

ART
NOW

DANIELLE DEAN

AMAZON

‘My work explores the ideological dimensions and material functions of technology, architecture, marketing techniques, and media as tools of subjection and oppression’. Danielle Dean

Through a multimedia art practice that spans painting, installation, performance and video, Danielle Dean examines how our minds and bodies are colonised by media and cultural production. Her work questions how we as humans are shaped by commercial narratives and the language and images of advertising. Dean’s work unravels how the self is constructed in relation to racial capitalism and considers our relationships to objects, specifically to consumer products. She creates space for the interrogation of our behaviour, language, relationships, and personality read through a lens of colonialism, capitalism and industrial production.

In her new five-channel video installation titled *Amazon* Dean constructs a landscape of failed industrial utopia upon which she layers historic and contemporary questions of the nature of labour and its commodification under capitalism.

Amazon starts with Fordlândia, a city founded by Henry Ford in 1928 in the Amazon rainforest. Dean discovered Ford’s experimental citadel, built to control rubber production, during her time researching in the motor company’s archives in Detroit, Michigan. She unearthed Ford’s compulsion to enforce his American factory work hours and methods upon the Brazilian workforce and environment, disregarding the tropical climate and indigenous botanical knowledge. Eventually, the workers rebelled and the rubber plantation fell prey to tree blight and parasites, leading to the settlement’s abandonment in 1934.

In *Amazon* Dean recasts this historic tale of corporate global hegemony alongside the contemporary e-commerce company Amazon, and specifically its labour-crowdsourcing marketplace Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) – a website that digitally distributes tasks to a globally dispersed, remote workforce. It was founded in 2005 on the principle that certain tasks could only be performed by humans and allows workers to perform discrete on-demand tasks for companies around the world. It has since grown into a mass data generator, powered by this human labour. This data is harvested to train artificial intelligence algorithms. Deans focuses on this platform as it parallels Ford’s industrial assembly line. Though now it is reconfigured and globally fragmented.

Through her collaboration with AMT workers around the world, Dean breaks the logic of individualization at the heart of this crowd sourcing platform – the reality that everyone is isolated working alone at home. Dean disrupts this reality by bringing together AMT workers as collaborators, architects, and protagonists of *Amazon*. Through collaborative workshops, followed by guided, remote filming, Dean directed the AMT workers to film themselves in their own homes.

The backdrop to the footage created with the AMT workers is a large-scale anamorphic projection of the imagined utopian landscape of Fordlândia, first rendered by Dean as a watercolour painting before being transformed into an animation. Like her other watercolour painting *4. a.m.* 2021, shown alongside the installation, Dean’s fictionalised landscape is drawn from advertising material unearthed in the Ford archives. For example, in *4. a.m.* Dean’s archival sources include the adverts for the *Lincoln, 1950* and *The Lincoln V-12, 1955* amongst others. In this mixing of reimagined archival imagery, Dean uses fiction and the aesthetics of advertising to engage and historicise the visual landscape of whiteness and social mobility suggested by Ford’s depictions of an idealised American Dream.

Central to *Amazon* is the representation of landscape, specifically landscape and nature as it is mobilised in Ford’s car advertisements. They depict scenes of unspoiled natural beauty,

rich in colour and devoid of human existence or intervention, but at the same time Dean draws our attention to the ideological problems in their depictions. The car is always at the centre of an empty American landscape, suggesting that if you were to buy the car, you could also consume the surrounding landscape.

Dean asserts that media representations throughout history have helped construct a cultural norm where humans are situated at the centre of the earth. She asks, if humans are now training artificial intelligence to be more human, are we always going to be at the centre? If our extractive behaviours are destroying the earth, how we (re)organise forms of labour is key to understanding how we will use the planet’s remaining natural resources.

Nathan Ladd

It’s not magic. The hidden workforce behind Amazon Mechanical Turk.

AI promises autonomous, almost magical, automation – delivered by heroic engineers and the compute power at command. This is a myth and it hides so many workers who make AI work.

