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An Artist's response to AI

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SCREW MIDJOURNEY: AI ART AND THE THEFT OF TECHNIQUE -BY: LIAM SWEENY

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I suck at writing articles. If any truth ever came from these keys on this keyboard, it is that. I'm awful. They always come out like essays. I even took a journalism course in college. But I took a lot of things in college, so I don't remember it. So if you'll indulge me, maybe we'll just follow this as an essay. I promise it will be fun. Promise. ChatGPT is a natural language processor powered by artificial intelligence (AI) developed by OpenAI. It's basically a chatbot; a very, very advanced chatbot. In fact, it can write articles, essays, stories, it can even pass the test to get into Wharton Business School. But it can't write a paragraph like the one above. Not yet. Hopefully not ever.

One thing that was a given in the rush to replace humans with programs and machines was that it would free us to pursue things like the arts and recreation. But only the last one – recreation – is free of the threat of being consumed by robotics and AI, of course, if you have a job and can afford it. But a chat-bot is no lone villain here, just a head of the hydra. One very important, disturbing, and controversial head is the small slew of AI art programs, like DALL-E, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion, where people who call themselves “prompters,” punch a few keywords into a prompt, and AI makes a piece of art for them based on those keywords.

In fact, the AI art programs are a better illustration of the villainy of all this. In these programs, the AI goes through the internet and “trains itself” on artwork, breaking down artists’ techniques into algorithms that can then be applied to anything. Want to see an apple in the style of Van Gogh? Easy. A day at the DMV by Hieronymus Bosch? No sweat.

A taxicab in the style of Jenny Saunders from Albany, NY? Easy-peasy.

Was Jenny told her technique would be copied and used to train the AI programs? Did they need her consent? Was she compensated? All ‘no.’

Now, I’m bouncing around, because an AI wouldn’t do this. You’re welcome. Some people, “prompters” who benefit from calling themselves artists, will say that real artists copy techniques from other artists without their knowledge, consent, and compensation. And if someone commissions them to paint an apple in the style of Van Gogh, doesn’t that make them the equivalent of Midjourney? And here is the nut of it all. Yes, artists train in the same way the AI does. In fact, that’s why the AI trains that way – the programmers copied the artists’ training techniques when they designed these AIs.

But, now getting right to the core of the nut; DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and anything like it are not human. To misquote Browning, their reach doesn’t exceed their grasp. They are not sentient. They aren’t trying to commit to paper one shard of a magnificent, unrealized whole. We create art from the heart. We are driven by passion and emotion and ambition. AI is not human. It is a machine that steals from artists so that people who have no interest in taking an artist’s journey and following that vocation can pretend they did.

So what’s the harm? There are people, many people, who will always go to an artist over buying AI-generated art, assuming they’re not tricked. Just like there are people who will always shop at local businesses instead of Walmart and Amazon. But let’s be real and face the fact that Walmart and Amazon are huge and local business struggle to stay above the water line. Businesses buy commercial art and hire graphic designers because they have to, not out of any sense of justice or the public good. They hire writers to write sales copy because they have to. It’s an expense of doing business; what business isn’t desperate to cut expenses?

Is there an end? Probably not good. If artists can’t find work, they stop doing art. Mama gotta eat and there’s a data entry job somewhere (for now.) So people stop doing art. Or maybe they just stop putting it online. Because AI has to continually

train, or its images start looking alike, maybe it loses popularity.

The coopting of creativity by AI is not an evil robot issue, no Skynet, no John Connor. In fact, there are situations where more limited AI can help artists save time with laborious tasks. But apps like Midjourney and Stable Diffusion are tools for thieves.

They're ways to devalue people who have a necessary role in society. It's the use of white noise to dilute and silence voices, done by, at times, well-meaning "prompters." AI will eventually create in a way that is indistinguishable from humans. And it may create in a way beyond that that is unintelligible to us. So we have to transition from how we create to why we create to understand our role as unique critters on the food-chain. And in this view there may be something for the prompters, but if they feel they are artists in their own way, they too will be replaced in exactly the same way they are helping to replace artist-s. Their experience in developing just the right key words is being copied and utilized by Joe Snot-rag who's grabbing cheat codes to make a Dali version of Rick James on a unicorn, for no other reason than that he can.

From an artist and a writer, please don't use advanced chatbots to write copy. Don't use AI art programs to design anything. Ask yourself what it would mean when every job was replaced, every trail hiked, every river kayaked a thousand times. What eventually becomes the point of human life if not to create something valued by the world? Do we let an algorithm do that for us too?