Art Meets Machine: Innovation and Creativity from the 20th Century to AI

Course Code: MBA Elective, 1.5 credits

Schedule: 6-week module, 3-hour in-person seminar each week

Dates: Tuesdays; Sept 16, 23, 30; Oct 7, 14, 21

Time and Location: 6pm ET; [location on Stern campus to be confirmed]

Instructor: Professor Tad Smith, Adjunct Professor, NYU Stern School of Business

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Course Description

This second-year MBA elective explores how technological change has reshaped human creativity since 1900. From the Machine Age to the rise of AI, students will examine how breakthroughs in industry, media, digital tools, blockchain, and algorithms have influenced the creative economy. Through debates, student presentations, guest speakers, and hands-on use of generative tools, the course equips students to lead in fields where innovation and culture collide.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Analyze pivotal 20th–21st century innovations that disrupted the creative industries.

- Evaluate how technology transforms business models in art, media, and culture.

- Use generative AI tools to augment research, communication, and creative exploration.

- Engage in structured debate on ethical, economic, and philosophical implications of AI in creativity.

- Formulate leadership strategies for navigating technological change in creative sectors.

Course Format and Expectations

Each weekly 3-hour session includes:

1. Student Presentations (3–5 min): Several students (selected at random) will present short examples related to the week's theme. All students must prepare each week, as any may be called on. Presentations must integrate AI tools (e.g., image generation, ChatGPT research, video synthesis).

2. Structured Group Debate: Students will be divided into teams to argue both sides of a provocative question based on the week's material. Teams are expected to use AI to support their preparation but must deliver their arguments in their own words.

3. Guest Speaker Session: Each week concludes with a discussion featuring a guest speaker from the art-tech, media, or AI-creative industries. Students are expected to engage actively, asking informed questions and making connections to course material.

AI Integration: Students must use AI tools weekly. This includes generating visuals, simulating historical dialogues, or using analytics to evaluate market trends. All uses of AI must be transparently cited (e.g., a note on presentation slides).

Attendance: In-person attendance is mandatory. Participation and engagement during sessions will significantly affect grades. More than one unexcused absence may result in a grade penalty.

Assessment and Grading

- Class Presentations – 25%: Quality, originality, and use of AI tools in weekly examples.

- Debate Performance – 25%: Argument strength, evidence, teamwork, and creativity.

- Speaker Engagement – 25%: Thoughtful contributions and preparedness during guest sessions.
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- Final Essay - 25%: Overall quality of answering the question.

Weekly Schedule and Themes

Sept 16th at 6pm ET – The Machine Age and the Avant-Garde (1900–1945)

Overview: Explore the impact of industrialization and mechanization on art and design. Topics include Futurism, Bauhaus, Dada, early photography and film. Understand how artists responded to war, machinery, and social upheaval with radical new forms.

- Student Presentations: Examples include Marcel Duchamp's readymades, László Moholy-Nagy's experiments in kinetic light, and how mechanical reproduction challenged traditional aesthetics. Use AI to recreate early photomontages or simulate a Futurist manifesto.

- Debate Prompt: "Did the machine age liberate or dehumanize art?"

- Suggested Readings/Media: Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction; selections from Bauhaus manifestos; short film: Man with a Movie Camera (Vertov)

- Guest Speaker: Brooke Lampley, Gagosian Gallery; former EVP and Global Chair of Sotheby's Fine Art

Sept 23rd at 6pm ET (Note - Rosh Hashanah) – Postwar Media and Consumer Culture (1945–1975)

Overview: Examine the rise of television, advertising, and mass media in the postwar era. Artists like Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik, and conceptualists blurred the lines between commerce and creativity.

- Student Presentations: Topics may include Warhol's factory as a media enterprise, McLuhan's media theories, or early video art. AI can help recreate 1960s-style ads or simulate a debate between critics of pop art.

- Debate Prompt: "Is commercialism antithetical to creativity or a new creative canvas?"

- Suggested Readings/Media: Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (excerpts); John Berger, Ways of Seeing; video clips by Nam June Paik and Warhol

- Guest Speaker: Amy Cappellazzo, Founder, Art Intelligence Global; former global chair, Sotheby's Fine Art Division; former founder, Art Agency Partners LLC

Sept 30th at 6pm ET – The Digital Frontier (1975–2000)

Overview: Personal computers, graphic software, MIDI, and the early internet transformed the tools and distribution of creative work. Understand how digital technology enabled new artistic practices.

