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Brian Droitcour  
Allado-McDowell: *The Known Lost*  
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# Cognitive Technologies

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## About the Author



**Brian Droitcour**

Brian Droitcour is a critic and curator specializing in digital art.



K. Allado-McDowell, *Labyrinth* (detail), 2025. Courtesy of the artist

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In the hands of thoughtful artists, much-derided AI systems can become an instrument for seeing the world differently. They invite us to imagine other kinds of intelligence and to reconsider how we understand our own powers of perception.

Two exhibitions in New York this summer, K. Allado-McDowell's *The Known Lost* at the Swiss Institute and Pierre Huyghe's *In Imaginal* at Marian Goodman Gallery, take up this challenge, using generative AI and robotics as collaborative, active agents in the work's creation. They remind us that "AI art" is an imprecise umbrella term encompassing several technologies which can be used by artists to achieve powerful emotional and conceptual effects.

*The Known Lost* is K. Allado-McDowell's proposal for a monument to all Earth's extinct species that paleobiologists have been able to identify. A lectern at the center of the Swiss Institute's basement gallery has a stack of seven volumes bound in black leather in its base; the pages inside list the scientific Latin names of bygone flora and fauna. Around the gallery's perimeter hang seven sheets of thin fabric printed with images of a monument in the mountains. The Latin species names appear in these images, too, as carvings in sheer faces of rock. Some of the images show hooded, monklike figures walking the smooth stone paths to give a sense of the dramatic scale.

Allado-McDowell used Midjourney to generate these images. Their style evokes the work of early twentieth-century Lithuanian artist M. K. Čiurlionis, who painted dreamscapes of castles on cliffs. It's hard to guess which parts of the rock were hewn with human tools and which parts took shape over millions of years; smooth and rough areas are rendered with the same stylized brushwork. In the gallery, music that Allado-McDowell composed for a forthcoming opera plays faintly over the speakers. At the opening, a singer provided a model for how the monument is to be used. She stood at the lectern, opened one of the volumes and sang the names of species.



K. Allado-McDowell, *The Known Lost* (Installation view, Swiss Institute, New York), 2025. Courtesy of Swiss Institute

*The Known Lost's* two monuments, the speculative one depicted in the prompted images and the actual one in the gallery, offer a simple but flexible space for reflection and performance. Like many exhibitions these days, the show presents the individual visitor with more information than they can possibly absorb. Elsewhere that might mean hours of video; here it's thousands of pages of names. The monument refers to what we can't possibly know, to species that died out millions of years before we existed. It offers some reassurance that the memory of humankind might be etched in stone and kept alive by computation, as Allado-McDowell has proposed doing for other species here. But this reassurance is bound up with a reminder that our species will someday be lost, too. Melancholy permeates *The Known Lost*; the hope it holds is wrapped in a promise of loss.

The mood of Pierre Huyghe's *In Imaginal* was harder to pin down. It unfolded across several rooms on two floors at Marian Goodman's Tribeca space, all of them dark, hushed, with occasional mysterious sounds emitting from Huyghe's sculptures. On the first floor was *Annlee – Umwelt* (2018–2024), with flaking, flickering images on a large screen made of semi-transparent LED panels. They depicted beastlike figures that resemble thumbs covered in hair, with holes that vaguely resemble eyes. If you've seen outputs from GANs or early text-to-image models, the aesthetic is familiar. These forms are almost recognizable but lack the clean boundaries that human vision expects.

Both Huyghe and Allado-McDowell suggest that AI, far from being just a derivative tool, can serve that same purpose: as a medium for expanding perception and articulating new kinds of knowledge.

But their projects diverge sharply in orientation. Huyghe's work fundamentally de-centers the human. Drawing on the early 20th-century biologist Jakob von Uexküll's concept of the *umwelt*—the idea that every species inhabits its own perceptual world—Huyghe explores the limits of human cognition by putting it in dialogue with other intelligences. His recent installations use neural networks, MRI data, robotics and live software to render a world that is not fully ours, producing the feeling of being small, offset, part of a larger and stranger system of sense-making.

Allado-McDowell, by contrast, keeps the human at the center. Their work as both artist and theorist concerns what they call “neural media,” emergent systems that reshape how information is processed and meaning is made. In *The Known Lost*, they use Midjourney and other cataloguing tools to summon images haunted by myth and memory, drawing on generative AI's archetypal tendencies to produce a digital sublime.

If Huyghe's installations destabilize, Allado-McDowell's offer reassurance: artificial intelligence may be competent enough to hold and mourn a world we're losing. What unites these artists is a conviction that AI isn't a single thing, nor is it inherently dull or derivative. It can be used toward radically different ends depending on the approach, technologies chosen and questions asked. These exhibitions remind us that these new cognitive technologies, like any artistic medium, don't just show us what we know—they shape how we know.

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