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Art as *Energeia* From Aristotle to today

Abstract

The paper examines how the philosophical concept of energeia shapes Aristotle's theory of art and what it can contribute to understanding emerging art species, especially AI-generated art. First, by tracing energeia across Aristotle's major texts, this discussion clarifies that the philosophical mode of energeia unites what a thing is and how it is. Extending this to aesthetics, energeia provides a conceptual basis for the reality of artistic imitation. Based on the Poetics, read in conjunction with other Aristotelian texts, this discussion concludes that, for Aristotle, art can be understood as energeia: it comes to presence as its potential is being actualized in the subject's aesthetic experience. Attention turns to today, energeia is becoming an important interdisciplinary concept. From an energeia perspective, the value and perhaps even the nature of AI-generated art can be approached by considering its potential and its mode of actualization.

Keywords

Energeia, Aristotle's view of art, AI art

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1. Introduction*

Energeia is a core concept across Aristotle's major writings (the *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *De anima*, and the *Nicomachean ethics*, etc.)¹ and is now becoming an important conceptual resource for rethinking the essence of art². However, in scholarship on Aristotelian art theory or aesthetics, *energeia* is only marginally discussed. In aesthetics-oriented discussions, *energeia* is frequently encountered in Book III of the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle devotes several chapters to examining its rhetorically vivid effect in language. Perhaps because *energeia* is similar in literal and phonetic form to the more common rhetorical term *enargeia* (spelled with an "a"), and also in meaning, *energeia* is easily confused with *enargeia*, which is usually translated as "vividness"³. Even though some scholars have recognized that *energeia* differs from *enargeia* (Krieger 1992: 76; Hagstrum 1958: 12; Westin 2017), it is unclear what role *energeia* plays as an aesthetic concept and how it shapes Aristotle's theory of art.

This paper aims to reinterpret Aristotle's view of art through the concept of *energeia*, extending the discussion to the present to explore how an *energeia* perspective can help us understand an emerging art form –

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¹ Regarding the foundational status of the term *energeia* in Aristotle's philosophy, see Chen 1956: 56-65.

² Scholars increasingly treat *energeia* as a key resource for rethinking art within phenomenological aesthetics, especially in the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Aristotelian philosophy is one of the most important resources of Martin Heidegger's thought. For example, Walter Brogan, drawing on Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's practical philosophy, holds that virtuous disposition (*hexis*) mediates between potentiality (*dunamis*) and its actualization (*energeia*). This twofold movement – recovering oneself from experience and then returning to it authentically – captures Heidegger's central insight from Aristotle's practical philosophy (Brogan 2024). Gadamer, in his later texts, likewise rethinks the essence of the image in light of insights derived from *energeia*. Regarding the reactivation of *energeia* in modern aesthetics, I return to this issue in the final section of this paper.

³ Richard A. Lanham, for instance, treats *energeia* as an umbrella term, which early on overlapped with *enargeia* (Lanham 1991: 65). As Monica Westin notes, "Most scholars have ultimately dismissed the contrast between these two terms as a distinction without a significant difference" (Westin 2017: 253). In her subsequent discussion, Westin sets aside *enargeia* and focuses directly on *energeia*. Her study is undoubtedly valuable, yet it can be taken further – the philosophical mode of *energeia* highlights its difference from *enargeia* in the aesthetic sense.

AI-generated art. It focuses on the following questions: What is the distinctive philosophical mode of *energeia*? What subtle yet crucial role does the concept of *energeia* play in Aristotle's aesthetics? How can Aristotle's view of art be understood through the concept of *energeia*? What makes *energeia* resonate with art today? And what inspiration can an *energeia* perspective offer for understanding AI-generated art?

Before proceeding, it is necessary to point out why understanding Aristotle's view of art through the concept of *energeia* is both feasible and reasonable. One reason is that *energeia*, as a central concept in Aristotle's corpus, maintains a consistent core meaning across multiple texts (Westin 2017), allowing it to be extended to aesthetics and the art field. Another, and more important, reason is that, at the beginning of the *Poetics*, Aristotle's key work on art, he makes clear that the key question he is concerned with is the *dunamis* (potential, capacity) of poetry and its actualization (*Poetics* 1447a), which echoes his thoughts about *energeia* throughout his whole theory.

Regarding methodology and process, this paper is based on conceptual analysis and close reading of Aristotle's texts and is structured as follows. In section 2, *energeia* is situated in a broad philosophical context and examined in relation to its paired concept: *dunamis*. In doing so, its general but distinctive mode is outlined. Section 3 extends the discussion to rhetoric and aesthetics by examining its usage in the *Rhetoric*. The aesthetic role of *energeia* and its distinction from *enargeia* can become clearer. Section 4 turns to the *Poetics*, in combination with other texts, to discuss why and how art can be understood as *energeia*. Section 5 examines today's reactivation of *energeia* in modern and contemporary aesthetics and, through questions and examples of AI artworks and Wojnowski's research experiment, offers possible inspiration for approaching AI art from an *energeia* perspective.

2. The philosophical mode of *energeia* across Aristotle's major texts

Without a close examination of *energeia* and its philosophical mode, it is difficult to see what Aristotle is doing when he introduces the term, and why it matters for aesthetics and art. Before turning to *energeia* directly, however, it helps to sketch the broader metaphysical framework in which it operates.

