

Just Put Me in the Recycling Bin Already!

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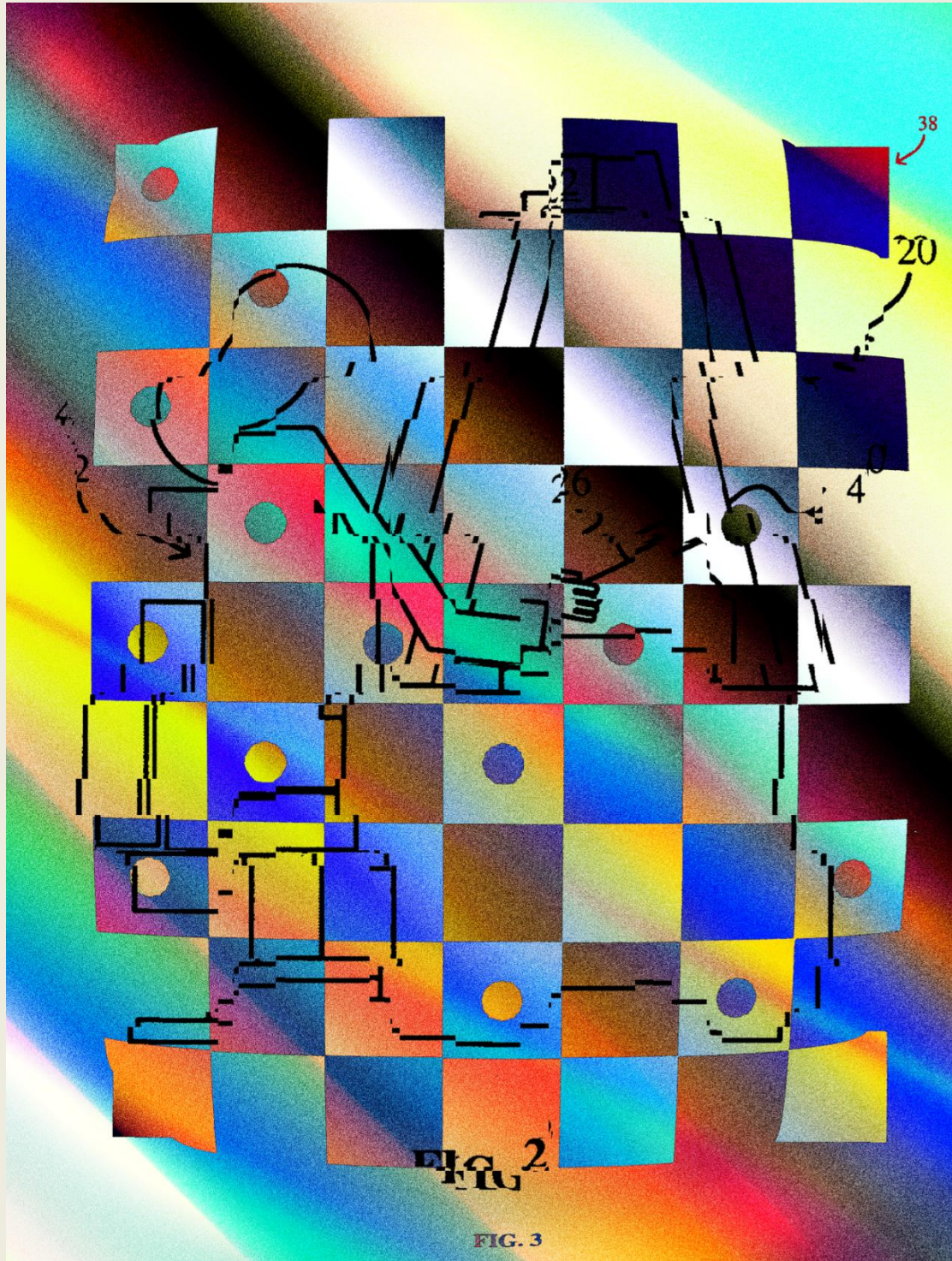


Figure 2 (2019) C-Type Metallic Print, Alif Ibrahim

+++ When was the last time you cleaned your desktop? Or your email inbox? What about your screenshots folder? Bet you didn't know there are people who cleaned those, did you? Typically, one would fall into one of two categories: those who keep their digital affairs clinically sorted and those who let it pile in a fluid act of rebellion. Of course, there are also people like me, who was a cleaner at one point in time and a piler at another, such that my current inbox sits at an awkward (154) rather than an awe-inducing (99,999+).

The boundary of this quirky cleanliness exercise extends only to the edges of personal computing. Once we extend the story to a domain where money and supply chains play a hand, the politics of digital hygiene start to resemble the mechanisms of urban life. Orchestrated by shift schedules and public transport timetables, throngs of workers prepare city centres for its role as a (neoliberal, financial, informational, power, networked) node.

