

## Virtual Assistance

An Interview with Andrew Norman Wilson

Hye Jean Chung and Athena Tan

The business process outsourcing (BPO) industry has been both celebrated and critiqued in popular and scholarly discourse as a phenomenon that epitomizes neoliberal globalization. Encompassing cinematic post-production work (e.g., computer animation and special effects), technical support and telemarketing services, software programming, legal research, and medical transcription, among others, the BPO industry has been championed for boosting national economies, creating opportunities for educated workers in the Global South, and bringing global capitalism to a higher level of efficiency. Yet critics have noted the racist and sexist harassment to which BPO workers are sometimes exposed, the detrimental health effects of BPO work that entails “time-shifting” (adjusting one’s schedule to that of a client on the other side of the world), and sub-par working conditions. The industry is also routinely blamed for the loss of white-collar jobs across the Global North.

Andrew Norman Wilson's project, [\*Virtual Assistance\*](#), takes outsourcing and information-and-communication-technology (ICT)-enabled labor as both its subject and its medium. As he writes in his statement,

The *Virtual Assistance* project began with research geared towards unpacking the relational system of GetFriday,<sup>1</sup> a virtual personal assistant service based in Bangalore, India. GetFriday typically provides remote executive support, where a largely American client base is assigned a "virtual" personal assistant. I am a part of that client base, paying monthly fees for a primary assistant who works out of the GetFriday office in India. My assistant is a 24-year-old male Bangalore resident named Akhil. In paying for our relationship I am not trying to lighten my work load, but rather to attempt collaborative projects and even reversals of the normative outsourcing flow under a corporate contract arranged for one-way command. [...]

Global outsourcing tends to produce telematic relationships - telematic in the sense of a remote control over another's labor, the manipulation of dependence. These conditions led to a number of questions about power relations that have been guiding me through the project. If power is defined as the ability to manipulate resources across space and time, to what extent can power in my relationship with Akhil and GetFriday be re-distributed amongst a service where the normative use is one-way command? How can this be reversed towards mutual assistance and collaboration? How can this relationship exceed the commodified forms intimacy and creativity privileged by service-based economies?

Wilson has worked with Akhil on a series of art projects (three of which we present here) that explore the possibility of forging a personal, site-sensitive connection within the structure of a commodified and ostensibly geographically transcendent relationship reliant on ICT. The playful tasks that comprise *Virtual Assistance* mock corporate efficiency and abstraction in an attempt to encourage viewers to rethink the valuation of certain forms of

labor over others within the global (re)configuration of work enabled by ICT. We asked Wilson to elaborate on this theme and on what he considers to be his role and responsibility, as a US-based artist, in participating in discourses about outsourcing.

**Hye Jean Chung and Athena Tan: First, could you tell us more about the origins of the *Virtual Assistance* project? What inspired you, or first drew you to this subject? When you first contacted GetFriday, was it with the project in mind, or did you initially hire them to do more functional tasks for you?**

**Andrew Norman Wilson:** I heard about GetFriday from an Indian software engineer who was visiting Google’s corporate headquarters in Mountain View, California while I worked there as a video editor. Eventually I was fired from my job at Google for investigating questionable labor practices. A few months later I read an [article](#) in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about virtual assistants that came from the self-promotion machine of “lifestyle designer” [Timothy Ferris](#). In the article, there was no attempt to problematize the blatant exploitation at play. It basically served as an advertisement for both Ferris and the virtual assistance companies it mentioned. Unquestioned labor practices were on my mind and fueling much of my work at that time, and so the service struck me as an opportunity for direct engagement with one of the dominant symbols of globalism—outsourced labor in India. This was in 2008, when the financial crisis was becoming a widespread matter of public concern, and my friends and I (who had a fairly active reading group in which we read critical texts on finance) were wondering how we could directly intervene in financial networks. That desire led to a lot of frustration, and half a year later I returned to the article on virtual assistants. I researched a number of companies, and chose GetFriday because they seemed like the Bill Clinton of virtual assistant services. I signed up with the project in mind, and told the people at GetFriday that I was embarking on a research-based art project about the service by using the service.

