MEMORY, DRAW

Lev Manovich

solo exhibition | Seoul, South Korea
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Catalog text and design: Lev Manovich

manovich.art
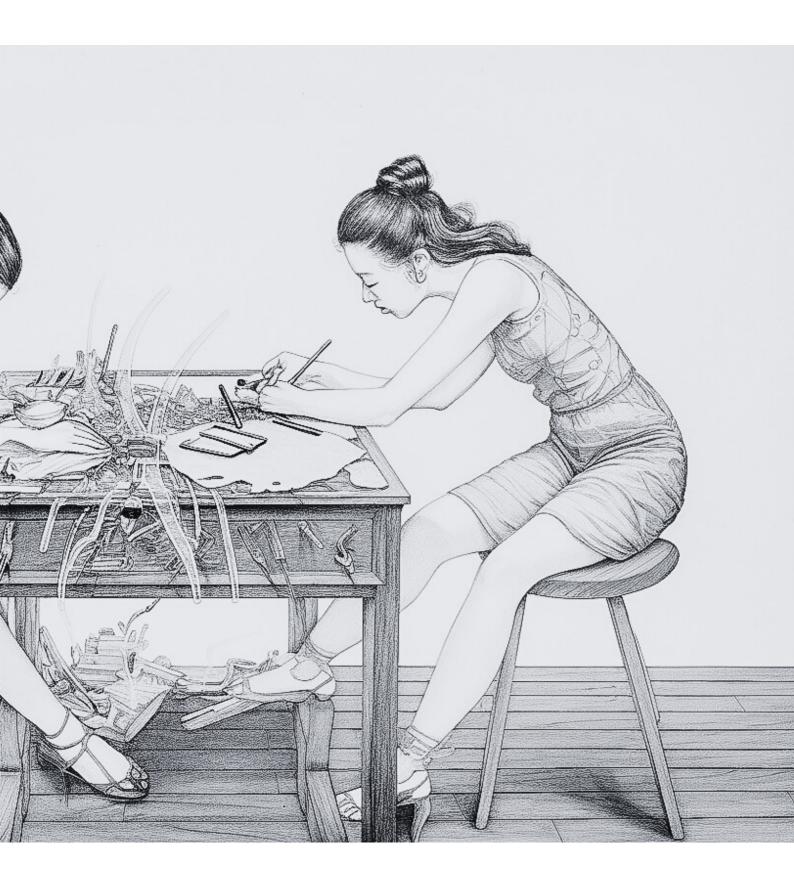
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition presents a selection of my digital images from 2023. The title of the exhibition refers to the use of generative AI as a "memory machine." AI models extract information from existing cultural material during the training process, constructing a new historical archive. And when we probe inside this archive, asking AI tools to generate scenes from a specific historical period or place, or to create something unique, the results are frequently idealized, generic imagery, or bland. For me, using generative AI is a constant battle against this fundamental limitation of this medium. The introductory texts below describe some of the techniques I employ to push AI to generate more subtle, delicate, and ambitious images that I prefer.

The title of the exhibition also refers to a number of my works on paper from the early 1980s, which are displayed as digital prints in this exhibition. These drawings were created following my emigration from the Soviet Union in 1981 (see the "Closed Word" section of the catalog).

