



e-waste

Katherine Behar



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An Exhibition at the University of Kentucky
Tuska Center for Contemporary Art
by Katherine Behar

With an essay by Anna Watkins Fisher





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<curator's statement>

The Tuska Center for Contemporary Art at the University of Kentucky is pleased to present *E-Waste*, an exhibition of new sculptural and video works by Brooklyn-based artist Katherine Behar. In *E-Waste*, viewers enter a whimsical dystopia in which a caring Gaia grants a second life to leftover, discarded electronic slaves. Created by humans who did not survive the world they themselves constructed, Behar's gadgets are reclaimed by the broken planet and live out their days in a strange symbiosis with the environment. Evoking science-fiction narratives, the exhibition reflects just enough of the dark present to make us feel a bit uneasy, but it is not a Luddite call to arms; the artist seems enraptured by the forms and movements of the very objects she critiques. In this, Behar's works perfectly reflect the complexity of the choices that we make in our supposedly "developed" world: our love of mobility parallels our hate of emissions that it brings, constant design innovation turnover leads to difficult questions around disposal strategies, and even sustainable products, such as solar technologies, can leach out extremely toxic by-products.

In Behar's sculptures, USB peripherals, which most often seduce their way into our lives as perfect companions for our heftier desktop and laptop purchases, are encased in remnants of various industrial materials that nevertheless betray imperfections of the human touch in their construction. Their cords weave around the exhibition space, forming patterns full of utility and visual games reminiscent of earlier postminimalist and land art works. The scale wonderfully complicates this allusion: in contrast to the monumental sites of artists like Robert Morris, Behar's materials are at a scale that is modest, even domestic.

The extraterrestrial quality of this series of sculptures also brings to mind some of the later works of Lee Bontecou that hover between allusion to figuration and the logic of industrial plastics manipulation. Pieces like *FN-12B* move tiny amounts of air while plugged into the electrical grid. Divorced from a human focus, the object's gestures are at once cute and pathetic. It and its brood-mates are the cartoon characters of the postpostindustrial landscape. They suggest a warning: while they invite us to smile and play, they simultaneously betray what is at stake in our increasingly domineering agency on this planet.

Behar's work spans the spectrum from fanciful sci-fi to Anthropocene Feminism, employing recent critical theory as it dips into the obsessions of contemporary gadget culture in everyday life. Given the work's strong intellectual underpinning, it is no wonder that the locus of Behar's production is a university gallery space. At the University of Kentucky, Behar has engaged with several academic units in the College of Fine Arts and the College of Arts and Sciences. It is this type of cross-domain collaboration that pushes the potential of universities as centers of innovative cultural production. The

intellectually rigorous academic approach is complemented by the whimsy of the works in the video series *Modeling Big Data*. Here we encounter a vaguely biomorphic figure "performing" the actions of clicking, buffering, pinging, and caching. The performances create a counterpoint to the commercial narratives around the quantification and monetization of data collected on Web users' behavior. This strategy is essentially the core approach that shapes the show. Behar presents us with an alternative view of the terminology that defines mass media's narratives and marketplace. By opening up this terminology, she gives us room to question its definitions and prototype our own answers.

-Dima Strakovsky

...The factories finally grow so large that the planet can no longer support their weight. It starts with a simple sinkhole in Shenzhen. Eroded beaches pile onto deforested mountainsides. Slums crumble over condos, sloshed in icecap runoff, and the continent slips. It isn't long before neighboring nuclear reactors are swallowed and the inevitable rest is history. Soon Earth is no longer habitable... for humans.

But what of all the gadgets those factories churned out, the always-on armies that once served the human race? Their plastic bodies prove impervious to eventual climate change and sudden catastrophe. Indeed they hastened this.

But without humans to program them, to direct their work and give them purpose, the devices persist in their empty routines. As years go by, the Earth beneath them takes pity. The stony ground creeps toward the orphaned gadgets, embracing their fragile frames to soothe and brace them for their burden of infinite work...

