

# Amazon (Proxy)

“Talking about the past was a way to talk about the present.”

By **Danielle Dean**



Danielle Dean, *Preparatory drawings for Amazon (Proxy)* (2021). Performa Commission for the Performa 2021 Biennial. Image courtesy the artist.

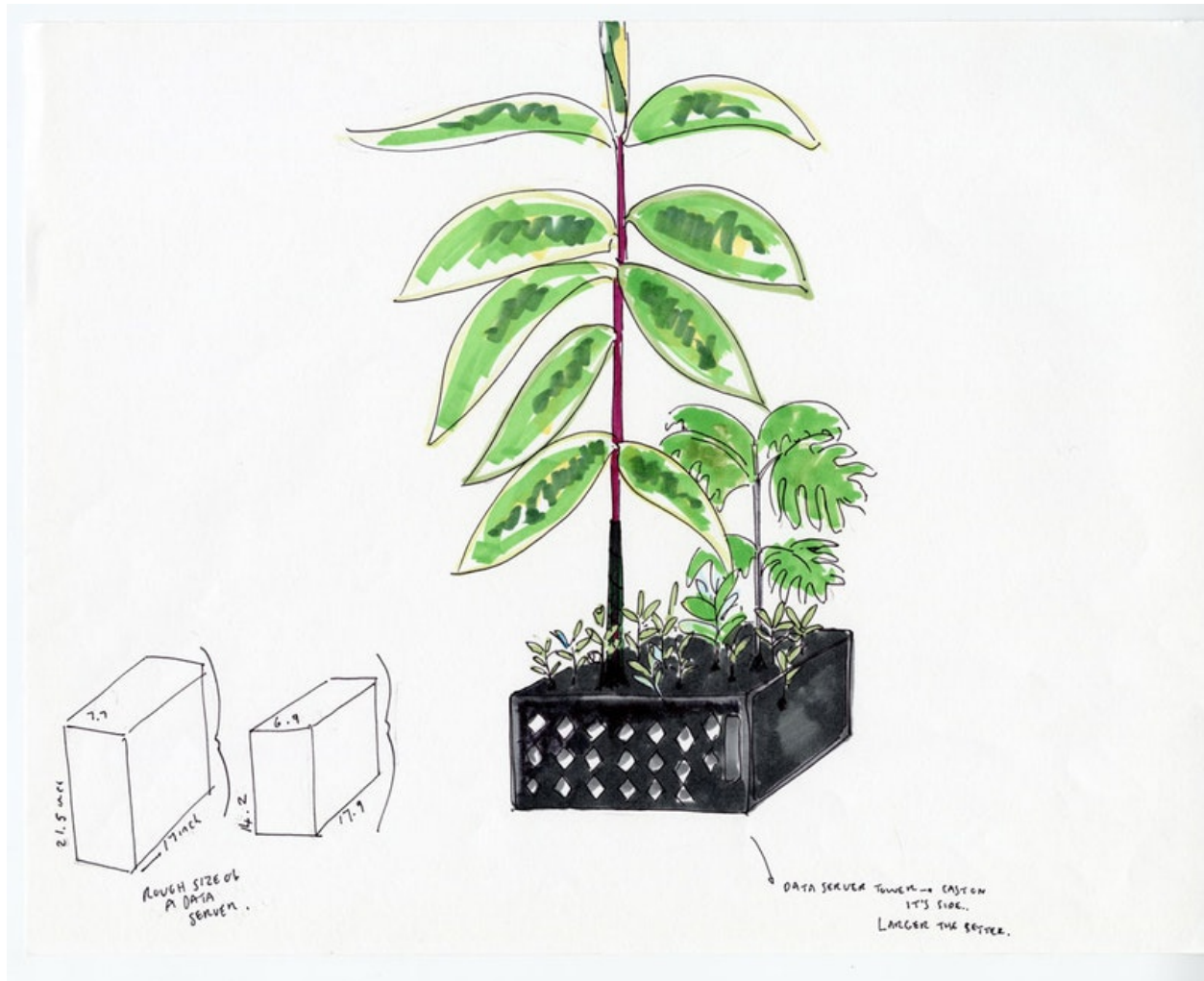
Danielle Dean collaborates with online gig workers to create a live performance that revisits the history of Fordlândia, a short-lived rubber plantation established by Henry Ford in the Amazon in the 1920s.

