

The Role of Chance in Art

Randomness and Accidents in the Creative Process

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Abstract

This thesis aimed to analyse the role of randomness, chance, and accident within the artistic process. In the context of this research this was explored by examining art movements that are conceptually connected to the idea of chance, emphasising the significance of random elements and unplanned results in the artistic practice, and looking at examples of artworks where accident is a valuable tool for broadening artistic viewpoints.

The practice-based research consisted of a series of collages where chance methods were used. Their purpose was to explore chance methods, describe their features, and analyse what benefits such techniques can bring not only to the particular piece but also the creative process in general.

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Abstrakt

Målet med denna uppsats var att analysera slumpmässighetens och tillfälligheternas roll i den konstnärliga processen. Inom ramarna för denna forskning undersöktes detta genom att studera konströrelser som är konceptuellt kopplade till idén om sammanträffanden med betoning på vikten av slumpmässiga element och oplanerade resultat i konstutövning, samt att titta på exempel på konstverk där slumpen är ett värdefullt verktyg för att bredda konstnärliga synpunkter.

Den praktikbaserade forskningen bestod av en serie collage där slumpmetoder har använts. Deras syfte var att utforska slumpmetoder, beskriva deras funktioner och analysera vilka fördelar sådana tekniker kan innebära, inte bara för det specifika stycket utan också för den konstnärliga processen i allmänhet.

Språk: engelska

Nyckelord: slump, tillfälligheter, slumpmässighet, generativ konst

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1 Introduction

Accidents have always intrigued me. It is both exciting and terrifying to consider how many aspects of our life are influenced by randomness and factors beyond our control. People often refer to such coincidences as fate or luck, and it can manifest itself in both beneficial and destructive ways. Even in situations that appear entirely predictable, there remains a risk of some unforeseen events.

In the realm of art, "chance" methods can serve as an effective tool for finding inspiration. Such working techniques can show new concepts or directions that an artist may have previously overlooked. A small accident can introduce an element of expression, intensity, and sharpness to an artwork.

I find it fascinating how a spontaneous idea can transform a piece of art. I think that coincidences and accidents are crucial for creative process because creativity thrives on originality, novelty, and innovation. While it is certainly possible to create something unique through careful planning and attention to detail, the inclusion of random and chaotic elements can bring forth something beneficial that cannot be planned in advance. Serendipity can truly bring a creative spark that is so necessary for a work of art.

2 Purpose

The objective of this thesis is to explore the significance of randomness, chance, and accident within the creative process. The research delves into this subject by examining art movements with conceptual connections to the idea of chance, highlighting the importance of unplanned and random elements in the artistic practice, and exploring examples of artworks where accident serves as a tool for expanding artistic perspective.

I believe that artists can gain valuable insights by analysing the reasons why chance methods were used and in what way they benefited the artwork if at all. The desire to control and predict the outcome varies among artists; however, it is in human nature to prefer safe and low-risk strategies. Embracing randomness and unpredictability can be challenging, yet I believe it has the potential to broaden an artist's perspective and lead to new avenues of exploration.

The practice-based part of this research aims to test chance methods in practice. The final project consists of a collage series, and my main focus while creating it was to explore what it means to embrace randomness in the routine and analyse how it influences the artistic process and the final result.

3 Analysis

3.1 Alexander Cozens's blot drawings

One of the examples of "chance" methods is a "blot" technique developed by Alexander Cozens, a British landscape painter in watercolours. His approach suggests that artists start their work with rapid and often accidental brush strokes. The initial abstract marks serve as a foundation that is subsequently reworked into a more polished and meticulously painted piece, in which the original blots are transformed into figurative elements of the landscape. The primary objective of this technique is to stimulate the artist's imagination, helping to find a more uncommon and interesting composition. (Cozens, n.d.; Cramer, 1997). Cozens's innovative approach also influenced other artists, such as Joseph Wright of Derby, who owned several of Cozens's paintings and acknowledged that he gained inspiration from his compositions (Artvee, n.d.; Turner, 2011).

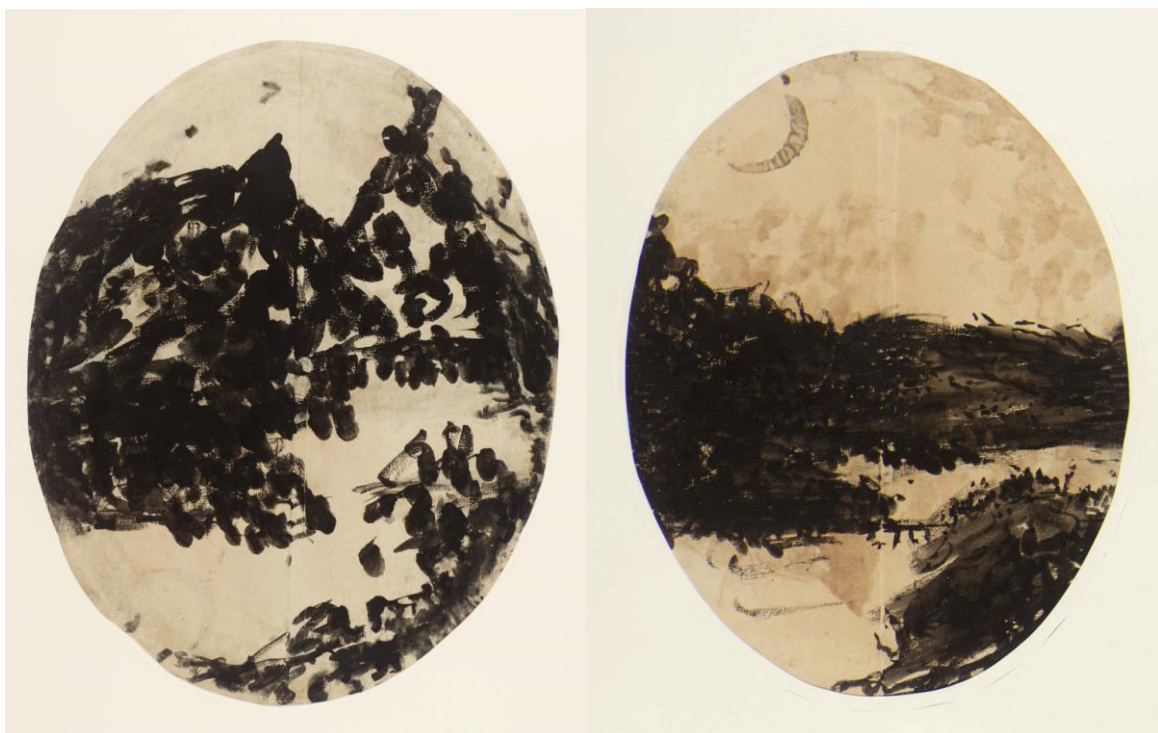


Figure 1. *A Blot, Based on New Method, Plate 10. Verso: A Clumsier Blot* by Alexander Cozens and a pupil.

