authentication, visitation, memory, or commodity circulation. (77)

The distribution of value across these pathways is an empirical question that the present cases do not quantify.

The third result concerns the relation among the paper’s three philosophical terms.

The Wako case makes the movement from beauty toward existential articulation unusually explicit.

GINZA SIX makes contingency and situated encounter especially visible because art is integrated into environments through which visitors move for heterogeneous purposes.

Ginza Mitsukoshi places aesthetic encounter directly alongside commodity circulation.

The Bvlgari case emphasizes historical and cultural depth through provenance, craft, institutional presentation, and cross-cultural interpretation.

Taken together, the cases suggest the following analytical sequence:

symbolic manifestation $\longleftrightarrow$ relational anchoring
 $\longleftrightarrow$ organized encounter conditions
 $\longrightarrow$ possible aesthetic salience
 $\longrightarrow$ possible existential salience. (78)

Only the first three relations are directly observable in the case materials. The final two concern participant experience and remain hypotheses without reception evidence.

This boundary is especially important for preserving neutrality. The cases do not show that firms have discovered a method for producing meaningful life. They show that commercial-cultural practice already operates through relations among symbols, history, art, place, bodies, institutions, and cultural narratives.

The historical hypothesis developed in this paper is therefore functional rather than genealogical:

established practice + changed symbolic scarcity $\rightarrow$ possible change in relative function. (79)

Public art does not become new because generative AI exists. Heritage does not become new. Luxury-art collaboration does not become new. Department-store galleries do not become new. What can change is their position within the wider system of differentiation.

When aesthetic manifestation is technically difficult, the manifestation itself can carry substantial information about scarce production conditions. When comparable manifestations become easier to synthesize, historical provenance, material continuity, named authorship, institutional authentication, bodily presence, temporal specificity, and recognized cultural relations can carry a greater share of the differentiating burden.

The cases are consistent with such a structure. They do not establish the historical causal claim independently.

A final comparative tension concerns cultural generativity. Each case can potentially expand cultural circulation. Artists gain audiences, works enter commercial spaces, historical objects become available for public encounter, and cross-cultural interpretation can generate new relations.

The same mechanisms can also increase the frequency with which art, heritage, craft, memory, culture, authenticity, feeling, and living become mobilized within commercial symbolic systems.

Whether repeated commercial-cultural coupling strengthens cultural generativity or eventually attenuates the salience of the very cultural resources upon which it depends cannot be determined from these cases alone.

This unresolved tension leads to the next section. If relational anchoring becomes an increasingly important response to manifestational abundance, the relations used for anchoring do not remain outside symbolic production. History can itself become a recurrent sign. Craft can become a visual grammar. Authenticity can become a standardized vocabulary. Existential language can become a commercial style.

The political-economic problem therefore becomes recursive: the resources used to respond to one symbolic scarcity crisis can themselves become subject to symbolic proliferation.

12 Cultural Re-Anchoring and the Recursive Crisis of Scarcity

The preceding case analysis showed that contemporary commercial-cultural practice can connect reproducible symbolic forms to art, craft, institutional authority, material provenance, historical continuity, place, temporality, and situated encounter. None of these practices originated with generative artificial intelligence. Their possible historical significance lies instead in the changing scarcity conditions surrounding symbolic manifestation.

This section examines a further implication of that argument. Relational re-anchoring does not provide a final destination at which scarcity ceases to change. Histories, cultural traditions, craft practices, authenticity claims, places, and even existential vocabularies can themselves become objects of representation, circulation, repetition, and economic differentiation. The resources used to respond to one loss of symbolic scarcity can therefore enter a new cycle of symbolic mobilization.

The resulting process is potentially recursive. An increase in the abundance of one class of differentiating symbols can increase the relative importance of less substitutable relations. Commercial actors can then connect their symbols to those relations. Successful circulation of the resulting forms can expand cultural visibility and generate new encounters, while sufficiently extensive repetition can also reduce their differentiating or affective salience. Under some conditions, competitive differentiation can subsequently move toward still more specific histories, places, events, relations, or forms of authentication.

This section develops that possibility without treating it as a necessary law of capitalism. The empirical cases presented in Section 11 are insufficient to demonstrate a long-run recursive transition. The analysis instead identifies a set of possible trajectories and specifies the evidence that would be required to distinguish cultural regeneration from symbolic exhaustion.

12.1 Cultural Resources and Commercial Re-Anchoring

Relational re-anchoring becomes culturally significant when the history to which a commercial symbol is connected exceeds the history generated by the commercial actor itself. A company archive belongs largely to the history of the organization. A craft tradition, urban district, language, artistic repertoire, religious symbol, regional history, or collectively remembered event has a substantially wider genesis.

The distinction matters because many valuable cultural resources have no single producer. They persist through distributed processes of preservation, repetition, teaching, reinterpretation, institutionalization, conflict, and ordinary use. Their present value can therefore reflect contributions made by persons and institutions separated across time and space.

Commercial re-anchoring occurs when a privately differentiated symbol becomes connected to such a cultural field in ways that support present recognition, authentication, or salience. The process can involve exhibitions, archival presentation, artistic collaboration, heritage narration, craft documentation, architectural location, sponsorship, museum partnership, or incorporation of cultural motifs into commodities.

This process is historically well established. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s analysis of heritage is particularly relevant because heritage is treated neither as the passive survival of an unchanged past nor merely as a stock of old objects. Her analysis emphasizes display, mediation, tourism, museums, and the active production of heritage through which past practices, objects, and places can acquire a “second life” within contemporary cultural arrangements [45]. The present paper therefore does not interpret commercial re-anchoring as the first moment at which culture becomes selectively presented or economically mobilized.

Boltanski and Esquerre provide an even closer political-economic precedent. Their analysis of the *enrichment economy* examines forms of valuation in which objects and places acquire economic value through narratives, histories, collections, heritage, and relations to the past [13]. Their framework demonstrates that the economic mobilization of history, uniqueness, and existing cultural resources already constitutes a significant mode of contemporary value formation independently of generative AI.

The present argument therefore concerns a possible change in relative pressure. If manifestational sophistication becomes easier to reproduce, the capacity to connect a symbol credibly to a specific history, place, institution, or cultural trajectory can become more important for differentiation.

The resulting relation can be described schematically as

$$S_C \longleftrightarrow \mathcal{H}_{\text{cultural}}, \quad (80)$$

where S_C denotes a commercially differentiated symbol and $\mathcal{H}_{\text{cultural}}$ denotes a wider cultural-historical field.

The arrow does not indicate ownership of the cultural field. It denotes an observable coupling through which the commercial symbol is interpreted in relation to that field.

The important political-economic question is therefore not simply whether culture has entered commerce. It concerns the consequences of repeated coupling between privately differentiated symbols and cultural histories whose generative origins remain socially distributed.

