

# SwarmSketch

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## ABSTRACT

*SwarmSketch* is an online participatory art system where users contribute to the drawing of a collective sketch. By strictly limiting the agency of each individual user an original aesthetic has emerged. The project is available at <http://swarmsketch.com>.

## DESCRIPTION

*SwarmSketch* is an ongoing online canvas that explores the aesthetics of highly distributed design. The aim is not to create the prettiest or most accurate image, rather it endeavors to produce an image that can be said to have been authored by the collective. *SwarmSketch* is a web interface that allows users to contribute a small amount of line and vote on the line contributed by others. Different users' contributions are placed on a common drawing plane so that each image contains hundreds of lines from hundreds of different users.

*SwarmSketch* is fuelled by high quantity, low involvement online participation. It relies on the assumption that the majority of users of participatory art are looking to contribute in a positive fashion, and that it is the minority that contributes negatively. There are two ways in which users can contribute to *SwarmSketch*; drawing and voting. On each visit the user is given one hundred pixels of line and fifty votes. Once they have contributed their line they are sequentially presented with a random line and prompted for what opacity they think it should be. Forcing users to vote on a random line instead of having them select the line that they would like to vote on makes it far more difficult for a single user to have a noticeable effect on the image.

Sketch topics are randomly selected from a regularly updated database of popular search terms. In this way, the collective is sketching what the collective thought was important each week. The automatic selection of sketch topics even further marginalises the role of the author, who has no input into the ongoing functioning of the project. Once a sketch reaches one thousand lines a new topic is



Figure 1. Example sketch from SwarmSketch

randomly selected and a new sketch begins.

The pencil sketch is a stylistic interpretation of an idea, often not fleshed out in detail it can be an indicative outline of a more detailed mental image. These attributes of the humble pencil sketch carry over to *SwarmSketch*. It also draws on the familiar analogy of the sketchpad because the inaccurate and frantic nature of the sketchpad is appropriately forgiving of the varied user input that the system receives. Stray lines from disagreeing contributors are reminiscent of stray lines from poorly executed pen strokes.

*SwarmSketch* is an extreme example of participatory art that harnesses the vast connectivity of the internet to push the boundaries of what has been possible in this field. Each sketch embodies the input from approximately one thousand individuals and twelve thousand user interactions.

A gallery of all the sketches so far can be found at <http://swarmsketch.com/browse/>.

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