**HJC and AT: What is the time frame for this project? How long did Akhil work for you, or how long has he worked for you—is the project ongoing?**

**ANW:** The project has no determinate end and I am still signed up as a client of GetFriday. My first month with GetFriday was February 2009, and I have just started to exhibit the project as a whole. I will be traveling to India sometime during 2011 or 2012, and my main goal there will be to dissolve the corporate relationship with Akhil, and hopefully his coworkers. The project so far is in part defined by a peculiar proximity across vast distances, and therefore I'm not all that interested in hiring Akhil to work with me while I'm in India. Instead I hope that Akhil and I can exhibit and discuss our work together in public settings outside of the conditions set by the corporate contract.

**HJC and AT: Have the project and/or your goals for it changed during the time that you've worked on it? If so, could you describe how it has changed?**

**ANW:** A crucial reorientation of my goals for the project came with my understandings of my contract with GetFriday. The power dynamics of the relationship are largely determined by the limitations put into play by the corporate contract and the accompanying forms of social engagement that are deemed acceptable by GetFriday management. I can't have contact with Akhil outside of the official GetFriday communication channels, and all communication can be monitored by Akhil's superiors. Akhil cannot organize or join a labor union. Akhil's superiors insist that he represent himself as my "virtual assistant" in the project. In a way, these restrictions are the juice of the project. With the installations I have developed I attempt to reflect and diffract a number of these restrictions because I believe that recognizing them is necessary for moving forward, both for me the artist and for people who experience the project. None of us can claim that we are on the outside of these types of relationships.

**HJC and AT: How much did you pay Akhil to perform the tasks? How did you calculate this payment? How does it compare to the customary charges of other clients of GetFriday?**

**ANW:** For my first month, I was on the B20 plan—I paid GetFriday \$200 upfront for twenty hours of labor. Because the project is not geared towards the outsourcing of my time-consuming tasks, I struggled to give Akhil even fifteen hours of labor time that month. Since that first month I have been on the pay as you go plan, paying a flat rate of \$10 per month and \$15 per hour of labor time. At first I had to send him an email at an address specifically for tasks and tell him to work for a specific amount of time (in ten-minute increments) and give him a deadline. Now if we're working on something I will usually just tell him a general amount of time that he can work for, and to feel free to go over or under. I also do not give deadlines. I think we're able to be lazy and/or disregard corporate protocol because I am not a high profile client with strict demands, and so the people at GetFriday don't take me very seriously.

**HJC and AT: In your statement for this project, you ask, "How personal and creative can this relationship become?" This suggests that you're privileging the terms "personal" and "creative" as characteristics of employment, but in a global economy increasingly characterized by affective labor, personal touches and creativity are just as commodified and even impersonal as, say, efficiency, professionalism, or other qualities valued in the workplace. In fact, your project could be seen in these terms as contributing to the commodification of creativity and individuality. In what ways, specifically, do you think the project provides or suggests an alternative to this process of commodification?**

**ANW:** I think it's important to acknowledge that any project made with the help of paid labor—whether it be a business project, an academic project, or an art project—is going to contribute to the commodification of creativity and individuality. There is no total autonomy from this process, and so the crucial question in this regard becomes how to exceed the capture of commodification, and how that can be sustained.

In the post-Taylorist mode of production, importance is placed on the blurring of business relations towards the pursuit of professional or economic interests that incorporate personal relations, friendship, or trust in profit creation. This brings relations once defined precisely as “disinterested” into the commodity sphere.

The question of the actual nature of the relationship between Akhil and I (when is it more “commercial,” and when is it more bound up with “genuine” feelings?) is always left in suspense, and invariably unanswered due to the intertwined relationship of relational protocols and “genuine” affect. I think the reason why the project makes some people (including myself) so uncomfortable is because it directly accepts that We The People Who Own Laptops are unavoidably engaged in these types of relationships, or often even more problematic relationships through the functions of capitalism. We don’t even need to stand up to recognize our reliance on cheap foreign labor—the evidence is on the tags of our clothing, inside the shells of our mobile devices, and on the other side of a phone call to the customer service numbers of our banks. *Virtual Assistance* is a project about attempting to overcome the limitations and failures of a sort of real-time social engagement with a particular form of this labor.