<works in exhibition>

All dimensions are in inches
(height x width x depth)

10-11

LED mousepad/USB hub, USB programmable message fan, Magic-Sculpt, styrofoam, Paverpol, stone filler, foam coat, sand, pigment

USB corded mouses, Magic-Sculpt, styrofoam, Paverpol, stone filler, pigment

4HB-RMP
2014
14 x 6.5 x 6

4HB-RMP (detail)
2014
14 x 6.5 x 6

UCM-OR2X
2014
4.5 x 7 x 4

UCM-RD1X
2014
13 x 4.5 x 4.5

12-13

USB fans, Magic-Sculpt, styrofoam, Paverpol, stone filler, pigment, USB cords and hubs

FN-1DG (detail)
2014
11 x 6 x 5

FN-2MG
2014
6 x 21 x 5

FN-12B (detail)
2014
16 x 18 x 18 (variable)

FN-1DG
2014
11 x 6 x 5

FN-12B (detail)
2014
16 x 18 x 18 (variable)

FN-12B (detail)
2014
16 x 18 x 18 (variable)

FN-12B (detail)
2014
16 x 18 x 18 (variable)

FN-3LG (detail)
2014
6 x 19 x 20.5

14-15

USB squirming tentacles, cords, Magic-Sculpt, styrofoam, foam coat, sand, pigment, paint

UTGN-001
UTGN-002
UTGN-003
UTGN-004
UTGN-005
UTGN-006
UTGN-007
UTGN-008
UTGN-009
UTGN-010
UTGN-011
UTGN-012
UTGN-013
UTGN-014
UTGN-015

UTGN-016
UTGN-017
UTGN-018
2014
3 x 11 x 3 (each)

16-17

USB laptop cooling platforms, Magic-Sculpt, foam coat, styrofoam, sand, pigment

BK3F-3TR (detail)
2014
4 x 13 x 11

BK3F-033
2014
4 x 10 x 12

BK3F-LMP
2014
4 x 10.5 x 12.5

BK3F-BOK
2014
12 x 5.5 x 11

BK3F-2DL (detail)
2014
16 x 20 x 14

BK3F-SLT (detail)
2014
4.5 x 10.5 x 12

BK3F-2DL
2014
16 x 20 x 14

BK3F-033 (detail)
2014
4 x 10 x 12

BK3F-BOK (detail)
2014
12 x 5.5 x 11

18-19

Adjustable USB cooling platforms, vintage brick, Magic-Sculpt, foam coat, sand

ACP2F-OR2 (detail)
2014
11 x 4 x 2

ACP2F-YE4
2014
7 x 11 x 2

ACP2F-OR4
2014
8 x 9.5 x 2.5

ACP2F-RE5 (detail)
2014
8 x 13 x 3

ACP2F-RE5
2014
8 x 13 x 3

ACP2F-OR2
2014
11 x 4 x 2

ACP2F-YE3
2014
6.5 x 12 x 2

ACP2F-OR4 (detail)
2014
8 x 9.5 x 2.5

20-21

USB-powered speakers, tripod legs, Magic-Sculpt, foam coat, styrofoam, sand, pigment, MP3 players, cables, SD cards, sound

