

ARTNEWS

SEPTEMBER 2014



ALL TOGETHER NOW:
ARTISTS AND
CROWDSOURCING

REAR WINDOWS:
PHOTOGRAPHY'S
PRIVACY PROBLEM

YUTAKA SONE'S
HOT TROPICS

WORKING THE CROWD

In galleries, public spaces, and online, artists are orchestrating pieces that can only be completed by you

BY TRENT MORSE

80





The early stages of
Pawel Althamer's
Draftsmen's Congress at
the New Museum, 2014.

For a week this past March, a 745-foot net stretched over the plaza that separates the Vancouver Convention Centre from some of the glass towers that dominate the city's skyline. At night, five high-definition projectors beamed digital animations of biomorphic forms onto the net, transforming it into a kind of cosmic jellyfish. The sight was glorious—even before hundreds of pedestrians gathered underneath the net and made changes to the visuals by touching their smartphone screens.

"A tap created a ripple, or you could draw a line. Things gravitated toward you while you were drawing—particles moved toward you," says new-media artist Aaron Koblin, who created the piece with sculptor Janet Echelman. "You could get a sense of what people around you were doing on their phones based on what you'd see in the sculpture." The phones also supplied an unearthly soundtrack. "Deep, bassy sounds came through big speakers set up around the plaza, and high-pitched sounds went through everybody's phones," Koblin adds.

Koblin and Echelman's colossal work, titled *Skies Painted with Unnumbered Sparks* and commissioned for the 30th anniversary of the TED Conference, joins a recent spate of artist-orchestrated projects—in museums, galleries, public spaces, and online—that can only be completed by audiences. This crowdsourced-art movement reflects a growing desire by artists and viewers to connect with each other in tangible, meaningful ways.

Crowdsourced art is about inclusiveness, turning formerly passive audiences into active creators and empowering people who aren't normally part of the art world. It also provides thousands of free (or cheap) man-hours to artists, enabling them to realize projects of stupendous magnitude. With a lot of crowdsourced art, "it would take one person 10,000 hours or a lifetime to create something like that on their own. It couldn't be done," says Koblin. "Crowdsourcing is creating something that's greater than the sum of its parts."

Moreover, it might just be the quintessential art form for our hyper-engaged era of social media and smart apps. In the digital realm, we expect to be able to affect the cultural products we consume. Everyone's a published critic, in one way or another, on Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. Through crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter, anybody with a few bucks can be a patron. Why shouldn't we all contribute to museum-grade artworks too?

An offshoot of social practice, crowdsourced art has roots in the communal idealism of the late 1950s and '60s, when Fluxus artists such as Allan Kaprow started staging Happenings and other interactive performances with the public. Fluxus member Yoko Ono was (and still is) a major progenitor of collaborating with the crowd, as is evident in her six-decade survey "Half-A-Wind

Show—A Retrospective," at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain.

"Half-A-Wind" includes several recordings of Ono's controversial *Cut Piece* (1964), a performance in which audience members snip off strips of the artist's clothing until she's naked on stage, and *Mend Piece* (1966/68), which consists of a shattered ceramic cup and a tube of glue. When confronting *Mend Piece*, "you can just contemplate the work, rebuild it in your mind, or reconstruct with your hands the broken pieces of a cup," says Álvaro Rodríguez Fominaya, the show's curator.

While those works were participatory, they weren't exactly crowdsourced. Ono's *Wish Tree* (1996/2014), on the other hand, requires museumgoers to add all the finishing touches. Participants write a wish, a hope, or a dream on a piece of paper and hang it from the branches of a tree installed in the museum. "For most members of the public, the tree embodies human traits, the tree becomes a listener. You can whisper to the tree, or you can write a message," Rodríguez says. "It is a powerful metaphor of what today's world is lacking, and in that sense it fills a gap in our consciousness."

Slightly less famous pioneers of crowdsourced art are also getting their due with fresh retrospectives. The postwar Japanese collective Gutai was crowdsourcing as early as the 1950s. Last year, the Guggenheim Museum in New York mounted the Gutai survey "Splendid Playground," which reconstructed Jirō Yoshihara's 1956 installation *Please Draw Freely*. That work, originally placed in a park in Japan, invited visitors to scribble with markers all over a freestanding wooden structure. It was decades ahead of its time and has only now found international recognition as a major work of socially engaged art. In Los Angeles, the late printmaker, activist, teacher, and Catholic nun Corita Kent held workshops with students to produce many of her Pop-inflected images and text pieces in the 1960s and '70s. She is currently the subject of a traveling exhibition organized by Skidmore College's Tang Teaching Museum that will head to the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in January.