Fifteen years ago, Silicon Valley companies were starting to face this reality head on. Trained as a computer scientist, I worked at Google for a few years. There, I never met but knew there were workforces who pitched in when the automation failed. They helped tune up a new search algorithm by judging which set of search results were better. They made sure advertisers’ webpages did not violate Google’s tobacco or firearms policies. My engineer friends faced challenges like teaching a computer how to see the difference between porn and not porn or the need to convert YouTube audio to text so search engines could search it. Tech companies were encouraging us to upload more of our lives and work onto their servers, but the companies had trouble understanding and organising it all.

These were tasks that are easy for people but hard for computers to do because we grow up learning and interacting with each other and with these objects over a lifetime. That knowledge is what AI engineers need to access and extract so they can approximate it with their algorithms. They can never fully automate it because culture changes, slang changes, standards of obscenity change. The shapes and forms of buses and cars change, buildings fall apart, receipts fade, and algorithms need humans to help them keep up with it all or step in when they fail. AI companies will downplay this because they want you to think they make magic and we should all be grateful to them. They pluck the cultural and tacit knowledge from workers to approximate it, re-embody it in circuits, and universalize it.

Amazon was no stranger to the limits and needs of AI. Their retail website hosted thousands of product vendors uploading photos and descriptions. One of their patents describes a technical problem: engineers needed to understand whether two pictures taken from different angles, or by different people were of the same product. Rather than hiring employees to do this, they made a gig work platform so they could outsource. They also made that platform, and their model of knowledge production, available to the world. That platform was what we now know as “Amazon Mechanical Turk”. The platform allowed engineers and academics to upload huge volumes of data tasks to the site and set a piece rate. Workers from around the world, but mostly the United States, could access the platform from wherever they could get internet and earn money doing the work. The platform did not enforce a minimum wage, as Amazon declared them independent contractors.

The platform empowered engineers economically. They could speed up their rate of technological experimentation, pivot from one engineering strategy to another, and stay in sync with the volatility of finance trends. And start-ups, whose main trade was labour intensive data processing, could claim they were AI start-ups, convincing venture capitalists to give them higher valuations because the human workers were nowhere in sight. The platform also empowered engineers culturally. In their world of Silicon Valley beanbags and free smoothies, they didn’t have to manage or deal with the awkwardness of denying co-workers those perks. The platform terms and conditions declared workers independent contractors. It also handled a lot of the irritating parts like recruiting, payment transfer, and contract negotiations (there were none). To my engineer friends, the platform was like “magic” – what you couldn’t code, you could send out. The cloud was not just someone else’s computer, but other people.

In 2010, Six Silberman and I developed a system called Turkopticon that allowed Turk workers to quickly share reviews of employers with each other, avoiding ones that treated them badly. We were inspired by the agitation, functionality, and critical capacity of tactical media, urged on by Kavita Philip and Beatriz da Costa. We maintained this mutual aid platform for a decade, but by 2019 we felt ourselves a band-aid for a broken system. So, Six and I decided to turn Turkopticon into a worker-led and maintained project focused on organising and advocacy. The worker-organisers of Turkopticon tackle problems that workers feel acutely – problems specific to the conditions of Turking’s infrastructures, such as “mass rejected” work resulting in wage theft. Issue by issue, they painstakingly build agreement on conditions that must be changed and solidarities that can be turned towards even bigger changes with a collective voice and action.

A future of work that is good for workers requires us to invest in workers’ collective capacities to tackle workplace problems, including time off to imagine, communicate, organise, strategise, and design. If the platform organises some tech workers to exploit other tech workers and atomises Turkers, workers need time to counter-organise with their own organisations and networks of relationships – neither vertical nor horizontal, as Rodrigo Nuñez puts it. Please donate to workers developing emergent strategies to transform their and our futures: <https://bit.ly/turkopticon-donate>

Lilly Irani

Amy Cutler and Hunter Keels are Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. They responded to Dean’s request for collaborators. Here they reflect on their work on the platform and on the project:

The most important part of having a job for me has always been not having a job. I hate the structure, the loss of control over my time and life, and the whole alienation of self from labour. This has led me down some interesting paths including Amazon Mechanical Turk. My work on AMT has been wild, chaotic, varied. It has been occasionally quite lucrative, but often full of crushing depression. I have learned about the art of survey taking and the more elusive art of survey giving. It has taught me more than I ever wanted to know about artificial intelligence and provided crash courses on math, science, and the Lithuanian language. I regret nothing, except for every time I accept a task that takes longer or is more annoying than expected. I can always count on that to raise my depression and anxiety levels.

