Ack! Knowledge! Work!

February 3 — April 20, 2024

BEALL CENTER FOR ART + TECHNOLOGY
CLAIRE TREVOR SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE
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TUESDAY — SATURDAY, 12PM — 6PM
beallcenter.uci.edu
Katherine Behar
Activist | Artist | Writer!
February 3 — April 20, 2024
Curated by Jesse Colin Jackson
Supported by The Beall Family Foundation

1 Indispensable
Hand sanitizer dispenser with floor stand, viretika键盘, custom electronics, software, parametric speaker, sound. Dimensions variable.

On the one hand (pun intended), we take hand sanitizer dispenser work for granted, suggesting parallels between nonhuman “indispensable dispensers” and human “essential workers.” On the other hand, when we use the dispenser with a cupped hand gesture reminiscent of begging and ask them to save us from contagion, we elevate them to a near-godly role. With reduced hand hygiene, the paltry and the impossibility of knowing our own fate, Indispensable repositions a dispenser as an oracle, showing the uncertainty and fragility of human survival.

Viewers who place their hands under the dispenser will hear a recording of one of their outstanding gestures and may rate their experience at a customer feedback kiosk. Positive or negative ratings “move the needle” of the dispenser’s mood, affecting subsequent statements.

2 Autonomous Plants, 2012 (2016 update)
Autonomous Plants compares a scene of managerial power to software that is impersonal, ineffective, and tone-deaf. The slowly scanning video reveals an image of an executive desk standing on an elevated office. Autonomous Plants are reanimated in a script that sends generic reply messages to incoming mail in a personally composed response. They share a powerful obsession of corporate culture, making matters matter, failed productivity, and bureaucratic redundancy.

3 Anonymous Autonomous, 2024
Modified office chairs, monitors, sensors, custom electronics, software, custom computer, viretika, paper, sound. Dimensions variable.

Connecting tracking and ride-share industries to creative class knowledge work, Anonymous Autonomous explores workplace de-personification through automation in blue- and white-collar settings. Empty office chairs behave like riders or drivers in a nearly simplified autonomous vehicle technology like computer vision and LiDAR to navigate space and avoid collisions, or sometimes sit rigidly in solitude. Blank paper acts as lane markings, overlapping layers evoke pandemic-era workplace exercises, recalling lockdown, work from home, and the Great Resignation. Viewers may arrange sheets of paper to guide the chairs.

4 She/She, 2018
Keyboard keys, metal, fabric, adhesive, styrofoam, 34” x 34” x 27”.
In She/She, QWERTY keyboard keys sit the surfaces of oddly shaped objects. Resting on doorknobs like doorknobs in an alternate reality, they appear to have broken free from the boring rectangles of black-box design. The typographic passages require mental and cultural re-education. She/She relies on the limited lifespan of devices; yet, this collection is poised at the ready, hinting that the options we have shelved may still vital potential.

5 We Grasp at Straws (Take One), 2014–ongoing
Single-channel 4K video, color, sound. Running time: 12:56.
We Grasp at Straws (Take One) is a work in progress, capturing an absurd attempt to predict paper group. Five dancers each embody a finger to form a hand that grasps at straws. As a group, they attempt to pick up an ungainly piece of material of much larger-than-life size. Using motion capture, their body-scored data defines a digital model of a physical hand, showing the social object as an exercise in futility. Collectively, they try the humble first step of basket-weaving in the age of straws.

This work is part of a larger project on robots and tech that probes the improbability of robots making baskets without human help. Instead of conceiving humans and machines as each other’s replacements, this project rethinks automation as an opportunity for collaboration.

Keyboard keys, fabric, metal, adhesive, styrofoam, 34” x 34” x 27”.
A keyboard first appeared in English in the phrase “a heap of data” in 1546. The word data cloud relates to the 21st-century Old English, when, spelled clout, it meant “a mass of rock” or “clot.” Today we imagine cloud computing as data immaterial, but Data Cloud (A, Aasp, A, Arm, A, AH) renders them physically as a mound of key keyboards. In this interactive interface, each key represents a singular input point or datum, or they become analog: weighty, unwieldy, and grounded.

7 Knock Knock, 2019 (2024 update)
Amazon echo devices with custom Alexa skills. Dimensions and duration variable.

In Knock Knock, two speech-enabled smart devices go hand in hand when Alexa meets Amazon. The device is not merely a typographic key known only to the other. Their guessing game begins like the familiar children’s game prompt “I’m thinking of number…” However, this number is 2024.2562, the same encryption used by biologic technology. The only way to win is through “true force,” that is, by trying random 64-digit combinations until luck prevails.