Finally, the exhibition title alludes to "Memory, Speak," the title of a 1951 memoir by Vladimir Nabokov, a famous Russian emigrant writer.
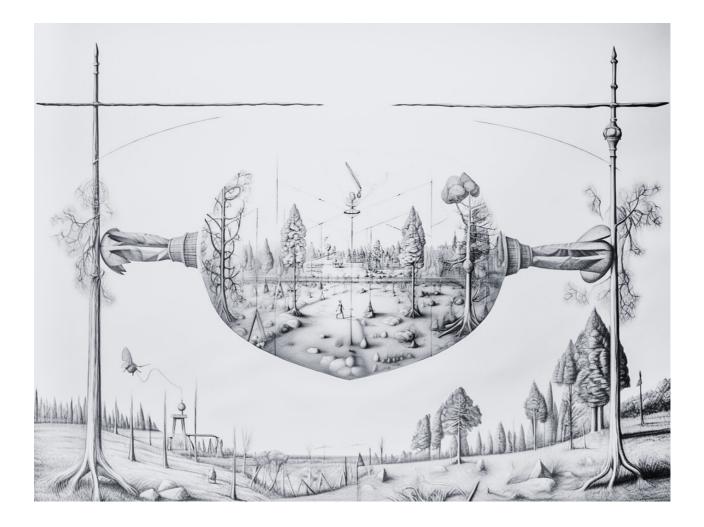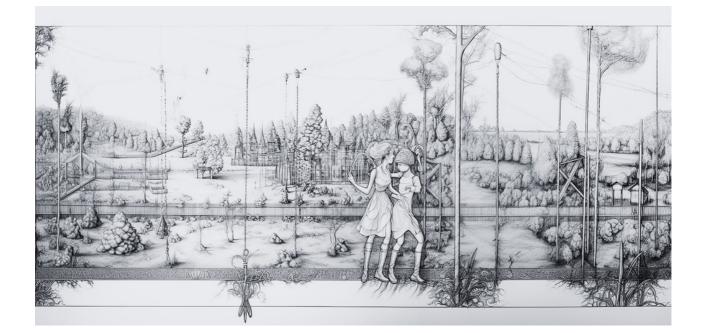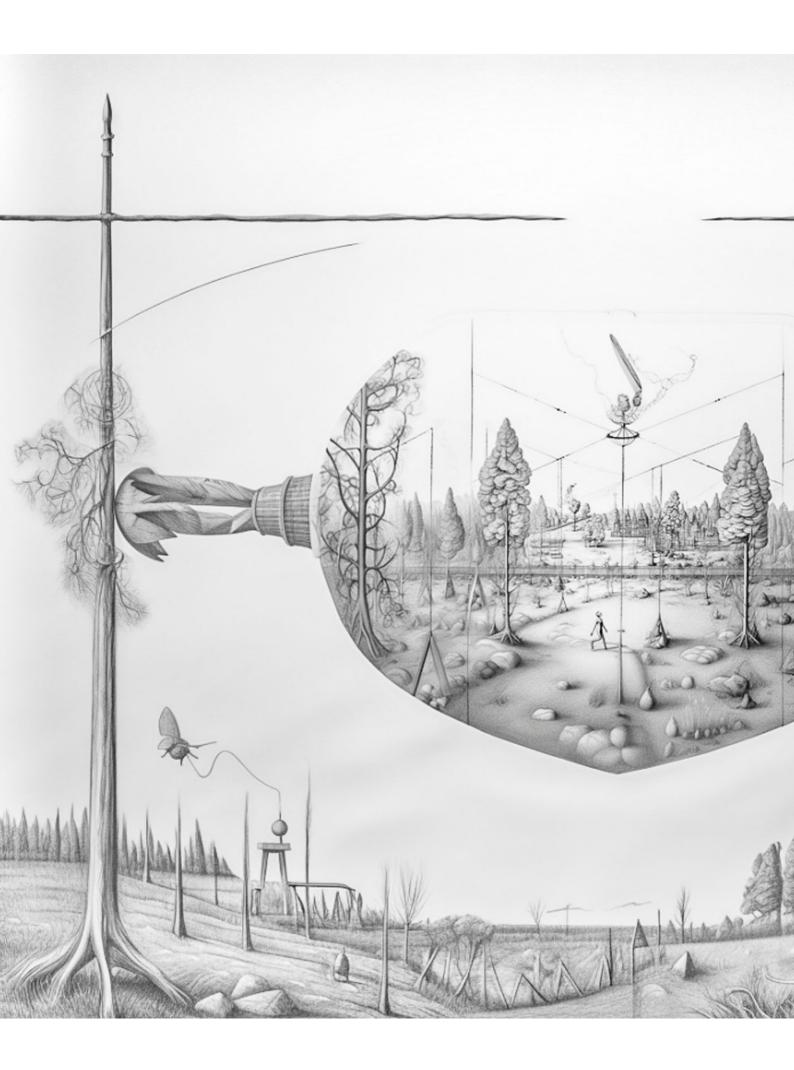
IN THE GARDEN

