

*Ack!  
Knowledge!  
Work!*

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BEALL CENTER FOR ART + TECHNOLOGY  
CLAIRE TREVOR SCHOOL OF THE ARTS  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE  
712 ARTS PLAZA, IRVINE, CA 92697-2775

TUESDAY — SATURDAY, 12PM — 6PM

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Curated by Jesse Colin Jackson  
Supported by The Beall Family Foundation

1 *Indispensable*, 2024

Hand sanitizer dispenser with floor stand, interactive kiosk, custom electronics, custom software, parametric speaker, sound. Dimensions variable.

On the one hand (pun intended), we take handsfree dispensers’ work for granted, suggesting parallels between nonhuman “indispensable dispensers” and human “essential workers.” On the other hand, when we approach dispensers 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 references to palmistry 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 its reflections on their outstretched hand gesture 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 *Autoresponder.exe*, 2012 (2016 update)

Single-channel 4K video, color, silent. Running time: 16:10.

*Autoresponder.exe* 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 end in a disheveled office. Autore-sponders are automated e-mail scripts that send generic reply messages to incoming mail in lieu of a personally composed response. They provide a shallow veneer of competence in corporate culture, masking inattention, lapsed productivity, and bureaucratic redundancy.

3 *Anonymous Autonomous*, 2024

Modified office chairs, motors, sensors, custom electronics, custom software, computers, vinyl, paper, sound. Dimensions variable.

Connecting trucking and ride-share industries to creative class knowledge work, *Anonymous Autonomous* explores workplace depopulation through automation in blue- and white-collar settings. Empty office chairs behave like driverless cars, using simplified autonomous vehicle technologies like computer vision and LiDAR to navigate space and avoid collisions, or sometimes rebel in solidarity. Blank paper acts as lane markings, but overflowing reams evoke pandemic-era workplace exoduses, recalling lockdown, work from home, and the Great Resignation. **Viewers may arrange sheets of paper to guide the chairs.**

Exhibition Statement

A host of objects related to digital labor is harbored at The Beall Center for Art + Technology. Everyday office-ware items—desk chairs, computer keyboards, hand sanitizer stations, Alexas, an email autoreply—seem to have shape-shifted or to have taken on lives of their own in ways that defy our usual use of them. At times, their unexpected behaviors and untoward forms feel like only slight exaggerations of the normal exasperations we associate with digital work: the work they do, or fail to do, or foist on us...

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 earnest chairs go about their business diligently. That is, until one finds its conditions intolerable and the others rebel in solidarity.

An automatic hand sanitizer dispenser doesn’t dose us when we offer it a hand. This is unsurprising anyway, since half the time they fail to register our presence. But in the interactive installation *Indispensable*, the dispenser responds to a cupped hand with a verbal remark. It comments on the perversity of the situation: a human—who anticipates seamless service—

4 *Shelf Life*, 2018

Keyboard keys, resin, Styrofoam, adhesive, shelves. Dimensions variable.

In *Shelf Life*, QWERTY keyboard keys stud the surfaces of oddly shaped objects. Resting on shelves like dollops from an alternate reality, they appear to have broken free from the boring rectangles of black-box design. Their voluptuous protrusions mimic biological mutations and no two are alike. *Shelf Life* recalls the limited lifespan of devices; yet, this collection is poised at the ready, hinting that the options we have shelved may store vital potential.

5 *We Grasp at Straws (Take One)*, 2024–ongoing

Single-channel 4K video, color, sound. Running time: 12:56.

*We Grasp at Straws (Take One)*, a work in progress, captures an absurd attempt at remote group puppetry. 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 like a larger-than-life straw. Using motion capture, their body-scaled data drives a digital model of a robotic hand, showing an exercise in dexterity that’s also an exercise in futility! Collectively, they try the humble first step of basket-weaving—picking up a piece of straw.

This work is part of a larger project on robotics and basketry 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.

6 *Data Cloud (A Heap, A Mass, A Rock, A Hill)*, 2016

Keyboard keys, fabric, metal, adhesive, Styrofoam. 34” x 34” x 37”.

The word *data* first appeared in English in the phrase “a heap of data” in 1646. The word *cloud* dates to ninth-century Old English, when, spelled *clúd*, it meant a “mass of rock” or “hill.” Today we imagine cloud computing and data as immaterial, but *Data Cloud (A Heap, A Mass, A Rock, A Hill)* renders them physically as a mound of keyboard keys. In this imagined interface, each key represents a singular input point or datum; en masse they become analog: weighty, unwieldy, and grounded.

