As I am writing this essay, I am also searching for extraterrestrial life. Boing—a free software platform for distributed computing using volunteer computer time—is running imperceptibly behind this Microsoft Word document. Along with 501,283 current online users in 227 countries, I am part of SETI@home—the now famous scientific experiment that uses Internet-connected computers to download and analyze radio telescope data in an effort to Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI). SETI is the most popular of “grid computing programs,” which employ the leisure time of the crowd to solve a complex problem.

While I’m not expecting a shout out from ET, I am curious about the art analog to this growing phenomenon of mass volunteer cooperation, or crowdsourcing.

Jeff Howe introduced the term crowdsourcing in his June 2006 Wired Magazine article, “The Rise of Crowdsourcing” 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.” Examples of online enterprises successfully built on crowdsourcing are abundant: eBay—which enlists users to stock a marketplace, consume from and police it; Amazon—which relies on users’ product reviews to sell to like-minded shoppers; and the more recent Threadless—a company that prints and police it; Amazon—which relies on users’ product reviews to sell to like-minded shoppers; and the more recent Threadless—a company that prints and sells user-generated t-shirt designs based on popular vote. In his 2002 book Smart Mobs, Howard Rheingold called these consumer-driven ratings “reputation systems” and indicated that for the moment (barring radical changes to telecommunica-
tions law) consumers have the power to create what they consume.

“Benign” words like “terrorism” and “E. Coli” have yielded formless squiggles, cartoonishly accurate illustrations arise from warm fuzzy terms like “pumpkin carving” or “panda bear.” The results are something akin to the unholy union of a Cy Twombly and a Willem de Kooning drawing, and a very compelling argument for the mob’s creative talents.

While collaborative drawing is one way to measure a crowd’s aptitude for creative consensus or collective unconscious, individual contributions that fuse by comparison also produce fascinating outcomes by virtue of the crowd’s general inability (or lack of desire) to follow simple directions. Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July's LearningToLoveYouMore.com is an online collaborative drawing project (web design by Yuri Ono) offers easy numbered assignments for anyone—artist or non-

artist—to complete and upload his or her results.
In Assignment #30: Take a picture of your parents kissing, everyone is an artist. It’s a good idea in theory, but in practice the puny sheep HIT was a disaster. As J.P. Guilford has predicted in Convergent and Divergent Thinking, 1967: “Convergent production is the creative generation of multiple answers. Divergent production is the creative generation of single answers.”

The Sheep Market hit is a participatory work of art. These artists are less interested in the titles of captains, but in the fringes, from skunkworks and start ups and even associations of amateurs. Especially associations of amateurs. Perhaps breakthroughs in art will come from the skunkworks, the noodlers, and the untrained crowd, too.


[1] Convergent vs. divergent production was defined by the American psychologist J. P. Guilford to distinguish different types of human response to a set problem.

[2] “Phantom Captain” is a chapter in R. Buckminster Fuller’s first book, 1929: Thedecorateadhouse, which lists sheep herding as a “phantom captain.”

“Helen loves me more than I love her” found by Casey C-P.

“Happy Couple” found by Hien, art critic. Chicago, Illinios.

LeaningLV.com/YouLook.com Assignment #40 submitted by Kimberly Saady, Richmond, VA.

“Noodler” found by Mark, 8-year-old. Chicago, Illinios.

“Noodler” found by Madeleine, 12-year-old. New York, New York.

“Noodler” found by Andrea Grover, 2006.

“Noodler” found by Allison Wiese, 2006, research image.


Assignment #30: Take a picture of your parents kissing.

Assignment #14: Write your life story in a cookbook.

Assignment #39: “Health Nut”

Assignment #1: Write Crystal, Hide guns, Pay Bills in advance, About college, Mail Dad’s Library Books, Find out about college, Pay Bills in advance, Turn in a “to-do list” retrieved from an empty shopping basket reading, “Turn in Library Books, Find out about college, Mail Dad’s shit, Pay Bills in advance, Write Crystal, Hide guns, Pack, and Get medication.”

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