At the core of Aristotle's metaphysics lies the unification of 'what a thing is' and 'how it is'. Unlike Plato, who situates Ideas (Forms) outside the realm

of the sensible world, Aristotle insists that form is not separated from things but immanent within them, that is, form (*eidōs*) inheres within matter (*hylē*), and together they constitute an individual substance (*ousia*). Even so, form and matter alone do not fully explain ‘what’ and ‘how’ of things. For Aristotle, becoming is possible only insofar as it is already present as potential (*dunamis*) in an initial state and is then realized, or actualized, in a subsequent state. On this basis, and in line with current research, the philosophical concept of *energeia* is often elucidated through its relation to its paired concept, *dunamis* (Polansk 1983; Ackrill 2012; Blair 1976; Carli, Carli 2017; Alexander 1993).

In the *Metaphysics* IX.6, to clarify and define *energeia*, Aristotle first distinguishes it from *dunamis*:

Let us make distinctions about being-at-work [*energeia*], to mark out both what it is and what sort of thing it is. For that which is potential will also be clear at the same time to those who make these distinctions, since we speak of the potential not only as that which is of such a nature as to move some other thing or be moved by something else, either simply or in a certain respect, but also in another way, and it is because we are inquiring after that other meaning that we went through this one. Now being-at-work [*energeia*] is something’s being-present not in the way that we speak of as in potency. (*Metaphysics* 1048a30, transl. Sachs)

In what follows, Aristotle elaborates on the distinction between these two concepts through a series of activities, such as building, sleeping, and seeing. According to Aristotle, *dunamis* as potentiality refers to capacities or possibilities that have not yet been actualized, whereas *energeia* designates the active process through which potentiality is actualized and a thing becomes present in this activity. As he explains:

By means of analogy, that which is as the one building is to the one who can build, and the awake to the asleep, and the one seeing to the one whose eyes are shut but who has sight, and what has been formed out of material to the material, and what is perfected to what is incomplete. And let being-at-work [*energeia*] be determined by one part of each distinction, and what is potential by the other. (*Metaphysics* 1048b, transl. Sachs)

In these two passages, *energeia* and *dunamis* broadly correspond, respectively, to the dynamic dimension of a thing’s coming to presence and to the latent (or dispositional) capacity to do so. For example, in the realm of perception, the sense-faculty itself (such as sight) exists as *dunamis* rather than as *energeia*. *Energeia* is the act of perceiving (seeing), that is,

the activity through which a faculty (sight) is brought into action and thus actualized.

More importantly, *energeia* is an activity whose fulfilment is internal to the activity itself. It is “complete” or “perfected” in its very enactment, rather than a process that remains incomplete until it reaches an external end. This point is especially clear in Aristotle’s discussion of perception and contemplation. In *De anima* II. 5, for example, Aristotle considers the relation between possessing knowledge and exercising it in contemplation. Approaching *energeia* from the standpoint of state or form, Aristotle distinguishes three senses in which someone may be called “a knower”:

In the first case, something is a knower in the way in which we might say that a human knows because humans belong to the class of knowers and to those things which have knowledge; but in the second case, we say directly that the one who has grammatical knowledge knows. These are not in the same way potential knowers; instead, the first one because his genus and matter are of a certain sort, and the other because he has the potential to contemplate whensoever he wishes, so long as nothing external hinders him. Yet another sort of knower is the one already contemplating, who is in actuality [*energeia*] and strictly knowing this A. (*De anima* 417a21-30, transl. Shields)

According to Aristotle, the first two are “knowing in potentiality” because each requires a change of state or form: “the first one by being altered through learning, with frequent changes from a contrary state; and the other, from having arithmetical or grammatical knowledge and not actualizing it to actualizing in another way” (*De anima* 417b1-2, transl. Shields). In this way, the transition from the first to the second kind of “knower” involves a generic movement of *kinesis* – a movement characteristic of what is incomplete – whereas the third kind of “knower” exemplifies *energeia* as the activity of knowing itself, in which the form or state is fully completed (*De anima* 431a1). This contrast echoes a passage in Aristotle’s the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the activity of seeing. Seeing is an activity of *energeia*, as it “is not lacking in anything which by coming to be at a later time will complete its specific form; and pleasure too seems to be like this” (*Nicomachean ethics* 1174a14-17, transl. Rowe). Accordingly, Aristotle allows for two modes of realizing potentiality: the movement of *kinesis* remains incomplete until it reaches an end external to the activity,

whereas the activity of *energeia* occurs in a given and completed form, with its end internal to its ongoing performance⁴.

In other words, *energeia* is not simply a process of actualizing *potentiality*; it is actuality as such – the being of something insofar as it is at work⁵. When something is buildable, its being-built is building. Likewise, a knower engaged in contemplation is a true knower in the strict sense. The same applies to seeing or appreciating, and in these activities of *energeia*, a thing realizes its mode of being.

Across Aristotle's major texts, *energeia* unites the 'what a thing is' and the 'how it is'. The philosophical mode of *energeia* can and must be understood in both ontological and teleological senses: as something with *energeia* and as an activity of *energeia*. Ontologically, something with *energeia*, complete in every moment, comes to presence as its own potential (*dunamis*) is being actualized. Teleologically, an activity of *energeia* shows the mode in which a thing proceeds toward its intrinsic end, which can be understood only in relation to what the thing is capable of (*dunamis*). Thus, something with *energeia* presents itself in and through its activity of *energeia*, and through this activity it fully realizes its mode of being.