Digital images created with generative AI and edited in Lightroom, 2023.

This series is inspired by formal French gardens as well as 17th-18th century architecture and ornament. I also wanted AI to simulate the look of old engravings and etchings. The reference to this medium in my prompts influenced the subjects depicted in the generated images. Lines represent everything in graphic arts, and the world itself is made up of them in my images: curvy ones for plants, straight ones for poles, and diagonal ones for wires stretched between them.

The series also makes use of the specific artifacts of the AI "zoom out" command: symmetries and repetitions of compositional elements. This seemed appropriate given the topic of formal gardens. In some images, the initial world has been enclosed by elaborate frames that are nested inside other frames.
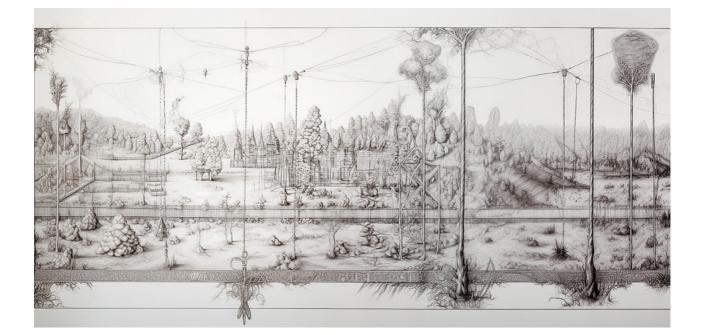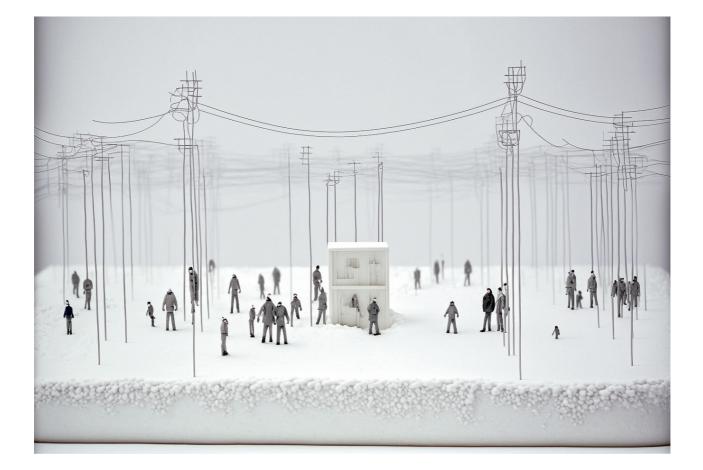
A PLAY FOR A WINTER CITY