Occasionally, in the course of my work, I get a chance to reflect on my work. These chances are usually not as extended as this film experience was - I joined this collaboration as a relatively new pandemic hermit and over a year and a half later, here I am, still reflecting (and hey, still in a pandemic). I know that AMT is not for everyone. It’s not for people who like structure or lots of money. There are no guarantees for future work or decent pay. I’ve put a lot of time and effort into my system for finding well-paying tasks; time and effort which my brother would like to point out could get me a well-paying job in software. He and my cat are both on team “Amy get a real job”. But for me? Well, I’ve learned that the one thing I’m truly committed to is my fear of commitment.

Amy Cutler

I was furloughed from my job as a purchasing manager in 2020. Faced with being at home to watch three children, while my partner worked was my initial motivation to work on AMT. It seemed like the answer to some significant problems. I was intrigued by the fact that no one talked about the work in detail, existing in a place that was totally alien to me. I was all in, hoping to support my family with grand returns on my efforts. 1.5 years and 15000+ Human Intelligence Tasks (HITS) later, I’d find out what it really meant to work on AMT. I would become imbedded in a new community, leading to a collaboration with Danielle and her team on this project.

I found the prospect of a remote film project very interesting from the get-go. I have a BA in visual art, specifically working in painting and mixed media installation. When Danielle informed me about what the project would entail and the form it would take, I was delighted to take part. The filming was directed via video call and various props and backdrops came through the mail to transform my home. It made me feel like more than an autonomous fountain of labour, hurling microaggressions and hushed expletives at my computer. Being involved in something like this has always been a fantasy of mine, and I am forever grateful for the opportunity to work and fully enjoy what I am doing. I continue to work on the AMT platform, though much less. The lengths I went to make what I thought was reasonable money based on the circumstances were not worth the cost to my mental health. AMT work to help support a family is not for the faint of heart, but it can fill an immediate need. I would be nowhere without my family’s support, the vast knowledge of others, and the seemingly random causal chain of life we share in links, as art.

Hunter Keels

Danielle Dean (b.1982) received an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in 2013 and a BFA from Central Saint Martins in 2006. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at 1646 Space, The Hague (2020); Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany (2019); Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI (2020); Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2019); 47 Canal, New York (2018); Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles (2017); and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2016). Dean is the recipient of the Tomorrowland Projects Foundation Award (2021), a Creative Capital Grant for Visual Artists (2015), and a Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Grant (2014).

Art Now Danielle Dean: *Amazon* is curated by Nathan Ladd, Assistant Curator, Contemporary British Art

Texts for this leaflet have been provided by Amy Cutler, Lilly Irani, Hunter Keels and Nathan Ladd.

