PHANTOM CAPTAIN

Art and Crowdsourcing

Curated by **Andrea Grover**
Oct 18 - Nov 25, 2006

Jeff Howe, Peter Edmunds,
Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July,
Aaron Koblin, Davy Rothbart,
Allison Wiese

READING: Wed Nov 8, 6:30pm
Davy Rothbart with special guest Anvil

LECTURE: Wed Nov 15, 6:30pm
Jeff Howe on the rise of crowdsourcing

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cover image: Aaron Koblin, *The Sheep Market*, 2006,
10,000 sheep created by workers on Amazon's
Mechanical Turk (detail)

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As I am writing this essay, I am also searching for extraterrestrial life. Boinc—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.
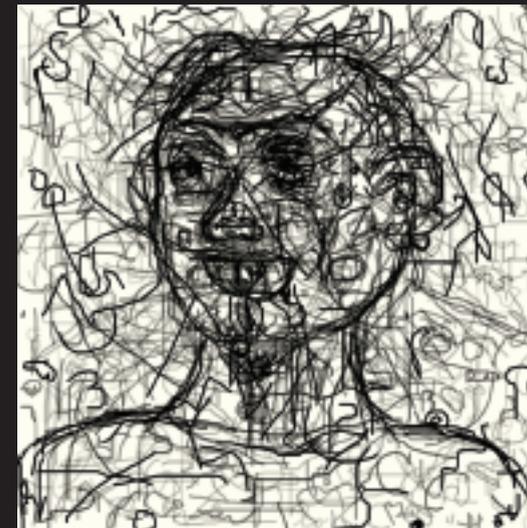
Jeff Howe introduced the term crowdsourcing in his June 2006 *Wired Magazine* article, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing" to describe a new form of corporate outsourcing to largely amateur pools of volunteer labor that "create content, solve problems, and even do corporate R & D." Examples of online enterprises 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 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 telecommunications law) consumers have the power to create what they consume.

If networked communication gives consumers newfound creative agency, can it also make the crowd more artistic? According to Clive Thompson in his 2004 *Slate Magazine* article "Art Mobs," mobs cannot think free form, or as he more aptly concludes, *mobs can't draw*. Thompson uses as example the experiments of British web developer Kevan Davis who provided the online platform for a mob to create a font or draw an image. While the crowd could approximate letters of the alphabet, they could not agree on how to draw a television or a face, two directives that yielded shapeless blobs. A more fruitful experiment along these lines is *SwarmSketch.com* created by Peter Edmunds. Each week, *SwarmSketch* randomly chooses a popular internet search term, which becomes the sketch subject for the week, with visitors contributing to a group illustration. Edmunds has improved the mob's draftsman-ship by restricting individual contribution to a single line,

Peter Edmunds, *Faces of Meth 10-24-2005,* online collaborative drawing from SwarmSketch.com

and then allowing users to vote on which line stays, goes, or gets lighter. While anxiety-triggering 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 function 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 web project (web design by Yuri Ono) offers easy numbered assignments for anyone—artist or non-artist—to complete and upload his or her results

(known as "reports"). In *Assignment #30: Take a picture of strangers holding hands*, the instructions are clearly stated: "Ask two or more people who are strangers to you and to each other to hold hands and then take a picture of them. Take the picture when they aren't smiling. Please make sure the picture includes the faces of the strangers."

LearningToLoveYouMore.com *Assignment #30: Take a Picture of Strangers Holding Hands* submitted by Kimberly Saady, Richmond, VA.

Despite the instructions, the majority of reports for *Assignment #30* include exactly two strangers with mixed smiles, and some don't include the strangers' faces, which might be cropped out or obscured from behind. These mistakes, deviances, or inspired interpretations of the same assignment are expansive responses to narrow specifications, and generally defy consensus. Divergent thought is after all one definition of creativity.[1]

Via assignments like *#14: Write your life story in a day* or *#39 Take a picture of your parents kissing*, LTLYM delivers on the spirit of togetherness implied in its name, inspiring telepathic fellowship among its worldwide contributors.

A similar bond exists among contributors to Davy Rothbart's *Found Magazine*, which turns average people into dumpster-diving connoisseurs of soiled and wadded-up scraps of paper. Entirely populated by the *objets trouvés* discovered by its thousands of loyal voyeurs, *Found Magazine* is dedicated to reprinting anonymous "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." Each found item is printed alongside field notes from the person submitting it, explaining the location and circumstances under which the item was discovered. The result has produced cult enthusiasm for both the magazine

and Davy's traveling public readings, in which he imagines and fills in the missing pieces of finds like 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."

