

Behind the Algorithm: Migration, Mexican Women and Digital Bias

Mónica Alcázar-Duarte's 'Second Nature'

Nicole-Ann Lobo



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *Second Nature*, 2021, print with embedded augmented reality, from the *Second Nature* series, courtesy of the artist and Autograph

How do we bear witness to technology's homogenisation of marginalised individuals? A series of photographs by the interdisciplinary Mexican-British artist Mónica Alcázar-Duarte currently on display in Autograph's online gallery, attempts one answer. Titled 'Behind the Algorithm: Migration, Mexican Women and Digital Bias', the exhibition includes thirteen images from a series called *Second Nature*, which the Mexico City-born artist worked on during her 2022 Autograph/Light Work residency. 'What I have found through my research is how invisible complex algorithmic structures are', Alcázar-Duarte writes in the opening text. 'I want to make the power structures behind our internet-dependent society visible and examine the impact of the biased thinking they perpetuate.' In the declining era of NFTs, computer-created art and the swan song of the so-called 'digital turn', Alcázar-Duarte seems

to appropriate the cultural hype around algorithms and virtual realities, turning them to the material realm in order to understand the struggles of those who are most vulnerable to these technologies' flattening effects. However, some works are more successful than others. Although the images on display – eleven of which are from the series, and two more that document both a 2021 physical exhibition in New York and a performance Alcázar-Duarte gave during the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie in Germany in 2022 – are aesthetically striking, the ambiguity of their meaning and the sparse curation fall short of making visible the actual structural deficiencies Alcázar-Duarte laments.

What exactly is digital bias? It is present all around us, but is only scarcely highlighted in public controversies such as Amazon's AI-built resume-screening tool, which reinforced historic discrimination against women and people of colour in the workplace, or a 2019 report¹ which revealed widespread algorithmic discrimination against Black people in the American healthcare system. Data-driven immigration policies lead to both discrimination and the undermining of universal human dignity. Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*² offered an in-depth analysis of algorithmic racism, finding that search engines often privilege whiteness by more negatively valuing and judging searches around terms such as 'Black' or 'Hispanic', which affects members from marginalised groups but also digitally reinforces existing discrimination on behalf of searchers. The way in which search engines deploy algorithms to suggest searches and capitalise off pre-existing biases using extensively collected data allows the phenomenon of confirmation bias, or the way one processes information to comport to or confirm pre-existing beliefs, to proliferate. There have been some efforts to hamper this form of racism, but information processing in our era, although initially set into motion by humans, is now dominated by the tech corporations and algorithms which are so complex and proprietary in their machinations that solutions in our privatised digital sphere appear far from clear cut. As a result, digital bias is sustained through its inconspicuousness, the veil of technological objectivity that requires no human justifications.

Research into these biases plays an important role in Alcázar-Duarte's practice, and the artist relies heavily on the individual accounts and testimonies of the women she interviews. 'Keywords' gleaned through this research practice, in the form of both recurring themes in conversations and dominant results on internet searches, then filter into the works. That is the case with *Here To Be Caught* (2021), a photograph of a woman who wears a *lucha libre* mask and a pair of cleaning gloves, and a green shirt tucked into a floral yellow skirt. The woman's covered head is framed with the text 'exotic'; in her hand, she grasps a mirror framed by the word 'suspicious'; her arm in motion, bent at a right angle, 'clean-clean'. The words Alcázar-Duarte incorporates were culled both from stories the artist heard from first, second and third

¹ See Starre Vartan, 'Racial Bias Found in a Major Health Care Risk Algorithm', *Scientific American*, 24 October 2019 www.scientificamerican.com/article/racial-bias-found-in-a-major-health-care-risk-algorithm/

² Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, NYU Press, New York, 2018

generation migrants and from internet research she carried out in the summer of 2018. By blurring the line between digital intelligence and subjective stories, Alcázar-Duarte seems to be challenging whether the algorithm creates reality, or vice versa.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *Here To Be Caught*, 2021, from the *Second Nature* series, courtesy of the artist and Autograph

The formal structure of the works recalls body mapping procedures, which have a diverse aesthetic history. From ayurvedic explorations of bodily imbalances to modern Western cartographic efforts at charting the range of felt psychological and somatic states, body maps usually attempt to render what is internal *external*. In this case, though, for Alcázar-Duarte the body is met with various experiential and predetermined suppositions that reveal little about the human body and its characterisations and needs. Instead, the body appears like a ground for the projection of society's expectations and assumptions; yet by veiling the face, Alcázar-Duarte suggests something akin to an innate immutability, the preservation of something inaccessible to and irreducible by the outside world.