3.2 Chance creations in dadaism

An important and inspirational figure for dadaism movement is a symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. He saw writing as a material medium; he shifted the emphasis to syntactic and typographic elements and the visual appearance of the text. One of the most extreme examples of his work that inspired Italian futurists' experiments and dadaists' linguistic exercises is the famous poem "*Un coup de dés*" about the rolling of dice never able to cancel chance. The poem is constructed as a typographic collage, featuring individual words and combinations of words. The broken syntax, lack of punctuation, and irregular spreading of words throughout the pages make a "common" straightforward reading impossible. (Sandqvist, 2006).

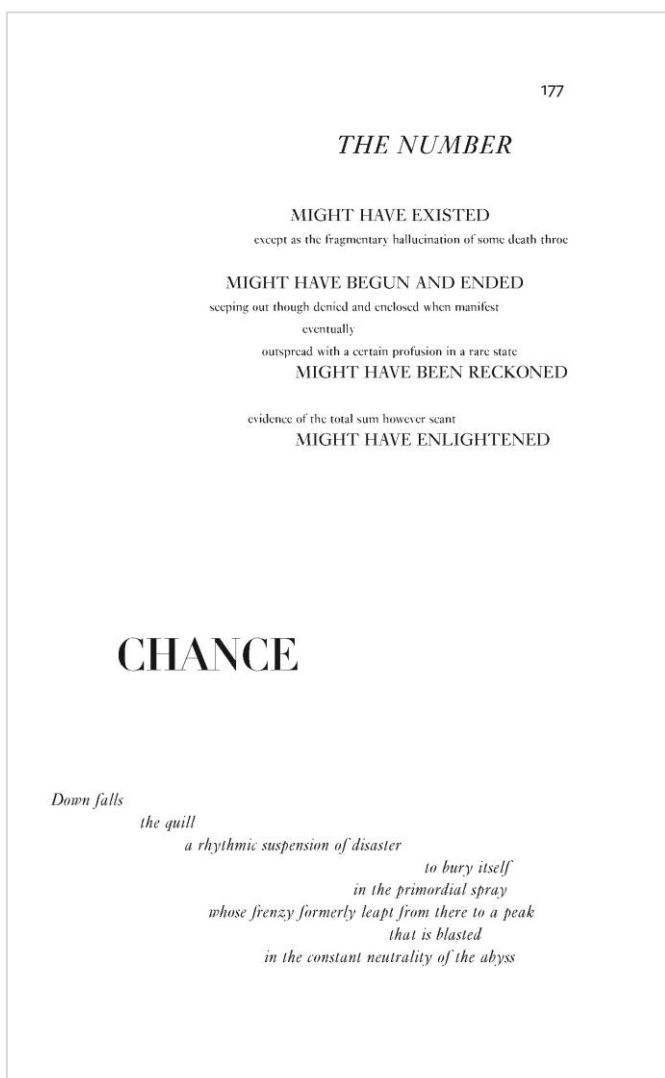


Figure 2. *A Dice Throw* (p. 177) by Stéphane Mallarmé (translated by E. H. and A. M. Blackmore).

Chance was often seen as a creative tool by Dada artists, for instance, Jean Arp. His colleague and friend, artist Hans Richter, described Arp's artistic process on "*Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Law of Chance*" (1916–17). Apparently, he had difficulties with the painting he worked on at the time. According to Richter, he tore that painting apart. Subsequently, while examining the remnants of paper that remained from the painting, he was struck by the unexpected harmony of the fragments. The composition seemed to possess all the expressive power that he tried in vain to accomplish in his ruined artwork. Richter explained that "chance movements of his hand and of the fluttering scraps of paper had achieved what all his efforts had failed to achieve, namely expression." (MoMA, n.d.).

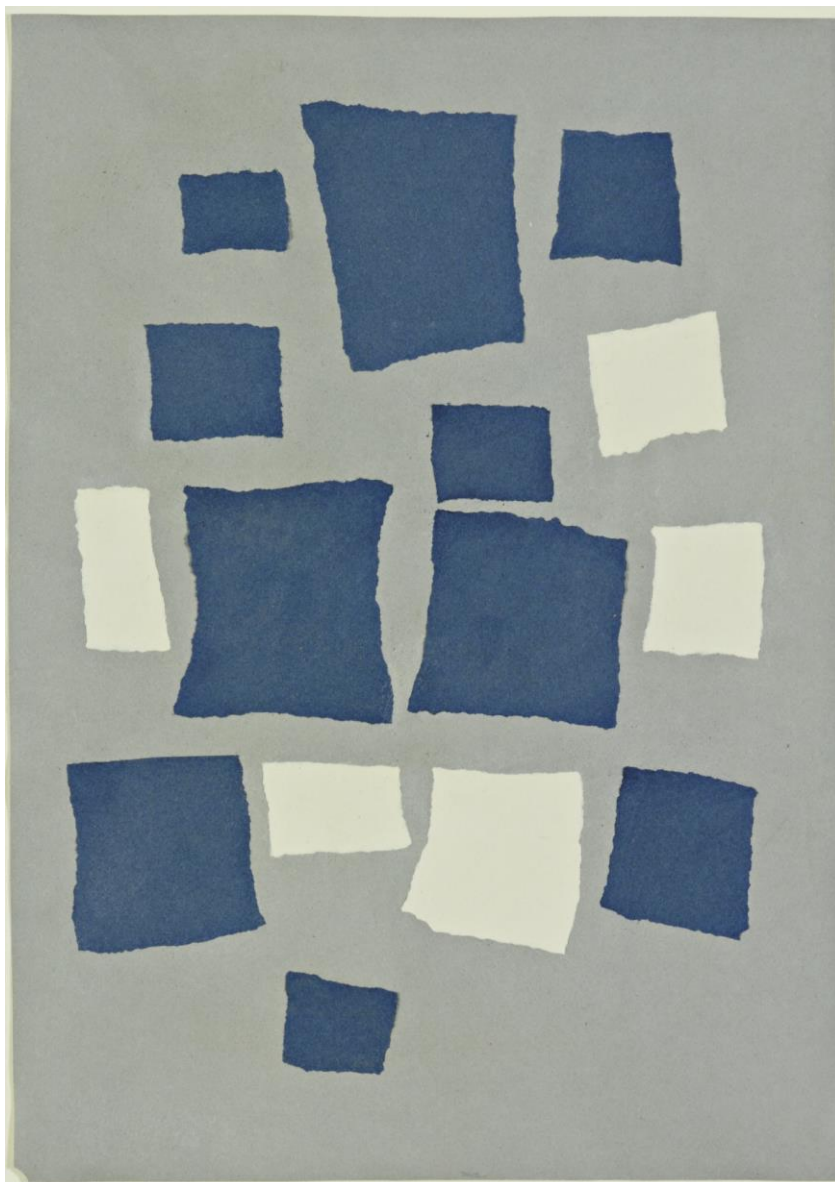


Figure 3. *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Law of Chance)* by Jean (Hans) Arp.

