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ETH-TECH

ETH-TECH ART CONTEST · EDITION II

Deliberation Notes

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Final jury session: 30 September 2026, 17:00–19:00 CEST, online

Awards confirmed: October 2

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Anchoring Ethical Technology (AI and Data) Usage in the Education Practice

Co-funded by the European Union

ETHTECH

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1. Nature and approach of the contest

The 2026 ETH-TECH International Art Contest, "Inhabiting Technological Present and Futures: What's my postdigital positionality?", invited students internationally to explore their relationships with technologies through creative expression. A postdigital positionality is a situated, evolving ontological and epistemological orientation to digital technologies, shaped by lived experiences, values, needs, goals and relationships (Hayes, 2021). It is not a fixed position for or against technology: it concerns how digital and analogue realities are already entangled and how people critically inhabit those conditions. It clearly refers to the personal makers like gender, race (Hayes, 2023). Sergio Carvajal-Leoni adopts the metaphor of a *compass* that allows any person to accommodate experiences, needs, values, goals and relationships through, with and without technology. In this sense, this Art Contest strongly embraces the idea of postdigital education and research, as something "firmly (rejecting) differences between the digital and the analogue and sought a more nuanced understanding of their relationships" (Jandrić & Knox, 2022, p.784) . It is to be noticed that the world heard about the idea of postdigitalism firstly from the voice of music and visual arts. Petar Jandrić has led the movement expanding the discussion to the field of educational practice and research. As expressed in the two examples offered in the Art Contest Call, some of us chose to name positionalities and offer autoethnographic processes of action and reflection to articulate our stance (Raffaghelli, 2025). Others have undertaken extensive processes developing manifestos and creating artifacts that help them reflect, refine, communicate and put their positionality into practice (Carvajal-Leoni, 2026). Drawing on transformative learning theory, Carvajal-Leoni highlights the distinctive contribution of visual art to critical inquiry. By engaging with dimensions of experience that words alone may not fully capture, visual art offers opportunities for critical reflection and potentially transformative shifts in perspective (Kokkos, 2010; Hoggan et al., 2009).

The contest was presented through a collaboration among the College of Fine Arts and Communication at Texas State University, the University of Padova, the EU co-funded ETH-TECH project, and Education Is Boring.

2. Participation: the Reflection Package

Participants submitted a Reflection Package consisting of (1) an original piece of visual art, (2) a thoughtful title, and (3) a written reflection articulating their postdigital positionality and explaining the creative process. The image, title, and reflection were to be considered both individually and as an interconnected whole. The aim was to invite critical reflection and potentially perspective transformation through artistic expression.

3. Assessment and deliberation methodology

Each submission was assigned to two reviewers for independent assessment, with a deliberately limited workload. Reviewers considered originality, clarity and thoughtfulness, paying attention to the relationship between creative process, final work and the positionality expressed. Their first task was to articulate qualitative impressions, reservations and arguments, rather than to begin with numerical ratings. They also recorded shortlist recommendations.

For the synthesis, the organising team subsequently mapped the qualitative assessments onto a four-colour scale (blue = 4, green = 3, yellow = 2, red = 1), averaged the two assigned reviewers' ratings, and incorporated shortlist recommendations (yes = 1, maybe = 0.5, no = 0). These figures were an aid to discussion, not an automatic determination of artistic merit. Deliberation recognised that different disciplinary and aesthetic perspectives could produce productive disagreement.

The jury convened on 30 September 2026, from 17 to 19hs (CEST Time). Two members contributed with their evaluations at distance, given the timezone. Assigned reviewers presented their perspectives and the wider jury discussed shortlisted works, with decisions kept provisional until comparative deliberation was complete. A subsequent round of asynchronous voting helped resolve close rankings. The final outcome took account not simply of the frequency of votes for a position but of the overall distribution of preferences. The awarded list was communicated to the jury in October 2026.