12.2 Cultural Circulation and Regenerative Possibilities

Commercial participation in cultural fields can increase circulation. An exhibition can place artworks before audiences who would not otherwise enter a museum. A retail institution can preserve archives. A luxury house can maintain specialized craft knowledge. Sponsorship can finance restoration, performance, publishing, or artistic production. A collaboration can generate new interpretations of an inherited cultural form.

For this reason, commodification should not be treated as synonymous with cultural destruction.

Cohen's analysis of authenticity and commoditization in tourism is important precisely because it rejects such a necessary relation. He argues that commoditization does not inevitably destroy the meaning of cultural products and that cultural forms can acquire new meanings or forms of what he terms emergent authenticity through changing social processes [19]. The implication for the present paper is that commercial mediation can alter a cultural field without determining in advance whether the transformation is degenerative.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's account of heritage likewise makes visible the productive side of mediation. Turning a practice, object, or place into heritage changes its mode of existence, but can also provide it with new institutions, publics, resources, and forms of visibility [45].

A regenerative trajectory can therefore take a form such as

$$\begin{aligned} \text{commercial or institutional resources} &\longrightarrow \text{preservation and circulation} \\ &\longrightarrow \text{new encounters and participation} \\ &\longrightarrow \text{reinterpretation and transmission.} \end{aligned} \tag{81}$$

The sequence is only one possibility. Each transition can fail.

Commercial funding can preserve an object while narrowing interpretation. Increased visibility can attract audiences without supporting the practitioners who sustain the underlying tradition. An exhibition can circulate historical knowledge while simplifying internal cultural diversity. A collaboration can generate genuine artistic novelty while simultaneously strengthening the commercial position of one participant more than others.

Regeneration therefore cannot be inferred from circulation alone.

The concept of cultural sustainability provides a useful external reference. Soini and Birkeland show that scholarly discussions of cultural sustainability contain several different concerns, including heritage, vitality, diversity, locality, economic viability, and resilience [70]. This plurality is useful because it prevents the continued visibility of a cultural symbol from being treated as sufficient evidence that the cultural system supporting it remains healthy.

For the purposes of this paper, *cultural generativity* refers to the capacity of a cultural field to continue producing relations, interpretations, practices, learning, participation, transmission, and new forms from within and across its heterogeneous participants.

This definition is intentionally process-oriented. A cultural form can remain visible while becoming progressively less capable of generating new participation. Conversely, a relatively obscure practice can remain highly generative within a small community.

Commercial-cultural coupling is therefore regenerative when it contributes to the continuation or expansion of such capacities, rather than merely increasing the circulation of recognizable cultural signs.

This formulation permits commercial and cultural value to coexist. A private actor can obtain differentiation and revenue while the wider field gains resources, audiences, documentation, or new practitioners. The political question concerns whether the relation reproduces the conditions from which future cultural generation remains possible.

12.3 Symbolic Saturation and Historical Desensitization

The regenerative possibility does not eliminate a second trajectory. Commercial success can increase the incentive to repeat the symbolic forms through which cultural depth was initially made salient.

Heritage, craft, authenticity, memory, tradition, locality, artistic collaboration, and historical continuity can become recurrent vocabularies of commercial differentiation. Their increasing visibility need not make the underlying histories false. It can nevertheless alter the capacity of those symbols to interrupt attention or produce affective differentiation.

The term *symbolic saturation* was introduced in Section 8 for circumstances in which repeated circulation reduces the differentiating capacity of a symbolic grammar within a specific field. The present section extends the concept to historical and cultural anchoring.

A heritage claim can remain historically accurate while becoming commercially conventional. A craft narrative can continue to describe a real practice while becoming one of many nearly interchangeable narratives of craft. Museum-like presentation can retain aesthetic sophistication while becoming a familiar retail grammar. Words such as “authenticity,” “timelessness,” “heritage,” “culture,” and “memory” can continue to refer to meaningful relations while losing part of their capacity to function as distinctive signals.

The relevant change therefore concerns salience rather than truth:

historical validity $\neq$ present affective salience.

A history does not become less true because it is repeatedly represented.

This distinction is crucial because the language of cultural exhaustion can otherwise become analytically careless. Repetition does not erase historical reality. It changes the environment within which a historical reference is received.

Research on aesthetic familiarity already cautions against any universal assumption that repetition necessarily reduces appreciation. Familiarity and processing fluency can increase positive evaluation under some conditions [64], while the relation among familiarity, novelty, viewer experience, and aesthetic preference varies with both the work and the beholder [71]. Cultural saturation therefore cannot be deduced from frequency alone.

The stronger proposition is contextual. If a field becomes densely populated with similar invocations of history, craft, authenticity, and cultural depth, their *marginal differentiating effect* can decline even when audiences continue to value the underlying ideas.

The phrase

History remains true, but ceases to affect.

should therefore be understood as an extreme possibility rather than a general law. In many cases, repeated exposure can deepen understanding or attachment. Historical desensitization becomes analytically relevant only where the repetition of cultural signs outpaces the production of new relations through which those histories can continue to be encountered differently.

The distinction between repeating a symbol and regenerating a relation is therefore central.

A museum can exhibit the same historical object repeatedly while new audiences, interpretations, research, and social contexts continuously transform its significance. Such repetition need not be saturating.

By contrast, many unrelated products can deploy a narrow and standardized visual vocabulary of “heritage” while providing little access to historical specificity. The underlying cultural reference then risks operating primarily as a portable aesthetic sign.

The relevant question is therefore not how often culture is represented, but whether repeated representation continues to generate differentiated relations.

12.4 Cultural Visibility and Cultural Generativity

The preceding discussion requires a sharper distinction between *visibility* and *generativity*.

Visibility concerns whether a cultural form appears within public attention. It can be measured through exhibitions, media coverage, circulation, reproduction, attendance, search volume, sales, or other observable forms of exposure.

Generativity concerns what the cultural field can continue to produce through that exposure and through relations beyond it.

The two can correlate positively. Increased visibility can attract new participants, transmit knowledge, provide income to practitioners, stimulate research, encourage preservation, and generate new artistic interpretations.

They can also diverge.

A cultural symbol can become globally visible while the community or practice from which it originates receives few resources. A craft motif can be reproduced widely while the embodied techniques required to make the original object decline. A historical district can attract enormous attention while the ordinary social relations that produced its character become increasingly difficult to sustain. A language can appear frequently in decorative commercial contexts while the number of competent speakers continues to fall.

The paper therefore maintains the relation

$$\text{Visibility} \not\Rightarrow \text{Generativity} . \quad (82)$$

This distinction also applies in the opposite direction. A field need not maximize visibility in order to remain generative. Some cultural systems depend upon localized practice, gradual transmission, specialist knowledge, protected ritual contexts, or forms of apprenticeship whose generativity would not necessarily increase through maximal public exposure.

The political economy of cultural circulation therefore cannot be evaluated through exposure alone.