In the realm of photography, discoveries related to chance played a significant role as well. In 1929, Man Ray, visual artist, and Lee Miller, photographer and model, came upon a new technique — solarisation. It was discovered while Miller was assisting Man Ray in his darkroom. During the process, a mouse ran across her foot, prompting Miller to switch on the light momentarily before turning it off again, realising the error. This incident led to the creation of a solarised print, characterised by the inversion of the original photographic tones. (*How Man Ray Became One of Art History's Most Radical Creative Forces*, 2024; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2021).

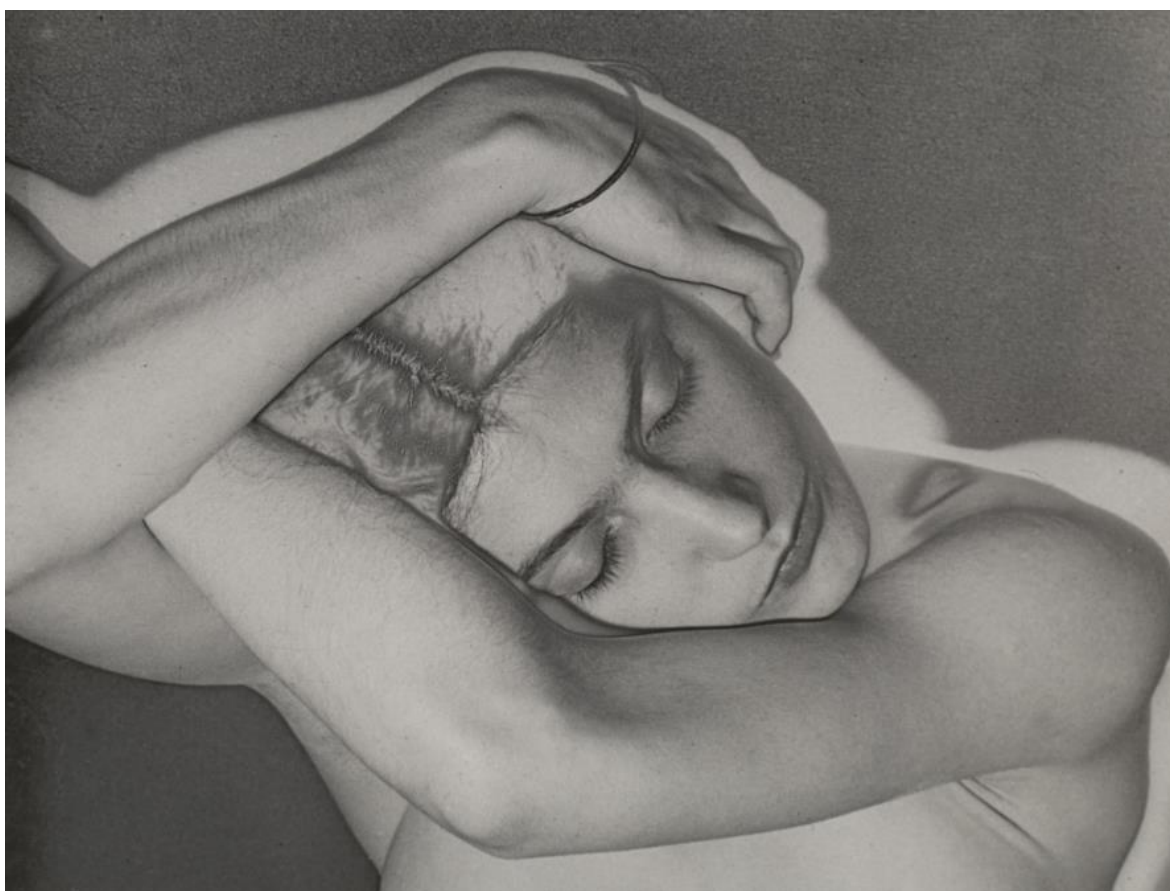


Figure 4. *Sleeping Woman* by Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitzky).

3.3 Fluxus and “An Anecdoted Topography of Chance”

One of the artists associated with the Fluxus group, Daniel Spoerri, wrote a book, “*An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*”, which provides a detailed description of various random objects found on Spoerri’s hotel table, alongside conversations with his friend and fellow artist, Robert Filliou. The items that he described evoke memories and associations,

making them recall and reflect on shared stories from their past. Spoerri articulates the motivation behind this book within the text itself:

I'm going to make topographies. Because it turns history completely upside down, and everybody can begin to imagine the object, and I hope they start looking around their own homes. <...> And that they will be able to imagine more than I could myself... (Spoerri et al., 1966, p. 95).

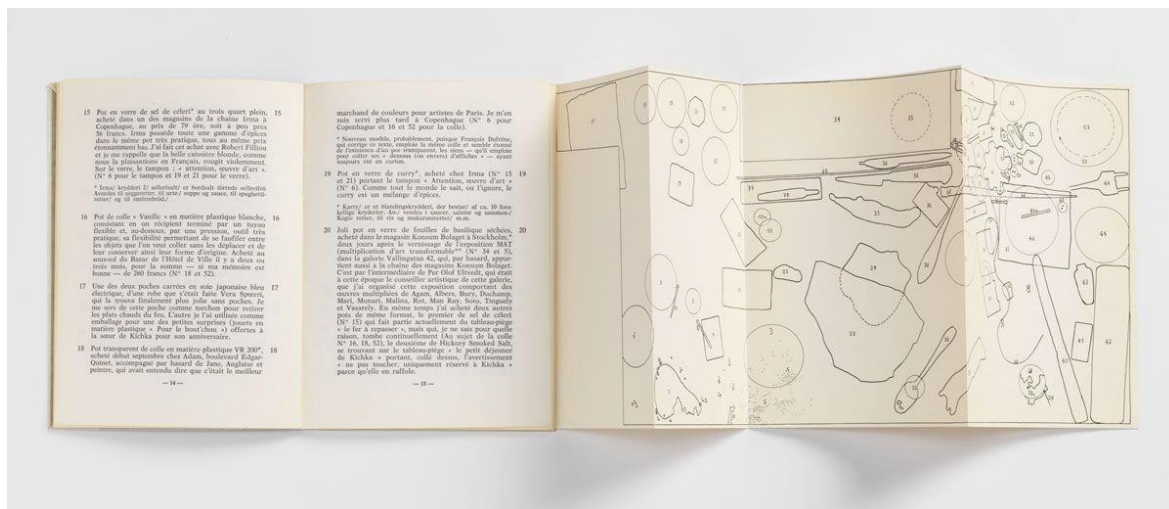


Figure 5. *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* by Daniel Spoerri.