4. Final awarded works

Recognition	Artwork	Artist / affiliation
First Prize	Archive404 — Welcome to the Future	Gabriela Moreno Texas State University
Second Prize	The creaitive — Embodiment and Failure	Giorgia Dal Corso University of Padova
Third Prize	Drainpipes — Means of Production	Claudia Fantucchio University of Padova
Honourable Mention M1	The Entangled Ones — An Entangled Perspective	Marie Meyer & Norina Leonie Pommerening Zurich University
Honourable Mention M2	Dantes19 — A More Perfect Nature	Francesca Balestro University of Padova
Honourable Mention M3	Jansen — Six Windows and a Shadow: Prompting the Hidden Adult	Chang Hasheminezhad-Li University of Padova
Honourable Mention M4	Fissura — A Ripple in Your Gaze	Camilla Saccon University of Padova
Honourable Mention M5	Roberta — Shaping The Unseen	Roberta Sarcuni University of Padova

The fifth honourable mention (Roberta) was added as an additional recognition in the final communication. The eight recognised works should not be confused with the earlier six-work shortlist.

5. Judges' observations on awarded works

We now present the jury's comments on each artwork. The jury members' names have been anonymised.

First Prize: Archive404 — Welcome to the Future

Artist: Gabriela Moreno (Texas State University).

J1 called the concept brilliant, highly original, and unsettling. He praised the multi-step creative process – from setting up a trail camera in nature to capture surveillance footage, to directly manipulating the image's hexadecimal code to distort the image and expose the vulnerability of digital systems to corruption. J1 noted that the sense of apprehension or aversion triggered by the presence of AI is an integral part of the artwork's reflection, framing the piece as a compelling commentary on surveillance, nature, and postdigital positionality.

J2 agreed that editing hexadecimal code in trail camera footage serves as a strong symbol for glitches and system disruptions. However, she felt a disconnect between the ambitious theoretical narrative and the final visual image, noting a Fahrenheit 451 atmosphere of emptiness rather than true postdigital entanglement. J3 noted a slight misalignment between evaluation criteria when the overall quality of a work is exceptionally high, proposing that the jury prioritize the intrinsic artistic value of the piece when assessing top contenders. She appreciated that the artwork avoids heavy-handed literalism, noting her general dislike for generated images where text, concept, and visual representation excessively overlap – a flaw this piece successfully avoids. She cautioned against rejecting fully AI-generated works outright, emphasizing that artists can use AI meaningfully to reflect on the artistic process and the societal impact of technology.

J4 reflected on the broader implications of fully AI-generated aesthetics (such as those touching glitch and digital art), pointing out how AI systems can resist user prompting and introduce bias. She questioned whether the artist or the AI holds true authorship in such processes, proposing that the jury establish a baseline aesthetic guideline for evaluating AI-generated pieces.

During the asynchronous session and after the debate in the synchronous session, the work was voted for the first place by the majority of the jury.

Second Prize: The creaitive — Embodiment and Failure

Artist: Giorgia Dal Corso (University of Padova).

J5 described the piece as haunting, distinctive, and imaginative in its use of light and color shifts – from the vibrant, untouched childhood self to the grey, slumped adult self struggling with AI ("the Reverend"). She highlighted symbolic details, including the toy, the matching tattoo, picture frames, and the deliberate choice not to let the two figures' gazes cross due to embarrassment. J1 observed that the drawing itself is visually conventional and the explanatory text is extremely clear (perhaps overly detailed), but acknowledged that the artwork is deeply thoughtful and demonstrates evident authorial dedication. J3 noted that the piece effectively captures the artist's postdigital positionality. She observed that while the aesthetic might appear somewhat naive or childish at first glance, there is a clear, deliberate intentionality behind the execution. She appreciated how the visual expression consciously diverges from standard artistic conventions, creating a thoughtful tension between concept and form.

During the asynchronous session and after the debate in the synchronous session, the work was voted for the second place by the majority of the jury.

Third Prize: Drainpipes — Means of Production

Artist: Claudia Fantucchio (University of Padova).

J6 described the piece as a clever "bait and switch" where the artist paid another artist €50 and submitted the redacted transaction receipt as the final artwork. While he admitted to "hating" the visual image itself and feeling it lacked artistic effort, he praised the written rationale as the single best, most thoughtful, and most creative text in the entire contest. He highlighted how it powerfully captures the precarious postdigital condition and the unresolved tension between the democratization of AI art and fair wages for human artists.

