The Dance Between Agency and Control

Creative collaboration in the twenty-first century
Written by Danielle Ezzo

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An artist's talent is often measured by what is colloquially recognized as "artistic genius". The archetype is clear: the artist is a master of craft with an unmistakable vision, obsessive by nature, and dependent on no one; their mind alone is the spark from which all perfection stems. The implication is that true ingenuity is the wellspring of the individual, not the collective. However, this rationale overlooks the assistants, teams, benefactors, institutions, and communities that more commonly raise these artists up. How we conceive of artistic talent says more about how we, as a society, conceptualize the origin of creativity and how it is fostered.

In the case of Pindar Van Arman's *CloudPainter*, software he developed and refined over the past decade that teaches a robot to paint, the artist directly challenges this notion of individual genius. *CloudPainter's* function is two-fold, the first being the waltz between machine and man. As the last eighty years have demonstrated, machines extend the artist's capacity. Human and robot collaboration began with *CYSP 1* in 1953, a cybernetic sculpture engineered by Nicholas Schöffer (1912-92) to be easily excited by the color blue.[1] *CrowdPainter*, distinguished from *CloudPainter* in so much as it allows strangers with an internet connection to access Van Arman's software and contribute to a painting, goes a step further not only by augmenting the artist's labor, but by outsourcing aesthetic choice entirely to a group of willing participants. It is here that the phenomena of genius, a rare gift accessible only to the individual, is deflated when that gift is handed off to the masses.

The lineage of crowdsourcing within an art historical context began in the beginning of the early twentieth century with Dada and Surrealism. Their mission made a political stance against capitalism through acts of "anti-art". Such acts first occurred in Zurich during 1916 with the inception of the Cabaret Voltaire, where 'soirees were often raucous events with artists

experimenting with new forms of performance, such as sound poetry and simultaneous poetry'.[2.]
Later, in 1925 Paris, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and André Breton (1896-1966) devised the Exquisite Corpse, a game in which each participant takes turns writing or drawing on a sheet of paper to create a Frankenstein of a finished work of art. Although slightly different in nature to what we know as outsourcing today, these served as a prototype of what would come.

In the 1960s, the idea of crowdsourcing gained popularity once again with the Fluxus movement, comprised primarily of musicians and performance artists like John Cage (1912-92), Yoko Ono (b.1933), and Nam June Paik (1932-2006), who expanded on the premise of collaboration and play as the primary mechanism of art making. However, its Jirō Yoshihara (1905-72), the leader of the Japanese group Gutai, in the installation *Please Draw Freely* (1956) that bares the most genealogical resemblance with *CrowdPainter*. Like *CrowdPainter*, *Please Draw Freely* set up a canvas for participants to directly engage with. Unlike *CloudPainter*, Yoshirara's work was a reaction to 'the extreme limitations imposed upon artistic expression in Japan during World War Two, including a dramatic shortage of materials'. [3] Van Arman never focused on the scarcity of resources, but on engaging tools that allowed him to paint more efficiently. This was his way of keeping up with and connecting with his children, of whom he had started to paint portraits.

A flurry of participatory art came into being in the late 90s and early 2000s, most notably including *YouDraw* (1999), created by Louis Paschoud, Peter Holberton, and Ally Cane, a project that commemorated earth's population reaching 6 billion people by collating 500,000 figure drawings into a single project. That same year Aaron Koblin (b.1982) created *The Sheep Market*, utilizing Amazon's mechanical turk system to pay workers to draw sheep facing a particular direction, resulting in a web-based gallery featuring a collection of 10,000 unique drawings.[4] Yet, these artworks depart from *CrowdPainter* in that they create archives from multiple participants, whereas *CrowdPainter's* novelty exists in the collaboration occurring on a single canvas.

Outsourcing has its benefits. In *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004), James Surowiecki argues that the hive mind may offer a wider and deeper range of understanding that, if synthesized in a productive way, can lead us more rapidly toward progress. He states 'Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise.'[5] However, for a crowd to work toward a common goal, its participants require some degree of alliance. If not, like a worked over wall of graffiti where the spray paint of many artists overlaps with differing styles and intents, each will inevitably compete for centre stage.

In 2015, during one of *CrowdPainter's* public painting sessions, the exercise became a perfect example of how crowds can present challenges when Van Arman's software system fell vulnerable to hackers. In the reference photo at the top of the screen, onlookers witnessed procedural ascii symbols, structured patterns created using the repetition of simple keyboard letters, overriding other participants' work. It is true that an unproductive crowd with the right motivation can easily become an unruly mob. To muddy matters further, participants began adding crude drawings of genitalia across the base image, a portrait of Van Arman's son, as well as scrawling political propaganda, and swastikas.

The obvious challenge or thrill of outsourcing creative labor (depending on how you look at it) lies in making peace with the lack of control you have as an artist. One can only frame processes of creation for the participants in a way that will encourage a particular kind of engagement. Van Arman monitored the cyber raids in the creation of the work, which he narrates in a time-lapse video of the painting on Youtube, acknowledging the nature of the content: 'Someone has actually reversed engineered the commands we send to our robot…', he continues, 'They are no longer using our interface to add it. If it wasn't for the hate speech I would be impressed.'[6] There are obvious challenges in giving away the power of choice one have as an artist, but it is clear that creative genius as an illusive phenomena ordained only to the individual artist is something that we can debunk. The power of the artist exists in all people, under certain circumstances, and even the masses can elevate a work of art.

1. Kadenze Inc., *A Survey of Robots in Art History* (K Blog online: https://blog.kadenze.com/creative-technology/a-survey-of-robots-in-art-history/, 2018)

2. Liam Klenk, *The Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich: The Birthplace of Dada* (Theater Art Life Blog: https://www.theatreartlife.com/lifestyle/the-cabaret-voltaire-in-zurich-the-birthplace-of-dada/, 2022)

3. Elephant Art, *Image of the Day (Elephant Magazine:* https://elephant.art/iotd/yoshihara-jiroplease-draw-freely-1956%E2%81%A0%E2%81%A0/, 2022)

4. Kevin Holmes, Creativity Bytes: A Brief Guide To Crowdsourced Art (Vice: https://www.vice.com/en/article/xyvmwd/creativity-bytes-a-brief-guide-to-crowdsourced-art, 2022)

5. James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds (Random House, Inc: Anchor Books, 2005) pp. Introduction XIX*

6. Pindar Van Arman, *Cyber Raid of Crowdsourced Painting Robot? (Youtube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OV5FRxAjJn4&t=1s*, 2015)*