This dual sense also complicates the translation of the word *energeia*. Scholars have also speculated on various ways to interpret it. For example, Chen collects a range of meanings of *energeia* across contexts, including "actuality", "being perfect", "in application to form", and others (Chen 1956). Sachs' translation of *energeia* as "active presence" or "being-at-work" underscores its ontological significance as a mode of being. Along similar lines, Carli and Carli understand *energeia* as "being-in-time" (Carli, Carli 2017), and Westin suggests that rhetorical *energeia* may be described as "unfolding into presence" (Westin 2017: 259). For the purposes of the present discussion, however, I will not insist on or provide a single fixed translation. Rather than defining it, what matters here is the role *energeia* plays in Aristotle's aesthetics, if applicable, and how we might revisit Aristotle's view of art through the concept of *energeia*.

⁴ Urmson (1995) notes that the end of a kind of activity of *energeia* can even be said to be a priori.

⁵ As Hans-Georg Gadamer notes in his later research, Aristotle introduces the term *energeia* by going "only one step beyond Plato when he made what Plato called 'coming into being' [*Werden zum Sein*] into his topic of 'the being of becoming' [*das Sein des Werdens*]". Based on this, Gadamer emphasizes that the Greek word *energeia* intends two words simultaneously: "activity and reality" (Gadamer 2007: 201).

3. *Energeia as a conceptual basis for the reality of artistic imitation*

This section first turns to the rhetorical context and then extends the discussion to the arts, showing how *energeia* can be understood as an aesthetic *concept* and what role it plays in Aristotle's view of art. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle describes the effect of vivid linguistic expression in terms of *energeia*. Why does he use *energeia* rather than the more familiar rhetorical term *enargeia*? The distinction between *energeia* and *enargeia* becomes clearer when *energeia* is extended beyond its philosophical usage into rhetorical and artistic contexts.

If we glance at the *Rhetoric's* treatment of *energeia*, we can gain inspiration from the affinities and differences between *energeia* and *enargeia* in language. Rhetorical *energeia* seems to give language real "life", functioning alongside metaphor and antithesis. Aristotle describes it as particularly captivating to hearers because it produces an effect of "making them see things" (*Rhetoric* 1411b25, transl. Roberts). But this effect is not produced by imitating appearances, as Plato would suggest. Rather, it arises when discourse renders what it represents as a kind of "state of activity" that enables language to present things as agents in action. In this sense, poetry, as a "living being", actualizes the potentiality of language by means of metaphor and other forms of linguistic imitation. In discussing expressions like 'flying arrow' or 'eager spear', Aristotle writes: "In all these examples, the things have the effect of being active because they are made into living beings; shameless behaviour and fury and so on are all forms of activity. And the poet has attached these ideas to the things by means of proportional metaphors...Here he represents everything as moving and living; and activity is movement" (*Rhetoric* 1412a1-10, transl. Roberts). Aristotle, here, explicitly shows that the vivid effect of language comes not from presenting an image but from imparting vitality – transforming inanimate things into living beings. What the hearer "sees", thus, is not merely the mental image produced by linguistic imitation, but an unfolding process in which the potential, or *dunamis*, preserved in linguistic imitation is being actualized⁶.

⁶ Here, I follow Westin (2017) in understanding rhetoric *energeia* in relation to the *dunamis* of language. This allows the earlier philosophical mode of *energeia* to be smoothly carried over into the rhetorical context. At the same time, it is worth noting that, for Aristotle, poetry actualizes the *dunamis* of language in a way that allows it to present itself as a living reality, rather than merely as an imitation of reality.

Then, what does *energeia* imply for how we understand Aristotle's view of artistic imitation? Before extending *energeia* to the arts, it is still necessary to recall Aristotle's overall position on *mimesis* (imitation), which may be contrasted with Plato's view of artistic imitation. For Plato, literary imitation, which evokes mental images through verbal representation, is far removed from the truth. In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato condemns both painting and poetry because he regards artistic imitation as inherently deceptive: painting produces a likeness through the combination of shadow, line, and color; while the poet, like the painter, makes a likeness of a thing through words and phrases without genuine knowledge of it. As Plato writes, "the poet uses words and phrases to paint colored pictures of each of the crafts, even though he knows only how to imitate them" (*Republic* 601a, transl. Reeve). Within this Platonic framework, rhetorical vividness – the capacity of language to elicit quasi-sensory experience by making things stand 'before the eyes' – is what later rhetorical theory would describe as *enargeia*. However, such vividness risks reinforcing the illusion of appearances and thereby obscuring the reality. On this basis, Aristotle's conception of *energeia* points beyond mere image-like linguistic vividness toward a notion of reality, suggesting that rhetorical "vividness" can be understood not only as the production of image-like effects but also, and more importantly, as a real actuality that makes linguistic imitation operative and present in its effects.

