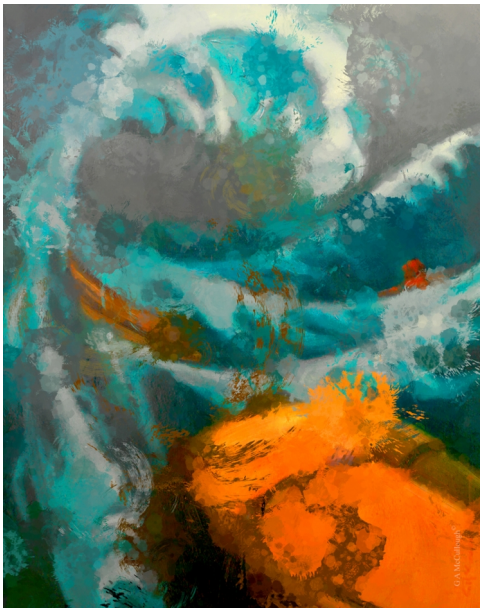

36 minutes from the Hokusai Oil Rig

Neonaissance:

Creativity as Conditioned Emergence

Or How to Surf the Rising AI Tsunami

Creativity has long been defined as the act of producing something new or novel. This traditional definition, however, increasingly fails to capture the nature of creative practice today. The modern creative landscape is defined not by scarcity of production, but by an overwhelming abundance of possibilities. Under these new conditions, creativity has shifted from generating unique forms to navigating their emergence.

This shift can be understood through the concept of "conditioned emergence.*" Emergence occurs when interactions within a system generate outcomes that are not fully predictable or specified in advance. These outcomes arise from the interplay of constraints, material behavior, and iterative responses. In practice, these outcomes are shaped neither entirely by authorship nor by randomness. In artistic practice, emergence often first appears as chaotic, as an unexpected deviation. Such as a mark that communicates unexpectedly, or a structure that exceeds intent, or possibly a direction that persists despite attempts to correct it. Initially, these deviations may be seen as errors, as faults. With sustained engagement, however, they come to be recognized as opportunities, as indications of a new path to follow, as potential possibilities. This marks a shift in the artist's approach. Rather than eliminating deviation, the artist begins to seek out spontaneity, learning to work with it rather than against it.

Across disciplines such as design, cognition, and complexity theory, this emerging structure of creativity is common. Herbert A. Simon framed design as the navigation of a space of possible states, rather than the execution of fixed solutions. Donald T. Campbell described knowledge as a process of variation and selective retention. Stuart Kauffman explored how complex systems continually generate adjacent possibilities through interaction and constraint. And though these thinkers use different terminology, they all highlight this shared insight; that systems generate far more possibilities than can be fully realized, and outcomes are shaped through selection. Emergence, then, is not an exceptional occurrence, but a structural feature of complex systems. Recognizing this, the question becomes, “How can outcomes be stabilized at all”? This is where "conditioning" enters.

Conditioned emergence refers to systems where outcomes cannot be fully specified in advance, but can be shaped by modulating constraints, attention, and iterative responses. In this framework, the agent—whether an artist, designer, or thinker—shapes the conditions under which certain forms are more likely to persist, rather than directly creating those forms.

In artistic practice, this shifts the application of creativity. The artwork now becomes understood as the progressive stabilization of

relationships that arise during the process, rather than the execution of a preformed idea.

Materials respond. Perception evaluates. Action adjusts. Through feedbacks, certain configurations persist while others fall away. What remains is not everything that happened, but what sustains its form. In this context, authorship is better understood as "selection within emergence," moving away from the traditional view of creation as the artifact of a singular genius.

To clarify this creative feedback process, we can describe it as an **emergence continuum** consisting of overlapping phases. These phases are not linear stages but recurrent modes of attention that operate at various scales—whether within a single gesture, a composition, or an entire body of work:

1. **Open**: Conditions are established to expand possibilities, either by reducing constraints or increasing variability.
2. **Emerge**: Forms arise through the interaction between materials, systems, and responses.
3. **Shape**: Selection takes place through reinforcement, refinement, and exclusion.
4. **Stabilize/Release**: The work reaches provisional coherence and enters circulation, where it may continue to transform through interpretation and use.

These phases describe a structure that already exists across many practices. In drawing, a single mark may reorganize an entire field. In writing, a phrase may redirect an argument. In sound, a tone may establish the conditions for coherence. In each case, something initially contingent becomes structurally necessary through continued interaction and selection.

This structure extends beyond artistic practices; it spans many disciplines. Consider cognition: thoughts arise spontaneously; most dissipate without consequence, while a few are selected for further development. Conscious experience itself can be understood as the stabilization of certain emergent patterns over others. Identity, too, can be seen as the persistence of selected patterns of thought, behavior, and attention over time. This creative structure extends through the Cognitive Sciences, Evolutionary Biology, Philosophy of Science and Complexity, Systems Thinking, Psychological and Existential Perspectives, Generative Systems and AI, among others.

This process becomes more apparent under contemporary generative conditions. Computational systems, for instance, can produce vast quantities of variation with minimal constraint. As a result, generation is no longer the primary limitation on creativity. Instead, the limiting factor becomes selection: the ability to nurture, recognize, sustain, and stabilize meaningful configurations within an expanded field of possibilities.

To reiterate, the role of the creative practitioner has shifted. Creativity is now less about the act of production and more about navigating conditioned emergence: enabling, recognizing, cultivating, and circulating new forms.

The creative process will become distributed across four phases: **Priming > Attending > Shaping > Release**. The logic of this process folds back upon itself: **Open** > **Become** > **Shape** > **Release**. In other words: **possibility**, **emergence**, **selection**, **dissemination**.

What distinguishes this conception of creativity is the amplification and visibility of emergent potential. As the cost of generating

variation has collapsed, the significance of ‘selection’ grows. Creativity becomes more about recognizing what, within an expanded field of possibility, is capable and desirable of becoming stable.

This is the condition of the ***Neonaissance,*** it is a structural expanded understanding of creativity, rather than a new stylistic movement or technological trend. Creativeness is no longer restricted to producing what didn’t exist before, and leans now to nurturing and cultivating what may be.

Creativity, in this sense, is now primarily located in conditioning emergence: shaping the environments in which forms arise and determining which of them shall persist. Mastery and craft remain important, but production is no longer the exclusive locus of creativity.

To describe creativity in this way clarifies its operation. Again, yes, the act of making still matters, but it is now embedded within a broader process of emergence and selection. The practitioner participates by shaping conditions, attending to what arises, stabilizing what proves coherent under sustained attention, and bringing it forth. Ignoring this feedback process diminishes the true loci of creativity and leaves one defensive and defenseless during this AI tsunami of change.

* *Robert Macintosh & Donald Maclean, 1999. "Conditioned emergence: a dissipative structures approach to transformation," Strategic Management Journal, Wiley Blackwell, vol. 20(4), pages 297-316, April.*