Reveling in the Pleasure of Process and DIY Culture
By Mira Dayal | September 27, 2016

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — "The work is the death mask of its conception," Walter Benjamin wrote about writing technique in his 1928 collection of essays *One-Way Street*. While this statement is open to interpretation, I take it to mean that, for Benjamin, the final state or deliverance of an idea was far less interesting than the process of its formulation. And while Benjamin was considering texts rather than artworks, his ideas came to mind as I navigated Ethan Hayes-Chute's deadpan DIY installation, *List Projects*, at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. There, woodchips, rusty
nails, incomplete texts, and one-liners represent fragments of Hayes-Chute’s ideas. This is not to say that the installation feels unintentional; rather, the domestic assemblages and repurposed objects feel like projects still under conception and thereby resist the death mask (or self-satisfaction) of completion.

The show opens with a black-and-white video showing the artist making small rolls of paper from larger rolls of paper. This tedious task relates to the most distinctive element of the installation: a series of Epson HX-20 computers, “considered to be the first laptop computers,” which use such paper rolls for printouts, formatted like receipts. “Egg Collector Pro” (2016), a creepily pseudoscientific work, asks the viewer a series of fairly basic demographic questions with an oddball thrown-in: How do you like your eggs? Answers on the spiraling printout ranged from “scrambled” and “tasty” to “wcrampled [sic]” and “poisoned.” “Errand Minder” (2016) helps the viewer create a custom to-do list to take home; “buy more pistachios” is automatically appended. The joke refers to a bowl of pistachio shells kept next to the computer.
While contemporary computers have screens large enough to absorb the gaze and distract a user from their surroundings, the Epson laptops, with their inches-wide screens, felt quite connected to physical space — more like typewriters than computers. Hayes-Chute highlighted this connection with his programs; the pistachio joke required me to search the physical space of the room for that bowl while the egg question prompted me to look at the physical receipt of answers that printed as I typed. At the same time, the data collected is fairly meaningless, data for the sake of data. How and why do our troves of computer-generated information take on value?

One answer, of course, is for commercial purposes. Keywords from Google searches tailor advertisements to the user’s interests. Hayes-Chute models this translation of data into products with “Cellar Store” (2016), in which dozens of custom labels made on that Epson laptop plaster found containers, redisplayed as commodities for sale. Unique spice blends form pyramids in a row of jars in “Spice Trade (Production Line)” (2016), and repurposed Tabasco bottles hold dubious medicines (“Uncle Scoot’s Original All-Season Tincture Makes You Feel O-K”). The
salesman’s pitch continues on a moving flyer composed entirely of Epson printout fragments (“A Memory In All Ways ... Please Call IMMEDIATELY[sic]!”).

The two-by-four shelves composing this installation frame it as a hybrid workspace and shop, admittedly less comprehensively furnished than some of Hayes-Chute’s previous cabins, which look more inhabitable. On a worktable, a TV plays another video, “The New Domestic Woodshop” (2016), in which the artist plays a friendly carpenter one might find on YouTube, late night TV, or, as the press release references, This Old House. While Hayes-Chute builds a pizza board and oven, he self-consciously fixes his hair and emits plenty of loud grunts. Sawdust and debris litter the space both on screen and off, so that one might believe Hayes-Chute shot the tutorial here and will return soon.
Materials aside, what makes these works interesting as a unit is their mock fetishization of homemade objects, in which the viewer is implicated as she admires this space and watches this video. The parody succeeds, not only because the artist makes such a poorly constructed pizza oven, but also because his demonstrated instincts to preserve, refashion, and contain one’s possessions convey the very conscientiousness and care that YouTube DIY culture chases after. The pleasure of DIY is in the process. Far from donning that death mask, Hayes-Chute is still working.

Ethan Hayes-Chute: List Projects continues at MIT List Visual Arts Center (Wiesner Bldg, 20 Ames St, Cambridge, Mass.) through October 16.