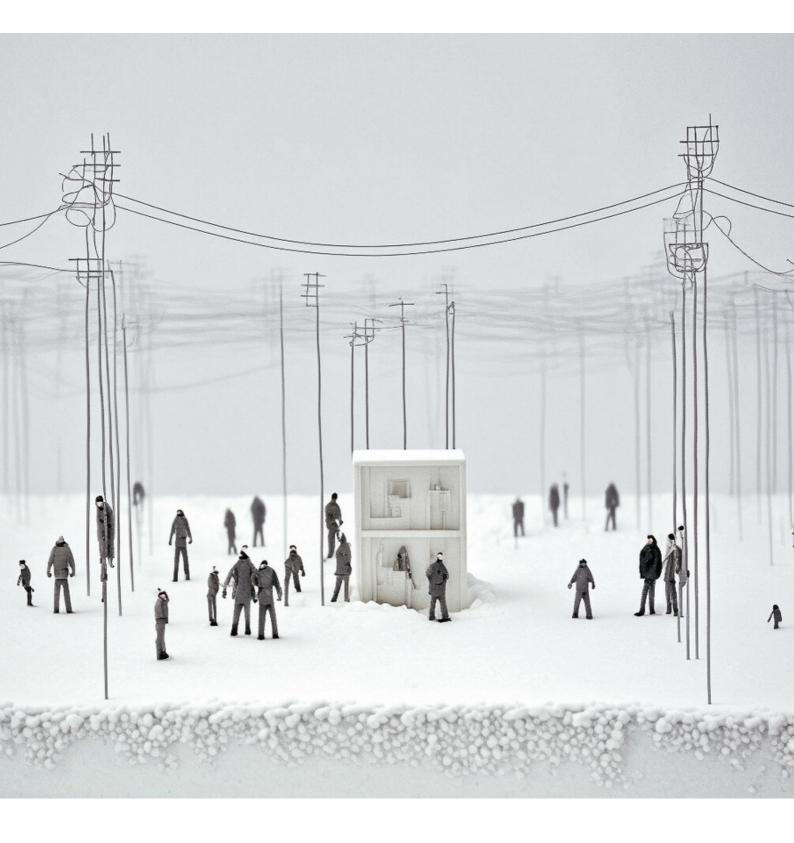Digital images created with generative AI and edited in Lightroom, 2022.

The descriptions of the images I gave to AI to create this series specify "architecture model" or "theatre set design." This is one of the techniques I used to push AI away from its default photo realism towards a different aesthetics where imperfections looks motivated. In an animated films we may see simplified characters and minimal features of and space - and this is what I wanted to get.

The imaginary city in this series is made from simulations of memories. The city is inhabited with atmosphere, moods, the particular light and particular cold of the winters in my childhood. They only now exist in my imagination. Although all details shown by AI such as people or buildings are not precise, the atmosphere and the feeling of a winter in the 1970s - exaggerated by the visual references to animated films from Eastern Europe made at that time - feels right to me.

LIBRARY OF UNWRITTEN MANUSCRIPTS

Digital images created with generative AI and edited in Lightroom, 2022.

Usually libraries collect already published books. But let's ask a question, using the history of literature in 20th century USSR as example. Do the works of fiction and that were published in USSR include best novels, best poems, best most innovative ideas? Often the answer is no. Many of the most talented and important writes in Russia could not publish their best works during this period - and sometimes no works at all. A few had their work published in other countries.

But many works remained only in manuscript forms. Or they were not even written down. Instead friends memorized them and wrote down many years later. But the very best literary works were not even written down. They remained in writers' heads. As plans. And perhaps even as detailed outlines or finished parts - which the authors never committed to papers in fear, or simply knowing that they will be never published in USSR.

This history is the background for Library of Unwritten Manuscripts series. It is an imaginary library that only houses writers' manuscripts of literary works that were either 1) never published, or 2) never completed, or 3) never written down.

The images show imaginary pages that could have been written - but they are not perfect final manuscripts. Instead, these manuscripts are torn, half-erased. They are material evidence of a cultural process typical of all human cultural history: the best ideas and plans in all genres of art were frequently never realized and remained only as notes and drafts. Or were they were never written down and therefore simply disappeared completely.

The universality of this history is emphasized by the text we see in the images. It looks like something that is written in some existing language but actually it is not: AI simulates general patterns of grammar, handwriting and hand sketching, as opposed to any concrete language.

Library of Imaginary Manuscripts: Reading Room

DRAWING ROOMS

Digital images created with generative AI and edited in Lightroom, 2023.

