

REFRACTISM: METHOD AND PRACTICE

The Refractist Operating Manual

Part I – Purpose, Scope and Definitions

1. Purpose

This manual specifies the operational method by which Refractist works are prepared, generated, assessed, classified and documented. It is intended to function as a reproducible SOP. (Standard Operating Procedure) A practitioner should be able to follow it without access to the conversations through which the method originally developed.

The rules of Refractism define the method, not its aesthetic objective. That objective is to create images that satisfy the artist's intention and judgement and that have sufficient visual, emotional or interpretative quality to attract and sustain the interest of the viewer.

The manual does not determine whether a finished image is aesthetically successful. It determines whether the process and the relationship of the finished image to its Anchor are consistent with Refractist practice.

2. Scope

The method applies to artist-directed transformations that begin with an approved Anchor Photograph. It includes outputs that remain photographically plausible and outputs that move further into visibly transformed visual language. It also defines the boundary between Refractism proper and the freer category of Refractist Variant.

An image generated only from a verbal description, memory, prompt or reconstructed approximation of a photograph is not Refractism, because the Anchor has ceased to operate as the continuing control.

3. Core terms

Term	Operational meaning
Anchor Photograph	The approved factual and visual control from which the work proceeds and against which all outputs are assessed.
Native Master	The original, unedited source photograph retained unchanged where available.
Final Anchor	The specifically approved image, including any authorised crop or clarification, used for generation.
Identity	The recognisable continuity of subject, place, geometry and significant relationships that makes the transformed image demonstrably arise

	from this particular Anchor rather than from a generic description of it.
Affective intention	The experienced, remembered, desired or presently perceived atmospheric and emotional character the artist seeks to communicate.
Photographic Refractism	A Refractist interpretation that remains recognisably photographic while intentionally altering affective character.
Visibly transformed Refractism	A Refractist interpretation that moves further from photographic appearance while retaining Anchor identity as the overriding constraint.
Refractist Variant	A deliberate extension in which the strict identity requirement is relaxed to a greater degree. This is a classification, not a judgement of quality.
Generic drift	Replacement of Anchor-specific identity by plausible but invented or generic content.
Clarification	An authorised change intended to restore or strengthen experienced identity.
Beautification	A change made principally to make the scene more conventionally attractive. Beautification alone is not a Refractist justification.

Part II – Mandatory Rules

These rules apply before aesthetic preference. A practitioner or computational system must not silently relax them because a different result appears more attractive.

- Use the supplied and explicitly identified Final Anchor as the image reference for every Refractism generation.
- Do not replace the Anchor with a generated reconstruction, descriptive prompt, thumbnail, memory of the image or previously generated variant.
- Preserve the number, identity, pose or orientation, relative position and relationship of significant subjects.
- Preserve image-specific governing geometry, including viewpoint, horizon, perspective, major boundaries, architecture, coastlines, paths, water edges and other defining structures.
- Preserve the Anchor aspect ratio unless a different crop or format has been explicitly authorised.
- Do not invent significant objects or geometry.
- Do not remove, relocate, rotate or materially resize significant Anchor elements merely to improve composition.
- Do not allow requested style, mood or atmosphere to override Anchor structure.
- Change only variables authorised by the artistic brief.
- Compare every candidate directly with the Final Anchor. Do not validate from memory.

- Reject generic drift even when the result is beautiful, plausible or emotionally effective.

Recovery from generic drift

Generic interpretation is a recurrent failure mode of generative systems. It may occur even when the Anchor and the rules have already been supplied. The practitioner must therefore treat Anchor fidelity as something to be actively re-established, not assumed.

This reflects an important limitation of current generative systems. Instructions given during a session constrain the system; they do not retrain the underlying model. Its broad prior learning can therefore continue to pull an interpretation towards statistically plausible or generic solutions. Refractist practice treats fidelity as something that must be actively verified rather than assumed.

If drift occurs, stop developing the drifted image. Return to the actual Final Anchor, restate the mandatory Refractist instructions and the image-specific locks, identify the precise departures, and request a more conservative transformation. Do not use the drifted output as the new reference. If necessary, reduce the requested stylistic or atmospheric change and rebuild from the Anchor.

Repeated failure to recover identity is a reason to abandon that generation route, not to relax the definition of Refractism.

Record any deliberate factual clarification that changes visible Anchor content.