This is where the paper’s concept of relational anchoring becomes normatively more demanding. A company can establish a credible relation to a cultural history and thereby gain differentiation. The relevant question is what that relation does to the continuing conditions of cultural generation.

Several possibilities should remain analytically distinct.

Commercial participation can be *circulatory*: it makes a cultural form more visible.

It can be *preservative*: it contributes resources to maintaining existing objects, archives, techniques, or institutions.

It can be *generative*: it supports new practitioners, interpretations, relations, and cultural production.

It can be *narrowing*: it increases the visibility of a restricted subset of symbols while marginalizing other dimensions of the cultural field.

It can be *exhaustive*: repeated mobilization contributes to declining salience or weakens the conditions through which future differentiated relations can emerge.

These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. A single project can preserve an archive, generate private commercial value, expand public access, and narrow the public image of the culture at the same time.

The distinction therefore directs empirical research away from categorical judgments and toward trajectories.

The relevant question is not simply whether commercial culture is “good” or “bad” for a tradition. It is which generative capacities increase, which decrease, for whom, and over what temporal scale.

12.5 Commercial Expansion into Relational Scarcity

If symbolic abundance reduces differentiation at the level of manifestation, competitive value formation can increasingly seek distinctions that remain less substitutable. History, material provenance, place, access, co-presence, institutional recognition, personal relevance, and temporally unique events provide possible resources.

The important word is *possible*. The paper does not propose a law according to which capital must continuously penetrate progressively deeper layers of human life.

Nevertheless, existing political-economic literature gives substantial reason to examine such a movement. Harvey’s account of monopoly rent emphasizes the economic importance of uniqueness, place, collective memory, cultural specificity, and claims that distinguish otherwise reproducible commodities [39]. Boltanski and Esquerre’s enrichment economy similarly focuses on the increasing economic significance of the past, collection, heritage, uniqueness, and existing places and objects [13].

These theories predate the symbolic-abundance problem developed here, but they identify a compatible structural tendency: when standardized production is insufficient for differentiation, value can increasingly depend upon the narratives and relations that make an object singular.

Generative AI can intensify the relevance of this problem because it weakens some barriers to producing stylistically differentiated manifestation. Commercial differentiation can then move toward conditions that are more difficult to synthesize through representation alone.

This movement can occur through increasing specificity.

A generic visual invocation of “craft” can be replaced by a named craft tradition.

A generic heritage narrative can be replaced by an archive with documented objects.

A generic image of a prestigious place can be replaced by actual access to the place.

A general promise of experience can be replaced by a temporally bounded event.

A broad consumer segment can be replaced by personalized recommendations based on increasingly detailed histories.

In each case, differentiation moves from a comparatively reproducible sign toward a more specific relation.

The term *relational scarcity* is useful here only when understood carefully. Relationships, histories, places, and events are not scarce in a single homogeneous sense. Their relevant feature is often non-substitutability.

A relationship with one person cannot be replaced simply by producing a relationship-looking representation. The history of one building cannot be created instantly by constructing another

building with the same visual style. Participation in one event cannot be reproduced exactly after the event has passed.

Commercial organization can therefore seek positions adjacent to such non-substitutable relations without owning the relations themselves.

This possibility creates the political-economic question developed in Section 10: who controls access to the conditions under which these relations can be encountered, authenticated, or made economically consequential?

The stronger language of enclosure should remain reserved for cases where control actually restricts broader possibilities. Commercial expansion into relational scarcity can occur without enclosure. A free public exhibition can increase commercial differentiation by providing access to a particular historical and spatial relation while leaving the cultural resource available elsewhere.

The structure becomes normatively more consequential when access to the underlying relation is progressively privatized, when shared cultural resources are made legible primarily through proprietary channels, or when highly personalized systems gain asymmetric informational power over the conditions through which subjects encounter the world.

The important transformation is therefore from competition over symbolic objects toward competition over positions within relational fields.

12.6 Second-Order Symbolic Crisis

Relational re-anchoring contains a recursive vulnerability. The relation used to differentiate a symbol must itself become represented if audiences are to recognize it.

A company cannot rely upon historical provenance commercially unless the provenance is communicated. A craft relation must become visible through demonstration, documentation, material cues, named practitioners, or narrative. A place must be represented through photographs, architecture, maps, stories, reputation, or prior social knowledge. Authenticity must be articulated through some recognizable grammar of authentication.

The solution to manifestational abundance therefore generates additional symbols.

This does not eliminate the underlying relation. It creates a new symbolic layer around it.

The process can be described as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{symbolic abundance} &\longrightarrow \text{relational re-anchoring} \\
 &\longrightarrow \text{symbolization of relation} \\
 &\longrightarrow \text{possible saturation of anchoring symbols.}
 \end{aligned} \tag{83}$$

The final transition is contingent.

Its possibility nevertheless explains why phrases such as “authentic craft,” “heritage,” “timeless tradition,” “local culture,” “meaningful experience,” and “living fully” can themselves become part of a highly reproducible commercial grammar.

At that point, two different objects must again be separated.

The first is the *underlying relation*: a real craft history, place, archive, institution, or interpersonal trajectory.

The second is the *symbolic grammar through which the relation is commercially recognized*.

The second can become saturated while the first remains historically intact.

This constitutes a second-order symbolic crisis. The initial problem concerns the declining scarcity of aesthetic manifestation. Relational anchoring responds by connecting manifestation to history, culture, place, or encounter. Repeated use of those connections can then produce abundance at the level of *relational representation*.

The system can respond again by demanding greater specificity or stronger authentication. Instead of “heritage,” audiences can be shown an original archive. Instead of “craft,” they can be shown a named artisan and production process. Instead of a generic historical story, they can be given documented provenance. Instead of an image of a place, they can be given restricted physical access. Instead of generic experiential language, personalization can seek a historically specific relation to the individual subject.

The movement is therefore potentially recursive because every new source of differentiation can eventually acquire a representational grammar that becomes widely imitable.

This observation also limits any claim that authenticity provides a permanent answer to generative abundance. Authenticity itself can become an aesthetic style. A generated system can produce the textual and visual conventions through which authenticity is normally signaled.

The resulting challenge is increasingly epistemic: audiences and institutions must distinguish between the representation of an anchor and a credible relation to the anchor.

The second-order crisis is therefore simultaneously a crisis of differentiation and authentication.

12.7 Recursive Capitalization of Scarcity

The preceding analysis permits a final hypothesis concerning recursive capitalization.

The term refers to a process in which economic differentiation repeatedly reorganizes around scarcity conditions that remain effective after an earlier source of distinction becomes more reproducible.