SPK-RU01 (detail)
2014
4 x 16.5 x 6

SPK-RU01 (front)
2014
4 x 16.5 x 6

SPK-RU01 (back)
2014
4 x 16.5 x 6

SPK-WT01
2014
9 x 10 x 9

SPK-WT01 (detail)
2014
9 x 10 x 9

SPK-WT01 (detail)
2014
9 x 10 x 9

SPK-BK01 (detail)
2014
5.5 x 12 x 9

SPK-BK01 (detail)
2014
5.5 x 12 x 9

SPK-BK01
2014
5.5 x 12 x 9

SPK-RU02 (detail)
2014
5.5 x 21.5 x 5

SPK-RU01 (detail)
2014
4 x 16.5 x 6

22-23

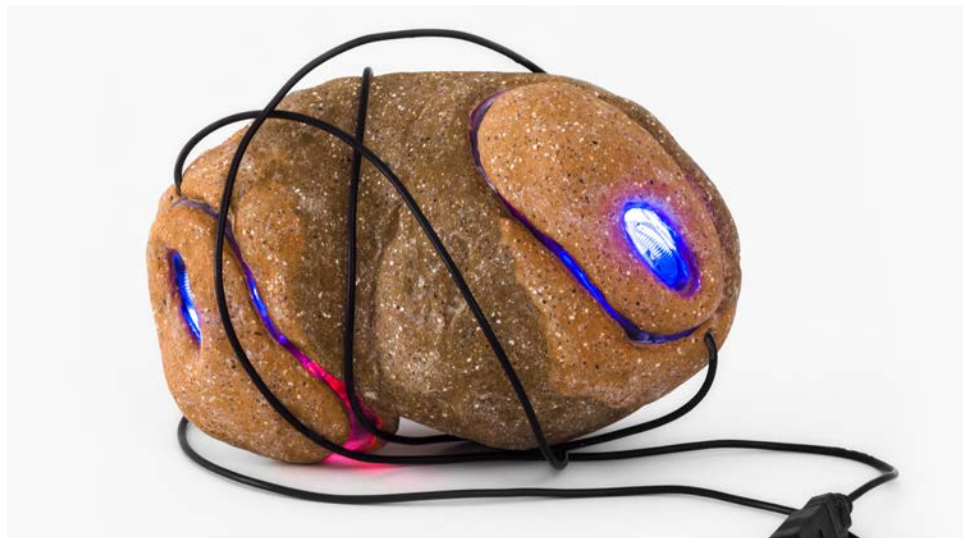
“Modeling Big Data,” series of four HD videos with sound

Buffering
2014
2:26

Clicks
2014
1:49

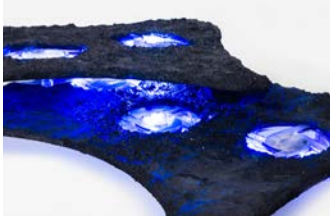
Cached
2014
5:46

Pings
2014
0:41 (loop)

















<atop the digital rubble>

Anna Watkins Fisher

In her essay “The Spam of the Earth,” Hito Steyerl contemplates a post-apocalyptic future in which extraterrestrials pick over the ruins of mankind’s wireless communications.¹ As if to preempt this imaginary encounter, Katherine Behar’s work places this confrontation with digital technology, anachronistically, in our contemporary moment; she turns us all into archaeologists of a future-past looking at ourselves in the present. Exhibiting everyday technologies like USB cords and wired mice as primitive-futuristic fetishes, her new sculptures look a lot like the “digital rubble” that Steyerl prophesizes.

Selecting found-technologies that have *almost but not quite* fallen out of use, Behar is interested in how tech commodities that purport to be “super high-tech” nevertheless appear near-instantaneously disposable: “(As if) *because* it has the ambition to talk to the future, it looks dated immediately” (Behar, Interview 2014). Pushing this to an extreme, by fossilizing the plastic surfaces of these kitsch objects, rendering them paleolithic and unusable, she hyperbolizes the manner in which they carry with them the specter of their own obsolescence. The objects she uses in her

¹ “In a few hundred thousand years extraterrestrial forms of intelligence may incredulously sift through our wireless communications,” writes Steyerl (2012:161).

sculptures are all, as she puts it, “just a little bit déclassé”: “almost past but still in the present.” Her fossils preserve contemporary technology’s old models at this vulnerable moment of lapsed desire, as they await being overwritten by an upgrade.

Trafficking at the cutting edge of scholarly debates in the posthumanities (whether discussions of the Internet of Things, Object Oriented Ontology [OOO], or the Anthropocene),² her work attends to the human-machine interface, finding points of empathetic contact in their shared fates within an unrelenting system of programmed disposability. Bringing a Marxist-feminist-

² These debates reflect on the possibility for thinking beyond the traditional frame of human actions and thoughts; they have in common a mode of questioning the humanistic conditions that ground and inform the way we take for granted that which distinguishes the human from objects, animals, the environment, and so forth.

antiracist reading of new media to bear on recent calls to dissolve the would-be distinction between the human and the digital object, Behar observes, “It is easy enough to despise the digital dross of so much junk culture...[But] are not digital tools the inanimate, un-unionized, exploited working class of global capitalist production?...Though we are eager to accept their servitude, we are quick to discard them for a faster, stronger, newer model” (2013).

