Missing Data, Cleaning Data:
Zach Blas Interviews Elisa Giardina Papa and Mimi Ọnụọha

Zach In both of your artistic practices, you examine as well as intervene in digital technologies at the core of neoliberal capitalism today. Elisa has documented her duties as a gig worker training artificial intelligence, while Mimi has exhibited numerous datasets as well as images of the working conditions of crowdsourced laborers for AI platforms. At the same time, you both create artwork that embraces storytelling and myths about digital technologies, like networks and artificial intelligence, without directly using these tools. For instance, you've each made a film. Mimi's film, *These Networks in Our Skin* (2021), employs Igbo cosmology to imagine the creation of a different kind of internet, and in Elisa's film installation, *"U Scantu": A Disorderly Tale* (2021), the Sicilian myth of the *donna di fora* is reframed as a disturbance to the digital economy. Can you reflect on your commitments to creating across technologies and stories?

Mimi When I make work that is concerned with technology, I often think about a quote from Ursula Franklin's *The Real World of Technology* lectures. Franklin wrote that technology has constructed—or at least helped to construct—the house that we all live in, but that the house is still being constructed. In a way, this quote encapsulates the two different modes that I work in. The first consists of pointing out the house that technology has constructed. In other words, calling attention to the sites where computational technologies have refigured and extended existing systems of labor, of capital, of control, of relations. Technological systems trade in myth, and there is work to be done in revealing these myths. For instance, in *Cleaning Emotional Data* and *The Future Is Here!* both Elisa and I are intervening in large data-driven supervised machine learning systems and, in the process, demonstrating how these systems, which are commonly imagined as completely autonomous, are deeply reliant on "cheap" crowdsourced labor. We are both puncturing a myth.

But then there's the second part of what Franklin says about how this house of technology is still being constructed, even as more of human life takes place within its walls. Much of my work—including a piece like *These Networks In Our Skin*—is itself trying to construct this house differently. A myth can never just be punctured; it must always be replaced with a different story. In much of my work I'm bringing forward different stories, rituals, and ways of being that can feed into new stories, positionings, and understandings of technologies. More often than not these new stories aren't entirely new. They might consist in part of my own ideas, but often I'm simply clearing room for older rituals, stories, and ways of being that have been discarded along the paths of modernity, coloniality, and globalization.

The house that technology constructs will never hold all of human activity, but as more and more takes place within it, it becomes ever more imperative to hold on to the assertion that we are the ones who get to participate in that construction. There is a humming hopefulness at the core of this call.

Elisa Yes, puncturing the myths that fuel AI propaganda is a place to start, but not a place to end. I see this trajectory in most of Mimi's works. For example, in *The Library of Missing Datasets,* the movement toward a critique of the biased and exclusionary politics of data collection is already also a movement toward the activation of a different rubric of values which upset and rewrite normative and hegemonic computational procedures.

When I try to make sense of the sociotechnical systems in which we are currently enfolded, I follow a similar path. I begin by trying to unravel the political and economic ideologies underpinning the algorithmic enchanted machines that techno-capitalism claims are essential for our futurity, and I proceed instead to consider what in our life, embodiments, and desires is already imagining and planning an alternative futurity.

For example, with the video installation *Cleaning Emotional Data,* I attend to the politics of the invisibilization of the decentralized and pauperized workforce of "data cleaners" who sustain the training and functioning of machine vision systems—specifically, emotion recognition algorithms—and I confront the orderly obsession of AI: the obstinate attempt to reduce the vibrant, recalcitrant complexity of the world into docile, well-behaved data. Thus, in the video—one of the components of the mixed-media installation—I document the labor of cleaning data for the training of emotion detection algorithms. I also trace a history of emotions that questions the methods and psychological theories

underlying facial expression mapping, which position emotions as universal, transparent, computable categories. Through the video, then, I try to debunk the fantasy of autonomous AI systems, and I point to the geographical and historical contingency of the theories that inform algorithmic procedures.