With the oldest recorded cookbooks dating back to the 15th century, the tradition of sharing recipes is perhaps the most familiar form of crowdsourcing presented in the exhibit. Allison Wiese's *Artists' Cookbook* is based on the *1977 Museum of Modern Art Artists' Cookbook* by Madeleine Conway and Nancy Kirk, and composed of free "recipes" submitted by contemporary artists. Like LTLYM, *Artists' Cookbook* encourages divergent thinking among participants posed with the simple assignment: *Give me a recipe*.

In the 1979 documentary "Everyone is an Artist," Joseph Beuys is asked while he prepares dinner if peeling a potato is art. His response is "even the act of peeling a potato can be considered a work of art if it is a conscious act." In the spirit of Beuys' potato and Gordon Matta-Clark's 1970s Soho restaurant "FOOD," Allison imagines the raw ingredients of a recipe as artistic material, cooking as artistic process,

"Health Nut" Found by Morty Spitz, Chicago, Illinois

"Happy Couple" Found by Casey C-P

"It'll Never Work Out" Found by Susannah Felts, Chicago, Illinois

and the shared meal as performance. Culminating in the distribution of recipe pages and a shared potluck, *Artists' Cookbook* pays tribute to the Beuys-ian theory of social sculpture: Everyone should apply creative thinking to their own area of specialization, be it cooking or otherwise.

From specialization to rote labor, the 7,599 participants in Aaron Koblin's *The Sheep Market* were unclear of its purpose but nonetheless accepted the task to "Draw a sheep facing to the left" for $.02 (US) per sheep. In November 2005 Aaron posted this Human Intelligence Task (HIT) without explanation on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, or MTurk, a crowdsourcing site— named for the 18th century chess-playing automaton alleged to have beaten Benjamin Franklin and Napoleon—where corporations can list simple paid tasks that "people do better than computers," such as categorizing products, completing multiple choice surveys, transcribing, rating, etc.

While a good idea in theory, in practice the puny compensation and uncreative tasks have led to the declining use of the site. Aaron offered an unusually creative task to MTurkers and collected over 10,000 responses in 40 days. He writes, "*The Sheep Market* is a web-based artwork that appropriates the MTurk system to implicate thousands of workers in the creation of a massive database of drawings." Aaron's integrated drawing tool application allowed him additionally to create animations of the sheep being drawn.

At the conclusion of the sheep HIT, Aaron notified the workers that they had participated in an artwork, and that the sheep would be for sale as collectible stamps. He posted the stamps and statistics (like sheep per hour: 11; average wage: $.69/hour; average time spent drawing: 105 seconds) on the project's website,

TheSheepMarket.com. The MTurkers were mostly "hostile" according to Aaron, who was however satisfied with the ensuing lively discussion, which included threads like "They're selling our sheep!!!" and "Does anyone remember signing over the rights to the drawings?"
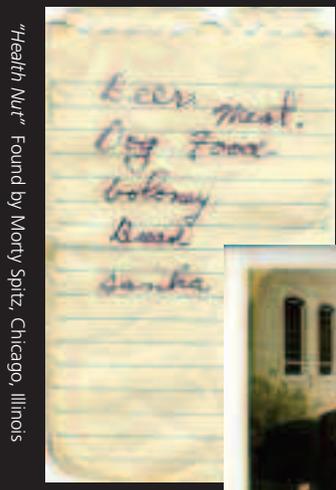

With the cooperative intention of projects such as these, crowdsourcing as a method of artistic production appears to be heir to the throne of 1960s and 70s happenings and participatory art. These artists are less interested in sole authorship and visibility—they are phantom captains[2]—and more in distributed creativity, gift economies, and other models that disrupt how we think about and assign value to art. As evidenced by grid computing programs like SETI, even the biggest supercomputers cannot compete with half-a-million networked home machines. And Howard Rheingold predicted in *Smart Mobs* that "key breakthroughs [in technology] won't come from established industry leaders, but from 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.

Andrea Grover, 2006.

[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. Convergent production uses deductive thinking to arrive at a single answer, while divergent production uses the creative generation of multiple answers.

[2] "Phantom Captain" is a chapter in R. Buckminster Fuller's first book, *Nine Chains to the Moon* (Fuller's metaphor that if all of humankind stood on each others' shoulders we could complete nine chains to the moon). He used the term to describe a sort of ghost in the machine concept of consciousness, and implied that all phantom captains are telepathically connected, especially when their actions are extended through the shared use of machines.

image above: Allison Wiese, *Artists' Cookbook*, 2006, research image