SOME ARTISTS WHO USE CROWDSOURCING TODAY ARE channeling the educational leanings of Kent. Shinique Smith is known for her wild assemblages and wall paintings that meld Abstract Expressionism, Eastern calligraphy, graffiti and textiles. She says she usually works alone in her upstate New York studio. But ever since she crowdsourced students from Charles White Elementary School to make a sculpture consisting of "one crazy bundle of socks" for her 2013 show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, other museums have been asking her to collaborate with kids in their hometowns.



Skies Painted with Unnumbered Sparks, 2014, by Aaron Koblin and Janet Echelman.

“Crowdsourced art turns formerly passive audiences into active creators and empowers people who aren’t normally part of the art world.”

So for her recent exhibition at Michigan State University’s Broad Art Museum, Smith partnered with local teenagers to build “miniature works that they then curated into a miniature installation” to accompany her sizable pieces. “We talked about small things versus large things, macro versus micro, and accumulation in my work,” Smith says. She’s also planning to do “performance work involving sound and movement” with Boston-area students for her current show at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Other crowdsourced efforts bring together thousands of collaborators working with very few guidelines—and that’s where things can get ecstatically messy. Last year, Urs Fischer enlisted 1,500 volunteers to sculpt 308 tons of clay at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and the resulting lumpy, misshapen, strikingly immediate sculptures were shown in their unfired state at the museum. Then, earlier this year, Fischer placed a selection of the artworks in two New York City storefronts under the auspices of Gagosian Gallery.

Those works had been cast in bronze and painted to look like raw clay or precious metals, but retained the amateur vibrancy of the original renditions. Inside an abandoned Chase Bank downtown, Fischer put up a mermaid fountain, a huge Napoleonic bust, a statuette of a man having sex with a pig, and other replicas of the clay sculptures. In an uptown storefront on Park Avenue was a rowdy interpretation of the Last Supper, with rats, cigarette butts, beer cans, pizza slices, and fast-food fries on the table. Many of the sculptures contained sneaker treads and handprints—traces left by Fischer’s collaborators that are now permanently enshrined in bronze.

During Paweł Althamer’s recent survey, “The Neighbors,” at the New Museum in New York, the Polish artist offered his audiences the entire fourth floor, where they could use paint, glitter, and other materials to mark up the temporary walls, the floors and even the elevator doors.

The room-filling piece was called *Draftsmen’s Congress* (2012/14). “There were not any strict parameters,” says New Museum curator Gary Carrion-Murayari. “The public could paint and draw whatever they liked, could paint over whatever they liked, or re-imagine what was already there.” And that they did—painting layer upon layer of cartoony faces, hearts, cats, phrases, and whatnot. Chunks of the walls were later distributed to the public, completing the cycle of egalitarianism.

Althamer also held workshops with homeless men from the nearby Bowery Mission during his show, and “together, they decided to make a group self-portrait in parts,” Carrion-Murayari says. “Each individual started with a cast of their own face and then chose various materials and processes to create incredibly inventive renderings of their own bodies.” One man made himself into an angel, another gave his self-portrait a flag made of money, and another reclined his likeness on a park bench. The life-size sculptures were displayed for one day on the sidewalk between the New Museum and the Bowery Mission, while bands performed and tourists snapped photos. The vibe was electrifying, as was the energy surrounding *Draftsmen’s Congress*. The psychological outcome of Althamer’s collaborations was a sense of interconnectedness and the pride that comes from expressing oneself. It felt almost cultlike.

BECAUSE CROWDSOURCED ART CAN REQUIRE HUGE numbers of people, Internet artists have become some of its most prolific practitioners. Even the word crowdsource, coined by Jeff Howe in *Wired* magazine in 2006, has techy origins. In his article, Howe wrote about e-commerce companies that “tap the latent talent of the crowd. The labor isn’t always free, but it costs a lot less than paying traditional employees. It’s not outsourcing; it’s crowdsourcing.” One such enterprise is the Amazon-owned site



Jirō Yoshihara's *Please Draw Freely*, 1956.



COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Mechanical Turk, which Howe defines as “a Web-based marketplace that helps companies find people to perform tasks computers are generally lousy at.”