Daniel Spoerri was not the only artist of the Fluxus group who experimented with the concept of chance. In 1967, another Fluxus artist, Alison Knowles, created *“The House of Dust”*, which is recognised as one of the earliest computer-generated poems. It consisted of the phrase “a house of” followed by a randomised sequence of material, site or location, light source, and category of inhabitants. By delegating the creation of her poem to chance, Knowles challenges the traditional authority of the author, questioning the very possibility of a direct expression of the author's inner thoughts and emotions.

Two years later, in 1969, Knowles created an architectural object based on one of the quatrains, thus opening the poem up to interpretation, inviting readers to envision alternative forms for it. (Higgins et al., 2016; The Center for the Humanities, 2016).



Figure 6. *The House of Dust* by Alison Knowles.

3.4 Automatism, surrealism, and the unconscious

When discussing the concept of chance, it is important to link randomness to the unconscious mind and artistic methods that incorporate spontaneous thoughts and actions during the creation of an artwork. In the context of art, automatism refers to the practice of producing art without deliberate intention, thereby accessing the unconscious. It was also an important idea for surrealists. André Breton, an influential writer and poet for the surrealism movement, highlighted the significance of it and described surrealism as follows:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. (Breton, 1924).

This connection between automatism and chance is also present in visual art. One of the examples is André Masson, who explored automatic drawing and chance effects, including

his experimentations with sand paintings. He believed that, if left to chance, compositions would expose the inherent sadism of all forms of life (MoMA, 2007).



Figure 7. *Battle of Fishes* by André Masson.

The concept of chance and “chance actions” was important for exploration of the unconscious. According to Freud, such acts emerge independently and gain acceptance as they are not credited with any specific intention or objective. Although he preferred the term “symptomatic actions” instead of “chance actions” because such movements or reactions play the part of symptoms. They express something that the actor himself is often unaware of and typically does not have an intention to share with others, preferring instead to keep these feelings private. He believed such symbolic actions to play a crucial role because they are connected to “the most intimate and important part of the life of a normal individual”. (Freud, 1914).

3.5 Serendipity in technology-based art

Chance methods are also used by artists engaged with technology, for instance, Paul Brown. He designs computer programs that generate artworks autonomously. He highlights that the artistic expression is not intentionally embedded within the programs; rather, it appears independently from their execution. He refers to this approach as “art that makes itself”. In several of his creations, he produced images composed of multiple tiles that were arranged and rotated through a random algorithm. For one of the artworks,

he wrote a program in FORTRAN to estimate rotations, while for another, he calculated them by randomly selecting a page in a book and using the last digit of the page number as a guide. (National Academy of Sciences, 2018).

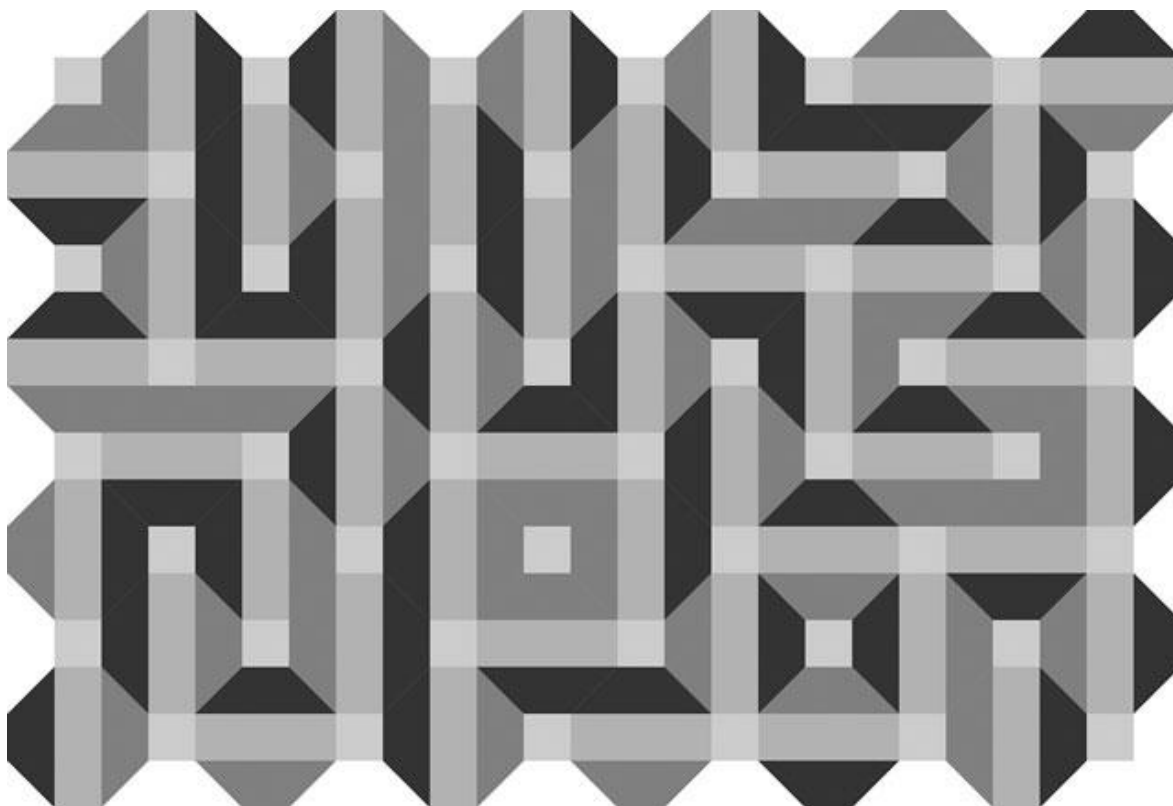


Figure 8. *Untitled Gouache* by Paul Brown.

3.6 Generative art

The emergence of artificial intelligence significantly influenced many aspects of our lives. It has raised numerous ethical questions concerning its application, not only in everyday scenarios but also in the realm of art. Many individuals wonder how AI will change our perception of art, as well as how it will alter the artist's role within society.

The artists who work with AI are now referred to as “prompt artists” or more widely recognised “prompt engineers”. While on a surface it may seem like the work process of a prompt engineer is very different from a traditional artist, they can be surprisingly similar. Artists can find themselves rewriting a prompt repeatedly, testing different approaches until satisfied with the result, whether it is what they had in mind initially or a total surprise. Similarly, traditional artists frequently try out different compositions by sketching or repainting sections of a final piece if they do not meet their expectations. Although the

physical execution of an art piece is different, the approach in general is very similar, and both methods can be considered a creative technique. (Svenungsson, 2024).

Generative art finds applications across multiple disciplines. A notable example within the field of architecture is the work of Michael Hansmeyer, a programmer and architect who analyses and tests algorithms to develop and realise his creative concepts. His focus lies in a design setting that simultaneously allows control and unpredictability, welcomes the unforeseen. He employs computer algorithms “to draw the undrawable, and to imagine the unimaginable” (Hansmeyer, n.d.), facilitating the creation of something truly unseen. The programmer designs not the form, but the process that generates the form (TED, 2012). The final form is so complicated and detailed that one creating it cannot predict the end state of this form. Although such computer processes are deterministic in nature, the outcomes are not foreseeable; thus, the computer acquires the ability to surprise us (*Generative Art*, 2021).



