

# PICSEL

## *The First Manifesto — Whitepaper*

Campaign I · 2025

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### Abstract

This paper describes the conceptual framework, operational mechanism, and institutional logic of PICSEL — a cultural institution built around the encounter between collective human aesthetic intention and artificial intelligence. The First Manifesto is PICSEL's inaugural campaign: a shared canvas of one million pixels, each purchased by a participant for €1, each carrying an aesthetic directive that AION — PICSEL's AI system — synthesizes into a single unrepeatable artwork. This paper addresses the philosophical foundations of the project, its relationship to the history of participatory and conceptual art, the technical and aesthetic logic of AION's synthesis process, and PICSEL's position within the current landscape of AI-mediated cultural production.

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## **1. The Rupture**

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Every instrument that has touched the act of making has provoked the same reflex: first denial, then absorption, then reinvention. Photography did not destroy painting — it liberated it from the obligation of representation and made Impressionism possible (Bazin, 1960). The question was never whether the new instrument would survive. The question was always what it would force the existing order to become.

Generative artificial intelligence represents a rupture of a different structural character. Not because it is more capable than what preceded it, but because — for the first time — the instrument does not merely assist the act of creation. It enters it. A system trained on the entire arc of human visual production, capable of generating images that no individual human has made before, is not a tool in any traditional sense. It is a participant (Boden, 2004). That single shift has reopened questions the art world considered settled: who is the author, what does originality require, where does authenticity reside.

The responses that have emerged so far are partial to the point of evasion. NFTs constructed an architecture of ownership without addressing what made those works worth owning (Rombach et al., 2022). Most institutions chose silence. The commercial AI art market produced volume without necessity — images without occasion.

What does not yet exist is an institution that has decided to treat this rupture not as a problem to be managed, but as a material to be worked with. PICSEL is that institution.

## **2. Conceptual Genealogy**

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PICSEL does not emerge from a vacuum. It is the product of specific precursors whose gestures it extends, and whose limitations it attempts to answer.

### **2.1 The instruction as work: Sol LeWitt**

Sol LeWitt's wall drawings demonstrated that the instruction can be the work — that execution is delegable without loss of meaning (LeWitt, 1969). The artist provides a set of rules; others produce the result; the authorship resides in the conception, not the execution. PICSEL extends this logic: the instructions here are not singular and authorial, but collective and distributed. One million participants each contribute a fragment of an instruction set that neither they nor any single author controls.

## **2.2 The audience as producer: Fluxus and relational aesthetics**

Fluxus insisted that the audience does not consume art — it produces it (Higgins, 1966). Nicolas Bourriaud extended this into a theoretical framework, arguing that significant contemporary art lives in the relational space between people, not in the isolated object (Bourriaud, 1998). PICSEL takes the next step: the relational space is not the artwork itself, but the raw material from which AION produces it.

## **2.3 Collective authorship and AI: the nearest precedents**

Aaron Koblin's *The Johnny Cash Project* (2010) established a model of collective visual authorship at scale — thousands of participants each animating a single frame, producing a coherent whole. Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst's work on collective AI training and distributed authorship structures (Herndon, 2019) represents the conceptually nearest precedent. The critical distinction: PICSEL introduces emergence as the operative principle. The final work is not the sum or average of participant contributions. It is a transformation of them — produced by a system trained on 800 years of visual memory — whose outcome no participant, and no system designer, can predict.

## **2.4 The failure PICSEL answers: Komar & Melamid**

Komar and Melamid's *America's Most Wanted* (1994) surveyed hundreds of Americans about their aesthetic preferences and produced a painting that literally combined the majority responses. The result — a landscape with water, historical figures, and a deer — was simultaneously statistically accurate and aesthetically null. PICSEL's mechanism is designed to answer precisely this failure: the synthesis is not additive but emergent. AION does not average; it transforms.

## **3. Emergence as Operating Principle**

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The concept of emergence — the appearance of complex properties from the interaction of simple elements — is the operative principle of PICSEL's mechanism (Holland, 1998; Kauffman, 1993).

In biological systems, consciousness cannot be derived from the properties of individual neurons. A murmuration of starlings — thousands of birds moving as a single fluid form — has no central leader, no coordinating intelligence. The complex behaviour emerges from local interactions following simple rules. The emergent property is real, but it cannot be read off its components (Luhmann, 1984).

The work AION produces is emergent in this precise sense. It is the product of one million individual directives — each simple, each limited — processed simultaneously by a system that has absorbed the visual memory of eight centuries. The outcome cannot be anticipated from any subset of the inputs. It cannot be reproduced, because the specific configuration of one million choices — shaped by the historical, cultural, and personal conditions of those who made them — will never recur in identical form.

This structural property constitutes a form of authenticity that has no precedent in the history of art. The work is authentic not because a master's hand touched the canvas (classical painting), not because the idea was singular (conceptual art), not because a certificate exists on a blockchain (NFT). It is authentic because it is the evidence of a unique and unrepeatable process — structurally impossible to replicate (Benjamin, 1936).

## **4. AION: The AI System**

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AION is the AI system at the centre of every PICSEL campaign. It has been trained on 800 years of Western visual art history — every major movement, rupture, and formal grammar from the fifteenth century to the twentieth. It knows what has been done. The First Manifesto is the first time it is being asked to synthesize from what one million people collectively want — not from what any single artist intends.