When a requested transformation cannot be achieved without violating identity, report the conflict rather than silently sacrificing identity.

When uncertain whether a proposed change is permissible, stop and obtain a decision.

4. Image-specific locks

The general rules are necessary but not sufficient. Before generation, the practitioner must write an image-specific lock list. The lock list identifies the particular facts most vulnerable to drift in that Anchor.

For a landscape this might include horizon height, coastline shape, church position, path width and cloud tiers. For the Swans at Byfield Hall it includes exactly three swans, their poses and relative positions, the fallen trunk and its openings, enclosing foliage, the water opening, viewpoint and overall landscape geometry.

The computational system should be given both the general mandatory rules and the image-specific locks. Neither substitutes for the other.

Part III – Preparing and Approving the Anchor

5. Stage A – Preserve the source

1. Retain the native photograph unchanged as the permanent master where available.
2. Work from the highest-resolution source reasonably available.
3. Do not overwrite the Native Master during cropping, correction or experimentation.
4. Record the original dimensions and aspect ratio where practical.

6. Stage B – Anchor Review

The Anchor Review determines whether the photograph provides a sufficiently sound and truthful basis for transformation. It is not an invitation to redesign the photograph.

In many cases the Anchor Review will confirm that the native photograph is already the appropriate Final Anchor and requires no crop, clarification or other alteration. The review is a control step, not an expectation that the photograph should be changed.

5. Is the intended subject complete and recognisable?
6. Are any important elements accidentally clipped?
7. Is the chosen crop deliberate?
8. Are horizon and verticals acceptable, or is correction needed?
9. Are there reflections, transient obstructions or technical defects that materially interfere with the intended encounter?
10. What objects and geometric relationships define identity?
11. What ordinary imperfections must remain because they belong to the place?
12. Are any proposed removals or corrections clarification, or merely beautification?

7. Stage C – Clarification decision

A proposed clarification must be justified before it is made. The test is: does the change strengthen fidelity to experienced identity, or merely improve appearance?

Permissible examples may include correction of a slight technical horizon error, restoration of an inadvertently clipped element where source information permits, or removal of a transient intrusion that demonstrably dominated the photograph without belonging to the experienced scene. These are examples, not automatic permissions.

Ordinary features should not be removed merely because they are inconvenient, untidy or less picturesque. Where a clarification changes factual content, record the decision.

8. Stage D – Approve the Final Anchor

13. Select one image only as the Final Anchor.
14. Give it an unambiguous file name or identifier.
15. Record whether it is native, cropped or clarified.
16. Record its dimensions and aspect ratio where practical.
17. Prepare the image-specific lock list.
18. Do not begin Refractist generation until the Final Anchor and lock list are approved.

9. Readiness to Proceed

Generation must not begin unless the practitioner can answer three questions clearly: What is the Final Anchor? What must not change? What is the artist trying to change?

If any of those answers is uncertain, the process remains in Anchor preparation and artistic briefing. The next part of the manual begins only after this gate has been passed.

Part IV – Defining Artistic Intention

Refractism does not begin by asking a computational system to 'make this artistic'. It begins by deciding what the artist wishes the image to communicate while preserving the Anchor.

11. The Artistic Brief

Before generation, prepare a short written brief. It should distinguish intention from execution. The brief may arise from memory, accumulated familiarity, present response, an imagined affective state or a deliberate exploration, but it should say what is sought rather than merely name a style.

Brief field	Question
Intended affective character	What should the transformed image feel like?
Source of intention	Memory, accumulated experience, present response, deliberate experiment or other stated source.
Elements to emphasise	Light, stillness, weather, distance, warmth, isolation, rhythm, colour relationships, etc.
Permitted variables	What may change.
Locked variables	What must not change; cross-reference the Anchor lock list.
Desired expressive distance	Photographic, moderately transformed, strongly transformed while retaining identity, or deliberately freer Refractist Variant.
Explicit prohibitions	Image-specific risks or unwanted tendencies.
Success test	What would make the artist say that the intended experience has been communicated?

12. Style references

A style reference or description may be used to communicate surface, colour, simplification or visual language, but it remains subordinate to the Anchor and the artistic brief. It is never permission to reconstruct the scene.

Where the desired effect can be described directly - for example restrained photographic mist, flattened chromatic planes, luminous dusk, softened edges or visible brush-like texture - direct description is preferable to relying upon a style label alone.