7 *Knock Knock*, 2019 (2024 update)

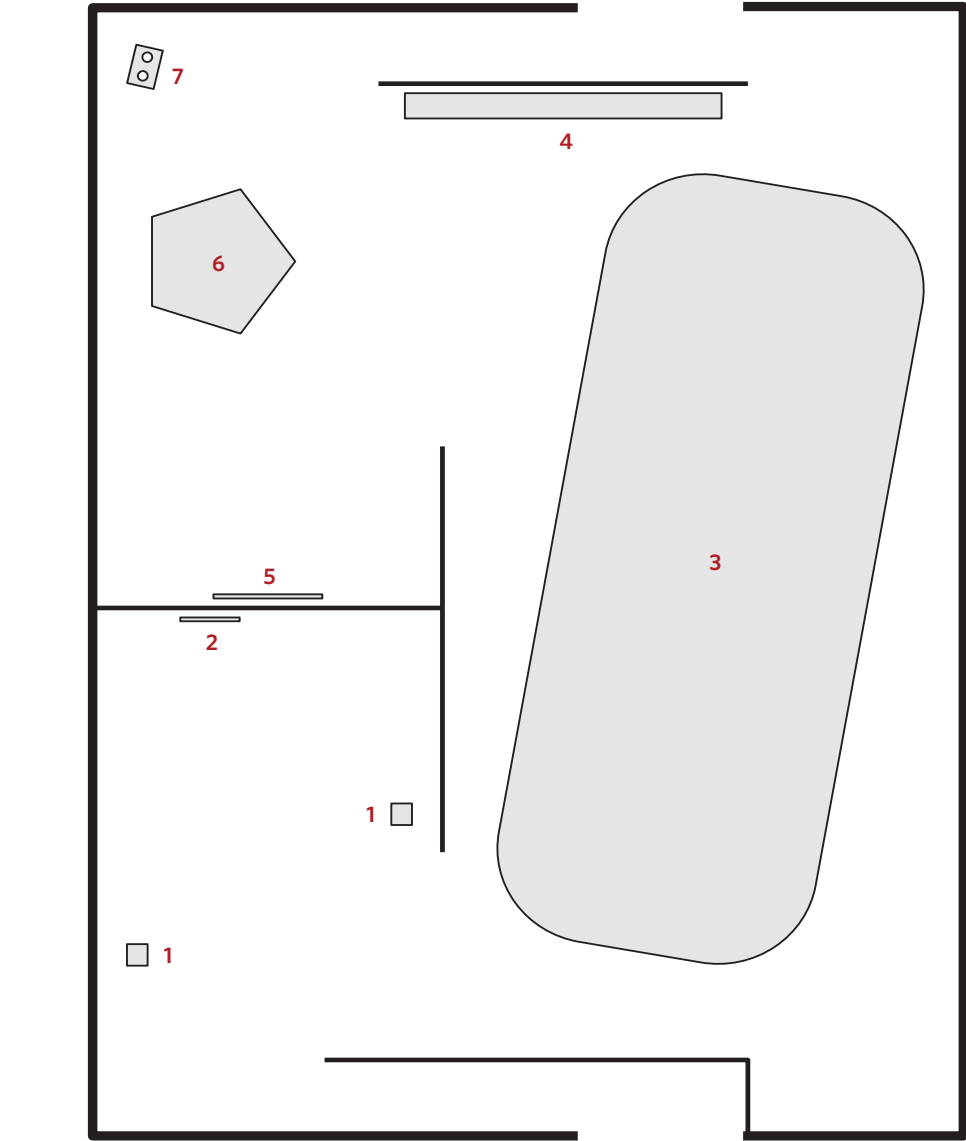
Amazon Echo devices with custom Alexa Skills. Dimensions and duration variable.

