

Who Pays Stays

How to See the Difference Between Depth and Surface in the Age of AI

Workbook — See It: Depth vs Surface

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How to use this workbook

Each lesson follows the slides in the Genially course: the cover slide sets what you will learn, the teaching slide carries the idea, the activity slide is the work, and the quiz is a quick check. This workbook goes deeper than the slides and ends each lesson with questions that challenge you to apply the idea to your own practice.

The workbook is structured in two sections. Section 1 covers direction and depth: the distinction between centrifugal and centripetal work, and the framework that separates a style from the philosophy that produced it. Section 2 covers surface and the copy: what AI captures versus what it cannot hold, and the moment when the copy becomes good enough to make the original optional.

SECTION 1

Direction and Depth

This section establishes the two foundational distinctions of the course: the direction a piece of work moves (outward from a centre or inward from a surface), and the difference between depth — how far you went — and direction — which way you moved.

LESSON 1.1

The Recipe and the Ingredient: Centrifugal vs Centripetal Work

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Define centrifugal creativity and centripetal collapse in your own words.
- Judge a piece of work by its direction, not its polish.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

The first distinction this course introduces is between two directions: centrifugal and centripetal. The direction a piece of work moves determines whether it has depth — not its finish, not its technical quality, not its resemblance to other work that has been praised.

Centrifugal work begins inside. The maker holds a world: lived experience, a philosophy, a set of constraints, a history. The work moves outward from that centre into form. Because the centre is real, every surface choice carries weight. Wu-Tang did not start with a kung-fu aesthetic and decorate it with meaning. They started with Five Percent theology, Shaolin mythology, and Staten Island, and the sound, the names, and the imagery grew outward from that. The surface is the trace of the interior.

Centripetal work runs the other way. It starts with a surface that already exists — a recognisable style, a trend, a format that is currently performing well — and moves inward looking for a centre that was never there. The result can look polished and still be hollow, because nothing inside is holding it up.

Why this matters now

Polish is no longer proof of value. AI makes surfaces inexpensive to produce. A convincing tone, a recognisable format, a style that reads as professional — these are now accessible at near-zero cost. The thing AI cannot reproduce is direction, because direction requires a centre, and a centre requires a life. The question to ask of any piece of work — yours or anyone else's — is not whether it looks right, but which way it moved.

The exercise: pick one recent piece you made. Decide: did it move outward from a lived centre, or inward from a surface you recognised? Write two sentences naming the centre it came from — or admitting it had none. That honesty is the beginning of the work.

WORK IT THROUGH

Map one piece of your own work.

1. Pick one recent piece you made.
2. Decide: did it move outward from a lived centre, or inward from a surface you recognised?
3. Write two sentences naming the centre it came from, or admitting it had none.

Outcome: You can name the direction of your own work.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

- Take a piece of your work you are proud of. Can you name the internal centre it grew from in one sentence? If you cannot, what does that tell you?
- Find a trend in your field right now. What would it take to build outward from a real centre rather than copying its surface?
- Describe a time you made something centripetal: you started from a look, not a world. What was missing in the result?
- Where in your current practice are you rewarding polish over direction, in your own eyes or your clients' eyes?

LESSON 1.2

The Direction Is Everything: Separating Style From the Philosophy That Produced It

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Separate a style from the philosophy that produced it.
- Tell the difference between depth (how far) and direction (which way).

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

This lesson names the framework and separates it from an older one. Lev Manovich mapped depth: how far you go into the material when you remix it. This course maps direction: which way you moved once you got there. The two questions are perpendicular. You can go very deep into a style and still collapse inward, reproducing its surface with great fidelity. You can work simply and still move outward from a real centre.

Style as residue

A style is the visible residue of a philosophy. The soft light and quiet grief of a Studio Ghibli film are the trace of a worldview about imperfection, nature, and loss — a philosophy that precedes the aesthetic and gives it coherence. A filter copies the residue and throws away the philosophy underneath. That is why it feels thin even when it is technically convincing. The surface is right. The structure that produced the surface is absent.

This distinction matters practically. When you admire a style, you are seeing the output of decisions made from a specific interior. To use that style without understanding the interior is to reproduce the trace without the source. The result is centripetal: it looks like the thing, but it moved the wrong way.

Scarcity as engine

The lesson also points at scarcity. The TR-808, house music, and the Funky Drummer break were all born from limits, not abundance. Constraint forced invention because the nearest surface was not available — you had to build something from what you actually had. When everything is available, as AI promises, the danger is that you reach for the nearest surface rather than building from your own centre. Naming the direction lets you catch that in your own work before it ships.

The exercise: name a style or aesthetic you admire. List the philosophy or lived conditions underneath it. Describe how you would build outward from that centre rather than copying the look. The goal is to separate what you can see from what produced it.

WORK IT THROUGH

Trace a style back to its source.

4. Name a style or aesthetic you admire.
5. List the philosophy or lived conditions underneath it.
6. Describe how you would build outward from that centre rather than copying the look.

