Ten Thousand Cents a picture of cheap online labor

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A penny can go a long way on the Internet.

Aaron Koblin makes that point and questions the ethics of cheap online labor with tenthousandcents.com art that he jokingly refers to as "the world's largest distributed forgery project."

Koblin diced a US 100 dollar bill into ten thousand itty-bitty pieces and used Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to contract an equal number of people to hand draw recreations of individual bits.

He paid each of them a cent for the work and didn't reveal the bigger picture. Koblin put the drawn pieces together.

"It looks pretty much like a 100-dollar bill," Koblin said. "But if you look closely, the individuals come out. Some are drawing smiley faces, others stick figures ..."

A giant version of the artwork has been displayed at museums and expositions.

The project earned Koblin a spot among finalists for South By Southwest Interactive awards being given out Sunday night to people that judges think are building the best new websites or online trends.

Koblin sells copies of the art bill for, poetically, 100 dollars each with the money going to a One Laptop Per Child program created to get low

cost [laptop computers](#) to children in poor parts of the world.

The artist says the donation is meant to help a worthy project while highlighting the irony that poor children linking to the Internet courtesy of OLPC machines may be bolstering a cheap online labor force.

"It's a bit tongue-in-cheek with part of it started by my mixed emotions," Koblin said.

"MTurk is the natural progression of capitalism in the mechanical world, but is also alienating. There is absolutely no looking out for the individual."

MTurk is an [Internet marketplace](#) for hiring people to do small "[human intelligence](#) tasks" that computers can't accomplish easily, such as identifying people in pictures or musicians on CD recordings.

[Amazon](#) markets the site as "Artificial [artificial intelligence](#)."

Koblin, whose day job is technology lead at Google's creative lab, said he was working at Yahoo! when he embarked on his first MTurk artistic experiment called Mechanical Sheep.

He paid people two cents each to draw a sheep facing left. The works remain online at thesheepmarket.com, where visitors can click on members of the flock to see videos of images taking shape.

Koblin picked sheep because of their role as the first farm animals cloned and selectively bred for wool and other uses aside from food.

He said he also saw similarities between herding sheep in the real world and online labor at MTurk.

"There are a lot of parallels between how I first saw Mechanical Turk working and sheep, of people being sheep," Koblin said. "I wondered how I would feel."

Koblin said the choice was also influenced by a character in the book The Little Prince that concludes an ideal drawing of a sheep is an empty box in which people can imagine the animal for themselves.

"It is about thinking creatively, and the obvious connotation of being a follower," Koblin said.

Koblin's latest project involved dicing the song "Daisy Bell," which became a US hit in 1961, into pieces and hiring people on MTurk to separately replicate the sounds they heard.

He bumped the online pay up to six cents per person and hired voices from 71 countries.

Koblin picked the tune because it was the first tune sung in a synthesized voice by a computer, a fact played upon in the classic science fiction film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

The result of the audio art project can be heard online at www.bicyclebuiltfortwothousand.com.

"It's horrible, but fascinating," said Koblin's creative lab colleague Valdean Klump.

Koblin describes the reassembled song as sounding "like a pack of demonic gremlins."

"In reality, we've moved through artificial intelligence to this outsourced network of human brains," Koblin said on the eve of the SXSW web

awards. "I wanted to re-synthesize the song through human voices."

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