J2 praised the project as a wonderfully original, witty, and deeply provocative commentary on the harsh economic realities of artistic labor. She loved how the mundane financial receipt exposes society's demand for artistic grandeur while barely paying artists enough to survive. However, she voted against shortlisting because she felt the "author's hand" and artistic hermeneutics were not sufficiently visible or integrated into the image itself.

J3 read several paragraphs of the artist's text aloud to the jury, expressing great appreciation for the author's dark sense of humor, self-irony, and critical commentary on the internet, AI, and the means of artistic production. She argued that art does not always have to be traditional or visually "beautiful" and suggested that this type of provocative conceptual thinking should be recognized. Recommendation: Candidate for Honorable / Special Mention.

During the session the judges engaged in a broader debate on contemporary conceptual art, questioning whether an artwork must be aesthetically pleasing or if a financial receipt can stand as a valid art piece. Because art is not only an aesthetical experience but sometimes is really an experience that shake us.

After the session and during the asynchronous votation, the panel agreed that while the image itself holds back its chances for a top prize, its conceptual text is exceptionally strong, placing it in the third position.

Honourable Mention M1: The Entangled Ones — An Entangled Perspective

Artist: Marie Meyer & Norina Leonie Pommerening (Zurich University).

J4 found the strategy of generating the poem with AI while creating the image through human intervention very clever, noting that the creators recognized AI's superior ability to handle verbal nuance over visual rendering. While she wished the submission had included actual prompt transcripts or conversation logs, she found the poem's expression of an "entangled" postdigital relationship compelling. J3 highlighted how the digital dimension is portrayed through the two figures observing the world through their devices. J3 praised the thoughtful fusion of poetry and visual arts as a strong expression of postdigital language, seamlessly integrating material, organic, and digital elements. While noting that the authors could have provided more details regarding their creative process, she commended the multi-modal integration and overall conceptual clarity.

During the asynchronous session and after the debate in the synchronous session, the work was voted for the first mention by the majority of the jury.

Honourable Mention M2: Dantes19 — A More Perfect Nature

Artist: Francesca Balestro (University of Padova).

J7 highlighted contrast as the core element of the artwork, where infinite digital reproduction draws directly from poverty and environmental disaster. While noting that the visual style is not strictly original and evokes familiar apocalyptic series/narratives, she praised the focus on the material infrastructure of technology and the author's conceptual realization that "technological progress cannot be separated from responsibility for its physical consequences". She also commended the creative process for its call not to "destroy the original" in order to produce a representation, sharply contrasting water scarcity and environmental degradation against the abundance of screens. J8 considered the piece quite original (more so than many others) and praised the visual juxtaposition. He rated the clarity of narrative and depth of thought as excellent. J3 noted that while it might not be immediately obvious at first glance, there is a meaningful and relevant connection between the text and the image. However, regarding the execution with AI, she pointed out that there is too much repetition and a lack of variation, expressing concern that the generated artwork feels "too perfect" or overly "glossy". J6 emphasized the conceptual irony of the piece, noting the paradox of using AI tools to convey a critique of environmental destruction and the ecological footprint of technology. J1 added observations on the conceptual framing, acknowledging the work's ambition in addressing systemic tech corruption and environmental impact, while noting the ongoing challenge in balancing narrative explanation with visual abstraction.

During the asynchronous session and after the debate in the synchronous session, the work was voted for the second mention by the majority of the jury.

Honourable Mention M3: Jansen — Six Windows and a Shadow: Prompting the Hidden Adult

Artist: Chang Hasheminezhad-Li (University of Padova).