But one thing is certain, at least on my end—despite GetFriday’s goal of “enhancing value to its clients,” profitability is not the fundamental horizon in which this project is formed. Profitability is a term of economic efficiency, and this is not an economically efficient relationship. I have spent thousands of hours/US dollars on the production and dissemination of this project. I spent a considerable amount of time last summer alone at my editing station, sweating in my underwear, editing a video that Akhil asked me to make about fighter jets. One could argue that this activity is primarily in pursuit of social profitability; however, if I really wanted to engage in a socially profitable relationship, I would not have chosen a paid Internet relationship with a Bangalore resident who has no ties to (and very limited interest in) the art world. A much more efficient relationship in terms of social profitability would be to find the most “relevant” Indian gallery or artist willing to work with me, and try to make work about outsourcing. This project, while partially about outsourcing, more importantly uses

outsourcing. The relationship-project is inherently problematic in a number of ways for me, and so the stakes are higher and the baggage is heavier.

Texts on affective labor have certainly influenced my approach, but this service, like many, is too particular and nuanced to rely heavily on such a broad theoretical characterization. Sure, the global economy is increasingly constituted by affective labor, but where is that happening? What is happening at and through GetFriday? Here are some the services GetFriday assistants regularly provide:

- Organizing Plumbers and Electricians...
- Managing Databases
- Buying Books, CDs, DVDs...
- Organizing Travel Arrangements (Tickets, Hotels)
- Setting up Appointments
- Online Research
- Moderating and Updating Blogs

Akhil's day-to-day work consists of manipulating and circulating information for the benefit of his clients. Consistent with the sociological categorization of immaterial labor, Akhil performs labor in which he has to speak, communicate, and cooperate within a context that has been completely normalized by management. Though the work Akhil has done for this project (which is far less than the work I have done for it) benefits me in certain ways (for instance, you have invited me to publish in *Media Fields Journal*), the project has become an attempt to allow for that forced speech, communication, and cooperation to become a will to speak, communicate, and cooperate. By asking Akhil to relax and write down his thoughts in front of his favorite view of Bangalore, or asking him to assign me a task, or asking him what he wants to be working on at work, we have achieved this to varying degrees. Akhil told me he wanted the opportunity to work on design and engineering projects in the office, so I asked him to design the toy boats he used to build as a boy but had to hide from his father because they were ruled as a distraction from his studies. He snail mailed me these designs and I have built boats accordingly. I then snail mailed him a boat that he took outside of the corporate space and corporate labor time, and into a personal

space on personal/family time—the beach near his childhood home in Kerala, India, where he used to float the boats as a boy. Beyond the interpersonal exchange, this task functions as a conceptual reversal of typical global manufacturing relationships—instead of a product being designed in the US, manufactured in Asia, and consumed in the US, the production flow has been reversed. And the toy boat is not a product—it is a sort of gift that now sits on Akhil's desk in Bangalore.





*Virtual Assistance:* [Toy Boat Task](#)

**HJC and AT: How has Akhil reacted to the project? Would he also describe your relationship as collaborative?**

**ANW:** It is difficult to summarize how Akhil has reacted to the project, as it consists of countless actions that in turn cause molecular reactions for both Akhil and his coworkers. Because Akhil is representing a company and serving clients, reactions are almost always positive or affirmative. At first he seemed very hesitant, because nothing like this has ever happened at GetFriday. However, he seemed to quickly warm up to our less conventional activity, and has maintained a steady enthusiasm in not only the project, but the relationship as a whole. There was a time during our first year together when he was trying to get me to upgrade my plan because that would increase his ratings in the company. He told me he felt comfortable asking me because our relationship is more casual than those with his other clients. But he has since stopped asking me to upgrade. He also used to ask me “how will this task be useful for you?” I’m not sure if he was curious/confused, if he

needed this information for the company, or both, but he isn't asking me that anymore.