"Every day, in every urban center of the world, thousands of black and brown women, invisible, are "opening" the city. They are doing dangerous work: they inhale toxic chemical products and push or carry heavy loads," writes Françoise Vergès in *Capitalocene, Waste, Race and Gender*. "Without the work of women of color, which is necessary but must remain invisible — literally and in valuative terms—neoliberal and patriarchal capitalism would not function," Vergès continues in a further section.

Computing replicates the structures that it's embedded in. The labour needed in preparing the indispensable pre-conditions of the continuous digital experience we're familiar with today have always been either racialized, gendered or both. From the invisible (Google Books *scanning operators*), the erased (*first ENIAC programmers*), the celebrated (*microchip assemblers*), the traumatised (*content moderators*) to those whose employment is celebrated as empowering (*AI data taggers*), a users' visual experience in traversing digital media seamlessly depends on this labour. The rhetoric around each of these essential

workers usually revolves around how the work involved is inherently creative, culturally important or how it will introduce women to the high-tech world. These jobs, however, lies in the high-culture/low-pay paradox that afflict many of us today.

(And as we've learnt during this pandemic, the pay of essential workers isn't usually reflective of its necessity due to its location in the economic value chain. The function of this "value chain" in society comes under greater scrutiny with each passing day.)

Look, don't take it from me, take it from the data tagging companies instead.

"Most impressively, *Samasource* has overcome a problem that most Silicon Valley firms are famously grappling with. Just over half of their workforce is made up of women, a remarkable feat in a country where starting a family more often than not rules out a career for the mother."

"Yes, it's cost effective," Janah said. "But one thing that's critical in our line of work is to not pay wages that would distort local labour markets. If we were to pay people substantially more than that, we would throw everything off. That would have a potentially negative impact on the cost of housing, the cost of food in the communities in which our workers thrive."

"I think there's a lot of hype around that. But if you actually talk to data scientists, the minds behind these algorithms, you'll find the machine is much further behind than most people realise."

"We're going to need training data for a long time."

In creating training datasets, the AI data taggers need to locate the boundaries of each object out of a sea of data. Much of these digital support work requires people to sort out what is trash and what is not trash, what

could be discarded and what should be kept. In contrast, the way we interface with personal computing today (or at least how it's being sold to us) is sleek, intelligent, intuitive, minimalist and meaningful. This is the digital analogy of what Vergès means when she says that this labour must remain invisible. For if it was wholly visible, none of it will seem as sleek or intelligent as they were promised.

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On the top floor of the National Theatre is a quiet concrete-clad corner that's only populated during the intermissions. In the afternoons, the sunlight glides horizontally across the table as if to summon dust, so anyone reading there would have emigrated to the shadier café on the floor below. This means that almost every time I go, the alcove is all mine, a little secret that I'm now telling you. If I sat with my back against the ceiling-high windows, with one shoulder against the cool concrete while the other rests against the warm glass pane, I could read a book undisturbed and go through fifty pages at once with perfect lighting. On some days, I sit there and clean my folders: folders that aren't really folders on my desktop that isn't really a desk top. Old files (instructionals, installers and self-produced stock photos, mostly) go into the recycling bin. Works-in-progress (unfinished job applications, unfinished love letters and limply written to-do lists) go into their respective dated folders.

It's clear to me a bot would never be able to do this job. It's analogous to having a Roomba do the cleaning: sure, the floor is spotless, but they won't know how you put your books on your bookshelf. At the end of the day, I tend to keep all my files in all its glorious clutter, because they're all sentimental to me. Photos I'll never look at again, drafts of bad writing that I promised myself I'll finish.

I went to a little talk a few weeks ago that reminded me of why listening to techno-futurists disturbs me so much. They always come with a model, two if you're lucky. Invariably, they essentialise today's complex issues into a set of hypotheticals for a 12-

minute seminar, usually centring their marked identity at the core of the solution. Even if I don't hate the model they put forth, every technology-based solution they propose will always be built on the backs of racialised and gendered labour, no matter how seductive their radical design is.

Human-centred design stresses that designers need make experiences more meaningful for users. The crucial skill, students are told, is to be able to empathise. In the discovery phase of design research, they are told to listen carefully and act as a neutral observer, removing themselves from the system they're observing.

However, the failures of human-centred design still happen, because of a linguistic turn that obfuscates and reveals at the same time. It obfuscates the true purpose of most human-centred design. Experience designer Christina Chen of *Bravo Studios* asks the following question: "how can UX be designed so people spend as little time using it as possible, while fulfilling the app's purpose?" The revelation is that the humans in this process really means "humans that happen to be users." Gone are the humans that clean data, that create digital assets, that remove traumatic images.

Vergès talks about the *economy of exhaustion* that these racialised bodies are extracted into, originating from the exhausted bodies in the colonies. Under digital colonialism, digital exhaust and waste is put to meaningful order by exhausted bodies and mind. Our work now is to put that behind us and form new, raw ways to relate and create in the post-digital world. ■