**Rail:** Can you tell us more about what *Amazon (Proxy)* is?

**Dean:** *Amazon (Proxy)* is a live performance that starts with Fordlândia, a work camp established by Henry Ford in the middle of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil in the 1920s. There are amazing stories that happened during this time, and these narratives will be reenacted by Amazon Mechanical Turk workers and actors.

**Rail:** What is an Amazon Mechanical Turk worker?

**Dean:** An AMT worker or “Turker” is an individual hired by the crowdsourcing online platform Amazon Mechanical Turk to perform discrete tasks and generate mass data that can be used to enhance Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) programs. I focused on Amazon’s platform because of its parallels to Ford’s assembly line. It is like the mass production of human labor, in a way.



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**Rail:** And you got in touch with a few of these online workers?

**Dean:** The first step for me was to become a Turker to understand how it worked. And then I put out a few “HITS” (Human Intelligence Task) to find workers. I also collaborated with a colleague from UC San Diego who runs a platform called Turkopticon, from which we ran an ad to find AMT workers interested in the project. Eventually, I found five people who have now been working on this project with me for a while. They all do AMT work from different places—Hunter is in Atlanta, Elizabeth in West Virginia, there's someone based in Portland, Oregon, and Greg is in Spain.

**Rail:** And you've been in contact with them almost every week, right?

**Dean:** Yes. Twice a week at this point. One of the main ideas behind the project was to go against the logic of the AMT platform, which does not really allow its workers to be connected to each other. Everyone is isolated doing their work alone at home. I first did a bunch of workshops with several of them. We came together on Zoom and started out just getting to know each other and talking about what prompted them to start doing this type of labor instead of going to an office or doing retail work, for example. Then, after a while, I brought in Fordlândia and the archival material I gathered and we discussed some of the events that happened there in the 1920s. Talking about the past, was a way to talk about the present.

**Rail:** How did you first come across Fordlândia?

**Dean:** I started out looking at an archive of Ford advertisements. I focused specifically on their representations of landscape and nature, which are really beautiful but ideological problematic in their depictions of cars always at the center of an empty American landscape. The idea was that if you buy that car, you could also consume the landscape surrounding you. One of the things I often think about is how media representations throughout history contribute to a cultural norm positioning humans at the center of the earth. But if humans are now training A.I. to be more human, are we always going to be at the center? While our extractive behaviors are destroying the earth... I mean, how we organize forms of labor has a lot to do with efficiently using up raw materials.

**Rail:** Between the historical facts and the fictional aspects of it, and the conversations you've had with the AMT workers, how are you going to organize the material you've gathered?

**Dean:** One of the reasons why the performance is called *Amazon (Proxy)* is because it'll be performed by proxies: Actors will simulate and act like the actual Turkers. I have a script for the actors, but there are moments where it will be mixed with footage that the Turkers I work with shot themselves. Because of COVID, I couldn't travel or film them in their homes, so the solution was to put a camera kit together and teach them to shoot their own footage. Having the AMT workers film themselves transformed the work into even more of a collaboration.

**Rail:** Can you describe what the performance is going to look or feel like?

**Dean:** The set will draw from the archive of landscape paintings from Ford cars. The backdrop will be an iconic landscape drawing and there will be lots of painted plants to form a jungle-like scene. The key is that many of these early landscape drawings resemble early Disney films. They are painted with watercolor and they have a kind of “American Dream” aspect to them. I wanted to make the two-dimensional archival material come to life in space. You will experience some drama. No, there will be a lot of drama!



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