We see young people talking, smoking, contemplating - but what interests me are the interior spaces they inhabit, and accumulation of objects and details in these spaces. Some objects are placed on the wall-size shelves; others cover coffee tables, sofas and smaller shelves. In some cases we can easily identify these objects, but in other cases they are harder to identify. Some look like fragments, traces and shadows of the objects that are gone. Yes, these are "fragments" - but of what?

In ancient art museum we see material fragments of long gone civilizations. Pieces of vases and plates, metal tools, jewelry, tiny statues missing limbs or heads. These are real objects from 3000 or 1500 years ago. But AI "fragments" have diffident ontology. Generative AI model extracts structures and patterns from hundreds of millions of images and distributes them across trillions of connections. In this process, digital materially of images is further virtualized, evaporated, diffused.

In generative AI training, digital materially of images is further virtualized, evaporated, diffused. These are fragments of fragments. Deposits of already broken forms. More fragmented then 18th century ruins admired by painters and visitors in Italy on Grand Tour.

They are not like "glitches." And they are not noise as defined in the mathematical theory of communication by Claude Shannon in the 1940s.

I see the accumulations of objects, their shadows, and traces in this series as a metaphor for Generative AI process. Despite their illusionary materiality, the generated "fragments" you see are like scents, the invisible movements of air blown by the wind, or tiny broken shells left in the sand after a wave recedes back into the sea.

The fragments of objects you see in this image series - breaking from the celling, covering the floor, floating in space, gathered in strange "clouds" - are ifantoms sent by AI models into our world. Perhaps in these images AI medium wants to reveal itself to us - to remind us that the seeming materiality of synthesized scenes is illusionary and fleeting, and behind it are endless debris of human cultural history.
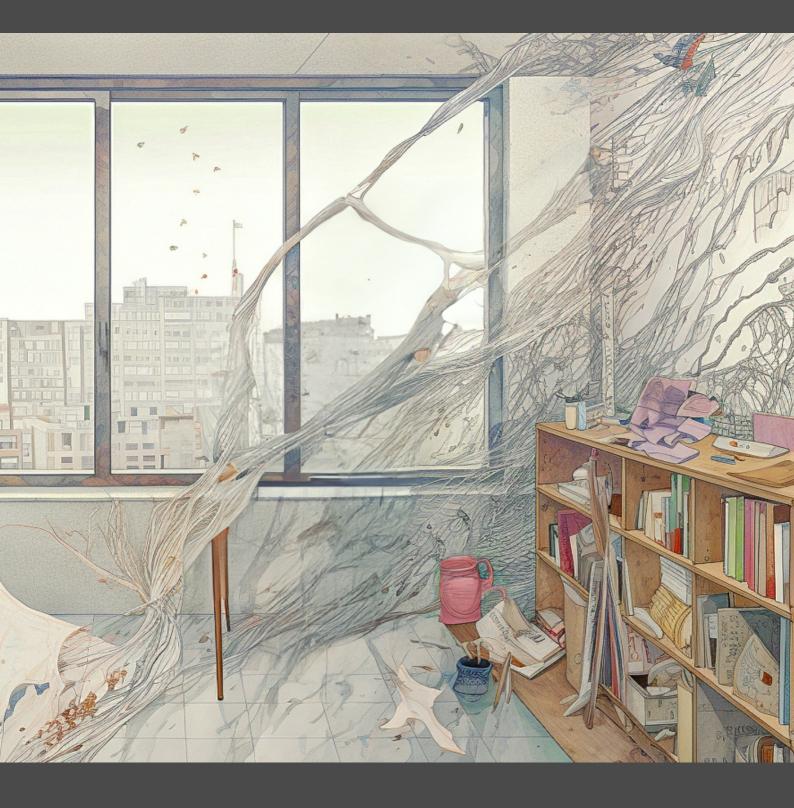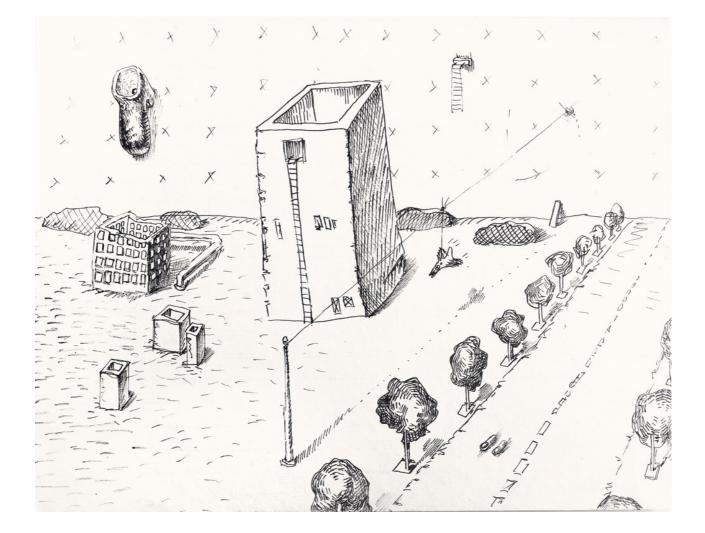
CLOSED WORLD