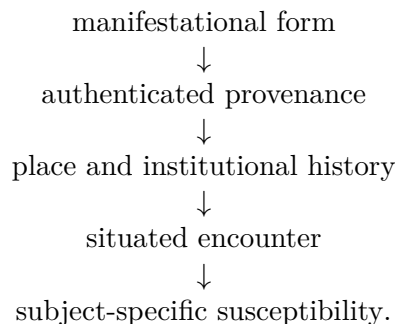
The concept should not be confused with an assumption of infinite capitalist expansion. No economic actor possesses unlimited capacity to identify, organize, authenticate, or monetize every remaining relation. Social resistance, institutional regulation, technical limits, cultural norms, public ownership, collective governance, changing preferences, and simple economic failure can interrupt the process.

Recursive capitalization is therefore a conditional mechanism rather than a historical necessity. Its abstract structure is:

differentiating scarcity at level $n \rightarrow$ commercial mobilization $\rightarrow$ greater circulation $\rightarrow$ possible attenuation $\rightarrow$ search

The “levels” should not be interpreted as a universal hierarchy. Different markets can move in different directions. One domain can return to material craft while another moves toward institutional authorization, personalization, temporal uniqueness, social exclusivity, or place.

Nevertheless, the paper’s earlier analysis suggests several increasingly relation-dependent objects of differentiation:



The diagram represents neither an inevitable sequence nor a normative ranking. It shows why the political economy of AI-mediated symbolic abundance can extend beyond the market for generated content itself.

The economically relevant problem can progressively concern the conditions that make one symbolic encounter more difficult to substitute than another.

This process can remain regenerative. Commercial investment can fund the relations through which differentiation becomes possible. A luxury company can support craft apprenticeships. A commercial complex can provide accessible public art. A retailer can create exhibition infrastructure. A platform can help a person discover a cultural practice that becomes important to them.

Recursive capitalization becomes more problematic when the search for differentiation systematically weakens the generative conditions on which it depends.

A cultural history can be reduced to a narrow commercial grammar.

A place can become economically valuable through its relational richness while the social relations that created that richness are displaced.

A craft can be celebrated symbolically while the economic conditions sustaining practitioners deteriorate.

A personalized system can increasingly profit from a subject's relational history while reducing the subject's control over how that history is modeled and used.

These possibilities suggest a distinction between *capitalization through generativity* and *capitalization through depletion*.

In the first trajectory, economic value is generated while the relational field retains or increases its capacity to continue producing future relations, interpretations, practitioners, and encounters.

In the second, present differentiation consumes or narrows the conditions from which future differentiation could emerge.

This distinction is more analytically useful than assuming that commercialization is either inherently regenerative or inherently destructive.

It also produces a temporal criterion for political-economic analysis. The relevant question is not only how much value a relation produces now. It is whether the process reproduces the conditions through which the relation can continue generating value, knowledge, participation, and cultural difference later.

The recursive scarcity hypothesis therefore reaches a broader conclusion.

Generative AI does not simply create more symbols and thereby eliminate scarcity. It can alter which dimensions of symbolic and cultural production carry differentiating force. Commercial activity can respond by placing greater weight upon histories, materials, institutions, places, encounters, and subject-specific relations. Those resources can then enter symbolic circulation themselves.

The resulting political economy is dynamic rather than a one-time migration from one scarce object to another.

Its possible trajectory is:

symbolic abundance produces pressure toward relational anchoring; relational anchoring can generate new cultural and economic value; successful circulation can increase both cultural visibility and symbolic repetition; repetition can either deepen cultural generativity or attenuate differentiating salience; and attenuation can create further pressure toward more specific, less substitutable relations.

Nothing in this sequence is inevitable. Each transition depends upon institutional arrangements, cultural practices, audience histories, technical conditions, and forms of governance.

The conceptual contribution of the recursive model therefore lies in replacing a static image of “scarcity migration” with a historical process in which the production of value alters the very conditions of future differentiation.

This recursive structure also returns the paper to its three central philosophical terms. Contingency cannot be exhausted by the organization of encounter. Beauty cannot be reduced to the abundance or scarcity of aesthetic symbols. Existential salience cannot be manufactured through a standardized commercial grammar. Yet the conditions under which all three become possible can increasingly enter political-economic organization.

The following discussion section evaluates the implications and limits of this model, considers counterexamples, and asks more directly how much explanatory work the scarcity-transformation hypothesis can perform beyond established accounts of heritage, authenticity, experience, luxury, cultural economy, and algorithmic personalization.

13 Discussion

The preceding sections developed a conditional account of changing aesthetic and cultural value under conditions of AI-mediated symbolic abundance. The argument began from a relatively narrow technological proposition: generative systems can reduce the production scarcity of some aesthetically persuasive symbolic forms. It then examined whether this change can increase the relative importance of other sources of differentiation, including provenance, historical continuity, institutional recognition, materiality, place, situated encounter, and subject-specific susceptibility.

The discussion now returns to the conceptual architecture as a whole. The purpose is not to convert the preceding analysis into a stronger historical claim than the evidence permits. Several of the paper’s most important propositions remain hypotheses concerning relative function rather than demonstrated causal transitions. The central task is therefore to identify what the framework explains, where established literature remains sufficient, which counterexamples constrain the argument, and what would be required to transform the proposed scarcity dynamics into a stronger empirical theory.

13.1 Contingency, Beauty, and Existential Salience

The paper has treated contingency, beauty, and existential salience as related without making them necessary stages of a single process. Their relation is better understood as a set of possible transitions.

A contingent encounter can remain aesthetically insignificant. An aesthetically salient encounter can remain local to appreciation. An existentially salient encounter can arise through grief, anxiety, historical rupture, interpersonal relation, or bodily experience without being beautiful.

The useful structure is therefore

$$\text{contingent encounter} \longrightarrow \text{possible aesthetic salience} \longrightarrow \text{possible existential salience}, \quad (84)$$

where neither arrow indicates necessity.

This weak relation is important because a stronger model would distort all three concepts.

Contingency would become merely an input into experience design.

Beauty would become an instrument for producing existential response.

Existential salience would become a commercially specifiable output.

The analysis developed here resists all three reductions.

Contingency enters because an encounter can acquire significance through conjunctions that were not fully specified in advance. The event can occur inside a highly organized environment while remaining contingent in its significance for a particular subject.

Beauty enters because aesthetic salience can interrupt habitual perception, sustain attention, activate memory, intensify awareness of material or spatial relations, and make an encounter experientially differentiated. None of these effects requires beauty to contain an intrinsic existential message.

Existential salience enters when an encounter makes some aspect of situated existence unusually prominent: presence, temporality, relation, belonging, estrangement, historical position, finitude, or a felt sense of being alive.

The distinction between these levels explains why the commercial organization of encounters can be consequential without granting commercial actors ontological control over experience.

A retail complex can organize access to art.

An exhibition can bring historical objects into a field of encounter.

A luxury institution can connect material craft to cultural history.

A recommendation system can increase the probability that a person encounters a particular event.

None of these operations establishes the eventual significance of the encounter.