Through his distinctive use of *energeia*, Aristotle understands poetic or artistic imitation as possessing its own reality. Although he does not explicitly develop the concept of *energeia* in the *Poetics*, he invokes an effect similar to *enargeia* when explaining what a poet should do in constructing plot and language (*Poetics* 1455a25). Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not treat this linguistic capacity to produce a vivid effect primarily as a mimetic relation between poetry and an external reality. Instead, he locates this vivid effect within a poem's own plot or action, as an effect arising from a poem's actualization of its internal potential. As Krieger puts it:

It is clear that Aristotle's metaphysical commitment to teleological process led him to see the dramatic poem as a single organic object whose unfolding form was to transcend and redispense every element (each of Plato's imitated "objects") within it. Aristotle counteracts the visual and spatial implications of *enargeia* with his own temporal interest in the very different term *energeia*, which characterizes the force that drives the developing plot, whose system of probabilities strives for the realization of all that is potential within it. (Krieger 1992: 76)

Here, Krieger highlights the fundamental difference between *enargeia* and *energeia*: if *enargeia* denotes an outcome of image-likeness and sensory vividness produced by language, rhetorical *energeia* shows an ongoing, dynamic process in linguistic experience through which language brings things ‘before the eyes’. More importantly, Krieger implies that *energeia* counteracts the sensory illusion often associated with *enargeia*. Rather than reducing poetry to deceptive imitation, *energeia* endows poetic (or linguistic) imitation with a sense of unfolding reality.

As for the arts, Jean H. Hagstrum also underscores this distinction in his discussion of *enargeia* and *energeia*: “*Enargeia* implies the achievement in verbal discourse of a natural quality or of a pictorial quality that is highly natural. *Energeia* refers to the actualization of potential, or capacity, the achievement in art and rhetoric of the dynamic and purposive life of nature” (Hagstrum 1958: 12). Following Hagstrum, Aristotle’s deliberate use of *energeia* may be read as a way of differentiating his view from Plato’s ideas of artistic imitation. For Aristotle, an artwork is not a passive and unreal imitation of sensible appearances; Rather, it is a living being, full of “dynamic and purposive life”.

So far, one crucial entailment is that Aristotle’s conception of *energeia*, from its very foundations, allows for the reality of artistic imitation. Mimetic works do not offer us deceptive pseudo-realities, as Plato sometimes mooted, but have the potential that enables people to perceive and respond to them, thereby realizing their reality and actuality in experience. In this way, *energeia*, understood aesthetically, provides a conceptual basis for the reality of artistic imitation, which I believe is crucial for distinguishing *energeia* from *enargeia*.

If *energeia* grounds the reality of artistic imitation, it also serves as an aesthetic concept through which Aristotle’s view of art can be more fully understood. In interpreting Aristotle’s view of art through *energeia*, Hagstrum also offered an insightful formulation: “Poetry possesses *energeia* when it has achieved its final form and produces its proper pleasure, when it has achieved its own independent being... and when it operates as an autonomous form with an effectual working power of its own” (Hagstrum 1958: 12). Here, however, given the dual sense of the mode of *energeia* discussed earlier, I am more inclined to suggest that art can be understood as *energeia* rather than as something that merely “possesses” it. In the Aristotelian context, what art is cannot be grasped only in terms of what it has; it also needs to be approached in terms of how it is, which is associated with art’s potential and its actualization. The next section will show why and how art may be understood as *energeia*.

4. Art as energeia

Although most discussions of Aristotle's view of art begin with the *Poetics*, it is worth noting that, already in its opening chapter, Aristotle makes clear that one of the topics he is concerned with is the different artistic (or poetic) species and their respective *dunamis* (potential or capacity) and their actualizations (*Poetics* 1447a1-10). This serves as a textual point of departure for developing *energeia* as a mode of understanding art. Building on the ontological and teleological dimensions of the mode of *energeia* developed earlier, this section advances the argument in two steps: first, it will show that artworks can be seen as something with *energeia*. For Aristotle, an artwork is a unified whole with an intrinsic end that can be understood only in relation to its potential being actualized. Second, it discusses how art comes to presence in its activity of *energeia* – how its potential is being actualized, and how its meaning emerges within aesthetic experience.

4.1. Artwork as something with energeia

Let us begin with Aristotle's account of tragedy's development as an artistic species. At its origin, tragedy is not yet complete; it advances "little by little". Each stage is marked by gradual refinements – changes in formal elements such as the number of actors, scenery, episodes, and so on – that can be understood as a movement of *kinesis*, a process of becoming that proceeds toward determinate completion. After "a long series of changes", Aristotle notes, this movement of Tragedy ceases when it attains its "natural form" (*Poetics* 1449a10-15). At that point, Tragedy, as a species of art, unifies its qualitative parts – plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody – into a coherent whole possessing its *dunamis*, that is, the capacity to produce the proper pleasure in the audience through pity and fear.

Here is one question that needs to be answered: where does the proper pleasure produced by art come from? Does it derive from an external cause, for example, a work's realistic representation of the real world, or from the work's unfolding within its own form? As discussed above, to treat the artwork as something with *energeia* is to assume that no further additional cause is required beyond matter and form, except a mover (an agent that actualizes the work's potential). For this question, an important clue appears at the beginning of the *Poetics* 4. Here Aristotle relates art, the

real world, and the aesthetic subject into a single explanatory framework, discussing the natural basis of the artwork's capacity to produce its proper pleasure:

It is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning – gathering the meaning of things, e.g. that the man there is so-and-so; for if one has not seen the thing before, one's pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or colouring or some similar cause. (*Poetics* 1448b5-20, transl. Bywater)

This passage highlights at least two important points. First, pleasure is a natural effect of the work of imitation itself. It does not depend simply on what kind of objects are represented. This point becomes clearer in Aristotle's discussion of music in Book VIII of the *Politics*. As Aristotle writes, "music is by nature a thing that has a pleasant sweetness" (*Politics* 1340b15, transl. Rackham) and its capacity to produce emotional effects and to shape the moral character of the soul is conceived as intrinsic to musically organized tones and rhythms. Artistic pleasure is therefore 'intrinsic' to the artwork itself, as Stephen Halliwell argues, it depends on nothing outside the artwork, nor does it need to be referred to any external source for further justification⁷.