- Student Presentations: Explore the rise of digital design, desktop publishing, CGI in early cinema, or text-based hypermedia. AI suggestions: simulate an early HTML art page or create an infographic about MIDI's influence on music production.

- Debate Prompt: "Did digital tools expand or dilute human creativity?"

- Suggested Readings/Media: Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media; Douglas Davis, "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction"; short clips from Tron or early CGI experiments

- Guest Speaker: Peter Olson, Former Chair and CEO of Random House; former Harvard Business School; McKinsey

October 7th at 6pm ET – Blockchain and the Decentralization of Creativity

Overview: Focus on blockchain's role in transforming art markets, digital ownership, and creator revenue streams. Examine NFTs, DAOs, and Ordinals.

- Student Presentations: Analyze the CryptoKitties phenomenon, Art Blocks generative NFTs, Bitcoin Ordinals, or DAOs for creative collaboration. Use AI to visualize NFT trends or compare royalty structures.

- Debate Prompt: "Are NFTs a true revolution or just a speculative bubble?"

- Suggested Readings/Media: Amy Whitaker, Art and Blockchain (excerpts); NFT market reports (e.g., NonFungible.com); Beeple's Christie's auction video

- Guest Speaker: Danny Yang, renowned digital artist, Ordinals enthusiast and entrepreneur and creator of OnChainMonkeys

October 14th at 6pm ET – Generative Art and Algorithmic Aesthetics

Overview: Survey the history and rise of generative art, from early plotter drawings to Midjourney and GANs. Explore how algorithmic processes redefine authorship and creativity.

- Student Presentations: Profile artists like Vera Molnár, Harold Cohen, or Tyler Hobbs. Non-coders can use AI tools like ChatGPT to generate poetry or Midjourney to create artworks based on rules or constraints.

- Debate Prompt: "Can machines be truly creative?"

- Suggested Readings/Media: Casey Reas and Chandler McWilliams, Form + Code; videos of Art Blocks projects; Rafik Anadol's installations

- Guest Speaker: Emily Xie and also Claire Silver — two renowned generative artists along with Sasha Stiles, who is a renowned digital artist as well as a poet

October 21st at 6pm ET – AI, Ethics, and the Future of Creative Work

Overview: Examine ethical, economic, and strategic questions related to automation, IP, authorship, and labor in the age of creative AI.

- Student Presentations: Topics might include AI voice cloning, legal disputes over AI-generated art, or museum curation by AI. Consider using AI to simulate a dialogue between an artist and a tech CEO.

- Debate Prompt: "Will AI enrich or replace the human creative economy?"

- Suggested Readings/Media: Tim O'Reilly, "Creativity and AI"; U.S. Copyright Office guidance on AI-generated content; articles from Wired or The Atlantic on generative AI

- Guest Speaker: Raoul Pal and David Mattin; prominent AI, Crypto, macro, futurists and analysts

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Slide Template Guidelines for Presentations

Each slide deck should include:

- Title slide with student name and topic

- 1–2 slides explaining the historical/artistic/technological context

- 1 slide showing how AI was used (e.g., image, simulated voice, ChatGPT summary)

- 1 slide with key takeaway or argument

   Use visuals when possible. Keep text minimal and focused.

AI Use Rubric (5-point scale per category)

1. Creativity – Was the AI used in a novel, insightful, or unexpected way?

2. Relevance – Did AI-generated content clearly support the student's core argument?

3. Transparency – Was the use of AI clearly disclosed and explained?

4. Technical Execution – Was the AI output clear, understandable, and well-presented?

Sample Questions for Guest Speakers

- How has your creative process changed with new technologies?

- Do you think AI threatens or enhances the value of human creativity?

- What's the biggest myth you hear about art and technology?

- How do you evaluate authenticity in the digital age?

- What advice would you give to MBAs entering the art-tech ecosystem?

Instructor Bio

Professor Tad Smith is a business leader and academic operating at the intersection of art, strategy, and technology. He has served as CEO of two NYSE-listed companies — Sotheby's and The Madison Square Garden Company — and currently serves as a general partner at 50T Funds, the largest growth equity firm pioneering the digital asset economy. A pioneer in blockchain and AI investment within the creative industries, Professor Smith brings deep insights from decades of experience to this dynamic MBA elective. He has taught at NYU Stern since 1999.