In *Knock Knock*, two speech-enabled smart devices go head-to-head when one Alexa tries to guess a cryptographic key known only to the other. Their guessing game begins like the familiar children’s game prompt *I’m thinking of a number...* However, this number relies on SHA-256, the same encryption used by blockchain technology. The only way to win is through “brute force,” that is, by trying random 64-digit combinations until luck prevails.

holds out a hand in a pleading gesture that for once puts the humble dispenser in a superior role. Like a slap-happy employee going through the motions all day long, the dispenser’s free associations wander 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 *Shelf Life*, QWERTY keyboard keys clot in exuberant orbs and bulbous polyps. Deformations of Dell’s boring black boxes, their permutations appear to have sprouted on storage shelves like a vegetal bounty that grew gloriously overnight. Their surprising contours might inspire wordsmithing in ways a Dell doesn’t, but would offer little in the way of resting wrists or relieving carpal tunnel. Even while their shapes seem liberated, the sameness of these objects’ recombinant repetitions still recalls a cubicle’s finite horizons, or a corporation’s glass ceilings, and the soul-sucking dullnesses of life lived 9-to-5.

These works among others in *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 work. Meanwhile the driverless cars the robotic chairs emulate are associated with manual labor and blue-collar or gig work in trucking or ride-share industries.



Katherine Behar is an interdisciplinary artist and critical theorist of new media. Through feminism and materialism, she explores gender, race, class, and labor in contemporary digital culture. She is known for projects that mix low and high technologies to create hybrid forms that are by turns humorous and sensuous. Behar’s artwork is exhibited throughout North America and Europe and held in private collections. *Data’s Entry | Veri Girisi*, a survey exhibition and catalog documenting eight years of work, was presented at Pera Museum, Istanbul. Additional solo exhibitions include *Shelf Life*, a site-specific installation at Trinity College, *Backups*, appearing at Framingham State University, and *E-Waste*, premiering with a catalog at the University of Kentucky and traveling to Boston Cyberarts Gallery. Since 2005 she has collaborated with Marianne M. Kim, exhibiting and performing as “Disorientationism.” Behar is the editor of *Object-Oriented Feminism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), coeditor of *And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art* (Punctum Books, 2016), and author of *Bigger than You: Big Data and Obesity* (Punctum Books, 2016). Her writing has been translated into Turkish, Portuguese, Russian, Lithuanian, and Spanish. Behar is Professor of New Media Arts at Baruch College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

In *Anonymous Autonomous*, the twinned absences of vacant seats and void sheets signal the missing something in the robotic automation of both cognitive and manual labor, cutting across class. This trope of human absence runs throughout the exhibition. On the surface, this appears to align with popular narratives about automation as a totalizing phenomenon, as in the implication that one day in the not-too-distant future robots and AI could take over human jobs. (Whether this totalizing view of automation presents a utopic reprieve from drudgery or a dystopic prospect of unemployment depends on the pundit.) But *Ack! Knowledge! Work!* seeks instead to show the present-day always-only-partial nature of automation, and the strange ways humans and machines come to conform to one another as a result. For example, if an essential worker could be automated as a dispenser, it is not only because of the cultural invisibility of the human laborer who gets absented by automation, but also because the robotic experience also proceeds without notice, as a principle of good interaction design that should appear to happen as if by magic. These works draw attention to that invisiblizing dynamic in automation, in the case of *Indispensable* through the eerie disembodiment of voice.

In contrast, a new work-in-progress *We Grasp at Straws (Take One)* uses manual handiwork and digital digits to reintroduce the human body. Five dancers wearing motion capture suits embody fingers, collectively forming a hand that grasps at straws. Motion capture actors are usually digitally replaced with CGI animated figures, but *We Grasp at Straws (Take One)* reveals the performers as they are,

posing in MoCap suits in a chroma key studio, to expose an elaborate and effortful production process as parody—a parody that functions inefficiently, but functions nonetheless. This work is part of a larger project that probes the improbability of robots’ making baskets without human help. A totalistic 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 metaphoric vessel for holding humans and robots together so *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 a something most humans do without thinking, but contemporary robotic hands struggle with the fine dexterity it requires.

In each of these works, the mental gets masked by the menial and the manual. *Ack! Knowledge! Work!* enjoins us to “acknowledge” the crucial labor automation often obscures, to question the supposed intelligence of “knowledge work,” and to indulge the conflicted “Ack!” so many of us feel about work and automation: we understand that automation could lead to unemployment, but even so we wish tedious work could be automated away. Ultimately, these artworks are sympathetic when it comes to locating minor dignities in all jobs, regardless of who or what performs them. So, the exhibition entreats us: Ack! Knowledge! Work!