

Disegno

Source of the Amazon

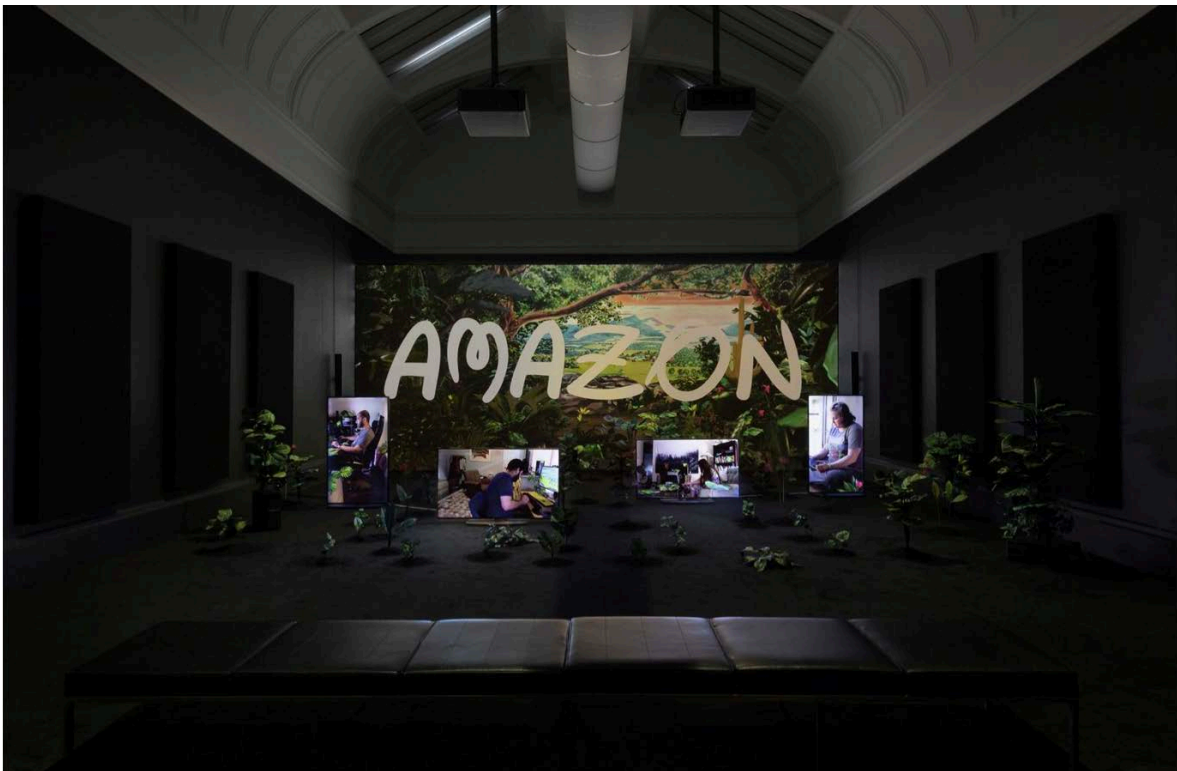
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Artist Danielle Dean is the creator of Amazon (Proxy), currently exhibited at Tate Britain in London (Image: courtesy of the artist).

Tropical plants burst out of computer hardware as clickwork labourers from the 21st century tell the story of a 20th-century capitalist dream overturned by rebellious workers and nature revolting. A rubber plantation's harvest fails in the late 1920s, while in the early 2020s an army of faceless low-paid workers harvest data remotely from their homes. Amazon (Proxy), an exhibition from advertiser-turned-artist [Danielle Dean at Tate Britain](#), takes the viewer to the Amazon (rainforest) as told by the people that keep Amazon (technology company) ticking.

Dean created Amazon (Proxy) in collaboration with Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) workers, people who make a living by performing tasks on their computers for one-off payments on Amazon's "crowdsourcing marketplace". The system is named for the Mechanical Turk, a fake chess-playing machine from the 18th century that was actually just a person hidden inside a box. Companies in need of human intelligence for tasks that are currently beyond the reach of artificial intelligence use AMT to find people to grind out mundane tasks. After discovering letters and documents in the Ford archive that detailed the last days of Fordlândia, a doomed 20th-century rubber plantation in Brazil set up by the Ford Motor Company, Dean worked with AMT workers to tell the story of a labour struggle from 100 years ago through the eyes of people at the sharp end of the contemporary gig economy.



Amazon (Proxy) at Tate Britain (image: Tate photography).