I think I have developed a sense of Akhil's reactions through Google chat, and there are ways in which I have come to know if he's feeling uncomfortable with a proposition of mine. Alternately, it is fair game for him to express understanding, joy, and intimacy about the work we do. I'm also the client who gets to hear Akhil's gossip, stories, worries, trivia, and more.

Neither Akhil nor I are describing the relationship as collaborative at this point.

**HJC and AT: You speak of experimenting with a potential “power reversal” between you and Akhil, but it seems to us that such a transformation can't happen with Akhil under your paid employ. Have your thoughts on this changed as you've proceeded with *Virtual Assistance*?**

**ANW:** In my project statement, this is a rhetorical question for viewers to consider what a full power reversal could entail and how my work with Akhil falls short of that. Akhil and I are both aware that power cannot be entirely reversed in the relationship, and this failure is something that he and others at GetFriday have taught me during the course of our relationship. At first I thought that more subversion or autonomy would be possible, but the restrictions of the corporate contract (which Akhil understandably abides by) allow for no communication outside of the official GetFriday channels. Because of this, Akhil and I are able to be monitored at any time.

Despite this ownership of communication, I think Akhil and I are drawing up novel forms of activity that dissociate the creation of common goods from the accumulation of profit by both the company and myself. As friends with an interest in each other outside of this as a productive/profitable relationship, a non-exploitative temporality emerges that allows for the creation of subjectivity, as well as material values, on both sides. I believe these new subjectivities, in relation to each other and the project, often find independence from the interests of capitalist production, and, when

successful, turn production towards the service of human development. However, though I'm constantly questioning my position and coming up with questions that I find interesting, I'm not finding liberation or the production of a radical new subjectivity for Akhil and his coworkers. At best we are momentarily or fragmentarily transforming (what I find to be) the problematic conditions that drew me to this service and field of work in the first place.

**HJC and AT: You say that there is a “non-exploitative temporality” that governs your relationship/friendship with Akhil. Could you elaborate on that a bit? Also, could you say more about how you’ve conceived of temporality in relation to materiality in this project, as in your exploration of bodily rhythms in “Pulse Rates Task”?**

**ANW:** A preconceived condition of GetFriday client-assistant relationships is time arbitrage, which is simply the endeavor to put time to profitable use. Outsourcing allows corporations (and now individuals) to farm out peripheral and repetitive tasks to contracted workers in cheap labor economies, while the home office can busily contemplate its core business functions. If this project involved time arbitrage, Akhil would be handling my email and calendar, preparing grant and residency applications, and, as GetFriday puts it, performing other “tedious tasks, leaving [me] to pursue more important things.”

