

A Letter to a Young Artist

Lev Manovich, 10/20/2023

The key difference between me, a human, and generative AI: **I am limited, but AI is unlimited.** Yes, of course: it has significant limits now, in practice. But it advances fast, and what it can already do today is beyond what we could have imagined a year ago. Instead of dwelling on what AI can't do at this particular moment, it is safer to assume that it "can" will only multiply.

Because of how human skills, learning and memory works, I have limitations. I **can't** draw in hundreds of styles of other artists or effortlessly combine them together. I **don't** have knowledge of the immense "museum without walls" distributed over the web and museum databases. **But AI can.** And it will only get better. I can't simply sit down and start writing summaries of numerous topics in the history of culture. AI can. I can't instantly make hours of music that mixes the languages of different composers and maps them into new instruments. AI can.

"I can't... but AI can." (Endless other examples can be added.) **So why make art now?** And what art will still be meaningful to make?

What is interesting about human art now is our limits - and obsessions. Our inability to instantly think and paint exactly like any one of the millions of artists who lived. Our inability to quickly change. The way I walk, talk, my habits. My constraints. This is what makes me human as opposed to an AI. The latter will continue to evolve. But human evolution does not work on the same scale.

Note that this is not about simulating my idiosyncrasies and thus **not about making AI "more human."** Yes we can do it, but that's not interesting. It is like taking a Boeing 777 around the block to get groceries. Its forcing super-humans to act like humans, and this is a banal and weak strategy.

What makes art "human" is not our intentions, plans, ideas or meanings. For over 100 years, modern **artists did their best to remove all this** from their art making. If you give AI a direction, it can perfectly simulate ideas, plans and meanings. So this is not relevant.

The only relevant thing now is our limitations. Our inability to compete with the superhuman. With the web, with search engines, with recommendation engines, with huge databases, with machine learning algorithms, with Generative AI - and other super-human computer technologies to come.

Therefore, "human artists making art with AI tools" is a meaningless idea. You want to collaborate with Gods? A mortal "collaborating" with Apollo, Athena, Hermes, Zeus?

Instead, nurture your limitations. Be extremely limited—not unlimited. **Don't be "creative."** Forget the meaningless idea that AI will help us "expand our creativity." Work within constraints—the ones you already—or the ones you can make on purpose. White on white. Black on black. This is the right direction. Instead of a vast surface of "endless possibilities", concentrate on a single area and go as deeply as possible.

Make a tiny hole in the vast surface of everything that was already created and everything that is still possible, and **keep digging.** When you get completely tired digging meters of wrong underground paths, get lost again and again, and want to give up, it means you are finally close to something. Keep digging.

Because AI is so vast and endless in its knowledge and skills, you needed to work on the micro-scale. Very narrow. So narrow that AI can't quite get there. Through the needle eye. Only in this way can you perhaps still make art now.