This 'intrinsic' character shows that a work's potential to produce its proper pleasure is inherent in its mimetic form and, more precisely, pre-structured within its unified organization in a purposive way. In the *Poetics* 13, for example, Aristotle emphasizes that tragic composition must be guided by its proper effects: pity and fear are to be embedded in the structured sequence of incidents as the poet designs it. Tragedy does not aim to produce every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it (*Poetics* 1453b11-14).

⁷ Stephen Halliwell, who has studied Aristotle's texts in detail, highlights that the significance of Aristotle's idea of artistic imitation lies in its "intrinsic" character. However, he does not explicitly distinguish *energeia* from *enargeia*, since his discussion remains focused primarily on the rhetorical context and treats *energeia* (vivid "activity") as a form of *mimesis* (Halliwell 2009: 160, 186).

Second, nearly everyone, philosophers or ordinary people alike, can take pleasure in artistic imitation, although not all pleasure is equal. Aristotle explains this by appealing to an innate human delight in learning, or our natural pleasure in recognizing and understanding what things are. In fact, if we read Aristotle's theory as a whole, it becomes evident that pleasure tends to accompany every activity of *energeia*.

To develop this point further, it is helpful to consider Aristotle's account of pleasure in the *Nicomachean ethics*. In *Nicomachean ethics* X. 4-5, Aristotle links pleasure not only to sensory perception but also to thinking, appreciating, and contemplating. He suggests that an activity of *energeia* is most complete and most excellent when a well-conditioned capacity is at work in relation to the finest object within its domain. This is what a sense's activity as *energeia* seems to be; it makes no difference whether we say that the sense itself is active or that the subject in which it inheres is active. Pleasure is greatest when the subject is in good condition and the object is the finest within that sense's domain. It is perhaps understandable that the intensity of this pleasure differs between the philosopher and others. Aristotle famously maintains that "every activity of *energeia* is completed by pleasure", and that different kinds of activity have corresponding pleasures that differ in kind (*Nicomachean ethics* 1174b-1175b). This echoes Aristotle's view that different kinds of art evoke different pleasures. Therefore, it can be said that the pleasure produced by art arises naturally from the artwork's inherent capacity or potential to be able to be perceived, recognized, and understood.

How, then, do these two aspects fit together? In other words, how does a work's potential relate to the organization of its internal elements? In artistic imitation, potential is structurally preserved in form through the material, or medium, of imitation. A work becomes a self-sufficient entity in which material and form are integrated into a single "one". As Aristotle notes in the *Metaphysics*, "the highest level of material and the form are one and the same thing", for example, bronze has the potential to become a particular form, but is not yet fully actual; by contrast, "a composition of bronze and triangle" constitutes "one" because the form of triangle actualizes the potential of bronze as matter. Thus, "what is in potency [*dunamis*] and what is in activity [*energeia*] are in a certain way one thing" (*Metaphysics* 1045b10-20, transl. Sachs). This hylomorphic account also provides a useful bridge to art: just as bronze stands to the triangle, so a medium stands to an artwork's organizing principle. In a work of art,

the medium serves as material, and the organization of elements constitutes form. Art's potential is preserved within a purposively organized form.

Therefore, we can say that, according to Aristotle, an artwork can be seen as something with *energeia*. an artwork not as a passive imitation, but as an independent being whose potential is contained within a purposively organized form. In this sense, we may say that artistic imitation is an end-directed practice of form-giving. As something with *energeia*, an artwork has its own mode of being, one that is complete, yet open to actualization in aesthetic experience. On this basis, what follows clarifies how art comes to presence in aesthetic experience, or how aesthetic experience does its work of bringing art from potential to actual. This, in turn, may help us better understand how the meaning of art emerges in its activity of *energeia*.

4.2. *Art's activity of energeia*

To explain how art comes to presence in and through the aesthetic experience, it is necessary to clarify how the mode by which artworks operate on the aesthetic subject intersects with the mode by which perception operates in the senses. What is clear, first, is that material and form together make an artwork both sensory and intelligible. In the process of aesthetic experience, being perceived and being intelligible do not occur in isolation but interact with each other. Different materials produce different perceptual effects because each material or medium is perceived in relation to its proper sense. As Aristotle notes, the proper object of a sense is "what cannot be perceived by another sense" (*De anima* 418a10-12, transl. Shields), for example, sight is of color, hearing is of sound, and taste is of flavor. Accordingly, artistic media like color and sound primarily affect the senses to which they correspond; when these sensible elements are organized into form, they become perceptible, recognizable, and interpretable.

In this way, even an artwork can be taken as a closed, self-sufficient real being, with a completed form, it remains open to an aesthetic subject. Art's potential, or *dunamis*, is involved in its ability to make this process of perception and understanding possible. More importantly, artworks can generate an intensified force that fully immerses the subject in aesthetic activity. Precisely because something with *energeia* has its end built into its own activity through which its potential is realized, the subject's

attention is no longer attracted to an external goal but is drawn by the artwork's own unfolding⁸.