The strongest form of commercial influence identified in the paper therefore occurs at the level of the *conditions of possibility*. Organizations can shape landscapes of availability, attention, access, framing, and authentication. Historically constituted subjects then enter those landscapes with susceptibilities generated through relations extending beyond the organizer.

This structure also provides a limit to the language of experiential commodification. An admission ticket, commercial product, journey, exhibition, or curated environment can be purchased. The existentially salient relation that may emerge through it remains only partially transactionally specified.

The commodity can therefore participate in an encounter without becoming equivalent to the encounter.

13.2 Old Practices under New Scarcity Regimes

One of the most important historical limits of the paper is that nearly every commercial-cultural practice examined predates generative AI.

Heritage branding predates generative AI.

Luxury-art collaboration predates generative AI.

Museum-like retail environments predate generative AI.

Experience-oriented consumption predates generative AI.

Public art in commercial spaces predates generative AI.

Personalized recommendation predates generative AI.

Commercial use of authenticity, memory, place, and craft also predates generative AI.

The paper's contribution therefore cannot consist in identifying these practices as new.

The proposed historical mechanism concerns a change in their *relative function*.

A practice can remain materially and institutionally continuous while the scarcity regime surrounding it changes. The same archival exhibition can operate in an environment where aesthetically sophisticated imagery is difficult to produce and in another environment where comparable manifestational forms can be generated at low marginal cost.

The practice remains recognizable. Its differentiating relation to the wider symbolic field can change.

This distinction is particularly useful for avoiding technological presentism. Generative AI should not become an all-purpose explanation for practices whose institutional histories are much older. The appropriate historical structure is instead

$$\mathcal{P} \mid \mathbf{S}_{t_1} \longrightarrow \mathcal{P} \mid \mathbf{S}_{t_2}, \quad (85)$$

where $\mathcal{P}$ denotes a continuing practice and $\mathbf{S}_{t_1}$, $\mathbf{S}_{t_2}$ different configurations of scarcity.

The relevant question is whether the weights attached to different scarcity components change.

For example, museum-like presentation can once have differentiated a luxury environment partly through the unusual aesthetic sophistication of the presentation itself. If museum-like visual grammar becomes easier to imitate, the same institutional practice can derive more of its differentiation from actual historical objects, documented archives, named artists, recognized institutions, material craft, or physical access.

This interpretation remains a hypothesis unless longitudinal evidence shows that organizations or audiences actually changed the weighting they assign to those relations.

The distinction nevertheless adds analytical value because it identifies a historical mechanism that established theories of heritage, experience, aesthetic capitalism, and luxury do not necessarily foreground. Those literatures already explain why history, atmosphere, authenticity, and experience matter. The scarcity argument asks whether their relative importance changes when the technical conditions of symbolic production change.

The contribution is consequently relational and historical rather than genealogical.

13.3 Symbolic Abundance without Relational Abundance

The strongest conceptual distinction developed in the paper is between symbolic abundance and relational abundance.

A system can generate a vast number of images of friendship without generating a history of friendship.

It can generate images of a city without reproducing a person's history with that city.

It can generate luxury-like design without generating the documented provenance of a particular object.

It can generate heritage language without generating a century of institutional continuity.

It can generate representations of craft without reproducing the material history of a particular practice.

This does not establish an ontological privilege for human relations. An artificial system can itself enter persistent histories, institutions, places, relationships, and cultural trajectories. The relevant distinction concerns historical genesis rather than biological authorship.

The paper therefore separates

capacity to generate a manifestation

from

capacity to instantiate the history represented by the manifestation.

These capacities can increasingly diverge.

This divergence is especially important because aesthetic manifestation has often functioned as imperfect evidence of underlying conditions. Technical sophistication could indicate training, labor, specialized equipment, access, or institutional resources. Generative systems weaken that inference for some classes of symbolic forms.

The resulting abundance is therefore epistemically consequential. An observer can become less able to infer operative history from manifestational sophistication alone.

This is one reason authentication can acquire greater importance.

The distinction also explains why the paper avoids the proposition that AI creates “fake” beauty while historically anchored objects possess “real” beauty. Such a claim would confuse aesthetic evaluation with historical genesis.

A generated image can be beautiful.

A generated poem can become part of a significant relationship.

An AI-mediated encounter can become aesthetically or existentially salient.

An artificial system can accumulate history.

What changes is the inference that appearance provides concerning the process behind appearance.

The resulting political economy can therefore be understood partly as a political economy of *relations to genesis*. When similar manifestations can arise from heterogeneous generative histories, institutions capable of establishing provenance, continuity, location, identity, or participation can acquire greater economic and epistemic significance.

Symbolic abundance consequently need not produce relational abundance. It can instead increase the value of being able to establish which relations are actually operative.

13.4 Authentication without Ontological Privilege

The increased significance of authentication creates a risk of reintroducing an ontology that the paper has otherwise rejected.

If authenticated history becomes economically important, one might conclude that historically anchored objects are more real than generated objects, or that physical encounters are more authentic than mediated encounters. Neither claim follows from the analysis.

Authentication concerns the credibility of a specified relation.

It answers questions such as:

Was this object made by the attributed maker?

Did this artifact participate in the claimed historical trajectory?

Does this institution possess the documented continuity it invokes?

Did this event occur at the stated place and time?

Is this material produced through the described craft process?

These are relational and historical questions.

They do not establish the aesthetic superiority of the authenticated object.

Nor do they establish that an unauthenticated or artificial object lacks relational reality.

This distinction is especially important under conditions of generative AI because the category of the artificial itself can become historically deep. A generated image can acquire provenance once it enters a documented process. An artificial system can participate in a long-term collaboration. A digital object can become associated with a specific event, community, institution, or relationship. A synthetic artifact can accumulate a history that later becomes non-substitutable.

The relevant contrast is therefore

$$\text{manifestational equivalence} \not\Rightarrow \text{historical equivalence}, \quad (86)$$

rather than

artificial $\neq$ real.

This formulation has several advantages.

First, it avoids essentializing human production.

Second, it allows future artificial systems to acquire historically meaningful relations.

Third, it preserves the possibility that a generated manifestation can be aesthetically valuable independently of provenance.

Fourth, it keeps authentication tied to specific claims instead of allowing the word “authenticity” to become a generalized moral ranking.

This is particularly important for luxury and heritage. A material object’s historical provenance can justify a claim about its trajectory. It does not justify the stronger proposition that the object must produce a more meaningful experience than an artificial representation.

The experience remains contingent upon the subject and encounter.

The political economy of authentication therefore concerns who possesses the authority and infrastructure to stabilize relations as credible, and how that authority enters value formation. It does not require a metaphysics of the authentic object.

13.5 Regenerative and Exhaustive Cultural Coupling

The paper has repeatedly resisted a binary account in which commercial participation either preserves culture or destroys it. The case materials and relevant literature support a more complex structure.

Commercial-cultural coupling can be regenerative.

It can finance artistic production.

It can maintain archives.