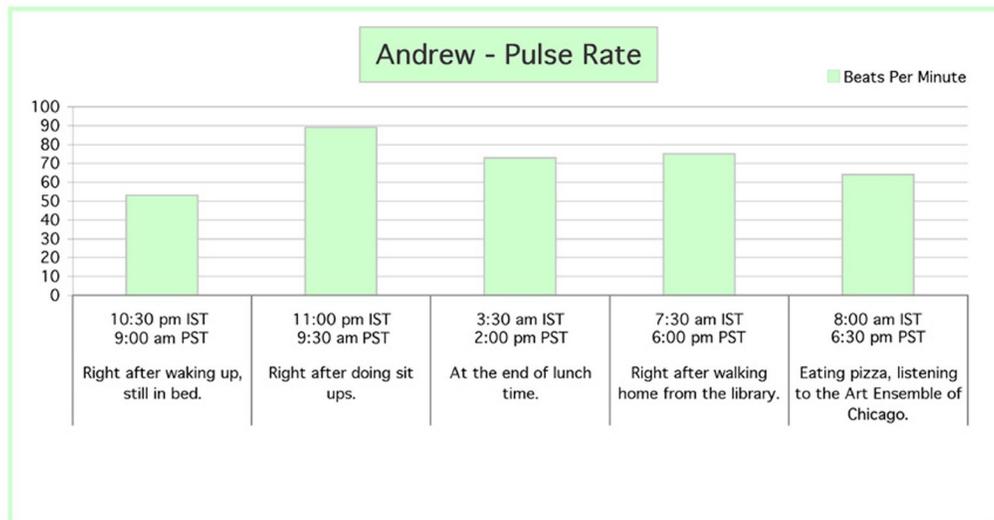
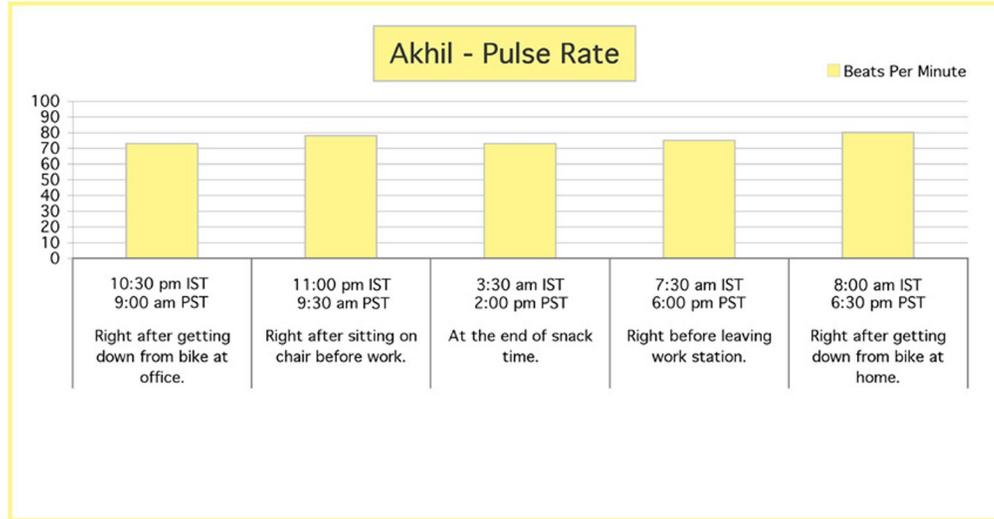
Also, global labor relationships often involve a consistent assessment and monitoring of relationships for their relative profitability, while allowing for the ability to move in and out of them without causing friction. Though I can easily terminate my contract with GetFriday or switch to another assistant, I think that would cause a lot of psychological friction for both Akhil and I, and conceptual/ethical friction for the project as a whole. Engaging with Akhil is a committed attempt to slow down the pace of connections, deferring any “completion” of the work, and instead sharing it in progress and as a process—through exhibitions, performances of the *Virtual Assistance* PowerPoint, online presentations, and print. I'm trying to linger over an ongoing project whose full potential I had not realized at the outset. “Fieldwork,” to me, is well defined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak when she describes it as working

in the field to learn how not to formalize too quickly, for one's own benefit in learning to resonate with responsibility-based mindsets; rather than a generally hasty preparation for artistic (and/or academic) transcoding.

Other forms of temporal autonomy could mean shortened work hours and rotating shifts, lighter workloads, reduced pressure, and a more relaxed working pace. By making work together that is about the exchange itself and not instrumentalized towards projects that are outside of the relationship, I can allow Akhil increased autonomy in the production of our work. I have no need for high expectations; whatever he does is revealing in and of itself. Though I can't offer Akhil shortened work hours or rotating shifts, a strange temporal autonomy from the GetFriday labor ecology has emerged through engaging, non-labor intensive work, a lack of pressure, and regular Internet relaxation such as chatting instead of getting work done. And chatting is free, in that I'm not billed per minute for our conversations. [It's also] a way for Akhil to escape work while making it look like he is doing work ("I'm just talking to Andrew, boss").

Yet the project is not merely a fight to secure more "leisure time," but also to integrate collective rhythms into the workplace setting. Global or standardized corporate time comes at the expense of other times—the corporeal time of biorhythms, reflective times, the labor time underpinning and invisibly incorporated into the IT economy. Akhil, in a way, lives in two worlds. One happens during his daytime (most of which is slept through), marked by local languages, friendships, and relations. The other, at night, is marked by the English language and interactions with people in the United States and Europe. This temporal asymmetry puts Akhil and many others in the Indian IT world out of phase with their own local conditions. Spatio-temporal integration is at once spatio-temporal alienation, which can have serious consequences for local social ecologies.