Art presents itself in a way that allows it to be experienced as it actually is. In *De anima* III.9, Aristotle proposes an isomorphic correlation between subject and object in terms of *dunamis* and *energeia*: what the soul perceives and knows in *dunamis* is the same as what is perceived or known in *energeia* (*De anima* 431b25-432a). This implies that if an object is only potentially perceivable, the subject is correspondingly only potentially perceiving; when the object becomes perceptible in actuality, the subject in turn becomes actually perceiving. Regarding art, an artwork is "potentially experienceable" insofar as it can be perceived and understood. Its potential is realized only when it is experienced, as the viewer or listener engages in the perceptual and understanding processes through which art comes to presence. At that time, the aesthetic subject is drawn into the artwork and is able to experience its proper pleasure.

How, then, does the meaning of art emerge in its activity of *energeia*? Or, more precisely, what does art's activity of *energeia* mean for us as aesthetic subjects? The actualization of art's potential occurs together with aesthetic experience, as argued above. Art's activity of *energeia* and the subject's experience stand in a mirror-like, reciprocal relation. What the art actualizes as potential aligns with what the subject undergoes. In the "mirror" of aesthetic experience, art presents itself, coming to presence as what it is; in turn, in admiring a painting or in gathering its meaning, the subject also comes to recognize herself, becoming aware of her own capacities for perception and understanding as they are being actualized. This perhaps explains why, as we showed earlier, even when the represented object is not pleasant in itself, people can still take pleasure in making the recognitional judgment: this pleasure, we might say, arises from the actualization of the subject's cognitive capacities for perception, recognition, and understanding. If so, art's activity of *energeia* elicits a corresponding activity of *energeia* in the aesthetic subject, who participates as an agent in their own activity of *energeia*, presenting and recognizing themselves in the aesthetic experience.

⁸ Carli and Carli (2017: 62) think both "admiring a painting" and "thinking about the nature of complete activities" are activities of *energeia*. When we are engaged in them, our awareness of time constraints fades. Attention is fully claimed by the *energeia*, and immersion can become so complete that even the passage of time drops from consciousness, phenomenologically, we are no longer oriented by clock time but by the activity's own unfolding.

For poetry (and, for Aristotle, dramatic poetry), because of its universals built into it, its activity of *energeia* – the potential being actualized – makes it more “philosophical” than isolated rhetorical figures or history. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes poetry from history on precisely these grounds: poetry “is of the nature rather of universals”, while history “is singulars” (*Poetics* 1451b6-7). According to the clues provided by the *Poetics* 9 and 17, poetic universals seem to be incorporated at the inter-medial level between abstract form and emotional expression into poetry through the plot’s purposive and causal organization, and thus need to be understood in relation to poetry’s potential. In constructing the plot, Aristotle first emphasizes that, in pursuing vividness, the poet must exercise a powerful imagination, “seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were”, so that the events cohere as actions. Aristotle then suggests that the relevant emotions should be described, for only then will the plot persuade. The poet should sketch the plot’s framework in a “universal form” (*Poetics* 1455b1, transl. Bywater).

The passage in Chapter 17 closely echoes Chapter 9 of the *Poetics*. Tragedy is a representation that imitates not only a complete action but also events that evoke feelings of pity and fear. What distinguishes poetry from history, on Aristotle’s account, is precisely this internally teleological and unified construction. In the *Poetics* 9, he therefore emphasizes that poetry does not primarily recount what has happened, but articulates what could happen, that is, what is possible according to probability or necessity. In this sense, poetry, by imitating “action and life” (*Poetics* 1450a17, transl. Bywater), builds universals into its plots, a purposive and causal pattern characteristic of human life. Such purposive vitality can be understood as a basic mode of lived experience – and, in Aristotelian terms, as a mode of *energeia* itself, as Aristotle writes, “the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity [*energeia*], not a quality” (*Poetic* 1450a-15-20, transl. Bywater). Poetry may therefore be “more philosophical” because its activity of *energeia* actualizes a potential that enables the subject to recognize something of the end for human life.

In conclusion, revisiting Aristotle’s view of art through the concept of *energeia* shows that art can be understood from two inseparable aspects. On the one hand, an artwork is something with *energeia*: its potential is preserved in a purposively organized form and is actualized through the work’s unfolding. In this sense, artistic imitation is an end-directed practice of form-giving. An artwork is complete, yet open to actualization in aesthetic experience. On the other hand, art’s potential is actualized in

aesthetic experience, where its proper pleasure is realized, and its meaning emerges. In this process, the subject's own capacities for perception, recognition, and understanding are also actualized. We may therefore conclude that, for Aristotle, art can be understood as *energeia*: it comes to presence as its potential is being actualized in the subject's aesthetic experience.