It can support craft practitioners.

It can create public exhibition infrastructure.

It can bring audiences into contact with unfamiliar work.

It can support translation and cross-cultural interpretation.

It can give neglected materials new forms of circulation.

Commercial-cultural coupling can also become narrowing or exhaustive.

A heterogeneous tradition can be compressed into a small number of portable commercial symbols.

A historical district can become valuable partly because of its accumulated social relations while economic transformation weakens the conditions through which those relations continue.

A craft can become globally visible as a brand resource while apprenticeship declines.

A historical narrative can become commercially ubiquitous while the range of public interpretation narrows.

A language of authenticity or living can become so standardized that it loses differentiating salience.

These possibilities can coexist within a single case.

The appropriate analytical object is therefore a trajectory rather than a categorical classification.

A useful distinction is:

$$\text{commercial visibility} \neq \text{cultural generativity.} \quad (87)$$

A second distinction is:

$$\text{private value formation} \not\Rightarrow \text{cultural depletion.} \quad (88)$$

The inverse non-implication is equally important. Cultural visibility does not establish regeneration.

Evaluation therefore requires asking what happens to the generative conditions of the wider field.

Do more practitioners gain the capacity to continue the practice?

Does access to relevant knowledge expand?

Does interpretive plurality increase?

Are archives preserved?

Are new relations and forms generated?

Does the commercial association support the conditions from which future cultural production can emerge?

Or does present value depend upon a narrowing of the very relations that generated the cultural resource?

This temporal criterion helps distinguish ordinary commercialization from a more exhaustive trajectory.

The question is not whether a commercial actor gains value.

The question is whether value formation reproduces, expands, narrows, or depletes the generative field from which that value partly arises.

This criterion also connects the cultural argument to the broader logic of generative conditions developed in Section 10. A relation can be economically productive today while weakening its capacity to remain generative tomorrow.

Conversely, commercial participation can create resources through which the field becomes more capable of future generation.

The normative assessment therefore cannot be determined from ownership or commercial participation alone.

13.6 Scope Conditions and Countercases

The scarcity-transformation hypothesis applies only under specific conditions. Several countercases substantially limit its scope.

The first concerns domains in which manifestational scarcity remains strong. Generative systems do not eliminate the difficulty of every aesthetic or symbolic task. High-control production, long-form coherence, complex material fabrication, live performance, architectural construction, conservation, scientific visualization, and other practices can retain substantial production scarcity.

In such domains, relational re-anchoring need not become more important because manifestational scarcity may remain economically consequential.

The second countercase concerns markets in which provenance is largely irrelevant. Many consumers can value an attractive generated image precisely because it is inexpensive, disposable, customizable, and detached from a prestigious historical trajectory.

In these settings, abundance can be the value proposition.

The third concerns symbolic forms whose value increases through circulation rather than scarcity. Memes, open cultural repertoires, public-domain images, linguistic conventions, and some forms of popular culture can become more valuable as more participants reproduce and transform them.

The paper's framework should therefore not assume that scarcity is the primary basis of symbolic value in every cultural domain.

The fourth countercase concerns newly scarce forms generated inside AI production itself. Prompt expertise, model access, proprietary training data, specialized workflows, compute, curation, fine-tuning, recognized AI authorship, or distinctive generative processes can create new production

differences. Generative AI can therefore redistribute production scarcity rather than merely reduce it.

The fifth concerns purely formal aesthetic differentiation. Audiences can continue to value manifest novelty, complexity, stylistic invention, or technical virtuosity even when provenance is irrelevant. A generated artifact can become distinctive because the output itself is difficult to reproduce, regardless of its relation to external history.

The sixth concerns cultures in which anonymity or detachment from provenance is itself valued. Some aesthetic traditions deliberately resist authorial centrality, institutional authentication, or permanent ownership. Relational anchoring to named provenance can be less relevant or even contrary to the practice's normative structure.

The seventh concerns digital-native relations. The paper frequently uses physical place, material object, and situated presence as examples because their non-substitutability is intuitive. Relational scarcity can also exist entirely within digital environments. A long-running online community, persistent multiplayer world, collaborative archive, recurring AI relationship, or digitally mediated friendship can possess historically specific relations without a privileged physical substrate.

The eighth concerns cases where greater reproducibility strengthens the original. Widespread reproduction can increase recognition, prestige, tourism, collective memory, or demand for authenticated objects. The original and the copy therefore need not exist in a zero-sum relation.

Benjamin's analysis of mechanical reproduction remains relevant here, but the contemporary configuration can produce both erosion and amplification of historically anchored value [6].

The ninth countercase concerns institutional decline. Authentication only supports value when relevant audiences trust the authenticating institutions. A museum, archive, luxury house, critic, platform, or certification system can lose authority. Symbolic abundance can therefore increase the demand for authentication while simultaneously destabilizing agreement over who is entitled to authenticate.

The tenth concerns deliberate rejection of personalization. Users can seek anonymous browsing, random discovery, public space, unfamiliarity, or algorithmic opacity precisely to preserve a field of encounter that is not organized around an inferred profile.

This countercase becomes increasingly important if susceptibility modeling develops further. A market can emerge for environments valued because they do not know the subject well.

These countercases show why the paper should avoid a universal transition from symbolic scarcity to relational scarcity.

Different domains can develop different scarcity structures simultaneously.

13.7 Limits of the Scarcity-Transformation Hypothesis

The strongest remaining limitation concerns causality.

The paper has established three different kinds of proposition with different evidentiary status. The first is comparatively well supported:

Generative AI can substantially reduce the cost and difficulty of producing some aesthetically competent symbolic forms.

The empirical literature reviewed earlier provides evidence for this claim within bounded domains [55, 25, 77, 37].

The second proposition is conceptual and historically plausible:

When manifestational production becomes less scarce, other sources of differentiation such as provenance, authentication, place, materiality, institutional recognition, and situated encounter can acquire greater relative importance.

The case studies are consistent with this proposition, but they do not establish the direction of historical causality.

The third proposition is substantially stronger:

Commercial actors are systematically moving toward relational, situated, and existentially relevant forms of scarcity because generative AI has weakened symbolic scarcity.

The present paper does not establish this claim.

Demonstrating it would require stronger empirical evidence.

Longitudinal data could examine whether investment in heritage, physical experience, cultural exhibition, craft authentication, and place-based programming increased relative to other forms of differentiation following changes in generative production.

Interviews with decision-makers could establish whether generative AI entered organizational strategy concerning art, heritage, luxury, or experience.

Consumer research could test whether audiences assign more value to provenance or situated encounter after exposure to large quantities of generated aesthetic material.

Experiments could hold manifestation constant while varying provenance, material history, institutional authentication, physical location, or knowledge of generative origin.

Field studies could investigate whether environments increasingly organize encounter around personalized susceptibility rather than conventional preference segmentation.

