

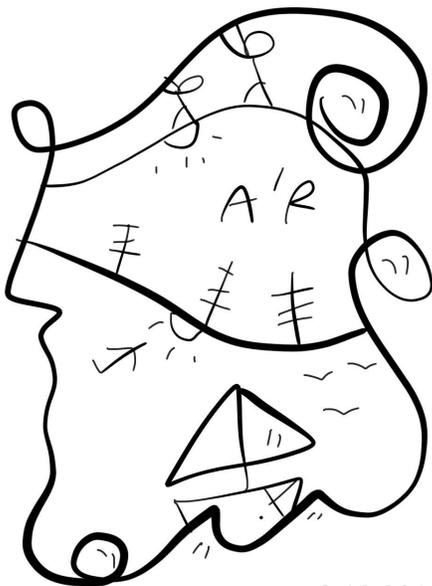
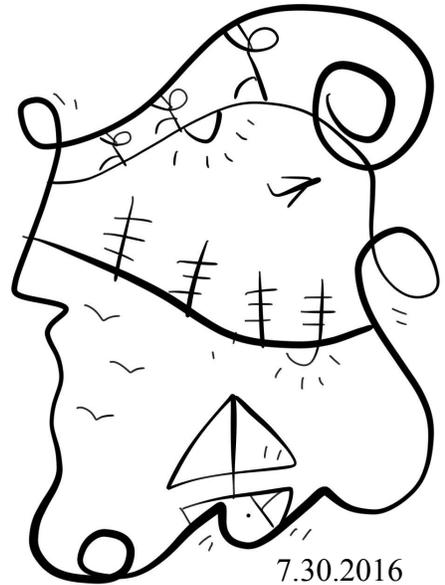
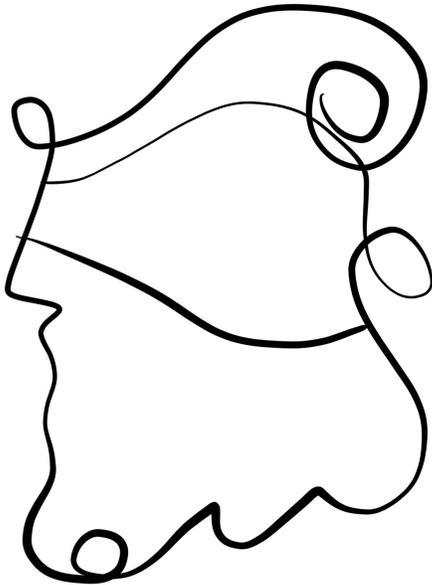
On Identity and the Creative Process

When thinking of art, we often focus on the product of artistic creation. For in many cases, the product in the absence of the artist is what we have the chance to interact with. Further, we tend to romanticize that product as a beacon of creativity and individuality, perhaps created in some spontaneous outpouring, a testament to the artist's humanity and identity. It is important, here, to separate the creative process from the product. A work of art comes into meaningful existence as the emergent result of a temporary coupling with its observer. Once the product leaves the artist, it does not exist in full form on its own, but is born and reborn in the space between the artwork and every new viewer, evolving a different identity through every interaction. It is often in this space of turnover and transformation where we set out in search of the artist's identity, even though the observed artwork arguably reflects the identity of its observer more than that of its creator. Why do we tend to search for artistic identity in the product, as opposed to the process of creation? Perhaps in part because 'process' conjures thoughts of the mechanistic, algorithmic, automated – that from which we often seek refuge in art. Yet perhaps it is in that process, when the artist is most intimately involved in the artwork, that we can find the foundation underlying their unique relationship to their creation, the key signature of what makes their work their own. At first glance, the creative process seems almost paradoxical, simultaneously systematic and spontaneous, a hallmark of some of the most interesting aspects of human cognition. Let us imagine that the consistent structure underlying the spontaneity of creation serves as a fingerprint of artistic identity. In that case, directing focus toward the process of creation and seeking to understand and reproduce it would not represent an effort to automate or replace the artist, but instead a search for the essence of what the artist brings to the act of creation, a search for identity.

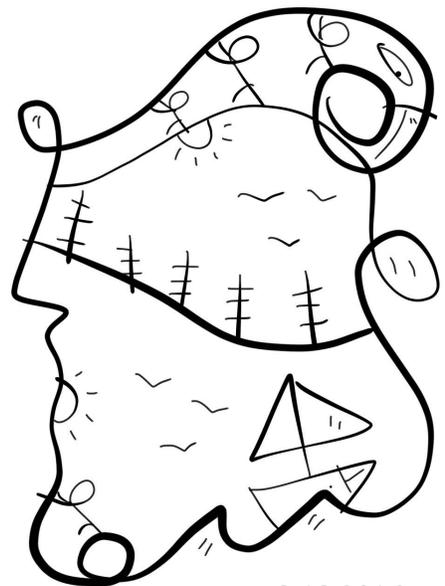
In their new collaboration, artist Shantell Martin and computational cognitive neuroscientist Sarah Schwettmann set out to re-humanize the concept of 'process' and uncover elements of artistic identity within. This project began with an intent to understand the consistency underlying the stream-of-consciousness outpouring that is Martin's drawing, evolved into an effort to understand the relationship of that consistency to artistic identity, and moves forward with questions of the uniqueness of that identity. Over the course of three months, Martin completed a series of 300 drawings developed from 100 initial hand drawn templates. Each template, a continuous line serving as the foundation of a future drawing, was sent to Martin three times, weeks apart, to be completed in her characteristic style. After recognizing consistency in the artistic choices Martin unknowingly made to complete each set of three drawings, Schwettmann and colleagues at MIT set out to see if they could define deeper structure underlying the visual similarity of different drawings. To do this, they trained a deep neural network to recognize recurrent elements of Martin's 300 drawings, potentially enabling it to learn her artistic style. After training, if the deep network can successfully predict how Martin would complete a given drawing, we can suggest that it has identified key elements of her identity in the artistic process. But where does this leave the artist? A common fear is that new technologies will ultimately replace the artist, in an era where resources are increasingly being diverted from the arts. Alternatively, the advent of technology as a window into identity could further the potential of art as a tool for self-expression, as awareness of one's artistic process, and ultimately oneself, can powerfully refine and evolve artistic style.

The 300 line drawings will be on exhibit in the offices of FiftyThree, makers of Paper, this November. Visitors to the opening of the exhibition will have the chance to visualize their individual engagement with Martin's artwork using mobile eye-trackers, and also experiment hands-on with their own ability to learn Martin's artistic style.

Example DNA image and 3 completions:



8.12.2016



8.18.2016