5. *Energeia today and AI-generated art*

Although there is evidence that Aristotle's concept of *energeia* is becoming an important interdisciplinary concept across physics, philosophy, social theory, linguistics, rhetoric, and related fields (Fortunati, Agazzi 2023), it might be worthwhile to briefly review how this concept has been reactivated in modern and contemporary aesthetics. From a phenomenological standpoint, a key moment in the modern reception of *energeia* is Heidegger's retrieval of Aristotle's *dunamis-energeia* pair in his early thought, where it becomes pivotal to his reformulation of the question of Being and the ontology of art. In philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer increasingly reframes the ontology of art in terms of *Vollzug* (fulfillment, performance), drawing on Aristotle's *energeia* to emphasize that artworks attain their being in and through acts of understanding and interpretation (Gadamer 2017)⁹. In image theory, Horst Bredekamp develops *energeia* into a vocabulary of "image acts", arguing that images can be treated as agents with their own efficacy in social reality (Bredekamp 2017). Bredekamp's focus on *energeia* as an agentive power within the image offers a dynamic perspective for linking image, viewer, and society, shifting attention from the image as a representational object to what an image can, or even "wants" to do. In comparative aesthetics, Wendy Steiner invokes *energeia* to think beyond representational likeness toward the work's operative "thingness", arguing that art is not merely an "imperfect copy" but an independent object with a degree of objecthood comparable to things in the world (Steiner 1982: 17). In intermediality studies, Jarkko Toikkanen distinguishes the intermedial difference between the classical rhetorical concepts of *enargeia* and *energeia* as a way of modelling intermedial experience (Toikkanen 2013: 882-94).

⁹ For further discussion of how Gadamer develops the concept of *energeia* in his thought, see Tate 2012 and Palmer 2006.

For these thinkers and scholars, *energeia* primarily functions as a historical-theoretical resource, one that is redeployed from contemporary theoretical standpoints in order to serve their own projects. These trajectories suggest that *energeia* now functions as a ‘travelling concept’, underscoring its renewed relevance for art whose mode of being is inseparable from production, operation, and reception. The perspective opened up by *energeia* resonates with new art forms characterized by performativity and generativity. Thus, the concept of *energeia* can offer a more dynamic and practice-oriented perspective for understanding art, especially a new form of art emerging today – AI-generated art (AI art).

The mode of AI art’s production, in which agency is distributed across human prompting, large-scale computation, and vast (often multimodal) datasets, means that, on the one hand, AI art is produced through an ongoing agentive process; on the other hand, key determinants of the output remain partially opaque and ‘unseen’ to the creator and viewer. By presenting examples of research experiments and AI artworks, and by raising a series of questions for reflection, an approach to AI-generated art from the perspective of *energeia* may help clarify what is distinctive about it. More specifically, its value and even its nature can be approached through questions concerning its potential and its mode of actualization.

One, where does AI art’s potential reside? Is it preserved in the prompter’s design and prompting, or in the model’s internal operations that shape the generated output? Konrad Wojnowski, a Polish theorist whose work focuses on probabilistic aesthetics and AI-generated art, offers an instructive example here. In his essay on the autonomy of AI art, he explores how AI-generated images emerge through the interaction between structured prompts and neural-network processes rather than through direct human intention alone. For example, he used the prompt “a photo of class struggle in the style of Jeff Wall” with DALL-E 2, which returned four similar images with slight variations. According to his account, these images failed to meet his expectations, but they may partly show the “mind of the neural networks” (Wojnowski 2024). This complicates Aristotle’s assumption that potentiality is preserved in a unified form through the maker’s purposive organization and raises the possibility of distributed (or even non-human) purposiveness within the generative system.

Two, if we are unsure where AI art’s potential lies, how is it being actualized, and does its mode of actualization change in reception? Boris Eldagsen, a Berlin-based photo and video artist, demonstrates, for example,

through his AI-generated image *The electrician* (2022)¹⁰ suggests that AI outputs can be compelling enough to attract attention and even compete with conventional photography. It won a major prize, which he later rejected. On his website (<https://www.eldagsen.com>), he explains that he wanted to ask how AI-generated images differ from photography and questioned if any of the judges “knew or suspected that it was AI-generated”. This in turn raises a further question: if viewers knew in advance that the work was AI-generated, would it still produce artistic pleasure, and if so, what kind, and where would that pleasure come from? If an AI art’s potential is not fully preserved by purposive organization, then its ‘actualization’ may no longer be understood in the traditional form-to-effect sequence; it may instead depend on conditions of disclosure and reception.

Three, are there “universals” in AI-generated art, and if so, what might they refer to? In Wojnowski’s research experiment, the images share a recognizable setting and draw on Jeff Wall’s visual idiom, yet the result is uncanny: industrial workers seated in an office space seem to contradict ordinary experience (Wojnowski 2024, 181-2). Eldagsen’s new series of 13 AI-generated images, *Artificial instinct* (2025), thematizes a similar “strange continuum”¹¹. He argues that the latent “artificial instinct” mirrors our own primordial impulses, thereby pushing the question further: perhaps what AI-generated art reveals is not the universal structure of “action and life” in Aristotle’s sense, but a new, statistically organized form of human affect and experience, including instinct and the unconscious¹². On this basis, one might hypothesise that AI art may have the potential to make the collective unconscious of human beings visible (Ahuja 2022; Schröter 2024).

From the perspective of *energeia*, then, the value of AI-generated art becomes clearer when we consider its potential (*dunamis*) and its mode of actualisation. Unlike Aristotelian form-giving, which organizes potential toward an immanent end, AI art’s generative pipeline tends to be open-ended under algorithmic constraints (prompts, model architectures, sam-

¹⁰ He won the 2023 Sony World Photography for it, but he rejected it. <https://www.eldagsen.com/sony-world-photography-awards-2023/>.

