

LIDLAW UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP AND RESEARCH PROGRAMME: SUMMER I

Near the end of the summer of 2021, I stepped out into the city of Toronto for the first time. It was one of the biggest decisions I have made in my entire life to come to the University of Toronto for my studies and to leave my home, the beloved city of Istanbul, and all the loved ones in it. Coming to the end of a year in Toronto, I can easily say that the research process I went through as a Laidlaw Scholar provided me with the greatest opportunities, friendships, and joy. For this reason, I would like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation for this life-changing experience, Shraddha Prasad and Flo Zheng, as well as my research supervisor, Dr. Karina Vold, for their guidance and support along the way.

One of the most crucial skills I have gained through the research process was the ability to solidify goals and ideas in the form of a proposal, pitch those ideas eloquently, and incorporate feedback accordingly. In the initial stages, the research proposal needed editing to reach the utmost clarity. My research advisor helped immensely with this by sharing her vision and understanding of the project with me and letting me share the proposal with her research lab team for further feedback. After fine-tuning the proposal to reach its final version, I had to prepare an elevator pitch for the project for our first leadership session: Best Research Practices. Throughout the year, I had recurring opportunities to pitch the project through email for interview correspondences, and in person at a variety of events to people from different backgrounds and professions. It required reformulation of the ideas corresponding to the specificity of the audience. Each time I pitched the idea, I was more aware of the sensitivity that the topic required, and I always found myself pitching an alternative version of the research proposal suited best for the people I was interacting with. So the elevator pitch practice at the leadership session was particularly useful for the further direction of the research. I am glad to be able to practice a substantial skill, which helped clarify ideas and goals for myself as well as the audience of the project.

The essential part of the research process was an extensive literature review on topics including but not limited to art theory, philosophy of art, creativity, and AI-Art to find responses to questions such as "What constitutes art?" as well as to learn about recent views on AI-Art. The main struggle I faced through this process of literature analysis was having a predetermined understanding of art and artist relational definitions on a personal level of interest. It took a good amount of mental work to deconstruct my views on such topics, but even more effort to try to incorporate perspectives from various disciplines and synthesize them to make peace between different traditions of knowledge. The challenges I faced throughout this experience required me to grow in terms of three aspects: time management, prioritization, and flexibility.

The number of readings I had to complete was quite extensive within the art theory side of things. I always started reading certain theories/ideas in the most general possible way I could find, following with a detailed perspective within the school of thought if it was relevant and practical in terms of shedding light on the bigger picture the project wanted to complete. The scope of the readings being extensive required masterful time management. Time management was not limited to a daily basis, rather it needed allocation of time to specific areas of literature for the duration of the entire research. If I could change a certain aspect regarding this process, it would be spending less time on readings of art theory to find a perspective that aligned with my perception of art and focusing more on creative thinking by following along with a fixed art definition, which I ended up following as a method. While time management and prioritization allowed me to create a skeleton of the research process, flexibility made it easier to afford changes along the way when faced with challenges. Overall, I am grateful for this experience providing me with a space to improve these three skills.

The research methodology also involved conducting a series of interviews with artists that utilize AI as a creative tool/agent to learn about their creative processes and the ways they incorporate AI. I had two ways of communication to experiment with for reaching out: Online and in person. In some cases of online correspondence, the communication process was comparatively slow. Yet, in the cases that lead to in-person conversations/interactions, the correspondences have been quite clear. Though I ended up not conducting the interviews within this 6-weeks research period due to timeline conflicts, I will run the artist interviews in Fall 2022 for an extended version of the project with Dr. Karina Vold for an independent study. Throughout the year, I had the opportunity to deeply engage with various global (and local) Digital and Contemporary Art networks, and this experience allowed me to grow as an individual and explore different paths of creativity, while helping me find my place and community in the city of Toronto, where I only came a year before, knowing initially no-one. After all, the reaching out aspect of this project resulted in many meaningful friendships and connections that lead to the creation of a brain-controlled generative art collective, a panel, various collaborations, and most importantly, wonderful mentors, whom I can benefit from the guidance and vision of.

Now, I have completed the summer of 2022 as a Laidlaw Scholar. I see the end of this summer as the beginning of my journey as a leader and a researcher. And I am curious about the questions awaiting me, excited about the future, and more than ever, to be a part of this network of like-minded global scholars.

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