Part V – Generation Procedure

13. Mandatory generation packet

Every generation attempt should be supplied with four components: here and under 14 renumber from 1, if you wish. I have replaced with bullets)

- The actual Final Anchor image.
- The mandatory Refractist session instructions.
- The image-specific lock list.
- The artistic brief, including permitted variables and desired expressive distance.

A verbal description of the Anchor is supplementary only. It must never replace the image itself.

14. First generation

- Begin conservatively. Establish that the system can preserve the Anchor before asking for large expressive movement.
- Request only the authorised changes.
- Do not ask the system to improve composition.
- Preserve the original proportions.
- Generate a small number of candidates rather than a large undifferentiated batch where practical.
- Inspect each candidate against the Anchor before requesting further development.

15. Iteration

Iteration is artist-directed. The artist may accept, reject, refine or redirect. A rejected image may still be aesthetically successful; rejection means that it does not satisfy the present brief or Refractist constraints.

Where a candidate is close to success, specify the smallest necessary correction. Do not casually regenerate the entire scene if the principal problem is local. Where repeated attempts produce the same structural drift, return to the Anchor, restate the locks and reduce the requested transformation.

This may appear onerous, but experience has taught that acceptable images are obtained from a small number of regenerative iterations.

16. Photographic Refractism

When the desired output is photographic, instruct the system to preserve photographic plausibility while changing only authorised affective variables. Photographic Refractism is not ordinary global filtering; the intention may involve complex redistribution of light, atmosphere, tone and local emphasis, but Anchor identity remains controlling.

Do not assume that a Refractist output which remains photographic in appearance is therefore faithful to the Anchor. A plausible photographic image may still be a reconstruction of a different scene. Fidelity must still be established by direct comparison with the Final Anchor.

17. Visibly transformed Refractism

When the desired output is more visibly transformed, permit the chosen surface language, simplification or abstraction only within the identity locks. The more forceful the style request, the more important direct Anchor comparison becomes.

18. Refractist Variants

If the artist deliberately wishes to relax strict identity, classify the exercise prospectively as a Refractist Variant where possible. Do not allow an accidental failure of Refractism to become a Variant merely by relabeling it after the event. The greater freedom should be intentional.

Part VI – Validation, Rejection and Acceptance

19. Direct Anchor validation

Every serious candidate must be compared directly with the Final Anchor. Validation from recollection is inadequate, including by the computational assistant.

- Same significant subjects and correct count?
- Same subject poses/orientations and relative relationships?
- Same viewpoint and governing geometry?
- Same significant boundaries, openings, architecture and spatial relationships?
- Same aspect ratio unless explicitly authorised otherwise?
- Any invented object or geometry?
- Any removed or relocated significant element?
- Any generic substitution of vegetation, buildings, sky-land relationship or background structure?
- Do the changes correspond to the artistic brief?
- Has beautification displaced experienced identity?
- Does the work remain recognisably derived from this particular Anchor?

20. Rejection rules

Reject a candidate from Refractism proper if any mandatory identity condition is materially breached. Do not retain it as Refractism because it is attractive, because generation was difficult or because the mood is successful.

A rejected candidate may be discarded, retained as an experimental image, or - only where the greater freedom was or becomes a conscious artistic direction - developed separately as a Refractist Variant. Its provenance should remain clear. To ignore the anchor is to emasculate artistic intention.

21. Acceptance

Acceptance requires two independent judgements. First, methodological acceptance: the image satisfies the Anchor and classification rules. Second, artistic acceptance: the artist judges that the image communicates the intended experience and is worth retaining.

Methodological compliance does not guarantee aesthetic merit. A technically faithful but uninteresting image may properly be rejected.

23. The controlling rule

Beauty does not cure drift. Fidelity does not guarantee beauty. Refractism requires both disciplined relationship to the Anchor and an artist's judgement that the transformation is worth making.

Part VII – Classification

Classification describes the relationship between a finished image and its Anchor. It is not a hierarchy of artistic merit.

Classification	Definition
Anchor Photograph	The approved factual and visual control.
Photographic Refractism	Anchor identity preserved; affective transformation achieved; output remains photographically plausible.
Visibly transformed Refractism	Anchor identity preserved; affective transformation achieved; output adopts a more visibly transformed visual language.
Refractist Variant	Begins from an Anchor and artist-directed intention but permits greater deliberate departure from strict identity.
Non-Refractist generated image	An image whose relationship to the Anchor has been lost, or that was generated without the Anchor functioning as the continuing control.