¹¹ <https://www.eldagsen.com/artificialinstinct/>.

¹² *The electrician* was shown in a group exhibition, “Promptscope: international artificial intelligence art documentary exhibition”, at the Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum in August 2025. One section of this exhibition explores AI’s emotional simulation (<https://www.eldagsen.com/promptscope/>).

pling procedures, and platform rules). Its potential is preserved across human-machine assemblages. Accordingly, the actualization of AI art's potential often requires the subject to bring more contextual knowledge to recognize references and infer why the model configures the prompt in a particular way. In this sense, we might say that AI art comes to presence (from potential to actual) through a process that spans prompting to viewing, and that it can generate a distinct layer of reflexivity: it exposes the 'unseen' operations that condition what becomes visible and meaningful.

Therefore, to approach AI-generated art from the perspective of *energeia* is to ask what its potential is and how it is actualized. More specifically, it is to ask what kinds of pleasure and meaning it can generate, and what new forms of perception, reflection, and interpretation it makes possible. These questions that continue Aristotle's concern with each art species, but they are now refracted through contemporary conditions such as technological affordances and limits, sampling procedures, platform rules, and the cultural unconscious sedimented in statistical data. AI, understood as a technological medium, actualizes its potential through the generation of works, while AI-generated art comes to presence through the aesthetic effects it produces and the reflective activity it demands. Precisely because its way of preserving potential involves multiple possibilities, indeterminacy, and non-human factors, the actualization of AI-generated art's potential differs from the traditional model. AI-generated art should be understood, therefore, as activating a new mode of perception, recognition, and interpretation. Reflecting on the potential of AI-generated art and its mode of actualization is crucial for articulating its value and perhaps even the nature of this emerging art form.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to draw the main points developed in this paper. Firstly, by surveying major Aristotelian texts, I have shown that *energeia* is a core concept in Aristotle's thought, one that unites what a thing is with how it is. It must be understood in both ontological and teleological senses: as something with *energeia* and as an activity of *energeia*. Something with *energeia* comes to presence through the actualization of its own potential (*dunamis*). An activity of *energeia* shows the mode in which a thing moves toward its own intrinsic end, which can be understood only

in relation to what is capable of (*dunamis*). Therefore, something with *energeia* presents itself in its activity of *energeia*. It is through this activity that a thing fully realizes its mode of being.

Extending the discussion to rhetoric and aesthetics, then, I have suggested that *energeia* provides a basic conceptual ground for the reality of artistic imitation, which is crucial for distinguishing *energeia* from rhetorical term *enargeia*. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle links vivid expression to *energeia* (not *enargeia*) because rhetorical “vividness” is not merely an image-like effect that places things ‘before the eyes’. Instead, it is a mode of making present that renders what is represented as active, as if endowed with life. Against Plato’s suspicion that mimetic vividness deceives by reinforcing appearances, aesthetic *energeia* points to reality and to the ongoing presence generated as the art’s potential is being actualized.

According to some textual cues of the *Poetics*, I have noticed that Aristotle’s discussions of art are centrally concerned with the potential (*dunamis*) of art and its actualization, and that this concern can be understood through the mode of *energeia*. Following Hagstrum, but departing from his view, I have argued that, for Aristotle, what art is cannot be grasped only in terms of what it has; it also needs to be approached in terms of how it is, which can be understood through the mode of *energeia*. In exploring Aristotle’s view of art, my overriding objective has been to demonstrate how *energeia* shapes Aristotle’s discourse on art’s intrinsic end and on the actualization of art’s potential within aesthetic experience. In this sense, art can be understood from two inseparable aspects. On the one hand, an artwork can be understood as something with *energeia*. Its potential for producing proper pleasure is preserved in a purposively organized form whose end is internal to the work, making artistic imitation an end-directed practice of form-giving. On the other hand, art’s potential is actualized in aesthetic experience, where its meaning emerges, and its proper pleasure is realized. In this process, the subject’s own capacities for perception, recognition, and understanding are also actualized. This helps explain why artistic pleasure may arise even from unpleasant objects. What is enjoyed is not the object alone, but the activation of cognitive and perceptual capacities. In this way, art’s activity of *energeia* makes possible a form of reflexive self-understanding. Poetry may even be ‘more philosophical’ than history because its activity of *energeia* actualizes a potential through which the subject can recognize something of the end of human life.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that, for Aristotle, art can be understood as *energeia*. Art is not merely a finished object or a passive

imitation of the world, but art comes to presence only as its potential is being actualized in aesthetic experience. Art is meaningful because it actualizes its potential.

Turning to today, recent aesthetic thought has reactivated Aristotle's *energeia* as a 'travelling concept' across phenomenology, hermeneutics, visual art, and intermedial studies. This renewed reception suggests that *energeia* remains highly relevant as a more dynamic and practice-oriented perspective for understanding contemporary artistic practices, especially AI-generated art. From this perspective, AI-generated art should not be approached merely as a form of technical imitation, but as a new mode of artistic activity whose potential and mode of actualization raise distinctive aesthetic questions. To approach AI-generated art through *energeia* is therefore to ask what its potential is and how it is actualized; more specifically, what kinds of pleasure and meaning it can generate, and what new forms of perception, reflection, and interpretation it makes possible. Reflecting on AI-generated art in these terms is crucial for articulating its value and perhaps even the nature of this emerging art form.

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