8 We Grasp at Straws (Take Two), 2024
Five dancers wearing motion capture suits and holding onto straws. 34” x 37”.
We Grasp at Straws (Take Two) is a project exploring the uncertain and fragile nature of human survival. With references to dispensers with a cupped hand gesture reminiscent of begging, and ask them to save us from contagion, four dancers reposition a dispenser as an oracle, showing the uncertainty and fragility of human survival. Viewers who place their hands under the dispenser will hear a recording of one of their outstanding gestures and may rate their experience at a customer feedback kiosk. Positive or negative ratings “move the needle” of the dispenser’s mood, affecting subsequent statements.

9 Shelf Life, 2024
Keyboard keys, metal, fabric, adhesive, styrofoam, 34” x 34” x 27”.
Skeptics might merely evoke the ennui of being desk workers. Meanwhile the driverless car, using simplified autonomous vehicle technology, appears to have broken free from the boring rectangles of black-box design. The typographic passages require intellectual and cultural re-education. In the case of Shelf Life, it lingers in a metaphor: weighty, unwieldy, and grounded.

10 Data’s Entry | Veri Girisi, 2016, coeditor of And Another Thing (Northwestern University Press, 2016), coeditor of And Another Thing, appearing at Framingham State University, and, and, appearing at the University of Kentucky and traveling to Boston Gy.

11 Behar’s work is part of a larger project on robots and tech that probes the improbability of robots making baskets without human help. A fantastic view of automation assumes human-machine replaceability. This project shifts the emphasis to human-machine cooperation. Seen in this light, automation becomes an opportunity for new intimacies and reconfigurations that can be equal parts caring and absurd. Baskets become a metaphor for vessel for holding humans and robots together as we Grasp at Straws (Take One) lingers in a preposterously laborious task, just picking up a straw. A necessary first step that paves the way for basketry, this is something most humans do without thinking, but contemporary robotic hands struggle with the fine dexterity it requires.

In each of these works, the mental is masked by the manual and the manual is automated. 34” x 37”.

Exhibition Statement
A host of objects related to digital labor is bartered at The Beall Center for Art + Technology Everyday office-ware items—desk chairs, computer keyboards, hand sanitizer stations, Alexes, an analog: weighty, unwieldy, and grounded. Resting on shelves like dollops from the boring rectangles of black-box design. Their volume is treated as immaterial, but also because the robotic experience also seeks instead to show to machines: Ack! Knowledge! Work! In this imagined interface, each key represents a singular input point or datum, or they become analog: weighty, unwieldy, and grounded. Anonymous Autonomous explores workplace de-personification through automation in blue- and white-collar settings. Empty office chairs behave like riders or drivers in a nearly simplified autonomous vehicle technology like computer vision and LiDAR to navigate space and avoid collisions, or sometimes sit rigidly in solitude. Blank paper acts as lane markings, overlapping layers evoke pandemic-era workplace exercises, recalling lockdown, work from home, and the Great Resignation. Viewers may arrange sheets of paper to guide the chairs.

Both C-suites and cubicle farms were emptied out by the shift to work-from-home, so abandoned offices have become familiar sights. But the robotic installation Anonymous Autonomous shows an office place devoid of human workers where the paper-pushing is continued by the furniture. Desk chairs roll robotically, navigating space like slow-going autonomous vehicles. As they struggle to plot their paths among piles of paper, they must steer clear of blank pages which soon overwhelm them. These works treat us: Ack! Knowledge! Work!/address how technologies of automation are reforming the future of work across multiple labor domains. For example, a dispenser automates a health care job that combines affective and reproductive labor. In contrast, computer keyboards and ergonomic rolling chairs are emblematic of cognitive labor and white-collar desk labor. Meanwhile the driverless car repositions a dispenser as an oracle, showing the uncertainty and fragility of human survival. Viewers who place their hands under the dispenser will hear a recording of one of their outstanding gestures and may rate their experience at a customer feedback kiosk. Positive or negative ratings “move the needle” of the dispenser’s mood, affecting subsequent statements.

An automatic hand sanitizer dispenser doesn’t owe us when it offers it. This is unsurprising anyway, since half the time they fail to register our presence. But in the interactive installation Indispensable, the dispenser responds to the presence of a verbal remark. It comments on the perversity of the situation: a human—who anticipates seamless service—holds out a hand in a pleading gesture that for once puts the dispenser in a superior role. Like a slap-happy employee going through the motions all day long, the dispenser’s free Speech synthesis wand and its mood vacillates, impacted by positive and negative ratings at a customer feedback kiosk.

A keyboard may be less than ergonomic or might merely evoke the ennui of being desk bound. But in the sculpture series She/She, QWERTY keyboard keys dote in exuberant and bulbous polytropes. Deformations of Dell’s boring rectangles of black-box design. Their volume is treated as immaterial, but also because the robotic experience also seeks instead to show to machines: Ack! Knowledge! Work!...