If a multiplication of identities and lived worlds is indeed a central element in networked capitalism, it can represent a liberating factor only if the local link is maintained. This is why the first two tasks Akhil completed for me were two page-long reports—one on his immediate office environment, the other on the one mile radius surrounding the office.



*Virtual Assistance: [Pulse Rates Task](#)*

“Pulse Rates Task” further addresses these issues by introducing a non-standardized body rhythm into this spatial and temporal integration that has been standardized for a global movement of information, technology, capital, and people. We took our pulse rates simultaneously at five times preceding

or following movement to a new space for new activity throughout his workday.



*Virtual Assistance:* [Inspirational Posters](#)

The inspirational posters I developed provide additional commentary on the temporal integration that “Pulse Rates Task” addresses. One day I woke up and had received an email from Akhil with the subject heading “Good Morning!!” I asked him where the quote came from, and he explained that there is a word document that all the GetFriday assistants have containing inspirational quotes. I started to send Akhil emails with Gmail’s random signature generator, and eventually came up with the one seen on the “Good Night” poster. When I wake up in the morning and say hello to Akhil, it seems insensitive to say good morning, because he starts his work day at 10:30 PM IST. But saying good night seems inappropriate because I am saying hello. When he leaves work around 7:30 PM CST, I could say good night because he is going to go home and sleep shortly thereafter, but it is 7 AM in Bangalore.

Where my project becomes critical is in [its] consideration of the conceptual and actual problems of this particular organization of labor, and creating expressions of desire that counter and exceed the typical functions of the GetFriday service. Chatting online plays a role in this, but I think Akhil taking a handmade toy boat that I mailed him out of the office and into his family/vacation time/space is a much more powerful statement.

**HJC and AT: How would you describe your role as an artist in contributing to the popular and scholarly discourses on outsourcing and affective labor? How does the *Virtual Assistance* project fit into your overall philosophy/beliefs on the role or responsibility of art as it grapples with “the dominant economic, social, and political forces in our world today,” as you put it in your statement?**

**ANW:** As stated before, this is not just a project about outsourcing and affective labor, but rather a direct engagement with them. I’m no anthropologist, but my hope is that my day-to-day use of the “field” can contribute to new categories of analysis. Though I may not be up for the task, I hope that someone more experienced will take on the project as a subject and tool for sociological analysis. I have already started the process by making public certain corporate conditions of this service. In the exhibitions, I have displayed the GetFriday User Manual, my assistant surveys, my billing receipts, and everything I have ever communicated through chat and email to Akhil and others at GetFriday. Akhil is also available for chat on PC stations in the exhibition.

While I’m interested in the image of outsourcing, or the “global” in general, I’m equally curious about what produces it: the procedural, political, social, and economic characteristics of a particular situation, and the process of translating them into operational devices that enable us to rethink our social ecologies. My hope is that the project rematerializes and relocalizes the global. That it takes our conceptions of the global, and accompanies it back to the rooms in which it is produced, but also the rooms, spaces, and temporal conditions that this production tends to ignore. For this project, “net art” is not a phenomenological engagement with the idealized, abstract concept of “cyberspace;” but rather an application of the Internet to the messy complexities of the real world with hopes for provocative and socially productive results.

I think that art, with its dense histories of self-reflexive inquiry and experimental engagement, is in a unique position to strategically expand and diffract/rematerialize the already present communicative and creative commonalities made possible by network capitalism. If we are to organize

wholesome cooperations of accountability in our networked world, we need to work at recognizing and thrusting upwards into curvature that which becomes flattened by the privatization of what is common and the smoothing flows of concentrated capital and information.

I don't think that all artists should be held accountable to this, but it is what I'm striving for.

## Notes

- 1 GetFriday derives its name from Man Friday, the protagonist's assistant in Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*. GetFriday, "Who We Are," <https://www.getfriday.com/?module=aboutus&action=whoarewe>, 2005, accessed 17 January 2011.

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