Their filmed narrative plays on TV sets placed in front of a projected backdrop of painted jungle, accented by sculptures of plants erupting from data servers. Dean's multimedia installation explores culture and colonialism, with a thrumming subtext of how technology, design and the means of production have always been uneasy bedfellows. Henry Ford designed his production lines to be efficient machines staffed with workers whose wages and healthcare plans were supposed to keep them loyal. Jeff Bezos designed his algorithms to keep products moving and data captured, with workers as expendable and replaceable drones. Even if you shun Amazon as an e-commerce platform, the company likely owns the servers you access your internet on,

while its Mechanical Turks train up the AI that will become ever more prevalent within society, but which will likely end up racially biased.

Amazon (Proxy) offers a tongue-in-cheek comment on the similarities and slippages between the two billionaire businessmen (by way of a third, Walt Disney, whom Dean says was obsessed with Ford's production line designs, something she pays homage to through the pastiche font used in the exhibition). Bezos named his company after the gigantic river that gives the Amazon its name; Ford tried to harness the same rainforest to give him a rubber monopoly for his automotive empire. Both billionaires gained notoriety for designing out unionising; Ford with violent mercenaries, Bezos with everything from tampering with traffic-lights to illegal ballot mailbox surveillance.



Painted plants appear to grow out of computer pieces in the installation (image: Tate photography).

It's an auspicious time for an exhibition examining worker struggles, nature and an inescapable multinational tech company. An Amazon warehouse in Belemer, Alabama, undertakes its second union election this month. Former human resource employees at the company are blowing the whistle on badly designed technology systems that have led to excruciating working conditions. A tornado flattened another Amazon warehouse

in Illinois, killing workers for subcontractor companies that wouldn't let them clock out. Ford's plan for a perfect American town in the Amazon fell apart when indigenous workers refused his prescriptive diet of canned peaches and Americanised working hours completely unsuited to the tropical heat. A century later, activist network Turkopticon is helping AMT workers band together to blacklist unscrupulous requesters. It's a potent mix that foregrounds Dean's Amazon (Proxy), which pulls back the curtain on the new digital economy.

Disegno spoke with Dean on Zoom – incidentally, the same video call platform she used while making Amazon (Proxy) remotely – to discuss the ideas behind the installation.



Four television screens are placed in front of an anamorphic projection (image: Tate photography).

Disegno Could you talk us through the exhibition and your process in creating the pieces?

Danielle Dean The main thing is the video installation. I made it so complicated! It was partly because I was making the work over covid, and I ended up deciding that it needed to be a five-channel presentation. It's a large, anamorphic projection against the back wall that is a depiction of a fantasy jungle landscape. It's related to my research

into the history of Ford's advertising mixed with Disney. The early Ford adverts from the 20s, 30s and 40s have a hand-drawn illustration style to them, they look a lot like Disney depictions of places. There's this interesting link between Ford and Disney, because Walt Disney himself was obsessed with Henry Ford, and he modelled his production of animation on the Fordist assembly line. I'm really interested in the way in which the culture industry has had such an influence on us. It has a relationship to labour organisation and the Fordist production assembly line. I find an interesting contrast in the Disney films I watched as a kid between their sense of imagination and how they were made from a very restrictive, repetitive, monotonous labour process. The large back projection will look like a fantasy version of Fordlândia in the Amazon. It was shot in the studio, and all of the elements were hand painted. It's giving context to the TVs in front of it, each of which symbolises one of the Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) workers that I worked with. The narrative is 26 minutes long, and it's a retelling of the story of what happened in Fordlândia by the AMT workers. It's about this type of clickwork labour that happens when you're stuck at home and the contrast between that and the American dream with its vastness of space and landscape. But it is set in a studio, so it's also fake and artificial. The sculptures are to do with linking the history of Fordlândia and extraction of rubber and raw material, nature, and the extraction of data from humans – which is the AMT layer. They're essentially large data servers, like hard drives, and they have the plants that I hand painted for the studio shoot growing [out of them]. It's reminiscent of the images I saw of Fordlândia, where the jungle is growing over the factory. It [symbolises] data being the contemporary raw material [equivalent] of [Ford's] rubber – that it will be worth big bucks in the future, but it will also be a disaster.”

“It was a way of having this slippage between the fiction of the work and the reality. It's part documentary, part fiction.”

— Danielle Dean

Disegno What did you know about Fordlândia going into the research part of the process?

Danielle It is something I heard about, and I was unsure whether to go down that route because it is quite well known and a lot of artists have already done a lot of work [around it] before. It is such an amazing case study if you're interested in capitalism or questions of labour relationships. So I was a little reluctant at the beginning to go down that route. But I felt like I couldn't ignore it. I didn't start out with Fordlândia, I just started out focusing on Ford and the history of representation of land through through these Ford adverts, and then looking at the organisation of labour in the factories in Detroit, in Dearborn, which is where I was living at the time. The archive I was looking at took me to the archive of Fordlândia. It became more unique to me, because the actual archive brings up some stories that a lot of people don't talk about, like the details of the the political dissent that happened. It felt like an exciting, interesting story. There was a person who was accused of being a diamond thief because he wanted to go and tell the press about how bad the conditions were at Fordlândia. I had never heard of that before, and I found that in the archive in a set of letters that told that story. I

reinterpreted the documents, which may or may not be true to an extent, because there's a lot of gaps, but I just went with it and allowed myself to use the archive as a jumping off point.