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

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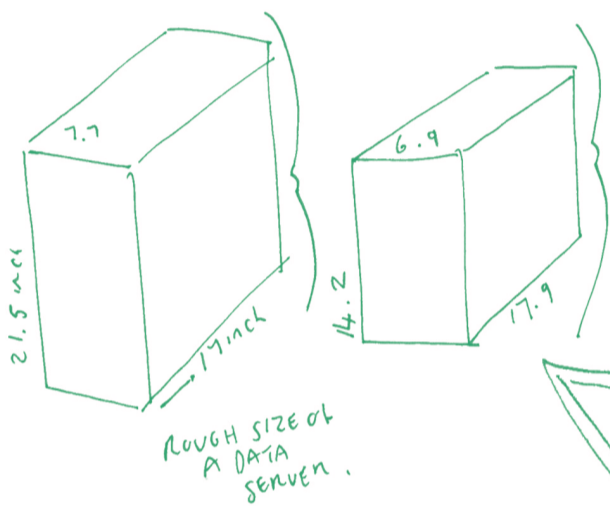
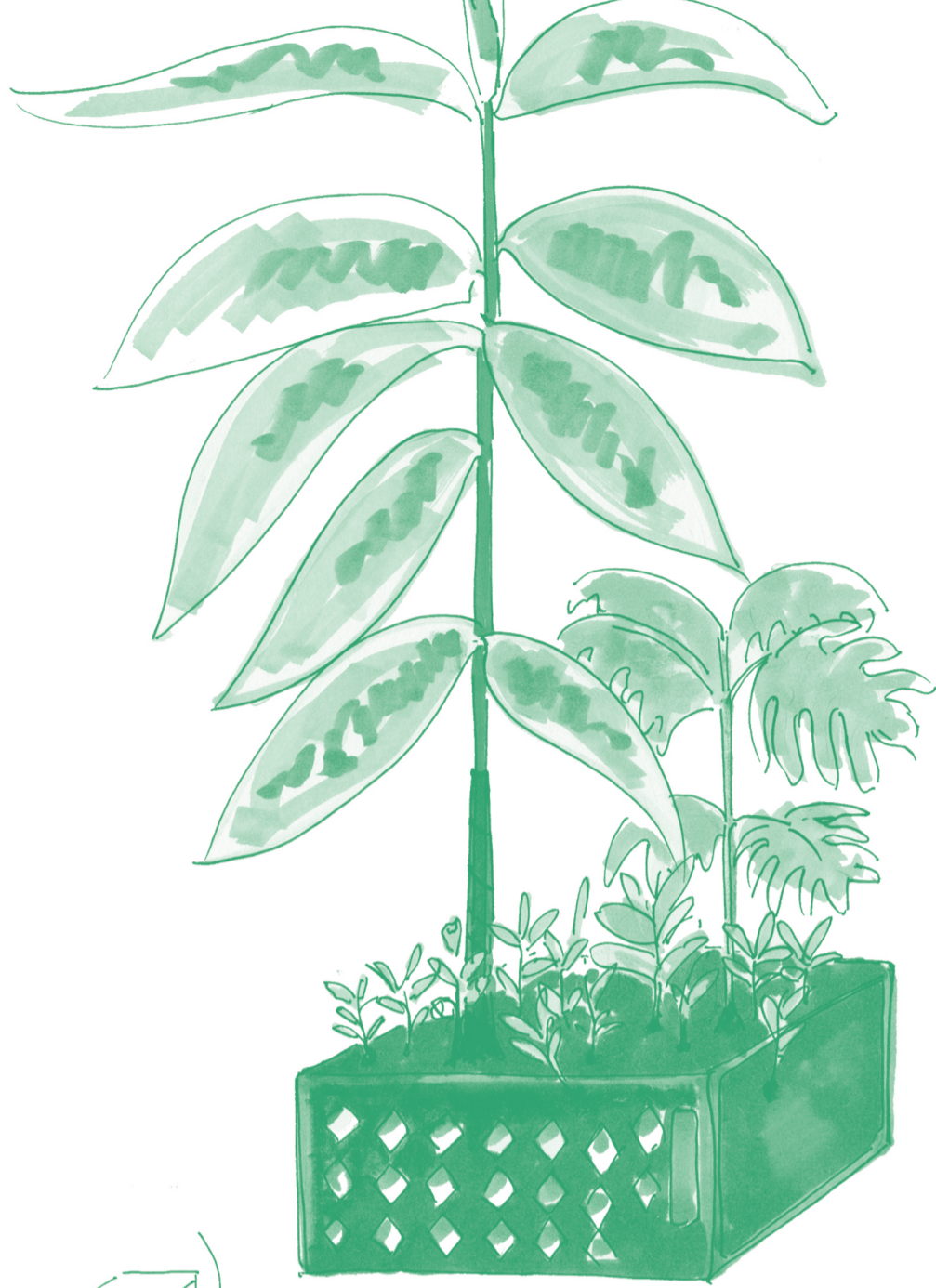