Many of the works on display share characteristics similar to this first image. Front and centre, they feature female bodies whose faces have been concealed or obscured, gesturing in a variety of action-based poses. Their clothing is bright, well-fitted and colourful, and stands out against the black expansiveness behind them as they appear weightless, virtually suspended in infinite space. The facelessness of the subjects merits a multifaceted reading: the forced invisibility and homogenisation of individuals under a world informed by digital bias is dehumanising – but anonymity can be important, too, a way to restore agency in a society characterised by constant surveillance. Then there is the question of balancing the particularity of individuals and their unique life circumstances with certain universals present

in migrant experiences, like financial stress, the perils of bureaucracy and the pressures of conforming to a dominant white culture. By obscuring the face, Alcázar-Duarte leaves the viewer to ruminate on the mask's multidimensional provocation.

Moving through the online gallery, the viewer sees *Here To Be Caught* hung in the York Art Gallery in the UK, as words attached to sparse trees protrude from another work on the ground, giving off a simulated effect. As text near the image explains, the shot is of a display of works from *Second Nature* in 2021, where animations embedded in an augmented reality app allowed viewers to have a more multidimensional, interactive experience in the physical space. Some of the prints feature this embedded augmented reality, such as *Hot Headed* (2021), in which a woman dressed in a shiny orange blouse holds a bowl filled with chili peppers, as a bouquet of the spicy plants makes up her head.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *Hot Headed*, 2021, print with embedded augmented reality, from the *Second Nature* series, courtesy of the artist and Autograph

Several of the images eschew text in favour of flashy designs: in *From The Shadows They Keep Coming* (2021), a helmeted woman wields a baseball bat in a defensive pose against a cascading web of spiraling leaves; in *Divided We Fall* (2019), a pink-haired woman in leopard print crawls in an intricate web of geometric forms, holding a tool like an artist. 'In the past,' the artist writes next to the image, 'racist graffiti, defamation of religious buildings and acts of vandalism have been the key indicators of racial hostility and hate in the public sphere. Racist and discriminatory language on platforms like Twitter has become the racist graffiti of our time.'

The medium of the exhibition as an online gallery, rather than just following the pandemic-originated trend of low-cost, high-access curated works, in some ways feels fitting: the nature of our own interaction with the gallery (and perhaps our chance-altered predisposition to even find and access it) is made possible by the same forces that helped the original problem proliferate. For better or worse, the internet here recalls Richard Kern's interpretation of the *pharmakon*: the technology that creates the problem is also its remedy. But if the breadth of intersecting and urgent topics Alcázar-Duarte attempts to cover – stereotypes, algorithmic bias, the difficulties of migration, colourism and racial hierarchies, online discrimination, the complexity of coding and the digital realm, and more – are admirable, the transmission of sentiment offered by the works' collective display leaves something to be desired. At times, pieces would benefit from more detail and explanation, perhaps with some background, for example, on the tripartite exhibition title and the connections to the symbolic forms the artist has used. A good example is the still of the performance *code:<<erasure>>* from earlier in 2022 at the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie. The image depicts Alcázar-Duarte with her back to us, clothes covered in chalk, drawing a red line on a blackboard between two pieces of code. But it almost appears like a stock image, the artist's gesture as incomprehensible as the white scribbles on the board she manually alters. A clip of the happening on Alcázar-Duarte's Instagram gives a better sense of the artist's motion, like reinscribing the human body's agency into the seemingly unbreachable world of code. Yet without a greater connection or even a sense of what is actually transpiring, the link between the image and the activism it represents is difficult to discern.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *code:<<erasure>>* (still), 2022, courtesy of the artist and Autograph, photo by Lys Y Seng