Figure 9. *Platonic Solids* by Michael Hansmeyer.

An additional illustration of generative art that embraces chance can be found in the works of Katharina Brunner. She uses software that helps to create images from thousands of points. The process begins with a simple grid composed of numerous points, each defined by two coordinates. Then the location of each point is altered through a mathematical

formula that calculates new positions based on random parameters. Due to the random figures used in the formula, each resulting image is unique, despite all originating from the same grid. (Brunner, 2019).

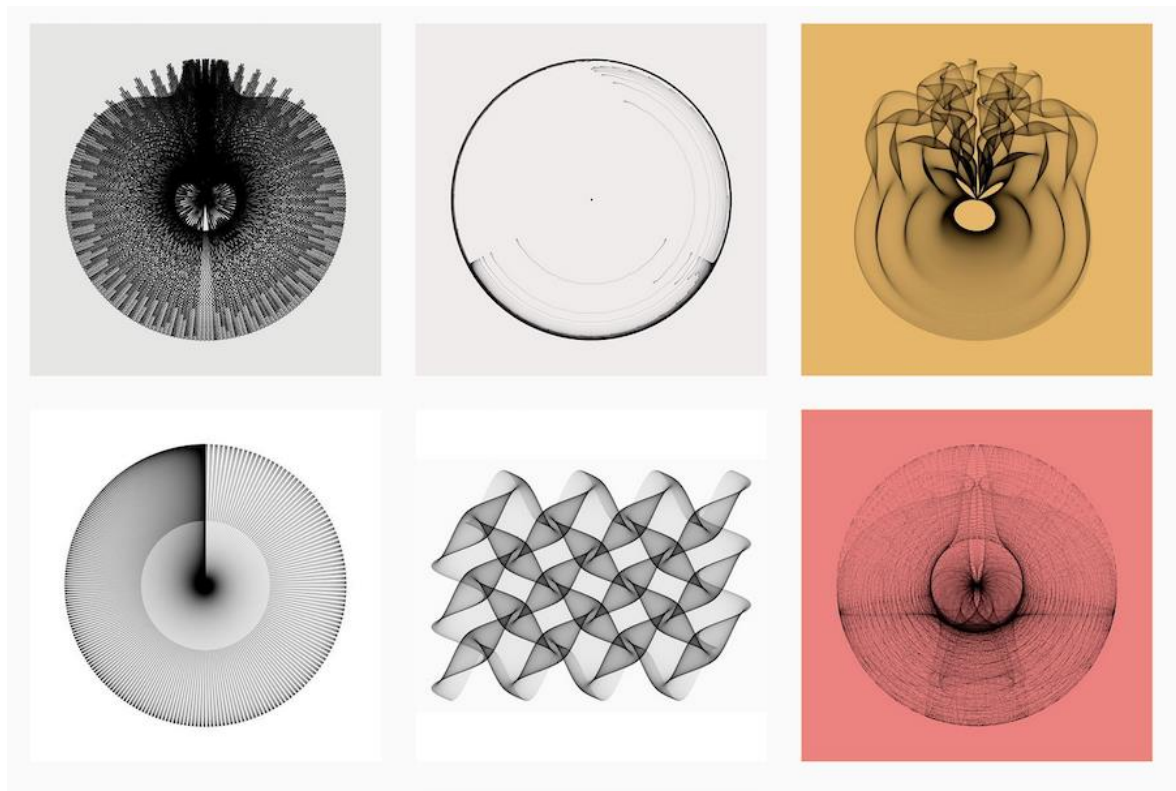


Figure 10. Untitled images by Katharina Brunner.

4 Methods and creative process

At the moment, my creative approach is focused on practices related to chance, accidents, and mistakes. The final project is a series of collages created with techniques that incorporate elements of randomness.

In terms of visual characteristics, my collages draw inspiration from glitch and pixel art. The concept of chance plays a significant role in technology-driven art, although in this context, it is more closely associated with technical errors or bugs. Nevertheless, a common thread linking these two themes is that both practices imply that the outcome is not entirely under the artist's control. One of the examples is *"Data Diaries"* by Cory Arcangel, a series of videos created using the contents of his computer's temporary storage to produce a film in QuickTime. The bugs in QuickTime related to RAM processing contributed to the piece's

distinctive glitchy and abstract appearance. (Kane, 2017; Net Art Anthology, 2016; Vavarella, 2015).

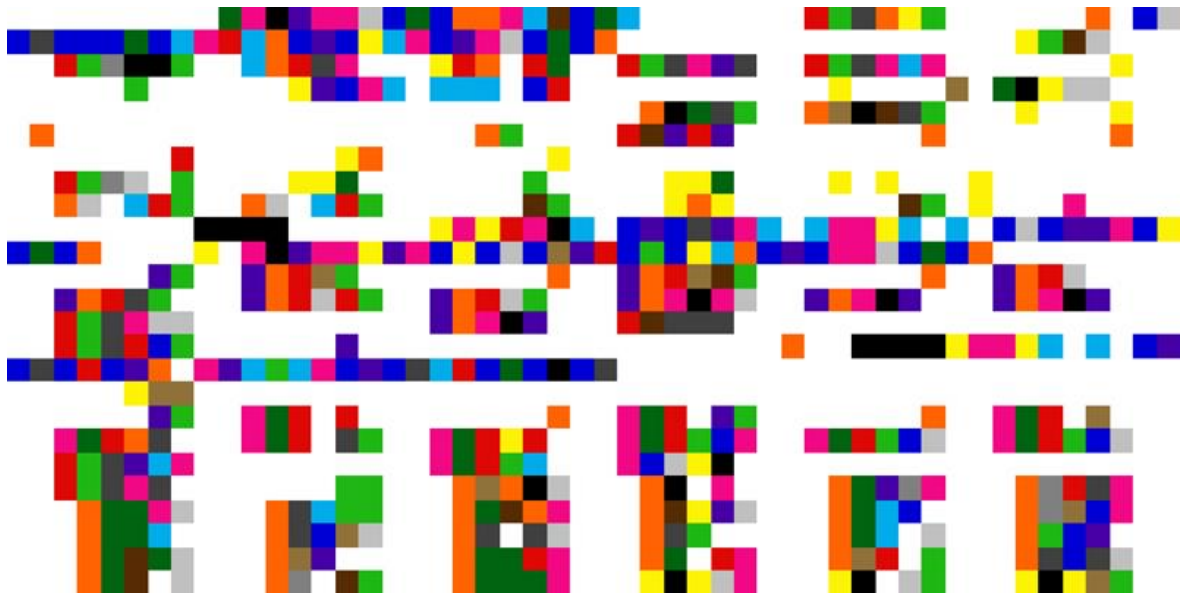


Figure 11. *Data Diaries* (still) by Cory Arcangel.