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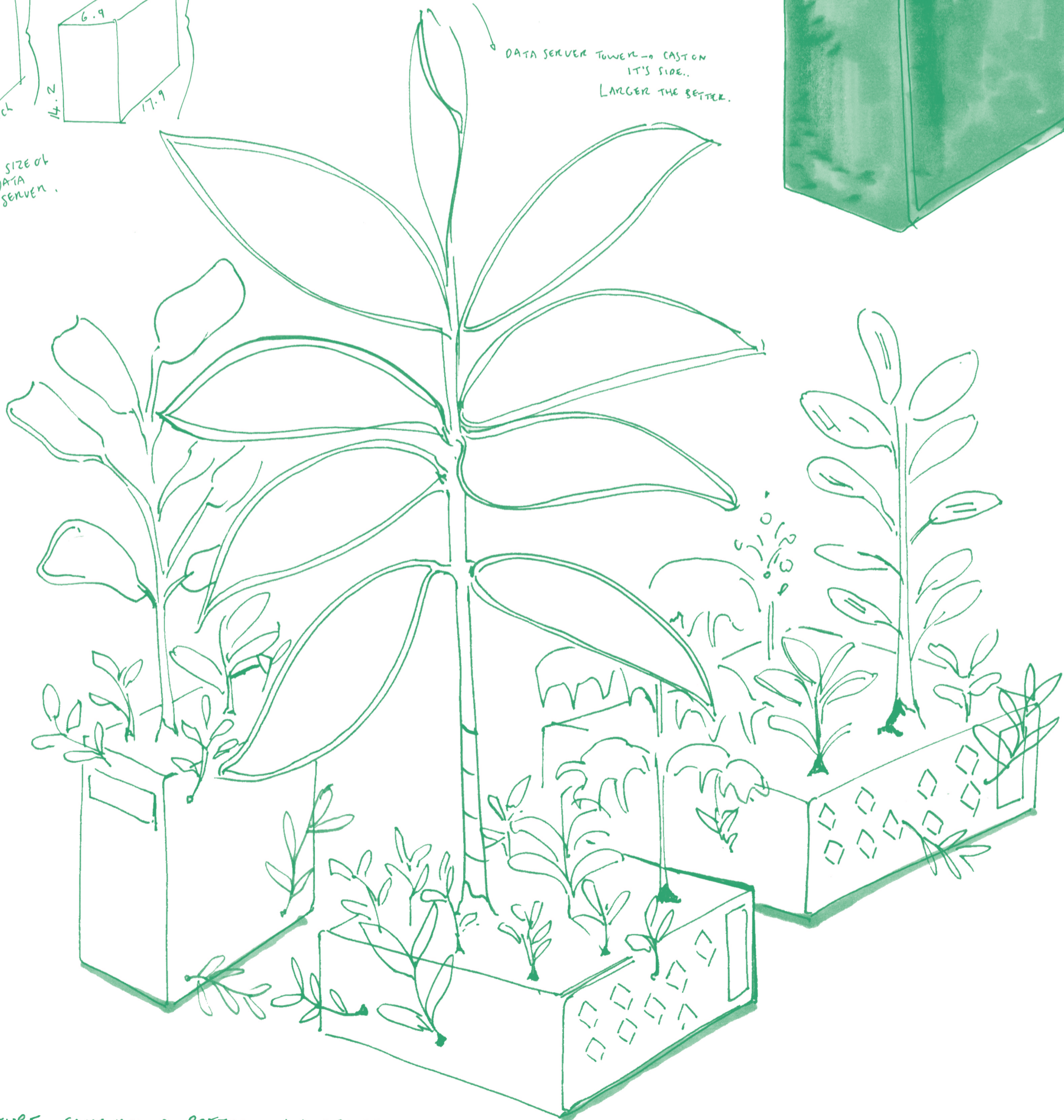
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LARGER THE BETTER.



3x DATA SERVER - SAME MOULD, PORTRAIT, LANDSCAPE..