At the same time—in the gaps left by the video narration—I try to create a space for incomputability. I literally wrap the space around the monitors of the installation with largescale textile pieces embroidered with untranslatable emotional vernacular belonging to the Sicilian dialect. I recover words such as *ricriju, raggia,* or *babbaria,* and I let them run through the work because of their ability to evade linguistic fixation and transcription and, in so doing, trouble the illusion that all can be translated or computed. It is a small gesture, but I deploy it as a reminder that alternative systems of thought, feeling, and relation are often already available to us. If we pause to consider it, we might see that the framework of thought underlying AI concepts and beliefs may not ultimately have the inevitability we tend to assign it.

Cleaning Emotional Data thus allows me to examine a tension between AI-capitalism's call to order and alternative modes of existence which exceed reduction and classification. In the other work you are referring to, Zach—*"U Scantu": A Disorderly Tale* (2021)—I explore a similar strain. Only, this time I go back to the 16th and 17th centuries, circa the time of primitive capital accumulation, which in Sicily was also the time of the heresy trials perpetrated during Spanish domination of the island. For this video and ceramic installation, I reopened the Spanish Inquisition archive, and I retrieved and reimagined the Sicilian myth of the *donne di fora* ("women from the outside and beside themselves"). Described as both magical and criminal, the *donne di fora* were said to possess both the feminine and masculine; the human and the animal; the benevolent and the vengeful. Once the Inquisition completed its work, they were only said to be a problem.

Zach Your artworks often demonstrate and reveal the violence of categorization in algorithmic systems, particularly concerning the production of high-value datasets. Mimi has attended to the inequalities black people have faced by being both included in and excluded from countless datasets that normalize and constrict societal understandings of value, freedom, and agency.

Mimi, I'm thinking of your works *In Absentia* (2019) and *The Library of Missing Datasets 2.0* (2018). Elisa, in *Cleaning Emotional Data* (2019), you have focused on the ways in which workers make data compliant via labeling and cataloging. Notably, you each have a terminology for describing such acts of violence: *missing data* and *cleaning data.* How do you see your terms relating to each other? Also, how do you understand your artistic practices in relation to discourse, writing, and concept engineering?

Mimi It seems to me that both Elisa and I are intervening in and chipping away at the same system, though from different angles. She talks about cleaning data, which I find to be an apt term because of the emphasis on the process of sanitization and removal. The implication is that there exists something dirty, something that is not useful, something that must actively be stripped away so that the end result can be "clean."

I speak of missing data, that which doesn't even make it into normative systems of data collection in the first place. When I think of missing data, I think of the information that challenges the smooth and seductive idea that all of the world can be converted into datasets and data points. Both of us are taking issue with a certain normalization of data collection and categorization. Each of us trains our microscope on a different aspect of that process.

Naming is a way to make sense of processes that are unfolding, and to gather others who are invested in making sense of the same processes. I still remember the thrill I felt the first time I read the words of Sylvia Wynter and realized that I had found someone who could give me a language and terms that anchored my own feelings. The act of naming, particularly when done from a position of invitation and of summoning others, can provide grounding and illumination.

I appreciate that you've brought up concept engineering, Zach, because so often I think that this is the foundational work that artists are engaged in: changing how a concept is understood, providing a different scaffolding. When you strip away the demands and prescriptions of the art world, so much of art-making is about examining, holding, questioning, and reshaping assumptions about the world. And I think this is even more apparent with artists who, as all three of us do, switch around to use the medium that a particular work demands.

Elisa Walter Benjamin once wrote, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." I thought a lot about this quote when I was working with the archive of the Spanish Inquisition trials in Sicily. But, can Benjamin's words also be applied to a dataset? To what extent is a state / corporate dataset also implicated in forms of ontological, epistemic, and representational violence? Both Mimi's reflections on *missing data* and my reflections on *cleaning data,* I think, address the dataset as a technology of power and confront the politics of visibility that every dataset enforces. What data are made seeable, hyperseeable, or unseeable, and how? What data are made part of historically predetermined politics of exclusion and inclusion by assimilation, and how?

