

# MECHANICAL OLYMPICS

*Artist as Startup – Web Application as Cultural Intervention*  
College Art Association Annual Conference  
Los Angeles, 2009

*hi. my name is xtine*

*1. How am I a startup?*



# *Artist as startup*

*1. How am I a startup?*



*Artist [posing] as startup*

1. *How am I a startup?*



*x*time [*poses*] as <sup>entrepreneur</sup>~~startup~~

Specifically, I acted as both an artist and a bit of an entrepreneur as the creator and organizer of the Mechanical Olympics.



## The Mechanical Olympics

is an ongoing interactive media spectacle that integrates the following communities: Amazon's Mechanical Turk website, YouTube, and the blog [MechanicalOlympics.org](http://MechanicalOlympics.org).

## 2. Explain the Mechanical Olympics



In short, the project creates an interactive version of the Olympic Games for the masses, where anyone can *perform* the Olympics and everyone can vote on the gold medal winners.

2. Explain the Mechanical Olympics



*x*tine[*posing*] as <sup>entrepreneur</sup>~~startup~~

*On mturk.com I hired workers to make videos. For this web project, I was an employer as part of my art practice.*



These are a few HITs  
I copied from [mturk.com](https://mturk.com)

HIT: Evaluate Search Results

Time allotment: 10 minutes

Reward: \$.02 per HIT





# These are a few HITs I copied from mturk.com

HIT: Write a short review on music,  
books, movies, restaurants,  
destinations, or anything you choose!

Time allotment: 60 minutes

Reward \$.30 per HIT



# These are a few HITs I copied from mturk.com

HIT: Label images of device

Time allotment: 2 hours

Reward: \$.05

(Mturk.com, accessed on February 6, 2009)



mturk.com could be  
considered a platform for  
*crowdsourcing*, a 21<sup>st</sup>  
Century networked  
version of outsourcing.

*“Crowdsourcing” was coined by Jeff Howe in a June 2006 issue of Wired Magazine*

## *2. Explain the Mechanical Olympics*



However, employers are using mturk.com not to work in collaboration on groundbreaking research and development tasks where the “strength of weak ties” leads to successful innovation. Instead, as Jeff Howe (2006) wrote, “just about anyone possessing basic literacy can find something to do on Mechanical Turk”

(<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>, Accessed February 8, 2009).



So...just before the Summer Olympics last year, I thought, *wouldn't it be great to hire the Mechanical Turk workers to make art?*



# Here is what my HIT looked like:

HIT: Create and Post a YouTube Video

Description: Mechanical work can be creative

Keywords: Olympics, Performance, Creative,  
Fun, Silly, Video, YouTube

Time allotment: 24 hours

Reward: \$3



## Directions:

1. Create a video of someone performing the role of a [gender] from [country] competing in the [specific event]

*What does this mean? Well, it's up to you!*

In the video you can do anything that you think a [performer] would do during the competition.

2. The video should be between 25 and 60 sec.
3. The performer should wear the logo/signage.
4. Post the video to YouTube & submit your link.

## *2. Explain the Mechanical Olympics*



This is when we watched a 2 minute video clip that illustrates the project.

You can see it online at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ3Q6Y6Ylqo>



### 3. Questions about this art practice

#### 3.1 Where is the art?



1.

The *art* is at the intersection of  
the idea of the project  
{xtine as conceptual artist or entrepreneur?}  
and the videos made by the  
Mechanical Turk workers

### 3. Questions about this art practice

#### 3.1 Where is the art?



1.

So, the *art* is some combination of  
my own thought

{xtine as conceptual artist}

and digital labor that I bought with US dollars

{xtine as entrepreneur}

### 3. Questions about this art practice

#### 3.1 Where is the art?



1.

The *art* is a result of participants following a set of instructions (not quite Weiner or LeWitt, but a link is made to conceptual art)

{xtine as conceptual artist}

The *art* is also a result of a massive amount of organization and communication

{xtine as entrepreneur}

3. Questions about this art practice

3.2 The relationship to art history



2.

The *art* is a result of participants following a set of instructions (not quite Weiner or LeWitt, but a link is made to conceptual art)

{xtine as conceptual artist}

3. Questions about this art practice

3.2 The relationship to art history



2.