Outcome: You can separate a surface from the depth that produced it.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

- Pick a style you admire. Write the philosophy or lived conditions underneath it in two or three sentences.
- Manovich asks how deep you went. This course asks which way you moved. Apply both questions to one recent project. What does each reveal?
- Name a constraint you currently treat as a problem. How could it become the engine of a new form?
- Where are you copying residue — the look — without the worldview that produced it?

SECTION 2

Surface and the Copy

This section examines what AI does well (capture) and what it cannot do (hold structure), and traces the moment when the copy becomes good enough to make the original optional — and what that means for your practice.

LESSON 2.1

The Xerox Problem: What AI Captures and What It Cannot Hold

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Explain why realism is not the same as depth.
- Audit an AI output for what it captures versus what it holds.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

This lesson makes a precise claim about what AI does and does not do well. AI is excellent at capture and limited at structure. Understanding the difference between those two things is the practical skill this course is building toward.

A photocopy reproduces a page well enough to pass in most contexts. But it does not hold the living relations of the original. It captures the surface and loses the structure underneath. AI does the same at scale. It can produce something that reads as real because the human brain is a coherence detector, not a fraud detector. We are built to accept things that hang together, not to interrogate whether they hold under pressure. This means realism is not the same as depth.

Prompting culture as evidence

The evidence for this claim is in how people use these tools. Prompting culture exists because depth is not native to the system. People coax, refine, and re-prompt to pull structure out of something that defaults to surface. Each iteration of prompting is the human adding the direction the tool cannot provide. The effort is the creator supplying the interior that the tool cannot generate on its own.

The practical move: when you evaluate AI output, separate the two questions. Ask what it captured — the tone, the format, the style. Ask what it failed to hold — the relation, the intention, the internal logic. The first is easy to obtain. The second is where your value lives.

Where your value lives

If the AI output captures the surface competently but cannot hold the structure, then the structure is what you bring. The structure is the direction, the intention, the relation between parts that makes the work mean something rather than merely resemble something. That is not a small contribution. It is the entire contribution that makes the output worth anything.

WORK IT THROUGH

Audit one AI output you made.

7. Pick one thing you generated with AI.
8. List what it captured: tone, style, format.
9. List what it failed to hold: relation, intention, structure.

Outcome: You can tell surface capture from structural fidelity.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

- Take an AI output you made. List separately what it captured and what it failed to hold. Which list is longer?
- Where have you accepted coherence as a substitute for depth, in your own work or someone else's?
- If realism is not depth, what is your evidence that a piece has real structure and not just a convincing surface?
- How much of your prompting is you supplying the structure the system cannot? What does that tell you about where the value comes from?

LESSON 2.2

The End of the Original: When the Copy Becomes Good Enough

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- Explain why a good-enough copy makes the original optional.
- Spot where a copy has quietly replaced an original relation in your work.

THE IDEA, IN DEPTH

The final lesson makes an uncomfortable argument: the original is not destroyed by the good-enough copy. It becomes optional. Once a copy is good enough to serve the purpose it is being used for, the original stops being necessary for that purpose. This is the real shift, and it is more useful to face it clearly than to argue against it.

The argument the course rejects is the one that tries to keep the original necessary by proving the copy is inferior. That argument will lose, because the copies are getting better. The more productive move is to shift the question away from real versus reproduced and toward centrifugal versus centripetal.

Basquiat and Warhol

The lesson uses Basquiat and Warhol as anchors for the two directions. Basquiat worked outward from an internal world of race, history, and lived struggle. His surfaces are the trace of an interior. Warhol designed for reproduction — surfaces built to be copied endlessly, which is itself a centripetal practice made into a philosophy. Neither direction is wrong. But they are opposite, and the difference is visible. The direction of Basquiat's work cannot be reproduced by a tool that does not hold his interior. The surface of Warhol's work was designed to survive reproduction, which is why it still holds.

The practical audit: find the places in your own practice where a good-enough copy has quietly replaced an original relation. Some of those replacements are fine — not everything needs to carry full original weight. The ones that carry meaning do. Identifying which is which is the work this course has been building toward.

What makes yours worth keeping

Repeated images come to feel true even when they are fabricated. AI-authored work tends to read as less authentic when it reaches for emotion, because emotion requires a centre to reach from. The question for your own practice is not whether your work can be reproduced, but whether the original relation — the direction it moved, the centre it came from — is still present. If it is, the copy cannot replace it. If it is not, the copy already has.

WORK IT THROUGH

Find your own good-enough copy.

10. Identify one place where a good-enough copy replaced an original relation in your work.
11. Describe what the internal centre used to be.
12. Write what restoring that centre would look like.

Outcome: You can spot where depth has quietly gone optional.

QUESTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOU

- Name one place in your work where a good-enough copy has replaced an original relation. Does it still need the original?
- Basquiat or Warhol: which direction does your current work lean, and is that a choice or a drift?
- If the original is optional, what makes yours worth keeping? Answer in one sentence a client would accept.
- Where does repetition make something feel true in your field, regardless of whether it is?

Build your economy. Who pays stays.

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