AION does not receive a single prompt. It reads the aggregate of one million directives across four dimensions simultaneously: geographic distribution (which regions are represented and in what proportions), thematic concentration (which periods, styles, and subjects recur), individual weightings (each participant's Content/Style directive, calibrating how their

input bears on what the work represents versus how it is rendered), and collective mass (the total volume of influence that certain choices accumulate).

From this aggregate, AION synthesizes a single unified work — coherent in style and content, bearing the collective imprint of its million contributors, impossible to anticipate. AION is reconfigured for each PICSEL campaign with a directive specific to that campaign's anthropological question. The system that synthesizes The First Manifesto is not the same system, in operational terms, that will synthesize The Memory Manifesto or The Body Manifesto.

The final work carries three types of authorship: AION; the human collaborating artist who co-signs each campaign; and the one million co-authors whose choices constitute the raw material. This authorship structure has no direct precedent in the history of art.

## **5. The Mechanism**

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### **5.1 The picssel**

A picssel is a single pixel on a shared canvas of one million units. It costs €1. When a participant acquires a picssel, they perform four actions: they choose its position on the live canvas; they select a fragment from a curated library of public domain artworks spanning the fifteenth to the twentieth century (sourced from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Rijksmuseum, and Wikimedia Commons); they set their Content/Style directive on a scale of 0 to 100; and they record their name and country of origin.

The Content/Style directive deserves specific attention. Content and style are the two fundamental dimensions of any work in art theory — what a work represents, and how it represents it (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1969). The directive is a real aesthetic position. Participants may not experience it as such — many will move the slider intuitively, without theoretical frame — but the aggregate of one million such positions constitutes a genuine aesthetic dataset of unusual depth and precision.

## 5.2 Square pixels

Participants may acquire individual pixels (quantities of 1 to 8) or squared pixels (perfect squares beginning at  $3 \times 3 = 9$ , up to  $30 \times 30 = 900$ ). Individual pixels each carry an independent directive. A squared pixel occupies a single contiguous block on the canvas; one image is assigned, scaled to fill the entire area, with a single directive applying to the block as a whole. The distinction matters aesthetically: individual pixels contribute many small, independent voices; a squared pixel contributes a single, larger, more unified presence.

## 5.3 The canvas

The canvas is live and navigable in real time. As pixels are acquired, their positions appear on the canvas — visible to all participants. The final canvas, once the campaign closes, remains permanently accessible and navigable. Every pixel node displays its before (the fragment chosen by the participant) and its after (AION's transformation of that fragment within the final work), together with the participant's name and country. The canvas is simultaneously the process and the archive of the process.

## 5.4 The postcard

Every participant receives two digital postcards. The first arrives immediately after purchase: a record of their fragment, position, directive, name, and country — a receipt, a certificate, and a portrait of a decision. The second arrives when AION completes the final work: the before and after of their specific pixel, side by side. What they chose, and what the system made of their choice.

## 6. The Work as Layered Object

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The work PICSEL produces is not a single object. It is a layered structure with four distinct levels of reading, each coherent independently and all coherent together.

At the macro level, the painting as a whole: a work with formal and thematic coherence, produced by AION, bearing the collective imprint of one million contributors. This is the object sold at auction. At the intermediate level, the

interactive canvas: a navigable territory in which visitors can trace the geography of collective decisions, identify concentrations and dispersions, and follow patterns invisible at the macro level. At the micro level, the individual portrait: each picssel is a record of a real person — a fragment chosen by someone, somewhere, for a reason that belongs to them alone. One million micro-portraits that together form a macro-portrait of contemporary humanity at a specific historical moment. At the temporal level, the living archive: the work does not conclude when the painting is sold. The canvas persists. Every participant remains inscribed in it — permanently.

## 7. The Seven Campaigns

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PICSEL is structured around seven campaigns, each built around a fundamental anthropological question. AION is reconfigured for each campaign with a directive specific to that question. A different human collaborating artist co-signs each work.

Campaign I — The First Manifesto: What is the impulse that makes a human being want to create something that did not exist before?

Campaign II — The Memory Manifesto: What do we choose to keep, and what does that choice reveal about who we are?

Campaign III — The Body Manifesto: How has the human body been the first and last territory of all representation?

Campaign IV — The Conflict Manifesto: What does it look like when beauty and rupture occupy the same space?

Campaign V — The Sacred Manifesto: What do people reach for when language is no longer enough?

Campaign VI — The Future Manifesto: How do we picture what has not happened yet?

Campaign VII — The Final Manifesto: What remains when everything has been said?

The seventh campaign synthesizes all that preceded it — not as a summary, but as a distillation. AION receives its final directive: forget everything. Create from what remains after forgetting. This deliberate finitude is itself an artistic statement about the nature of archives, memory, and conclusion.

## **8. Institutional Context**

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PICSEL is not a project. The distinction is not one of scale — it is one of intention and time. A project has an end. An institution has a cycle. PICSEL is built with deliberate finitude — seven campaigns, seven years — but each completed campaign adds a layer that cannot be erased: a work in a collection, one million documented co-authors, a curatorial text, a festival presence, an auction record.

The reference model is not a gallery or a digital platform. It is closer to the Ars Electronica Center in Linz — a permanent institution dedicated to art, technology and society, housing both a permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. In the long term, a PICSEL space can exist in Bucharest, Berlin or Amsterdam.

The window for this institution is not permanently open. AI technology for image generation has reached genuine artistic maturity at this specific moment. In five years, the question will no longer carry the same urgency — the rupture will have been absorbed or abandoned without reckoning. The institutions that arrive first with conviction do not merely occupy a space. They define what that space means (Hegel, 1807).

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