My working process begins with cutting a photograph into multiple squares, which are then rearranged in a different sequence. In my opinion, a fascinating part of this method is that it combines elements of randomness with a rigid sequential structure. Collages maintain a structured appearance with the firm order reminiscent of a pixelated image; however, by shifting and rotating the individual components, an element of chance and disorder is introduced. Another aspect of this approach is that such a method allows one to look differently at a solid piece, perceiving it not as a fixed and stable object but rather as a puzzle that can be reconfigured to reveal unexpected elements within a familiar image. This transformation changes a figurative photograph into a more abstract form, inviting diverse interpretations and encouraging viewers to engage with it from a fresh perspective.

Most of the initial images I used were either landscapes or space photographs, although the series also includes some images of commonplace objects. The reason behind this is to emphasise the sense of depth. I find it exciting to see how the perception of depth and perspective shifts when the image is fragmented and the pieces are rearranged. It is intriguing how many possible compositions there are. By merely altering the position or angle of the same elements, one can create almost countless combinations. It is similar to writing music; with only seven natural notes, one can compose thousands of melodies.

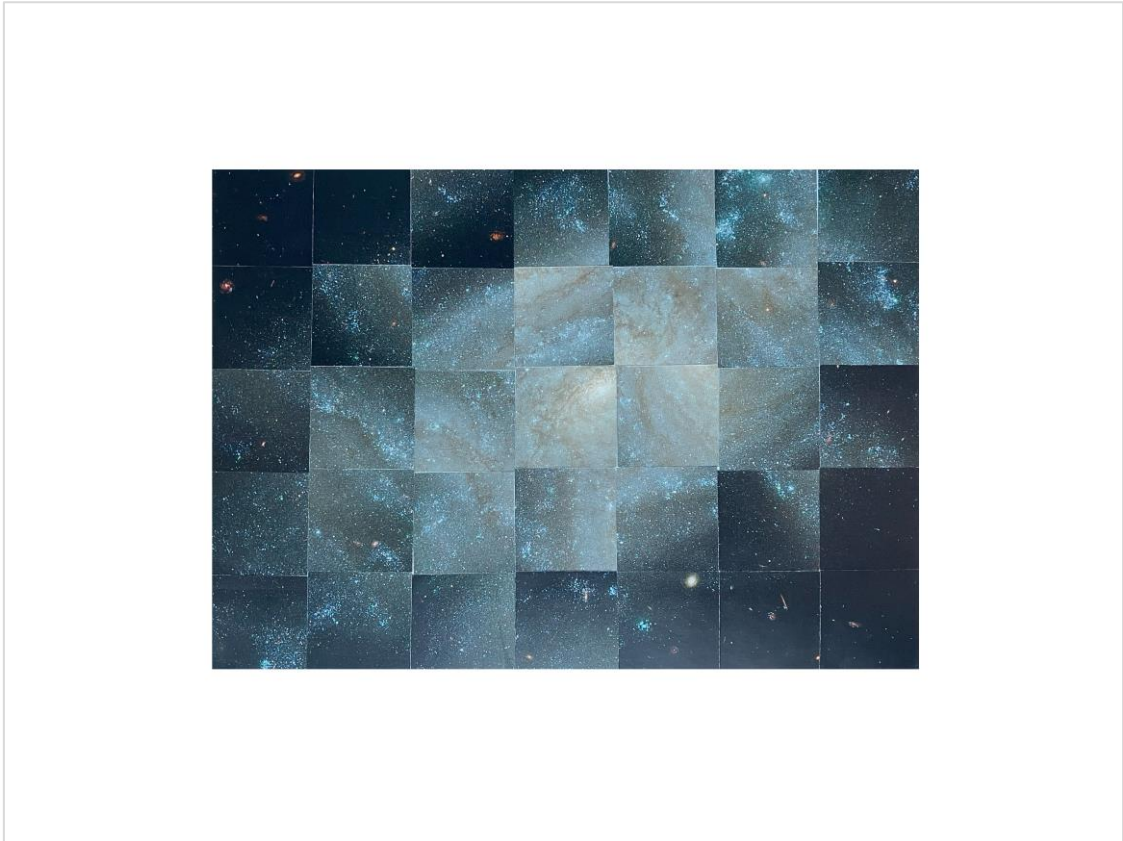


Figure 12. Final project. Collage *Blue 35*.

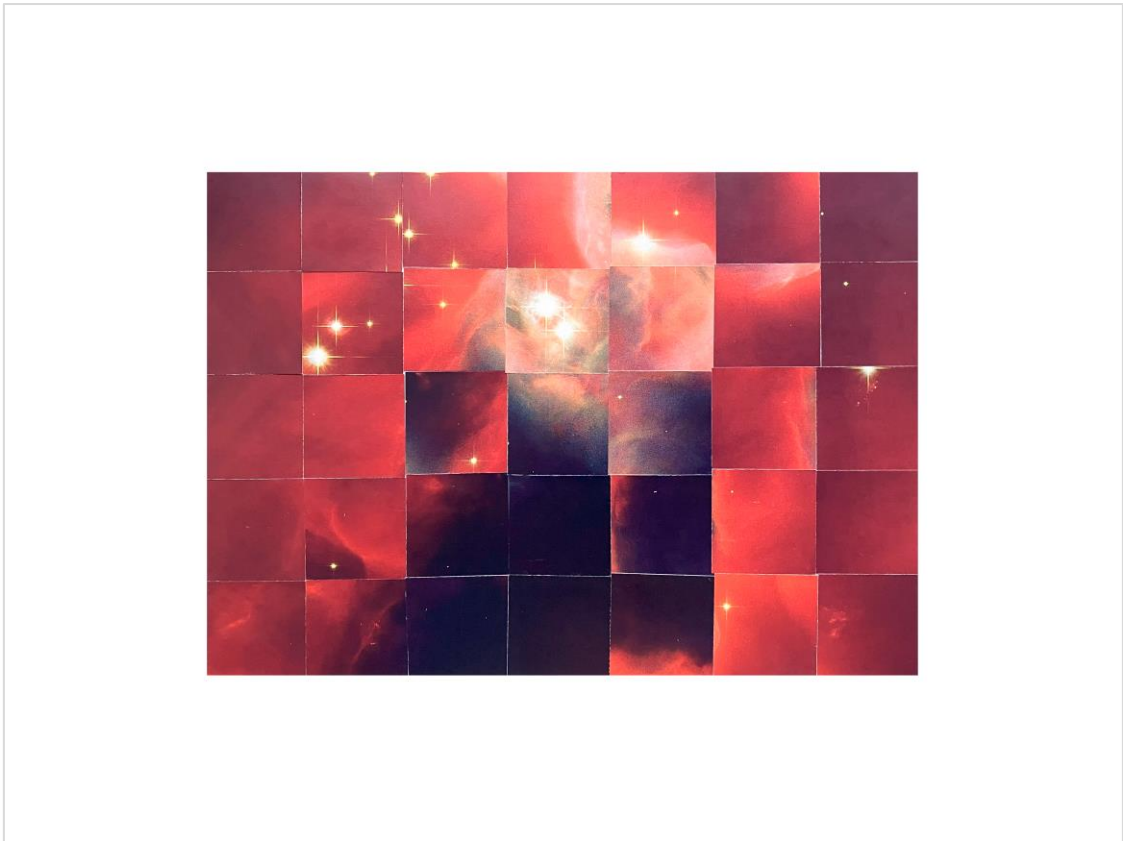


Figure 13. Final project. Collage *Red 35*.