Koblin, who is now creative director of data arts at Google, beta-tested Mechanical Turk while he was a grad student at UCLA, and he has since used the site for several web works. Among the earliest was *The Sheep Market* (2006), for which Koblin asked Mechanical Turk users to simply “draw a sheep facing to the left.” Workers were paid two cents per sketch and were not told what their pictures would be used for. Koblin collected 10,000 sheep drawings of varying skill levels in 40 days and sold them online for \$20 per jiggit, a sheep-farming term for 20 heads of livestock.

By employing the symbolically loaded motif of a sheep and reselling the crowdsourced works at a huge markup, Koblin was knocking the ethics of Mechanical Turk, which he calls a “utopian vision that became kind of a dystopic service,” because of its sometimes pitiful pay and nontransparency. He adds of *The Sheep Market*, “It was a critical art project inciting two reactions. The one from the workers was, ‘This smarmy capitalist person is selling our sheep drawings.’ And the reaction from viewers was, ‘This is so adorable.’”

Koblin has gone on to construct ever-more ambitious artworks with crowds. In 2012, he and Chris Milk launched the web piece *This Exquisite Forest*, wherein each participant uploads a short animation that branches out thematically from the one before it—like a 21st-century upgrade of the Surrealist game “exquisite corpse.” Tate Modern in London projected the constantly growing film inside the museum in 2012 and ’13. “Olafur Eliasson and Julian Opie started the first trees on the website,” Koblin says. “And so people could collaborate with world-famous artists and see their work on the wall of Tate Modern.”

Both the algorithmic nature of the Internet and its potential to amass distant collaborators allow artists to execute very big ideas. Using Instagram and Twitter, Ono has collected photos of smiling faces from every continent except Antarctica for her ongoing *#smilesfil* campaign. And Eliasson and Ai Weiwei accumulated tens of thousands of crowdsourced drawings within weeks of introducing their web project, *Moon*, last year. For *Borges: The Complete Works* (2012), Daniel Temkin and Rony Maltz inserted every literary word published

Daniel Temkin and Rony Maltz’s interactive word-search puzzle *Borges: The Complete Works*, 2012, projected on a wall in Manhattan.



A still from *Emily's Video*, 2012, by Eva and Franco Mattes. Participants were recorded while watching “the worst video ever.”

88

by Jorge Luis Borges into an online word-search puzzle, in English and in Spanish. People could find and circle the words on a website, and the results were projected in real time at the 3LD Art and Technology Center in Lower Manhattan. (It will be restaged at the Dumbo Arts Festival in Brooklyn later this month.) Temkin says that creating the massive puzzle “was actually easy. The hard part was the interactive element—to get it so that the circles would show up on the collective board.”

CROWDSOURCED ART HAS ITS SINISTER SIDE TOO, especially when individuals are sourced without permission. During their recent exhibition at Postmasters gallery in New York, artist couple Eva and Franco Mattes displayed *The Others* (2011), a slideshow of 10,000 photographs and homemade music pilfered from strangers' personal computers. “Technically, the act did not involve any hacking,” the Mattes told *ARTnews* in an e-mail. “By chance, we found a software glitch that gives you complete access to some people’s computers over the Internet.”

The slideshow features numerous mundane photos of friends posing together and drinking beer, as well as the occasional nipple shot, line of cocaine, or catastrophic flood “We didn’t select or edit the images, not even their

sequence. Our only intervention is in the speeding up and slowing down of the slideshow” to simulate how a person flips through photos in real life, the Mattes said.

The ultra-voyeuristic exhibition, titled “By Everyone, For No One, Everyday,” also included the Mattes’ 2012 piece *Emily's Video*. That film presented various people’s expressions of shock, horror, disgust, or amusement as they viewed a presumably disturbing video, which has since been destroyed. “The viewers are random volunteers who replied to our online call to watch ‘the worst video ever.’ If you’d answer, a girl named Emily—our assistant—would come to your home and show you the video, filming your reaction with a webcam,” the Mattes explained. Even the online press release for the show was crowdsourced, as a handful of paid amateurs read the release aloud in front of their computers’ cameras. All the hesitations and mispronunciations were left in.

“In many of our works, we use the audience as raw material, we need an audience to see and react to the given work, we need their reactions for the work to exist,” the Mattes said. “Duchamp once said, ‘It is the viewer who makes the work,’ and we took that very literally.” ■

Trent Morse is senior editor of ARTnews.