Selected works on paper (drawings, etching), 1981-1985.

My early images frequently depict a "closed world." This world sometimes has a wall enclosing it in the back, and other times it has all three walls. In some drawings, the ceiling serves as an enclosing surface.

These drawings can be interpreted as stage designs for imaginary plays. You are the observer watching this scene. But a play - a narrative, a story with actors, motivations, and actions - never was of interest to me. I was only interested in scenography. As a result, you rarely see human figures in my drawings – only space and objects.

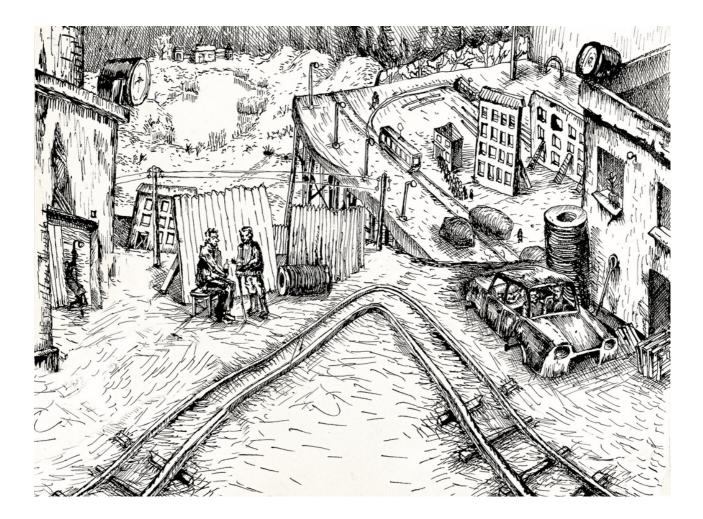Another interpretation: we live in the world which for us is real, but it is only a performance inside an enclosed theatre stage. This concept comes from my experience of growing up in Russia during the late communist era. I experienced reality around me as a giant surreal performance on the scale of a whole country. Every day, people were performing the roles they were assigned in front of one another on a massive stage.

There is no other outside world. People spend their entire lives in this theater. There is no redemption, escape, some "normal" life, or even some small rehearsal area. You get born into this society and learn its rituals already as a child.

Nevertheless, enclosures like low hanging skies, back walls, and curtains aren't always perfectly fixed. The corners' seams came loose over time. To keep them in place, various pols and nails were added. The simulation is slowly disintegrating, and perhaps a few actors even managed to escape. The toilet paper roll is affixed to the rear wall of a particular area, but we cannot be certain. The typical construction site objects (we lived next to one such site in Moscow) progressively became frozen. They became part the utopia that turned into its opposite. We can see from the signs that this has been ongoing for at least 800 years and that construction will never be completed.