Lucy Lippard defines conceptual art,  
loosely,  
as “work in which the idea is paramount and the  
material form is secondary, lightweight,  
ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious  
and/or ‘dematerialized’” (vii).

(Lippard, L. *Six Years*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press 1973.)

3. Questions about this art practice

3.2 The relationship to art history



2.

Sol LeWitt's dictum,  
“the conceptual artist merely catalogues the  
consequences of his  
[or her]  
premises” (46)  
is extremely relative.

(Marzona, D. *Conceptual Art*. Germany: Taschen 2005.)

### 3. Questions about this art practice

#### 3.2 The relationship to art history



2.

*A This Way Brouwn*, a fax directing a wall drawing from LeWitt, and a postcard from On Kawara are included on the next slides. Events by George Brecht or participatory works such as James Collins' *Introduction Pieces* are also inspirational.

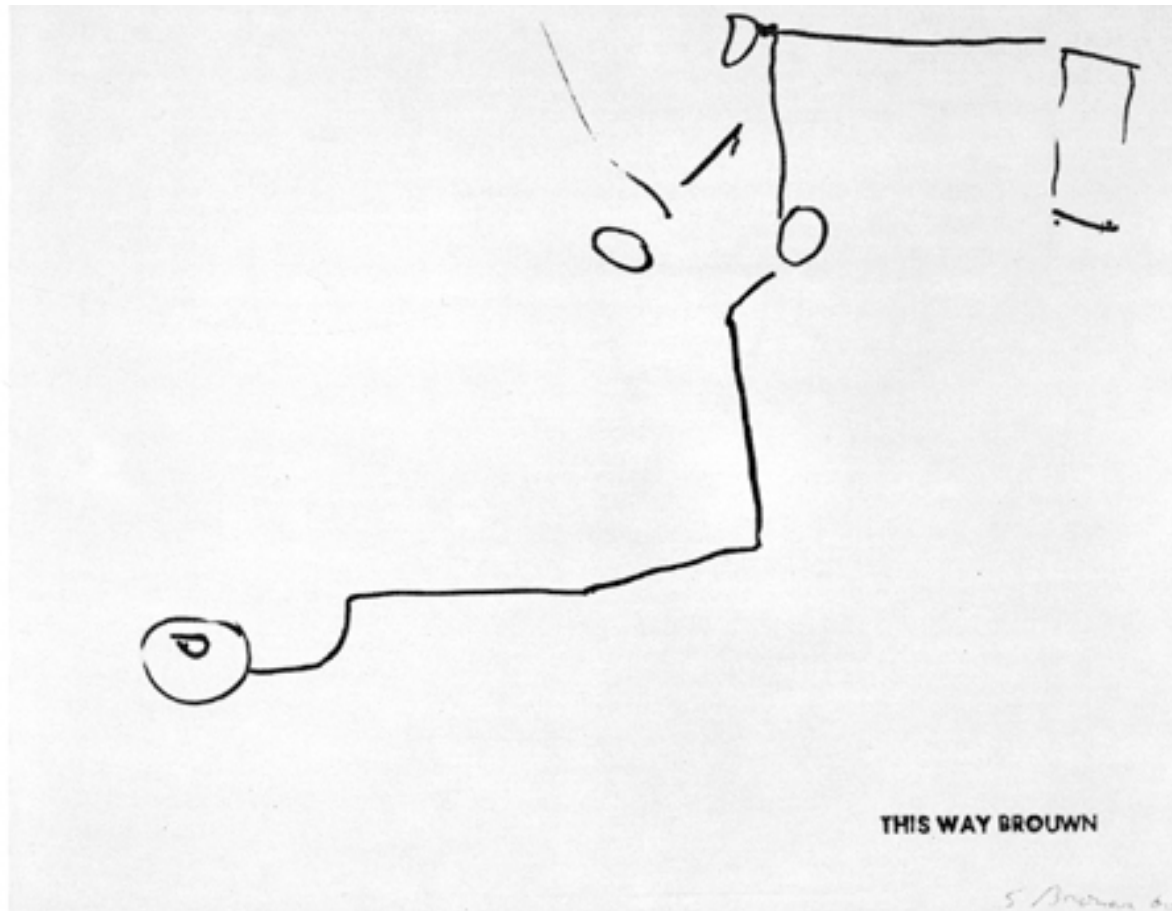
(Images that follow...totally Google-searched...are being used *fairly* in this setting)

### 3. Questions about this art practice

#### 3.2 The relationship to art history



2.



