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Larry Ebert

## Why Artists Fear AI Beyond Content Rights

A little over a year ago, I received an email containing song lyrics about my life. A friend prompted ChatGPT to write them in the style of one of my music idols, Bruce Springsteen. I felt a mix of astonishment and dread as I read the generative AI tool's output. The lyrics, though superficial, captured my passions in the cadence and style of The Boss.

*I was born and raised in Potomac Maryland  
I had four sisters, and a best friend named Lisa  
We were young and wild, we were free and bold  
We lived for the music, and we never grew old*

*I teach college students, and I play music too  
I've got a voice, that's strong and true  
I sing and play, every chance I get  
I'm living my dream, and I'm not done yet ...*

Whenever I encountered artificial intelligence in the past — learning about expert systems, for instance, like IBM's Watson, the computer chess champion — I always assumed I

would be immune from the threat of AI. After all, I reasoned, I am a creative person, a musician, with human feelings. Surely AI will never be able to replace the creative impulses that course through my body. Now the line was not so clear. Stunned but curious, I began reading everything I could about generative AI and experimented with tools like ChatGPT, Bard, Dall-E, StableDiffusion. I might as well get to know this seemingly ubiquitous provocateur, I figured.

In the fall, I interviewed 74 artists across domains (visual arts, theater and film, writing, music) to better understand their feelings and perceptions about AI's role and impact on the arts. I wanted to add color and clarity to my otherwise inchoate feelings, to understand AI's impact on the creative act and on human expression.

Building on the Turing Test (a test of a machine's ability to produce output indistinguishable from a human's), I asked artists if they would value a piece of art differently if they found out that it was made primarily by a machine rather than a human. A minority said that it would make no difference, but the vast majority indicated, often following a long pause, that they would value the art piece less. The pauses and accompanying sighs were so common I came to expect them. The most common first word in response was "Ugh."

Artists emphasized the importance of authenticity and the role of direct, "felt" experience. An artist and teacher I interviewed pointed out that "AI can't paint from a place of pain." "The uniqueness of the individual artist matters," he said, and then elaborated: "Edward Hopper painted a building in a certain way. Monet would do it in a different way. The way that they saw it would be different. Van Gogh had a starry night. No one's painted it like him. Because of what he was going through."

Many seemed to be saying that art must come primarily from a human to be real. A music arranger drew a crisp line in asserting that an AI-generated composition "might be 'beautiful sounding stuff,' but it's not music."

Even the struggles of artistic training contribute to authenticity, they said. "It's a huge part of an artist's journey to reach their authentic expression and master their medium to create an artwork that reflects it," said one of the writers I interviewed. As humans, our experiences move through us, transform and transmute. They stir us, shifting awareness and perceptions, impact our bodies, press our soft hearts. What emerges shows up as genuine in our art. As one of the painters I interviewed observed, "Anything you do in art has some self-portrait in it."

Idiosyncrasy matters, too, the artists said, including appreciation for imperfection. A painter-printmaker described making an errant brush stroke, stepping back from the canvas, and realizing that the "mistake" added beauty to the piece. She wondered, "Could AI do that?" If authenticity brings us closer to each other and to ourselves, a lack of authenticity can introduce distance. Some artists are concerned that the use of AI tools and "prompt engineering" can distance us from our emotional state and interrupt the natural flow of the creative process.

Still, a few artists that I spoke with are excited about the potential for collaborating with AI, seeing it as a way of expanding options for authentic expression. They view AI as enabling

another layer of storytelling, an extension for interacting with audiences; they see AI opening up “new reference points that we never imagined with our human minds.”

Many artists see a positive in AI’s potential to democratize the making of art but worry about the loss of creatives’ livelihoods and wonder about quality and dilution of art, particularly when corporate producers are involved. They worry about a future with “a great sameness,” an ethic of “good enough,” and “more Marvel movies.”

Around the time of the interviews, the SAG-AFTRA and Writers Guild strikes were going on in Hollywood. Artists I spoke with, some of whom are members, expressed solidarity with striking workers, emphasizing that creatives need to be protected for their content with fair compensation for their efforts and use of their works.

But respondents didn’t stop there. They pointed to a deeper concern: an efficiency ethic driving AI adoption that is fundamentally misaligned with the art motive. Art and creativity in their purest sense are not about being faster and cheaper.

Creating a piece of art is not always easy or quick, but gains are almost always well worth it. When we make art, we engage in a sacred journey, opening ourselves to profound and often-challenging feelings, connecting our body and mind through movement — one described the physical act of painting as “erotic” — and, when fortunate, even channeling the divine. In the creation of art, we are creating and re-creating ourselves. Each work of art can alter us forever.

Do we want to give this up? Do we want to abnegate our human privilege and precious opportunity to go inside and express in the deepest, most-embodied way to the world?

Will we short-cut the artist's journey?

Rather than having a chatbot write about me, even with a Springsteen lilt, I’d prefer to do it myself. I can’t guarantee the result would be better, only that something would happen inside that would make the effort worth it, and that those who read the output might be touched in some special way by my attempt.

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