2017

THE PROCESS

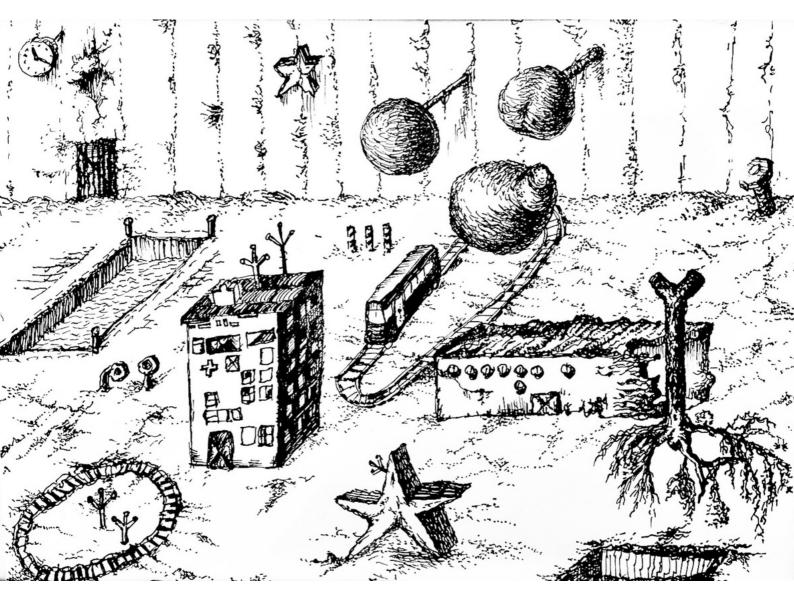My digital images are created using a variety of AI tools. Some of these tools are new, while others have been available to artists, photographers, and designers for many years.

First, I fed text and multiple visual references into the Midjourney generative app. These references could include previously generated images, photos of my early artworks, paintings, etchings, and engravings from art history, and so on. The text portions of the prompts are also frequently purposefully ambiguous, resulting in what I call "controlled misunderstanding."

I only select a tiny proportion of generated images, similar to how photographers choose only a few photographs to include in their portfolio from thousands they shoot and edit. I edit selected images in the Lightroom app, returning to the same images many times over the course of months. Using its own AI, Lightroom can suggest possible edits to me. I also frequently use its other AI features to automatically select subjects and objects in images so that they can be edited separately.

Finally, I use Gigapixel AI to prepare high resolution versions of images that can be printed at large sizes. This tool predicts how my images' details will appear at larger sizes .

In the end, my image creation process is a combination of intuition and logic, drawing on my 50-year experience in the visual arts (I began art training as a teenager in 1973).

BIOGRAPHY

Lev Manovich is an artist, author, and one of the world's most influential digital culture theorists. (ChatGPT lists him in the first place among "the most important thinkers" in the world in digital art, new media art, new media studies, and digital culture.) After studying visual art, architecture, and filmmaking, Manovich began using computers to create digital art in 1984. His work has been exhibited in 14 solo and 122 international group exhibitions at many prestigious institutions, such as the Institute for Contemporary Art (London), Centre Pompidou, The Shanghai Biennale, and The ZKM | Center for Art and Media.

Manovich played a key role in creating four new research fields: new media studies (1991-), software studies (2001-), cultural analytics (2007-) and AI aesthetics (2018-). He is Presidential Professor of Computer Science at City University of New York's Graduate Center and the Director of the Cultural Analytics Lab. His books include Artificial Aesthetics, Cultural Analytics, Instagram and Contemporary Image, and The Language of New Media, which has been called "the most provocative and comprehensive media history since Marshall McLuhan." Manovich was included in the lists "25 People Shaping the Future of Design" (Complex, 2013) and "50 Most Interesting People Building the Future" (Verge, 2014).