The notion of *cleaning data,* which I use in my work, might be helpful for paying attention to computational processes that allow for recognition and inclusion through normalization and assimilation. That is, it can be useful to take a closer look at the procedures via which data are disciplined and made "docile" so that they can fit into a normative "clean" rendering of the world. While I was working through the idea and labor practices of *cleaning data,* I was deeply influenced by the reading of *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* In it, José Esteban Muñoz makes us keenly aware of the false promise of recognition proposed by a neoliberal LGBTQ assimilationist agenda and calls instead for a revivification of a queer political imagination.

Zach I appreciate how your practices attend to the complexities and historicities of data classification and its discontents. Specifically, your works show that the political struggles of minoritarian subjects cannot be reduced to simply finding better ways to be included in datasets. But also, your works question the political efficacy of remaining excluded from data classification. That said, I am curious to hear more about the horizons of political transformation and change in your practices. Would you characterize your works as seeking an "outside" to data classification? Here, I recall your interest in Édouard Glissant's philosophy of opacity, a decolonial mode of existence and relation that refuses and exceeds classification's drive to dominate and reduce. Alternately, are your political stakes more oriented toward finding socially just ways to work and live with / in data

classification? Or, perhaps you find it important to create on both of these axes simultaneously?

Mimi I think that it is the seeming power, centrality, and primacy of data collection that creates this trap that you've alluded to in the first place. It's a trap because we are limited in our responses to data classification: we are either in it or outside of it, and there are different material and political trade-offs that result from our choice of positioning within that binary. If we accept these terms, then the act of using data to make sense of the world remains unchanged, unmoved, uncontested. It's the boulder in the stream that we take for granted, and we are the ones who must move like water around it.

But decoloniality is, in part, about epistemic reconstitutions. So, in my work, when I focus on data collection it is toward the aim of contextualizing it. Things that are in context no longer remain unchallengeable facts. Instead, they become minimized, conceptually graspable. They become simply one tool or approach, not *the only approach* which we are called perpetually to center and respond to.

And I'm very aware that in the here and now there are practical and political considerations for different groups that might require pinning down a clear position. I make art from a political perspective, while understanding that art-making is just one strategy and different moments call for different gestures. But perhaps this is the whole point: I'm uninterested in only two options, and far more interested in the flexibility suggested by positioning routine mass data classification as simply one strategy of many, one that is suited to a small selection of tasks and ill-suited to many others. I think that this position opens up a sense of flexibility. It opens up the capacity for attuning and honing the ability to always assess what the options in any situation are for any specific group and then to determine which tools are best suited to those options. I'd argue this is an application of Glissant's philosophy, and is a nod to so many other decolonial approaches (after all, there isn't even just one decolonial option!).

Elisa I am thinking about Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, and the *Undercommons.* Referencing Gayatri Spivak's decolonial writing, Harney and Moten talk about the "first right," which is the right

to refuse the choices as offered. Within the context of this conversation, can we also imagine a right to refuse the either "in" or "out" data classification? Of course, sometimes we have no other choice than to be "in"—I am applying once again for a U.S. visa, and I will provide the U.S. Department of State with all the mandatory data they ask me for, hoping they'll categorize me as a "good immigrant." But, as both Mimi's and your work, Zach, make clear, if we stay in the sweltering loop of "in / out," we might never fully question the assumption that there "must" be a data classification. If instead, as you suggested, we travel en route with Glissant through the notion of opacity, we might see that the question of in / out falls apart. Glissant taught us that inclusion in a hegemonic order which claims truth and universality—as state / corporate data categorization systems do—is never inclusion, it is only reduction. It means being formatted, compressed, abstracted into an external system of inscription which admits alterity only when it can be measured against a pre-established scale. Calling for the right to opacity for Glissant, I think, is about imagining and practicing a relationship with someone who is irreducible to a scale—or to a protocol of categorization—which she did not generate on her own. It is perhaps about bringing an end to the very notion of scale and classification.