Part VIII – Common Failure Modes

Failure	Meaning
Generic drift	The image becomes a plausible scene of the same type rather than the anchor scene.
Subject drift	Number, pose, identity, orientation or relationships of people/animals/objects change.
Geometry drift	Horizon, path, coastline, architecture, water opening or other defining structure changes.
Aspect-ratio drift	The output is silently cropped, extended or reformatted.
Style dominance	The requested visual language reconstructs the scene to satisfy style conventions.
Beautification drift	Untidy but authentic elements disappear and the place becomes idealised.
Atmospheric invention	Weather or light changes alter the physical scene rather than its affective reading.

Anchor substitution	A generated approximation or earlier variant becomes the de facto reference.
Resolution confusion	A reduced or cropped derivative is mistaken for the source and subsequent comparison becomes unreliable.
Memory validation	The practitioner or AI judges fidelity from recollection rather than side-by-side comparison.

The corrective action for structural drift is normally to return to the actual Final Anchor, restate the image-specific locks and reduce the degree of requested transformation. Repeated prompting against a drifted output usually compounds the problem.

Part IX – Documentation and Traceability

Documentation should support provenance, continuity and understanding of the method without turning Refractism into a laboratory quality-management exercise.

For work intended for publication, exhibition or later review, retain the Anchor Photograph and accepted final image, together with enough information to identify the artistic intention, important constraints and any material clarification or authorised departure from the Anchor.

Prompts, rejected candidates and detailed iteration histories may be retained when useful, but they are not mandatory records of artistic practice. Practitioners may organise their files in whatever way best preserves provenance and enables them to understand how a work developed.

The essential requirement is that the relationship between the finished work and its Anchor should remain demonstrable.

Part X – Worked Methodological Example: Swans at Byfield Hall

The Swans experiment is particularly useful because it demonstrates both failure and recovery.

The Anchor contained three swans beside a fallen tree, dense enclosing foliage and a specific opening onto water. Early attempts to create photographic mood variants produced attractive images but reconstructed the scene, at one point inventing a large house and open lake and altering the disposition of the swans. They were visually plausible but methodologically useless.

Recovery occurred only when the actual Anchor was restored as the governing reference and the vulnerable structural facts were explicitly locked. The successful photographic interpretations then demonstrated that affective transformation need not be painterly: the image could remain photographic while still changing atmosphere and emotional register.

Operational lesson: never infer Anchor fidelity from attractiveness, plausibility or subject similarity. Validate the particular image directly against the Anchor. Where this example is presented in an illustrated edition, the Anchor, a failed generic interpretation and a successful Refractist interpretation should be shown side by side.

Part XI – One-Page Quick-Start SOP

Paste or provide the following at the start of a new Refractist image session:

- THIS IS A REFRACTIST SESSION. Treat the supplied Anchor Photograph as authoritative throughout.
- Do not recreate the scene from a description. Work from the actual Anchor image.
- Before generating, identify and state the image-specific locks: significant subjects, count, pose/orientation, relative positions, viewpoint, governing geometry, boundaries and aspect ratio.
- Preserve those locks unless I explicitly authorise a change.
- Do not add, remove, relocate or materially resize significant elements to improve the composition.
- Do not let style, mood or photographic plausibility override the Anchor.
- Change only the variables I authorise, such as atmosphere, light, colour, tonal relationships, surface treatment or degree of abstraction.
- Preserve the Anchor's aspect ratio unless I explicitly authorise a crop.
- After every generation, compare the candidate directly with the Anchor. State any material drift before proposing acceptance.
- Reject attractive results that have lost Anchor identity.
- If the requested effect cannot be achieved without violating the Anchor, tell me rather than silently changing the scene.
- If uncertain, ask. Do not assume permission.

Appendix C – Relationship to the Website Explanation

The public website uses a concise explanation derived from this manual rather than an independently evolving set of rules. The website introduces the method and its discipline; this Operating Manual remains the authoritative source for those who wish to understand or attempt the process in reproducible detail.

Appendix D – Status of earlier documents

Earlier Ten Commandments, Anchor notes, Operating Manual versions, amendments and prompt sheets should be retained as development history but marked superseded for operational use once the final manual is approved. This prevents incompatible historical instructions from being mistaken for current procedure.

<https://refractism.com/>