J1 praised the substantially original and imaginative iterative prompting in Midjourney to generate six visually cohesive vignettes. He emphasized that although the individual panels were AI-generated, the overall composition, prompting, selection, and interpretation made it a human-created work. As a parent, he wrestled with the central

analogy of the "hidden adult" in children's literature. He felt that framing adult mediation as inherently problematic introduced unresolved contradictions (e.g., questioning whether the alternative is children writing for children or AI writing for children), which clouded the clarity of its postdigital positionality. J4 highlighted the unique premise within children's literature: replacing the human illustrator with generative AI to interpret the scene as described by the author, while simultaneously critiquing AI's capacity to interpret complex theory. Drawing on her background in children's literature publishing, J4 admitted that on first review she was unimpressed and put the piece aside. However, because the piece stayed in her mind, she revisited it several times, researched the referenced theorists, and unpacked its layers – ultimately falling in love with the juxtaposition between adult agency and the "hidden adult" filter in children's books. J3 acknowledged that visually the artwork is not immediately striking or accessible on its own, noting that its value only becomes fully clear once the context and theoretical rationale are explained. So, given the strong theoretical layers uncovered through J4 and J1's debrief, J3 concluded that while it may not contend for the top prize, its thoughtful conceptual framework makes it a prime candidate for recognition.

During the asynchronous session and after the debate in the synchronous session, the work was voted for the third mention by the majority of the jury.

Honourable Mention M4: Fissura — A Ripple in Your Gaze

Artist: Camilla Saccon (University of Padova).

J9 found the description particularly strong. She noted that the artist hand-painted the jacket featured in the video and then built the entire AI-based concept of the work around it. While she considered the idea very compelling, she was less convinced by the final output. Recommendation: no award, or possibly a mention.

J5 highlighted that the artwork presents a rich, multi-layered story rather than a single monologue, bringing multiple characters and perspectives into dialogue through both physical and digital mediums. J5 loved that the concept originated away from screens by hand-painting onto a second-hand jacket – preserving the human history, bodily traces, and memories of those who wore it previously rather than erasing them. And she praised the artist's approach to looking into a future that isn't blindly bowing or "blinking" at AI. J9 pointed out that instead of surrendering to automated aesthetics, the artist finds a way to bring rich material elements and human imperfection into what might otherwise appear as a cold, high-tech landscape. Noted that generative AI (Gemini) was used deliberately – not to replace human creativity, but to introduce subtle motion and life into

an imperfect, physical, handmade garment. J5 pointed out the expressive imagery of three figures meeting by the sea whose faces become eyes, capturing the emotional encounter of looking at one another, allowing oneself to be truly seen, and accepting vulnerability in postdigital spaces ("not being afraid of getting wet").

During the synchronous session, there was already a consensus that the work deserved consideration for the third honourable mention. The subsequent asynchronous voting confirmed this position.

Honourable Mention M5: Roberta — Shaping the Unseen

Artist: Roberta Sarcuni (University of Padova).

J9 praised the imaginative use of an old television frame, the juxtaposition of handcrafted art and synthetic interfaces, and the parody of news broadcasts to question the replacement of human creativity by generative AI. However, she found the work overly didactic and its opposition between artisanal and AI-generated production too binary. She also noted inconsistencies between the declared role of AI as technical support and the use of synthetic avatars and voices, alongside insufficient documentation of prompts. J10 appreciated the video's creative power and its ability to capture the viewer's attention through contrasting media and provocative imagery. However, he observed that the strong ethical message relied on somewhat absolute distinctions, limiting its engagement with complexity. He also identified tensions between the artistic process, the intended message, and the accompanying reflection.

During the synchronous session, it was mentioned the need to closely examine the work as a further mention. The subsequent asynchronous voting consolidated this position.

6. Closing record

The deliberation was not a mechanical aggregation of scores. The process allowed jurors to reconsider the meaning of originality, clarity, thoughtfulness and artistic merit across distinct forms of creative practice, including conceptual art, material intervention and AI-mediated image-making. The final awards reflect this collective consideration, while the individual comments above preserve significant differences of interpretation.

Source note: Prepared from the contest approach supplied by the organisers, ETH-TECH Jury Speaking Notes (slides 1–9), Detailed Judges' Assessments, and the organisers' final

awards votation using a form, and email communications between September 30 and October 5th.

Judges' comments are presented as editorially supplied summaries, not verbatim transcript excerpts.