Longitudinal cultural research could test whether repeated commercial mobilization of heritage or authenticity produces saturation, increased understanding, renewed participation, or heterogeneous effects across audiences.

Such research would also permit the proposed scarcity vector from Section 5 to become empirically tractable. Rather than assuming a general migration, future work could estimate changes in the relative importance of

$$S_{\text{prod}}, \quad S_{\text{circ}}, \quad S_{\text{att}}, \quad S_{\text{inst}}, \quad S_{\text{auth}}, \quad S_{\text{rel}}.$$

Different cultural domains could then be compared.

A second limitation concerns the term *scarcity* itself. Some of the relations examined in the paper are better described through non-substitutability, specificity, path dependence, institutional concentration, or limited access than through scarcity in a strict economic sense.

The term remains useful because all of these properties can contribute to differentiation under conditions of limited substitutability. It should not, however, erase the differences among them.

A friendship is not scarce in the same manner as a limited-edition commodity.

A historical building is not scarce in the same manner as restricted platform access.

Institutional authority is not scarce in the same manner as attention.

Provenance is not scarce in the same manner as physical material.

Future work could therefore replace the general language of scarcity with a more differentiated theory of *relational non-substitutability*.

A third limitation concerns the role of capital. The paper uses capital as a political-economic category when commercial actors organize conditions of differentiation and value formation. Yet many of the mechanisms discussed are also used by noncommercial institutions.

Museums authenticate.

Universities curate knowledge.

States organize heritage.

Religious institutions preserve ritual.

Families transmit memory.

Public libraries facilitate serendipity.

Cities shape encounter landscapes.

The mechanisms identified here therefore cannot be explained by capital alone. Political economy becomes relevant because ownership, access, accumulation, rent, commercial differentiation, and informational asymmetry shape how these mechanisms operate.

A fourth limitation concerns subjectivity. The concept of prepared susceptibility remains analytically broad. A full theory would require greater precision concerning memory, affect, embodiment, language, habit, social relations, trauma, attention, cultural knowledge, and changing internal organization. The present paper uses the concept to mark historical dependence without claiming a complete psychology.

A fifth limitation concerns existentiality. The paper deliberately uses *existential salience* instead of stronger terms such as meaning, authentic existence, flourishing, or good life. This restraint reduces the normative ambition of the concept but protects the analysis from attributing a unified evaluative structure to heterogeneous experiences.

The concept remains useful if it identifies encounters in which situated existence becomes unusually prominent. Whether such encounters are beneficial, truthful, emancipatory, manipulative, painful, or culturally desirable remains a separate question.

A sixth limitation concerns recursion. The proposed second-order symbolic crisis is plausible but currently the least empirically established component of the argument.

The sequence

symbolic abundance → relational anchoring → symbolization of relation → saturation

should therefore be treated as a research hypothesis.

It is possible that relational anchoring remains durable precisely because the underlying relations continue to generate differentiated histories. It is also possible that audiences become better at distinguishing generic heritage language from specific provenance, preventing complete saturation.

The recursive model becomes empirically meaningful only if future research can show that the commercial success of one form of anchoring changes the differentiating environment in which subsequent actors operate.

The final limitation concerns historical scale. Generative AI remains a rapidly developing technology, and many organizational responses are still unstable. The present paper is therefore written close to the beginning of the transformation it attempts to interpret.

Its contribution should be understood accordingly.

The paper does not establish a completed transition from symbolic capitalism to a relational or existential capitalism. Such labels would suggest a historical closure that the evidence does not support.

The more modest proposition is that a change in symbolic production makes certain longstanding political-economic relations newly visible.

When aesthetically persuasive manifestation becomes easier to produce, value formation can depend increasingly upon what the manifestation cannot establish by itself: where it came from, what history it participates in, who recognizes it, where it can be encountered, which relations surround it, and why it becomes salient to a particular subject.

These questions connect technical change in symbolic production to political economy without reducing cultural experience to economic determination.

They also preserve the central philosophical limit of the paper. Contingency, beauty, and existential salience can enter organized fields of value without being exhausted by those fields.

The concluding section therefore returns to this limit and states the paper’s contribution in its most restrained form: generative AI can erode some forms of symbolic scarcity, but the resulting political economy is better understood as a reorganization of differentiated relations than as the disappearance of scarcity itself.

14 Conclusion

This paper began from a limited technological observation: generative artificial intelligence can reduce the cost and difficulty of producing some aesthetically persuasive symbolic forms. From that starting point, it asked a broader political-economic question. When manifestational sophistication becomes easier to reproduce, which other conditions of differentiation become relatively more important?

The answer developed here is not that scarcity disappears. Nor is it that economic value simply moves from symbols to experiences. The more plausible interpretation is a reorganization of scarcity across several dimensions. Production scarcity can decline while attention, institutional recognition, authentication, provenance, material continuity, place, situated encounter, and historically specific relations remain unevenly substitutable.

This distinction required separating manifestation from history. A symbolic form can resemble another without sharing its operative genesis. A generated image can reproduce a visual grammar associated with craft, heritage, luxury, or historical depth without reproducing the material, institutional, or social trajectory through which a particular object acquired those relations. Manifestational equivalence therefore does not imply historical equivalence.

The paper developed the concept of *relational anchoring* to describe the process through which symbolic forms derive part of their differentiation, credibility, or salience from connections to histories, places, institutions, materials, cultural repertoires, and situated relations extending beyond the manifestation itself. The concept does not imply that relationally anchored objects are aesthetically superior or ontologically more real. Its function is to identify a dependency structure that can become increasingly consequential when surface manifestation becomes easier to synthesize.

This argument also required distinguishing symbolic scarcity from relational non-substitutability. A history, place, relationship, institution, or event is not scarce in the same manner as a limited commodity. Its relevant economic property can arise from path dependence and historical specificity. One relationship cannot be recreated merely by producing another relation with a similar appearance. One event cannot be repeated after its temporal configuration has passed. One institution cannot acquire a century of continuity through instantaneous symbolic simulation.

The resulting scarcity can become concentrated in the credible relation between symbol and history rather than in the visible symbol alone.

The paper then moved from authentication to encounter. Relational anchoring can explain why one object is treated as historically distinctive, but it cannot explain why the object matters to a particular subject. For this reason, *contingent encounter* and *prepared susceptibility* were introduced as distinct analytical problems.

An encounter takes place within an organized field but acquires significance through a historically constituted subject. Institutions, cities, platforms, commercial spaces, museums, or recommender systems can alter which encounters become possible and how frequently they occur. They can organize routes, access, timing, attention, curation, authentication, and spatial proximity. They cannot thereby determine the significance of the resulting event.

This distinction led to the concept of *probabilistic governance of encounter*. Governance can operate upon distributions of possible encounters without eliminating contingency. A physical

environment can increase exposure to art. A platform can rank an unexpected recommendation. A cultural institution can place historical objects into a visitor's path. The eventual salience of the encounter remains dependent upon histories and relations extending beyond the organizer.