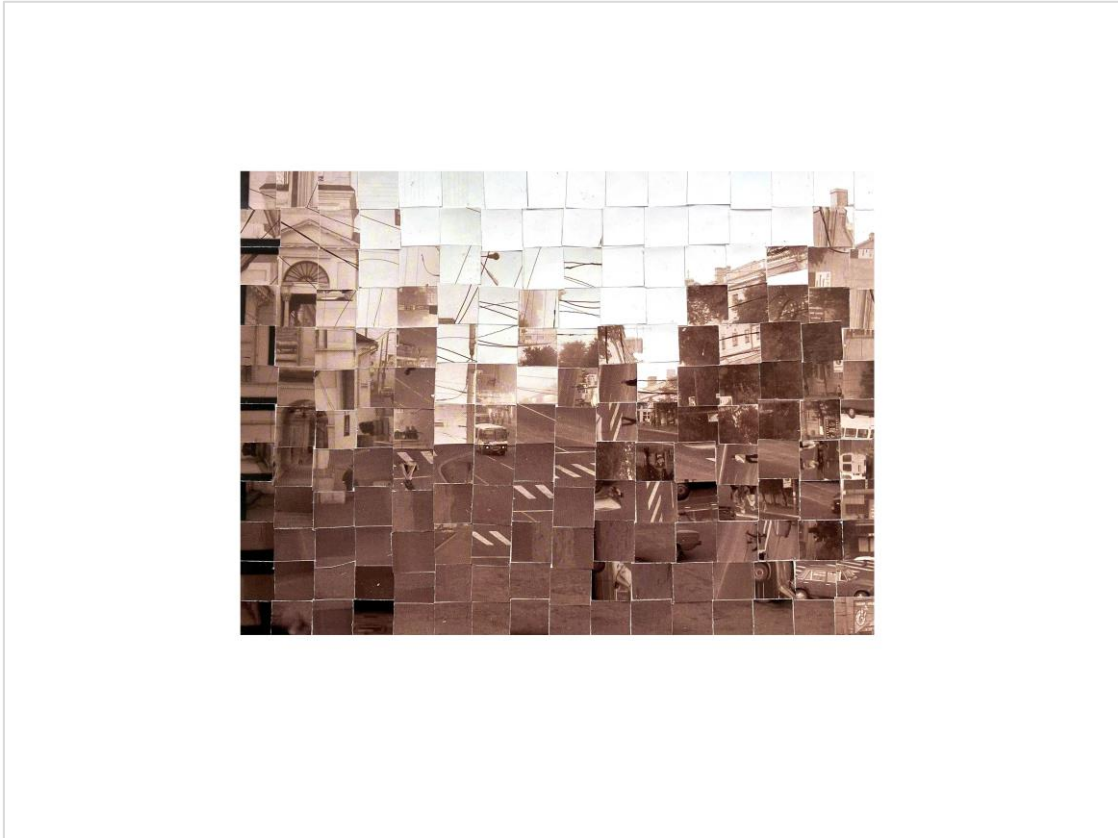


Figure 14. Final project. Collage *Sepia 192*.

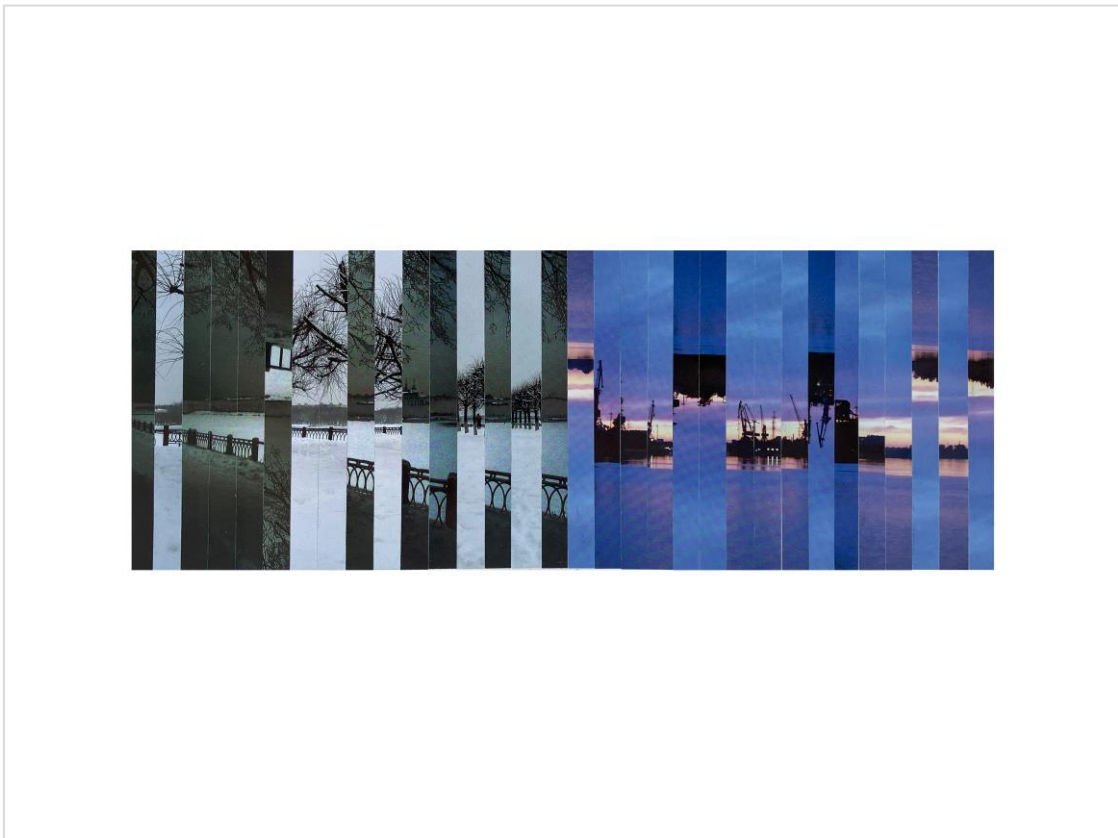


Figure 15. Final project. Collage *Landscape 32*.