The new media object made old is precisely the kind of critical tangle that compels Behar's theoretically charged investigations into the everyday experience of digital technologies. A preoccupation with perhaps the most insidious aspect of the lived experience of new media—"big data"—has increasingly marked the artist's practice. The ways in which digital media technologies have heralded new protocols of state and corporate control in mass surveillance has long been a preoccupation of scholars of new media. Digital technologies, whether face-recognition technology or scannable barcodes, have not only represented emergent tools for making previously tedious tasks simple but also sites of vulnerability to exposure and regulation, at once banal and pernicious. The appropriation of our personal information by software—whether on social media websites such as Facebook or “cookies” and other tracking mechanisms imbedded in our browsers—is a much-cited example of this, as major corporations have generated enormous revenue by tracking and selling our data to advertisers and other interests.

“Data are everywhere and piling up in dizzying amounts” writes Lisa Gitelman, who continues:

Not too long ago it was easier to understand the ways that data was collected about us, first through the institutions and practices of governmentality—the census, the department of motor vehicles, voter registration—and then through the institutions and practices of consumer culture, such as the surveys which told us who we were, the polls which predicted who we'd elect, and the ratings which measured how our attention was being directed. But today things seem different—in degree if not always in kind—now that every click, every move has the potential to count for something, for someone somewhere somehow (2013:2, my emphasis).

“Raw data”—ubiquitous and yet nonexistent—is, Gitelman argues, an oxymoron, since “data are always already ‘cooked,’ that is, never entirely raw.” To cite Lev Manovich, data do not exist but rather must be generated. Because “big data” refers to a collection of data that is so large and complex that it becomes difficult to process, Gitelman reminds us with the supposed distinction between “raw data” and “cooked data” that big data is, rather than a “natural” vestige of our contemporary moment or the mere byproduct of a digital age, instead a highly constructed indication of the very system that makes it. In the sense that data is made or produced, it is exquisitely artificial. Big data, then, is not just a matter of being generated *but of being shaped*.

As Behar knows well, data is fundamentally a function of *modeling*. It is its malleability, indeed its *manipulability*, that makes it, terrifyingly, the preeminent “raw material” of our time. So while working with clay—or more accurately, a moldable epoxy resin putty called “Magic-Sculpt”—may have been a departure for the artist used to working in other media (i.e. interactive installation, video, performance), *E-Waste*'s centralizing of the concept of modeling (which also appears as the title of her grouping of video works, “Modeling Big Data”) is especially apt for confronting the interventions of the artist's wider body of work. Modeling, of course, signifies in multiple, contradictory directions: as both the work of mechanical reproduction (as in something modular, the

endless parade of obsolete models) and the unrepeatable (as in the singularly indexical act of modeling clay). It describes the act of creation—natural and artificial.

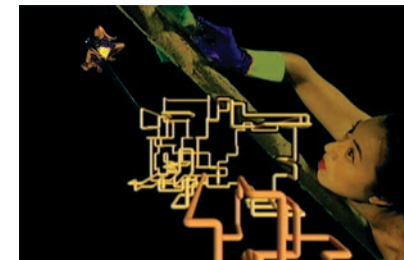
The questions of human versus non-human reproduction apparent in the artist's sculptural work are extended to the exhibition's 3-D printer installation, given pride of place in the gallery. Its own form fossilized much like Behar's sculptures, the “organic” printer spits out “organic” computer mouse fossils, literally bringing into form the mutual “imprinting” of organic and non-organic life. Echoing her choice to use Magic-Sculpt (a plastic material that hardens so as to mimic clay) instead of actual clay, the printer installation poses the question: can mechanical reproducibility be considered part of a natural process? Make no mistake: Behar is interested in the natural appearance of the artificial.

Of course, to model is also to perform, to arrive belatedly to a crucial dimension of the artist's original contribution to the field of new media art, where an engagement with performance seems at times to be both everywhere and nowhere. As the once-boutique province of “new media art” has become all-pervasive, and phrases like “ubiquitous computing” have merely scratched the surface of our

ever more atomized and inexorable digital condition, Behar's work forces a different kind of interaction between the digital and the aesthetic than what is regularly shown and promoted under the banner of new media art. It is through an aesthetics of modeling that Behar makes new media and performance speak to each other.