Similar criticisms could be levied against works like *How Do We Stop These People* (2019), which features a seated figure with bright orange hair, her back to the viewer, on a modular labyrinth of spindly forms. ‘This work is inspired by stories recounted to me by migrants I’ve met during my residency in New York, who escaped vigilante groups at the border with the United States’, reads the text adjacent to the image. Yet the viewer is left wanting to actually hear these stories and how they informed this practice; without more detail, the gesturing feels cursory. Here lies one challenge of digital exhibitions, which must at once combat the dizzying tempo of the digital economy and its deluges of information while also acknowledging the challenged attention spans of online spectators, both easily distracted and weary from information overload and screen fatigue.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *How Do We Stop these People*, 2019–ongoing, from the *Second Nature* series, courtesy of the artist and Autograph

Perhaps a more generous reading of the curation would suggest that the abstraction of experience, sterilised into an aesthetically beautiful image which allows the viewer to contemplate and imagine, mirrors the nature of encountering instances of bias, racism and tragedy online. As digital bias proliferates unseen, the ways in which our perception of the world and of others is dictated by detached internet engagement threatens to erode our fundamental grasp of reality. Data, figures, and even subjective narratives can appear as hollow signifiers to a world increasingly out of reach.

What might an activist-artist practice look like that begins to address this problem? Alcázar-Duarte provides some valuable first steps by naming some of the terms of the fight and offering an initial language in the form of terminology and keywords. *Second Nature* offers a valuable glimpse into a much deeper problem, one which pervades each of our experiences

online but is felt to wildly different and grossly unequal degrees. A work like *Static* (2019) empowers the uninitiated viewer to first grasp the idea of the ‘static dictionary’, which as the artist’s accompanying text reveals, is used by some coders and ‘whose full set of strings is determined before coding begins and does not change during the coding process’, an approach often taken ‘when the message or set of messages to be encoded is fixed and large’.



Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, *Static*, 2019, from the *Second Nature* series, courtesy of the artist and Autograph

A technologically-illiterate person, such as myself, is intrigued, but still left largely confused. Ending algorithmic racism is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges faced by a reappropriated internet for all, yet understanding the inner workings of these algorithms in order to combat their biases seems to be a task beyond the lay viewer, a task likely beyond the capacities of any human alone. Such a response is to be expected, but has also been responsible for much of the technofatalist work that has proliferated over the past few years. Yet given the urgency of climate change, and the way in which the internet has assumed an ever-totalising position in our relationship to the natural world (Alcázar-Duarte importantly points to the presence of terminology for organic matter, like ‘cloud’ and ‘stream’, appropriated for a catastrophic digital realm), we cannot succumb to this despair.

But many algorithms are created using artificial intelligence technologies which rely on media created by *human beings*, much like the algorithms themselves. As the transmission of human bias rages through disinformation propagated by the media, focusing on the algorithms alone neglects this agency in favour of the mysticism of the black box. A danger lies in reifying such mysticism rather than challenging the very real, very human, and perhaps

even addressable causes behind bias – it might afford the algorithms themselves more power than they are due.

After all, the mass incorporation of algorithms into our everyday lives is not unconnected to the increase in migration itself: both are rooted in the fundamental devaluation of human flourishing in favour of efficiency, the lifeblood of capitalist economics. Subverting the powers these algorithms have over our lives requires subverting the very values imposed by the system they work to uphold. This online exhibition of Alcázar-Duarte's photographs is an important first step in a broader cultural shift required to name and change this problem, yet it might have gone even further. Here again, the question comes down to attention: sustained viewing might be difficult on the internet, yet it is this that is required in order to bring about the cultural shift and material changes needed to build a better society for all.

Nicole-Ann Lobo is a PhD student in art history at Princeton University. She researches modern art in Goa and the broader Lusophone world and writes about art, politics and religion for publications including *Commonweal Magazine*, *Dissent* and *The Quietus*.