The font is a nod to Walt Disney's obsession with Henry Ford's production lines (image: still from Amazon (Proxy)).

Disegno The AMT workers that you worked with for the narrative, was that scripted or was it improvised?

Danielle It's both. That's usually how I work and I've done this kind of method a few times now. In order to bring the narrative out and collaborate with the archive, sometimes some things need to be scripted. I work with the the participants to find a way that makes sense for them to say it. It's a lot of workshops and having conversations about "What does this context of this history mean to me?" So yes, some of it was scripted and some of it wasn't. Some of it is about them talking about their lives and finding a way of weaving in the fiction. So if, for example, we have a conversation about what it's like to work for AMT, they say "I have been working for The Amazon" instead of Amazon. It was a way of having this slippage between the fiction of the work and the reality. It's part documentary, part fiction.

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— Danielle Dean

Disegno How did you find the AMT workers that you created the work with?

Danielle It took quite a long time to find people who wanted to commit. It was a long-term commitment, which is the opposite of how that platform operates. As a requester who goes online and puts a job onto the site, you would you never get to meet the

person who does the work. You don't know who they are, and you'd never see their face. That anonymity is partly why a lot of people like to use it, because then they don't have to care about who does the work. So it was a little difficult, because I did start out requesting participation through the site. They're called HITs – Human Intelligence Tasks. You put whatever work you want your human to do and you'll get like thousands of people doing the HIT. I realised that that was not the way I wanted to work because I couldn't find them again. I wanted to do the opposite, to do what the site doesn't allow, which is to get the group of people who are working with me, that we meet each other – at least through Zoom. In the beginning, I wanted them to meet in reality, but Covid stopped that. But it was still really effective, because it's still a connection. Lilly Irani, who is a friend and colleague of mine who works at UCSD, set up an activist site called Turkopticon. It's a site that helps AMT workers vet their requesters by a rating system, so they won't do a set of work for people who are going to treat them badly. Lilly knows a lot of people through that site, and she put out a newsletter that connected with a lot of AMT workers in a more personal way. That's how I found the people who I'm working with. Then we had an agreement: you'll be paid and you have to commit for this amount of time and be interested to do the work.



All of the faux tropical plants were hand painted by Dean (image: still from Amazon (Proxy)).

Disegno What do you see as the symmetries between Fordlândia and Amazon, and the slippages? Because in some ways, Amazon has managed to achieve what Fordlândia didn't: whole towns of workers, where one is based around the warehouse, and another is based around the managerial staff. But then, there will never be this kind of dissent or uprising that managed to happen at Fordlândia, because we're atomised by the systems like AMT or the warehouses that have such high turnover.

Danielle I had meetings with activist organisers at Turkopticon where we had these conversations, asking them why there isn't a push for unionising. Last year there were a few Amazon warehouses trying to push for unionisation, but there are so many barriers that are put up against it. What's super interesting about that, which is the one of the

slippages between the case of Amazon and Ford, is that there's a lot of squashing of that political dissent and attempts at unionisation by Amazon themselves, which Henry Ford also did. I mean, he used to literally hire gangsters in Detroit – literally, this is no joke – to beat up people who were talking about unions or muttering about political dissent. That's related to this narrative of the diamond thief in Fordlândia. They labelled this person a thief, which is ridiculous, but that was the way they tried to squash that political dissent. Although I do totally understand what you're saying, that in the case of Amazon it's very, very hard for change to happen. I have always believed in the possibility that – even though there are so many things against change – humans coming together and thinking of ways of creating disruption or organisation to oppose the atomisation and separation that Amazon wants, is the only way that those things can change. I'm not saying my work is a solution to any of that. I don't know if you've ever heard of Saidiya Hartman's term “critical fabulation”? It's a really amazing term. It's about how you never can really know the history because it's always been retold through points of views or documents that have a viewpoint to them. A narrative being told by a manager as opposed to the worker, for example. You can't really fully know the truth, but you can imagine and take that narrative and make it become a possibility. That's what I was thinking about, the potential of the fact that there was a successful dissent in Fordlândia. Although Fordlândia did collapse, it wasn't just the workers' dissent, it was partly because of nature as well. That's another thing to think about, it wasn't just because of the workers saying no – it was also nature saying “fuck you”. This atomised way of organising the trees and the plants doesn't work either. They grew all of the rubber trees close together, because that's the rational way to do it, in an assembly line. But in terms of nature that is the worst, because all of the bugs can jump over [between plants]. They had a lot of issues with blight, bugs and fungi destroying the crop. To me, art is a way of proposing things that seem impossible. So, of course, I agree what you're saying – that it feels like an impossibility for there to be workers organising in Amazon, but I still don't think that it's a total no.