Consider an earlier piece like *Pipecleaner* (2007), for which the artist inserted a pole dancer, wearing a dress made out of cleaning gloves, into the ever-present, late 1990s Microsoft Windows screensaver. Or take *Hexxed* (2007-2009), for which Behar performed as a cybernetic sorceress, enacting the gendered meaning that underlies the German word “hexen,” referring—incredibly—both to the “hexadecimal codes” that determine color on websites *and* to black magic.

Binding conventions from the genre of performance art such as literalization and dark humor, Behar reinterprets vernacular and technical digital tropes in their most concrete or elemental forms, rendering explicit those unpaid debts otherwise trusted to metaphor. Her work constitutes an aesthetic vocabulary for attending to digital media's complicity with forms of material and representational violence that have historically targeted those racialized, classed, and gendered subjects perceived as “excessively” embodied, who cannot disappear and yet are everywhere made to disappear. Indeed, just as her sculptures appropriate so-called USB



Pipecleaner, 2007
Cross-platform screensaver
Katherine Behar

peripherals, “marginalized” on the fringes of desktop computing, her latest videos present data itself as such an un-disappearing subject. Behar finds in scholars such as Lisa Nakamura and artists like Stephanie Rothenberg fellow travelers for exposing the material conditions and bodies on and by which the wet dream of new media’s supposed immateriality is founded.

So while the digital boasts a capacity for abstraction that makes it rarely associated with the material, Behar’s performances expose the digital’s disavowal of its own relation to embodiment. If modeling can be said to be what digital media is best at and yet what it most vociferously denies, it is digital media’s (real and perceived) allergy to a certain kind of representation that Behar’s video work tests again and again by insistently inserting the gendered, raced, and classed body into the smooth, clean digital space.

Nowhere is this insistence on the embodiment of digital forms more apparent than in the centerpiece of her recent video work, *Clicks* (2014). The work, described by the artist as “a parody of big data,” presents the body of big data as a pathetic glob. It offers a stark counter to claims of the unrepresentability of data: against a brilliantly saturated backdrop, data hallucinates its own presence; it is both encumbered and affirmed by its undeniable materiality (rendered by Behar, comically, as a kind of bubble-gum colored sex toy or rubberized Sherpa). The quasi-Lynchian video

represents the artist’s first foray into the slick aesthetics of high-def, which signals a departure from her penchant for the lo-fi nostalgic-effect of standard-definition.



Hexxed, 2007-2009
Katherine Behar

The unexpected juxtaposition of the video’s absurd object with its perfect formal quality creates a surreal dissonance, which Behar has described as its “glitchy aesthetic.” Herein lies what may be the piece’s disruptive potential: by enacting data’s excesses, its potential for exhaustion and collapse, Behar models—quite literally—its capacity for breakdown by inserting her own body inside the plastic larva meant to represent big data.

Giving idiosyncratic shape to the amorphous notion of big data, *Clicks* confronts us with a strange encounter, inflecting Gitelman’s stark characterization of a digital present in which “every click, every move has the potential to count for something, for someone somewhere somehow.” Even as she remains critical of its potential dangers, Behar turns our gaze to the liveness—and moreover, the creepy vitality—of big data. Big data’s coercive or disciplinary effects are hardly resolved by the work. In something of a pivot from her earlier work, the artist’s latest work offers a less decisive or immediately articulable response to the issues she raises, and for this reason, the work is less assuring.

Modeling (and indeed digital media) is revealed in the work to be not merely a method of manipulation but one for exploring a different kind of corporeality. Hence, one finds a sense of alienation reflected in Behar’s representation of a fossilized digital “present” that is intentionally askew. Tethered in wire, her sculptures are poised at the intersection of the animate and the electric, like props for a never-released Cronenberg film. Her soft handling of their clay-like material gives them an uncanny skin, a perverse porosity that presents them as indecipherably—uneasily—both organic and inorganic. So too, the synthetic-if-fleshy body of big data is shown not as threatening or even knowable but as autistic, repetitive, impaired: advanced and yet primitive. Behar represents big data, not unlike the archaeological world of her sculptures, as an uncanny form of life still awaiting discovery.

Anna Watkins Fisher is a new media and performance scholar and art critic. Currently a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, her research and teaching explore the politics and aesthetics of digital culture. She is currently completing her first book, *Playing the Parasite: The Art of Dependence in a Networked Age*, which theorizes parasitism as an emergent paradigm in digital art and performance. She is co-editor, with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan, of the new edition of *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2015).

