

Phantom Captain

APEX ART, NEW YORK, USA



At least since the 2004 US presidential election, the word 'outsourcing' has become not just a household term but a downright bad word, conjuring up images of worker insecurity, exploited labour pools and ever-increasing disparities in wealth. Curator Andrea Grover's recent exhibition at Apex Art may not sweeten your experience of trying to book a flight on United Airlines with a call centre agent located in Bombay, but it will make you reconsider the possibility that remote and scattered labour can still be meaningful. 'Phantom Captain: Art and Crowdsourcing' explored forms of outsourcing artistic labour to amateur, often anonymous and in some cases unwitting volunteer collaborators. The show featured examples of such 'crowdsourced' works, including a wall of excerpts from Davy Rothbart's Found Magazine, consisting entirely of found, anonymous ephemera – the kind of stuff you happen upon in the gutter or beneath the bushes in a car park; the stuff that only tells part of its story, be it amusing, heart-breaking or indecipherable. The magazine reprints 'love letters, birthday cards, kids' homework, to-do lists, ticket stubs, poetry on napkins, doodles – anything that gives a glimpse into someone else's life'. If Rothbart has recruited a 'crowd' to collect these glimpses, then it must comprise individuals with a dedication to this detritus because it is so profoundly affective and so endlessly generative of fantasy. Together with a disturbing note scrawled by a child who asks, 'Can you help bury me?', there were also photographs of people whose relationship is only suggested by a gesture or a pose. 'Richard, you will not win a game of pool today', reads a scrap pasted to the wall alongside dozens of others. Together they take on a refrigerator-door aesthetic. Included with each found item is the equally compelling field note appended by the individual who made the submission. One thing the crowd does well, the magazine suggests, is create an alternative form of history writing, whose authors are connected by the mysteriously serendipitous laws of chance.

In the June 2006 issue of Wired magazine, Jeff Howe coined the term 'crowdsourcing' to name the 'new pool of cheap labour: everyday people using their spare cycles to create content, solve problems, even do corporate R & D'. Whether or not we have heard the word before, Grover reminds us that most of us already participate in this work model. eBay uses us to stock, consume and patrol its market-place, and Amazon trusts that it can count on one consumer's purchasing patterns to ascertain, or perhaps even shape, another's habits. Indeed Amazon may have become 'Phantom Captain' for some of the readership it services – Grover borrows the term from Buckminster Fuller, who suggests that each of us is navigated from within by the same

machine-like consciousness, or 'captain'. Does Amazon make us, collectively, more or less well read? By encouraging consumers to post comments online, has it transformed consumers into an unpaid workforce of literary critics? If we tried to sketch by the same means – outsourcing each line to a different hand – would that make us more able to draw? Such is the guiding question at SwarmSketch.com, created by Peter Edmunds to function as an ongoing online canvas. Every week a popular search term – say, 'California Earthquake', 'Kids with Guns' or the more elusive 'Year 3000' – is chosen to become the sketch subject for the week, with visitors contributing to a group illustration. While they are invited to add only a short line segment to a drawing, they are also given the option of voting on the lines submitted by other users – art-making as a majority-rule community. In the resulting sketch a dark line tells you that a great number of users voted to keep it.

Grover cites artistic practices of the 1960s and '70s as a critical point of reference. Other antecedents include the yet more primitive form of crowdsourcing that takes place with the production of a cookbook, as exemplified by Allison Wiese's compendium of recipes entitled Artists' Cookbook. Grover's nod to an earlier era makes good sense here. There is a central idea at work, and one could say it behaves like a machine whose purpose is to produce art, or something like it. But the difference between this embrace of anonymity and the one that we know from the Vietnam War era is significant. 'Phantom Captain' suggests that, while labour may become ever-more alienated, and our authorship of it increasingly fractured, this may not be such a bad thing.

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