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— Danielle Dean

Disegno I don't either. In fact, I think it's exciting that this exhibition is going to happen in February, because there's a unionisation rerun happening in Alabama. There has also been press coverage of HR representatives from Amazon coming forward to say that the system is broken. People are getting fired automatically, even when they've been given leave. And these these warehouses, they don't have an unlimited supply of workers—

Danielle Because they get replaced. That's the whole point of the model, which is basically a post-Fordist situation, right? Part of Ford's thing was that he wanted to create the ideal worker, an ideal human, essentially. He wanted to control every aspect of his workers' lives so they wouldn't leave. But the model we have now is where you –

the labour – can just be replaced. With AMT workers from this project, their labour is actually to do with developing AI. Their awareness of that is really high, they say things like, “Well, eventually, AI is going to replace us.” On the one hand, it's this push for more basic human rights as a worker, and then on the backside, there's also this push to not have humans at all, which is insane.

Disegno I knew that AMT was what Jeff Bezos called “artificial artificial intelligence”, that they're doing tasks that it's not possible for a computer to do as accurately as a human. But I didn't realise that they are also training the AI in the process of doing that.

Danielle Originally, I started out thinking exactly that: that it's human labour and it's about what the computer can't do. But it turns out that a lot of the labour is that very thing: extracting data from humans. It's about asking the workers about their emotions and feelings, and you're like, “What the fuck? Why do you need to know that?” It's all to do with data that's feeding AI. It's extracting stuff. It could just be very simple, like identify this image as a fire hose, and do that over and over again. Then that becomes an algorithm that an AI can learn and then they'll be able to identify a fire hose or to identify cancer. It's this thing that humans can do and AI can't do yet, but they're extracting that information to train AIs to be more conscious of human nuances. It's kind of dark.



Amazon Mechanical Turk workers tell the story of the Ford plantation in the Amazon (image: still from Amazon (Proxy)).

Disegno Did that the AMTs that you worked with do this as their full-time job? Do they do other things? Are they all still working there?

Danielle That's also a big thing, the degrees which people engage with that platform. One of them, Hunter, was doing it full-time, now he's doing it part-time because he's working in a kitchen as well. But the rest of them do do it full-time. I didn't go into it in the

project, because it was already super complicated – most people don't understand what AMT is like, so we had to find a way of telling that story in the film. But a lot of them work on multiple platforms. So it's not ever really just AMT. There are many different online platforms that are similar that are doing the same thing. Like Uber, where drivers also link to Lyft at the same time, and they'll take whatever job comes quicker. They have a system, maybe an algorithm that they're working with, or they just have their own way of monitoring all these different platforms and getting the job that pays the most. Throughout the day they do multiple different jobs from different platforms. A lot of people are working this way, particularly during Covid. Amy, who is one of the participants, has been doing it for many years. And she said that, during Covid, it got harder to get work because more people were joining the platform because they were losing their jobs.

“I’m not claiming that this is going to make major change, but it’s putting stuff out in the world that talks about the reality that we are in a different way to how Amazon would describe the reality.”

— Danielle Dean

Disegno Have you heard from Amazon? Do you know if this exhibition is on their radar? By referring to Amazon as in the rainforest, is that a way of skirting around any kind of legal or copyright issue?

Danielle I don't know. I make a lot of work about advertising-stroke-corporations. I've used archival material from Nike and I don't use the logo or say Nike in the work, but there's so much appropriation from them. I get away with it because I use it in a different way. It doesn't ever look super glossy, it's always a little handmade, which is on purpose. I used to work in advertising too, so that influences me a lot. I can't imagine that Amazon would really care, who knows, maybe they will.

Disegno Maybe Jeff Bezos is gonna be crying into his pillow at night, when he's not dreaming about colonising space.

Danielle The Henry Ford Foundation sponsors art, so they're less bothered. They do have a history of, you could say, absorbing critical artwork about themselves. I am really obsessed with – it was a big influence in the way I thought about the film – the Diego Rivera murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Those were commissioned by Ford, but they're very critical of the Ford assembly line. They go into his use of raw materials and extraction and how a lot of the managers were constantly watching the workers and surveying them. It's unbelievable, but [Rivera] did it and they didn't destroy it. He got away with using a commission critically. But I would never be commissioned by Amazon. I'm just saying, I don't know how much they care. I think that the way that art can function is that it becomes a cultural support for what's actually happening politically, right? It's not necessarily the political dissent in itself. I'm not claiming that this is going to make major change, but it's putting stuff out in the world that talks about the reality that we're in, but in a different way to how Amazon would describe that reality.