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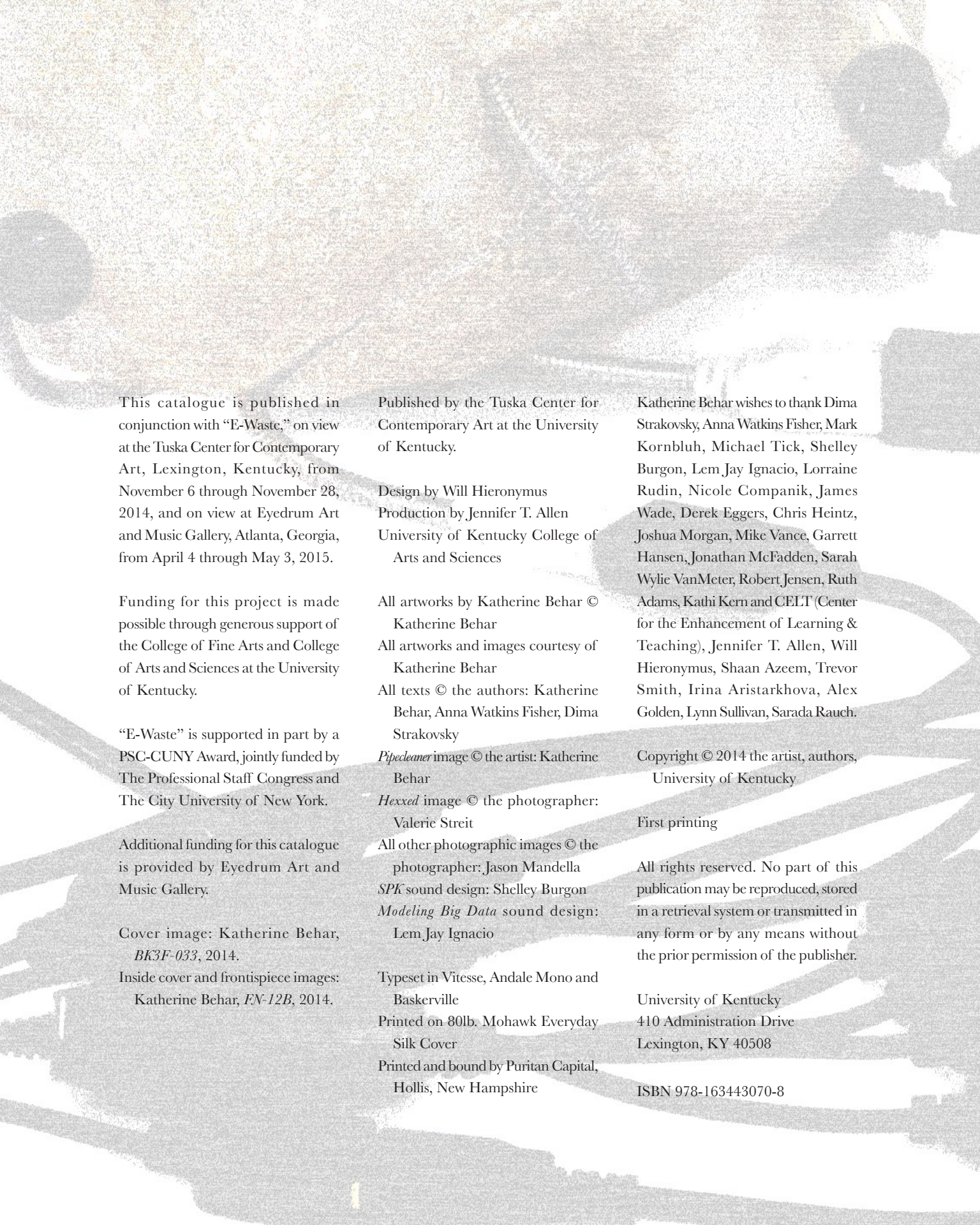
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Katherine Behar is a Brooklyn-based interdisciplinary artist, whose videos, performances, interactive installations, and writings explore issues in contemporary digital culture. She is Assistant Professor of New Media Arts at Baruch College.



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