Thus, to return to the last part of your question on whether the political stakes of Mimi's and my work are oriented toward finding socially just ways to work and live with / in data classification: What if there is not a socially just way to work and live with / in data classification? What if classification is simply not "just" because it is already too deeply entrenched in pre-existing and historical operations of domination and dispossession? From this standpoint, seeking a "beyond" to data classification is not about "opting out" or a paranoid disengagement. It is about insisting that we do not yet know what computation beyond an economic system driven by profit and dispossession could be, do, or look like. It is about insisting on imagining and cohabiting with computation and networks otherwise, and also imagining and cohabiting with the world otherwise. But the world has already been imagined and cohabited otherwise. Mimi's video, *These Networks in Our Skin,* is an ode to this already present "otherwise." By activating Igbo cosmology and rituals, she enacts an Internet which stems from an alternative system of knowledge, values, and premises. *These*

Networks in Our Skin already assumes that there is an alternative digital economy of being, belonging, and giving.

Zach You both embed yourselves in your works in varying ways and to varying degrees of legibility, which gestures toward feminist practices of creating from one's own positionality. How do you approach the process of situating yourself in your artwork?

Mimi Simply put, there is no way that I could not be situated in my own work. I learned this truth early, long before I was an artist. I come from a lineage of women who have grown food, and I grew up with a mom who gardened. She chose what to grow, she started the seeds, she put them in the ground, she nurtured and tended to them. And then when the plants had grown tall and were heavy with fruit, she would bring those fruits into the house. When the rest of us came into the kitchen, we'd find treasures on the counter: okra, watermelon, peanuts, tomatoes. If we wanted, we could have popped a cherry tomato into our mouths and deluded ourselves into thinking that such bounty had appeared out of thin air. But that would have been silly, and it would have cost us the much richer truth: even when she wasn't in the room with us while we ate that which she had grown, she was still deeply intertwined within the entire process. We would gain nothing by pretending that she wasn't.

Art-making carries the same truth. The artifacts we create can travel through the world, and because they are ultimately commodities they move with more ease than many of us are able to. But we are completely wrapped up in them even when we are not with them. We have been part of the entire process. We gain nothing by pretending otherwise, and everything by acknowledging ourselves.

Elisa I agree with Mimi. Besides, the myths built around technology which we were discussing at the beginning might look completely different according to the geographical, cultural, and linguistic coordinates we find ourselves in. For example, when I started the research for *Cleaning Emotional Data* I was living in Palermo, Sicily, which is where I am originally from. During the research period, I ended up working remotely for several North American "human-in-the-loop" companies who provide "clean"

datasets to train AI systems. Among the tasks I performed at that time was image segmentation for machine vision algorithms used for self-driving cars. That is, I would outline objects' boundaries with polygonal circuits and then label them. After full days of tracing and tagging shapes in these videos, I would go out for walks in the city, and, without initially realizing it, I started to name and visually enclose objects—I would pay attention to their contours, and I would be particularly bothered by obstructions. The problem is, I don't know how familiar you are with Palermo, but it defies and exceeds any logic of capture and control. If you try to grasp it, it might end up grasping you instead. This unruly, unyielding mood might be the result of the many colonizations and dominations it has witnessed—founded by the Phoenicians, it then endured Greek, Roman, and Arab conquests, the Normans and the Spanish Kingdom, and so on. Refusing to learn the lessons of history, a pulse, a rhythm, a tune arose in the city which doesn't ever fully sync with any external system or structure of dominance. So now, if I imagine a self-driving car trying to find its way through the wayward alleys of Ballaró—the neighborhood in Palermo where I was living at the time—I can't help but smile. I also have to ask myself, why exactly would we ever need a Google self-driving car in Palermo? This corporate vision of a future based on capture and control, reduction and optimization cannot but fail there, and probably for the best of reasons. It is not an intellectual theorization which led me to think this; it is the whole city, the moving, the feeling, the tuning within it.