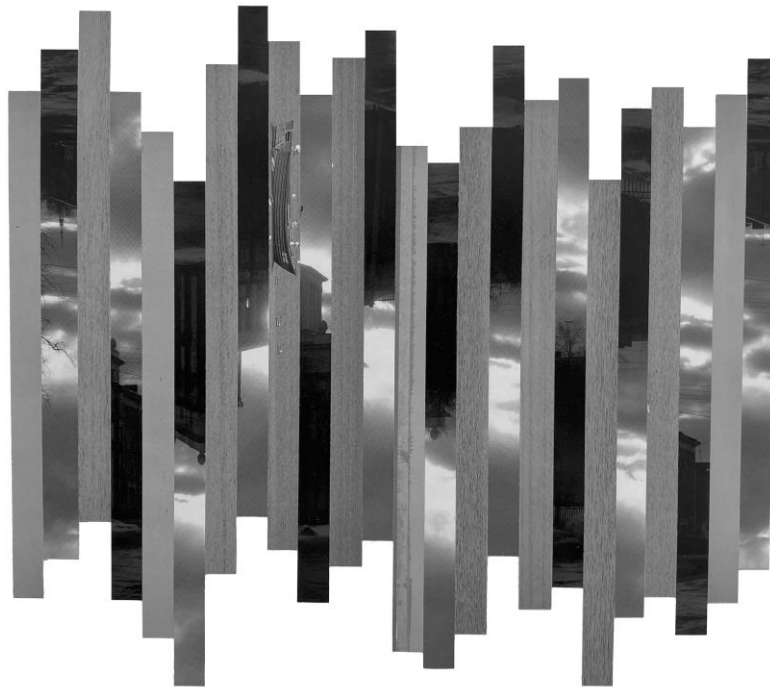


Figure 16. Final project. Collage *Black & White 24*.

I sourced some images from old magazines or photo albums, while others were taken by me. For instance, collage *Accident 110* is made from a photograph I took a few months back. This particular image was also somewhat serendipitous; I was on my way home from work when I noticed an old building with vibrant, colourful lights emanating from several third-floor windows. In comparison, the other windows were either completely dark or had a common warm yellow glow. Such a contrast immediately caught my attention. Later, as I scrolled through my photo gallery, I came across this image and realised its relevance for my collage series, not only because of the accidental emergence of this photograph but also because of its visual appearance with architectural elements.

The fascinating aspect of making collages from images of architectural structures lies in their inherent order and geometric patterns. These visual elements are rather expressive, and even after the initial image is cut and the fragments are rearranged, this original motif remains. Accidental changes and chance methods do not destroy this initial aesthetic but reconfigure it in a new manner.

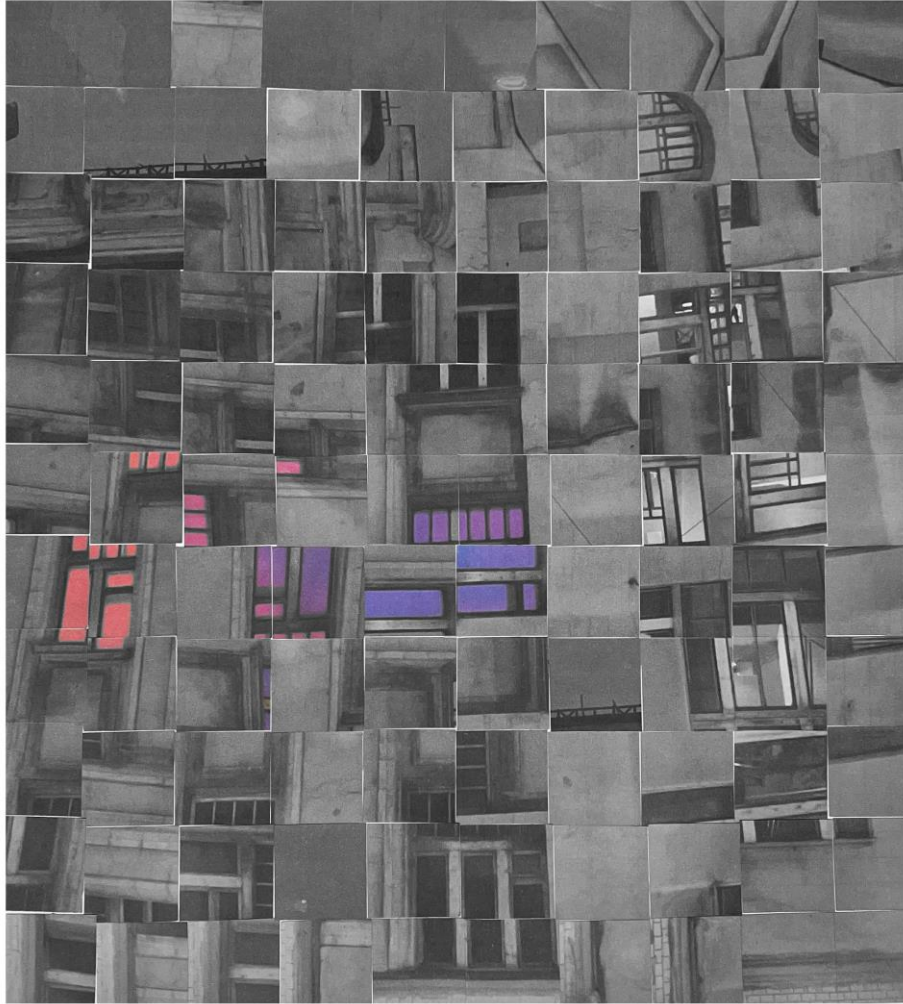


Figure 17. Final project. Collage *Accident 110*.



Figure 18. Final project. Collage *Black & White 68*.

5 Conclusion

Throughout history, artists have engaged in diverse chance-based methods to seek inspiration, broaden their perspectives, and discover innovative approaches. While some artists encountered these techniques by chance, others actively sought out strategies that incorporated elements of randomness and unpredictability. Some pursued their creative ideas independently, while others employed technological tools and software to produce their artworks. What connects all these artists is a shared desire to investigate randomness and chaos, as well as a drive to uncover aspects beyond deliberate artistic intention, thereby embracing chance as a valid form of expression.

Personally, working on the final project influenced my approach to creativity, encouraging me to embrace randomness and be more receptive to experimentation. It can be terrifying to let go of control and make decisions intuitively or count on some random algorithm to make a choice; however, it can help to see a broader perspective. Artists can often find themselves stuck with specific thought patterns and methods, easily settling into familiar routines. This tendency is often an unconscious “automatic” decision, as it is just a safe and clear way of working, but including elements of randomness and chance in the creative process can help one to break a habit and discover new ways of expression.

Moreover, chance methods can be especially promising for those working in the art fields connected to generative and technology-based art since computers are able to complete the calculations that the human brain simply cannot perform. As described in previous chapters, software can generate heavily detailed and complicated forms with the use of random algorithms, thus helping artists to create designs that seemed impossible to produce or even imagine in the first place.

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