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Phantom Captain: Art and Crowdsourcing

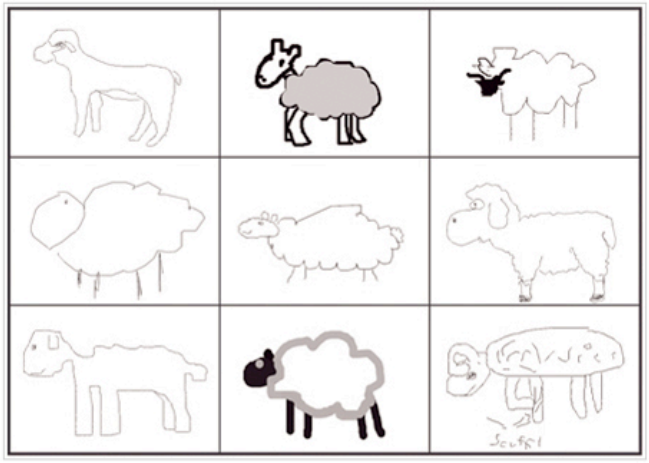
APEXART

- John Ewing -

Phantom Captain: Art and Crowdsourcing was curated by Andrea Grover, Founder and Executive Director of Aurora Picture Show in Houston, and includes projects by Allison Wiese, Davy Rothbart, Aaron Koblin and the collaborative duo Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July. According to Grover, *Wired* magazine writer Jeff Howe introduced the term crowdsourcing in 2006 "to describe a new form of corporate outsourcing to largely amateur pools of volunteer labor that 'create content, solve problems, and even do corporate R&D.'" Prime examples of crowdsourcing include the Web-based Wikipedia, eBay, Amazon and YouTube.

But is it art? That annoying question seems to hover around many contemporary art practices these days, particularly those described as "projects"—you know, a gallery, lots of scribbled notes, Polaroids pinned to a wall and a computer. More research than follow-through, more idea than object—the viewer "completes" the work, which increasingly feels like a sham.

So, I entered Grover's show with a clinched jaw, ready to *work*, prepared to *decide* whether crowdsourcing should be considered an art form...and then got caught up in the projects. The first was, yes, a bunch of "Polaroids" pinned to a wall—*Assignment #30: Take a picture of strangers holding hands*. But this excerpt from Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July's very successful ongoing Web-based project, *Learning to Love You More*, bears the crystalline beauty of something complex presented simply. Five stacked rows of photographs show fifty-three different pairs of people holding hands in fifty-three different locations. The uniformity of the compositions accentuates their subtle differences, particularly the variations in facial expressions and body language.



Aaron Koblin, *The Sheep Market*, 2006
Collaborative online drawings

The brilliance of *Learning to Love You More* (LTLYM) is the concept of the "assignment," a nostalgic throwback to grade school. Volunteer participants are given just enough positive instruction to prompt action but not squelch individual initiative and creativity. The resulting "reports" are consistently entertaining and ready-made to be presented in a collective format, be it Web-based or in a physical space. In this presentation, displaying Assignment #30's "reports" as a group allows viewers to compare and contrast individual efforts, expanding the resonance of the project.

Davy Rothbart's ongoing *Traveling Found Show* is drawn from his *Found Magazine*, which publishes photos, letters and scraps of paper found and submitted by a devoted cult readership. In this presentation, *Found* ephemera (with accompanying explanatory Post-its and letters) are pinned to a gallery wall in a random patchwork. Unlike LTLYM, the role of the intervening hand, or curator, is crucial to how the traveling piece is experienced. From the plethora of original material, a selection is made and arranged, setting up unique relationships that will likely never be repeated. A flyer for a lost black cat is situated near another for "Condoms and Cupcakes," an LGBT event on a Vermont university campus, which is near an expert landscape doodle on a Starbucks napkin. Elsewhere, a teenager's love note (and speculations by the finder) are displayed near a breathtakingly simple plea ("Can you help to bury me...any donations will help") scrawled on a scrap of yellow wrapping paper by "7 year old BJ," found in a Milwaukee park during a political rally.

The Sheep Market, Aaron Koblin's collection of 10,000 sheep doodles created by volunteers on a website of the same name, reduces the collective to a repeating image that is nevertheless unique. Presented here as a scrolling linear projection, the seemingly infinite parade of sheep is fascinating to watch as yet another scribbled iteration manages to improve, devolve or simply change the familiar puffy doodle. Likewise, Peter Edmunds *SwarmSketch: 6 Histories* collects online submissions. But, in this case, the project is a single image constructed from a thousand marks submitted by individuals, which are later accepted or rejected by the collective.

Lastly, the Houston-based artist Allison Wiese contributed *Artists' Cookbook*, an homage to one of the oldest forms of crowdsourcing and a fundraising favorite of local historical societies, Junior League groups and church auxiliaries. Presented along with a vintage cookbook browsing station (including MoMA's 1977 version), Wiese's project is displayed as a wall of laser-printed book proofs featuring recipes and artwork by some familiar Houston names. Kenneth Beasley submitted a recipe for "MASS: Mustard and Spinach Sandwich." Francesca Fuchs' "Chicken Renoir" comes with a folksy historical note and Eileen Maxson's "Fancy Beans for a Week" has a provocative "alternate ending."

Whether the role of the curator is horizontal, as in *Found Magazine*, or more vertical, as in *Learning to Love You More*, the potential for random contributions is what makes crowdsourcing an exciting and radical social phenomenon. Where the happenings of the '60s and '70s made it possible for a small audience to participate, the Internet has made collaborative projects available to an infinite number of participants. If engaging the work of a single artist yields some insight into the human condition, then sampling the psyches of many individuals at once might help us locate ourselves within the collective, a kind of psychological comfort derived from the surrounding hum. With that benefit in mind, deciding whether crowdsourcing projects constitute art seems oddly beside the point. Perhaps that's the hallmark of a new art form.