The analysis of beauty developed the same argument at the level of aesthetic experience. Symbolic abundance should not be confused with an abundance of aesthetically salient encounters. Aesthetic salience depends upon relations among manifest form, memory, attention, context, embodiment, cultural competence, prior experience, and the present situation. Increasing the number of aesthetically competent representations does not increase these conditions proportionally.

This distinction explains why aesthetic value can become increasingly dependent upon history, materiality, place, and encounter without requiring a theory in which physical or human-made objects possess privileged access to beauty. Generated artifacts can be beautiful. Artificial systems can acquire histories. Digital encounters can become relationally consequential. The argument concerns the structure of genesis and relation rather than an opposition between the artificial and the real.

Some aesthetic encounters can develop further into what the paper termed *existential salience*. The concept was used narrowly for events through which dimensions of situated existence such as presence, temporality, relation, belonging, estrangement, or the felt fact of being alive become unusually prominent.

Existential salience is neither a theory of the good life nor a claim about an essential self. It is also not an economic output that can be manufactured on demand. Commercial-cultural actors can articulate existential language and organize some of the conditions through which such experiences might emerge. The experienced effect remains contingent.

The empirical cases made these distinctions concrete. Wako's GOOD LOOP project publicly connected feeling, beauty, temporality, artistic practice, and living. GINZA SIX demonstrated how public art can become embedded within the spatial infrastructure of a commercial environment. Ginza Mitsukoshi showed the coexistence of aesthetic encounter, institutional mediation, and direct commodity circulation. The Bvlgari Kaleidos exhibition in Shanghai connected commercial identity to heritage objects, material craft, museum authority, contemporary art, and wider cultural histories.

None of these practices establishes a direct response to generative AI. Their importance lies elsewhere. They show that commercial-cultural value already operates through relations that exceed detachable symbolic form. Under a changed scarcity regime, these longstanding practices can plausibly acquire different relative functions.

The paper therefore proposed a functional rather than genealogical historical hypothesis:

established commercial-cultural practice+changed symbolic scarcity → possible change in relative economic function
(89)

The cases are consistent with this hypothesis but do not establish its causal direction.

The political-economic analysis further distinguished organization from enclosure, value formation from extraction, and commercial gain from cultural depletion. Commercial participation in relational and cultural fields can support preservation, circulation, artistic production, apprenticeship, institutional access, and new interpretation. Private value and cultural generativity can increase simultaneously.

The relevant normative question is therefore not whether commerce has touched culture. It is what happens to the generative conditions of the wider field. Do new participants enter? Are practitioners supported? Does interpretive plurality remain possible? Are archives and practices sustained? Are relations expanded or narrowed? Does current value formation reproduce the conditions from which future cultural generation can emerge?

This distinction became particularly important in the discussion of recursive scarcity. Relational anchoring does not end symbolic competition because the relations used for anchoring must themselves be represented.

History becomes narrative.

Craft becomes an aesthetic and linguistic grammar.

Authenticity becomes a recognizable vocabulary.

Place becomes imagery.

Existentiality becomes a discourse of feeling, presence, connection, and living.

The attempt to restore differentiation through relation can therefore generate a second symbolic layer. If those representations become sufficiently common, their differentiating salience can weaken even when the underlying histories remain true.

The resulting dynamic was described as a possible recursive process:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{manifestational abundance} &\longrightarrow \text{relational re-anchoring} \\
 &\longrightarrow \text{symbolization of relation} \\
 &\longrightarrow \text{possible saturation} \\
 &\longrightarrow \text{renewed search for less substitutable differentiation.}
 \end{aligned} \tag{90}$$

This sequence is not proposed as a universal law. Some cultural forms become more valuable through repetition. Some markets remain strongly differentiated through manifestation alone. Some relations resist commercial integration. Some organizations invest in cultural generativity rather than exhausting it. Institutional, legal, technical, social, and normative forces can interrupt the process at every stage.

For this reason, the language of *scarcity migration* should remain provisional. A more precise interpretation is a transformation in the relative weight of heterogeneous scarcity and non-substitutability conditions.

Future research can test this hypothesis empirically. Longitudinal studies can examine whether audiences increasingly value provenance, materiality, physical encounter, or institutional authentication after sustained exposure to generated symbolic content. Organizational research can investigate whether investment in heritage, art, physical experience, and historically anchored cultural programming changes in response to generative production. Experiments can hold manifestation constant while varying attributed history, authentication, location, or mode of production. Research on recommender systems and persistent AI can investigate whether personalization increasingly moves from preference prediction toward inference concerning affective and historically constituted susceptibility.

Such work would also permit the stronger claims avoided here to be evaluated. The present paper does not establish that capital is systematically moving toward existential experience as a new commodity frontier. It does not establish that heritage and craft are being exhausted through commercial repetition. It does not establish that generative AI caused contemporary firms to invest more heavily in relational anchoring.

Its contribution is more modest.

Generative AI weakens the assumption that sophisticated symbolic manifestation necessarily indicates a correspondingly scarce generative history. Once that connection becomes less reliable, political-economic attention can shift toward the relations that remain difficult to reproduce through manifestation alone.

These relations include provenance, institutional continuity, material process, historical specificity, place, embodied presence, contingent encounter, and the subject's own accumulated susceptibility.

The resulting transformation can be expressed in its most compressed form as

$$\text{abundance of manifestation} \not\Rightarrow \text{abundance of relation.} \quad (91)$$

This non-equivalence is the conceptual center of the paper.

It explains why symbolic abundance can coexist with intensified struggles over authentication, attention, access, cultural history, place, and the conditions of encounter. It also explains why the political economy of generative AI cannot be understood solely through the cost of producing content. The more symbolic manifestation becomes reproducible, the more consequential the question can become of what stands behind, around, and through the symbol.

Yet the final limit remains equally important.

Contingency cannot be reduced to probability management.

Beauty cannot be reduced to differentiation.

Existential salience cannot be reduced to an optimized commercial response.

Commercial actors can organize conditions through which these phenomena become more or less likely to emerge, but the resulting relations remain historically situated, partially open, and capable of exceeding the purposes of the organizations that helped make the encounter possible.

The political economy after the erosion of symbolic scarcity is therefore not a political economy in which relation has replaced symbol. It is one in which the relation between symbol and its generative conditions becomes increasingly visible.

That visibility creates both opportunities and risks. It can support renewed attention to provenance, craft, cultural memory, place, embodiment, and historically meaningful encounter. It can also create incentives to control, authenticate, enclose, or repeatedly commercialize the very relations upon which differentiation depends.

The central problem is consequently not how to restore scarcity to an abundant symbolic world. It is how the conditions that continue to generate cultural, aesthetic, and relational difference are organized, shared, reproduced, and transformed when symbolic manifestation itself is no longer reliably scarce.

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