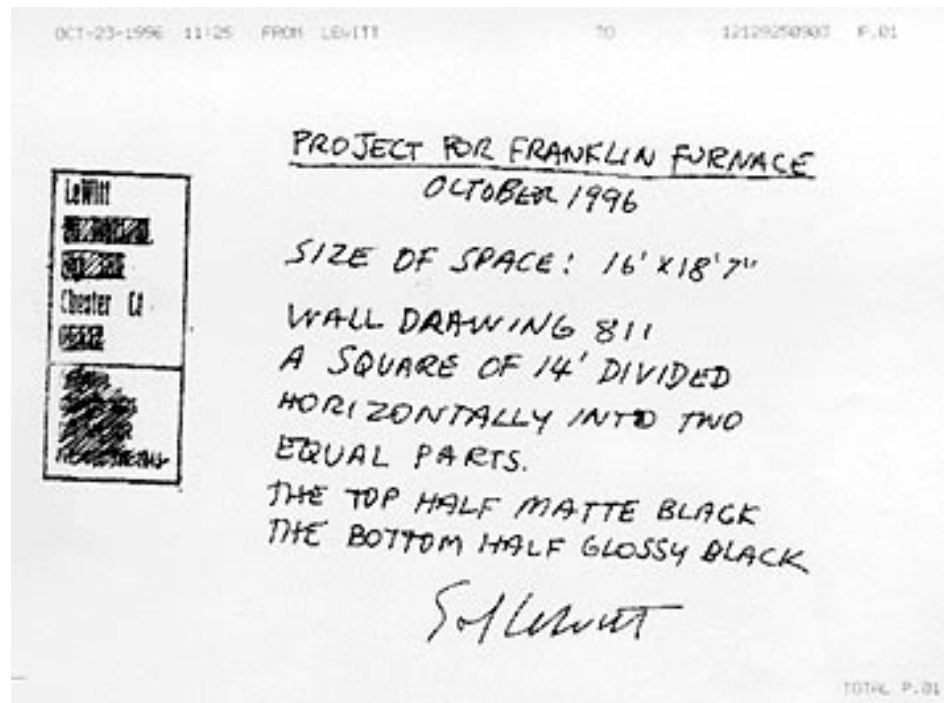
Stanley Broun, early 1960s



3. Questions about this art practice  
3.2 The relationship to art history



2.



Sol Lewitt, this one is from 1996 but it could have happened a lot sooner

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.2 The relationship to art history



2.



On Kawara, *I Got Up At* series

3. Questions about this art practice  
segue



*between conceptual art and the panelists' web practices*

Conceptual artists formed a relationship between  
their (dematerialized art object/non-object/  
communications and so on)

projects or experiments

&

models of power

within the system of the  
art academy or institution

3. Questions about this art practice  
segue



*between conceptual art and the panelists' web practices*

Our practices as 21<sup>st</sup> Century, post-web-two-  
point-oh artists (sorry) forms a relationship

between our *immaterial*

projects or experiments

&

models of power

within the system of the  
consumer culture on the web

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.3 Immaterial labor



3.

The *art* is also a result of a massive amount of organization and communication

{xtine as entrepreneur}

Another way to think about the artist as startup or entrepreneur, is that entrepreneurs are now hiring a different kind of workforce. That is, the nature of labor has changed.

3. Questions about this art practice

3.3 Immaterial labor



3.

*Entrepreneur*  
founder  
leader  
idea-person  
organizer  
financial risk taker  
ambitious  
opportunistic (capitalist market)  
investor (time/money)  
in the business (networker)

Media and cultural  
*production*  
is the  
new global  
*commodity.*

### 3. Questions about this art practice

#### 3.3 Immaterial labor



3.

*Entrepreneur* *Artist*  
accounts for decentralized,  
networked employees providing  
acts of  
*communication*  
in lieu of  
*goods*

founder  
leader  
idea person  
organizer  
financial risk taker  
ambitious  
opportunistic (capitalist market)  
investor (time/money)  
in the business (networker)

creator  
developer  
idea person & practitioner  
organizer  
social risk taker  
ambitious  
opportunistic (art market – also capitalist)  
investor (time, just time)  
in the business (of art-making)

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.3 Immaterial labor



3.

# *Entrepreneur*

founder  
leader  
idea-person  
organizer  
financial risk taker  
ambitious  
opportunistic (capitalist market)  
investor (time/money)  
in the business (networker)



# *Artist*

creator  
developer  
idea-person & practitioner  
organizer  
social risk taker  
ambitious  
opportunistic (art market – also capitalist)  
investor (time. just time)  
in the business (of art-making)





3. Questions about this art practice

3.3 Immaterial labor



3.

*Immaterial labor*  
accounts for decentralized,  
networked employees providing  
acts of  
*communication*  
in lieu of  
*goods*

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.3 Immaterial labor



3.

*Immaterial labor*

“is defined as the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (133).

(Lazzarato, Maurizio. “Immaterial Labor” in *Radical Thought In Italy*. Virno and Hardt, eds. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1996.)

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.3 Immaterial labor



3.

“The split between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience, is simultaneously transcended within the ‘labor process’” (134).

(Lazzarato, Maurizio. “Immaterial Labor” in *Radical Thought In Italy*. Virno and Hardt, eds. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1996.)

*3. Questions about this art practice*  
*3.4 Tools of change?*



4.

When the web is the final destination for a project, and the tools to make the project are digital, the communication effort is like the type of communication effort made by entrepreneurs such as Larry Page and Sergey Brin (Google), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim (YouTube), and so on.

*3. Questions about this art practice*  
*3.4 Tools of change?*



4.

In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, conceptual artists made dematerialized works – events, happenings, drawings, recordings, maps, postcards, and so on, the works were often non-art-objects, or at least, non-Art-objects (with an intentional upper-case A).

Many of these art practices and non-objects were meant to exist and/or intervene in everyday life.

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.4 Tools of change?



4.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and throughout, so far, all of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a large portion of labor can be articulated as *immaterial*.

This project, like many web projects, is meant to exist and/or intervene in everyday life *online*.

*3. Questions about this art practice*  
*3.4 Tools of change?*



4.

A common theme in my web art practice is to use the network to share information in a way that promotes education, independence and interpretation. Basically, I'm interested in challenging consumer trends online. For me, the web is an arena for a practice that can both practical and playful.

*3. Questions about this art practice*  
*3.4 Tools of change?*



4.

The Mechanical Olympics offered the workers a creative and physical alternative to the typical HITs placed by requestors. Independent thinking and interpretation is seen in their videos, where the workers translate athletic events to visual performances by swimming through air, hurdling over a cane, or playing hockey with brooms.



*3. Questions about this art practice*  
*3.4 Tools of change?*



4.

Since I identify as an artist and not so much as an  
entrepreneur

(I'm not interested in seeing the project return  
money on my investment...

though you could argue this presentation is a  
form of cultural currency)

the project was successful as soon as the first  
interpretive video was submitted.

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.4 Tools of change?



4.

The changing nature of labor relates to the project directly, as workers were paid to generate the videos, without which the *art* would be difficult or impossible to locate.

*3. Questions about this art practice*  
*3.4 Tools of change?*



4.

But...my role in the project, as  
organizer, blog creator, and employer is  
also a laborious activity.

The Mechanical Olympics becomes an  
ideological product.

3. Questions about this art practice  
3.4 Tools of change?



4.

As the developer of this *product* I  
suppose I could be rendered an  
entrepreneur (*posing as an artist?*).

#### *4. A couple of debatable conclusions*



Don't all artists pose as entrepreneurs?

We all need an audience and find ourselves sending email blasts, press releases, or posting to blogs and lists to create awareness of our ideas, projects and practices.

#### *4. A couple of debatable conclusions*



Digital tools, especially those that interact with the web – sites, applications, plug-ins, and so on, can not escape their context of participation.

The very reason for which a viewer/participant is even available, most of the time, has nothing to do with our work. So it is important for us to think of ourselves as interventionists, conceptual artists, or situationists. *It probably also doesn't hurt to think of ourselves as entrepreneurs.*



*Thank you.*

MechanicalOlympics.org

*xtine keeps all of her work at [missconceptions.net](http://missconceptions.net)*