


Rahel Aima



**THE BEAUTIFUL
SQUARE**

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In 1915, Kazimir Malevich painted his famous Red Square painting, more properly called *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions* (1915). I think about how incendiary it must have been at the time, how arresting. How it prefigured the general collapse of figuration, of representation, into a single, glowing screen, an ultimate abstraction of life and death that is later taken up by PredPol, a predictive policing software company. How the Red Square is not even a square, but a slightly angled parallelogram. Particularly exciting is the way it, along with its sibling *Black Square* (1915), references Russian Orthodox traditions. In their colors, yes, but especially in the way they were originally displayed: hung high in the corner of a room, in the place that an icon painting would have traditionally been displayed. Malevich purportedly kept a small Black Square painting in the same sacralized part of his own bedroom until he died. Today, in the same spot, we install surveillance cameras instead.

In 2015, forensic X-ray analysis of Malevich's *Black Square* revealed that his iconic painting was in fact a racist joke, white supremacy recast as Suprematism. Inscribed in one lower corner, in the white square that surrounds the black square, is part of the phrase "Battle of the

negros at night in a dark cave,” which comes from earlier 19th-century caricatures. Paul Bilhaud’s 1882 original, *Combat de nègres dans un tunnel*, was reprised by Alphonse Allais in 1897 when he swapped out the presumably dark tunnel for a cave. The discovery reveals once explosive abstraction to be, in fact, nothing more than crude representation, of undifferentiated figure and ground. Perhaps, then, the only escape is to leave visibility and representation behind and abstract ourselves, becoming a constellation of commodifiable data points. Even today, facial recognition software is notoriously bad at identifying nonwhite faces, especially those of Black, indigenous, and POC women. We need to recognize this as a feature, not a bug.

Lynn Hershman Leeson’s *Shadow Stalker* considers this overlap between surveillance, structural racism, and the Red Square in the case of predictive policing. The ominously capitalized and contracted PredPol software draws on data to predict where a crime might take place *before* it occurs, in what can only be a self-fulfilling feedback loop. Like much of the technology we use today, the system was originally developed for army applications, specifically for predicting the occurrence and timing of battlefield casualties in Iraq. This is its

provenance, as if we needed any reminder about the increasingly blurry boundary between police and the military. But here, the life-saving ethos of predictive algorithms is inverted: to designate an area as *high risk* is to effectively levy a death sentence upon its residents, who tend to be disproportionately low-income and (or) from marginalized communities.



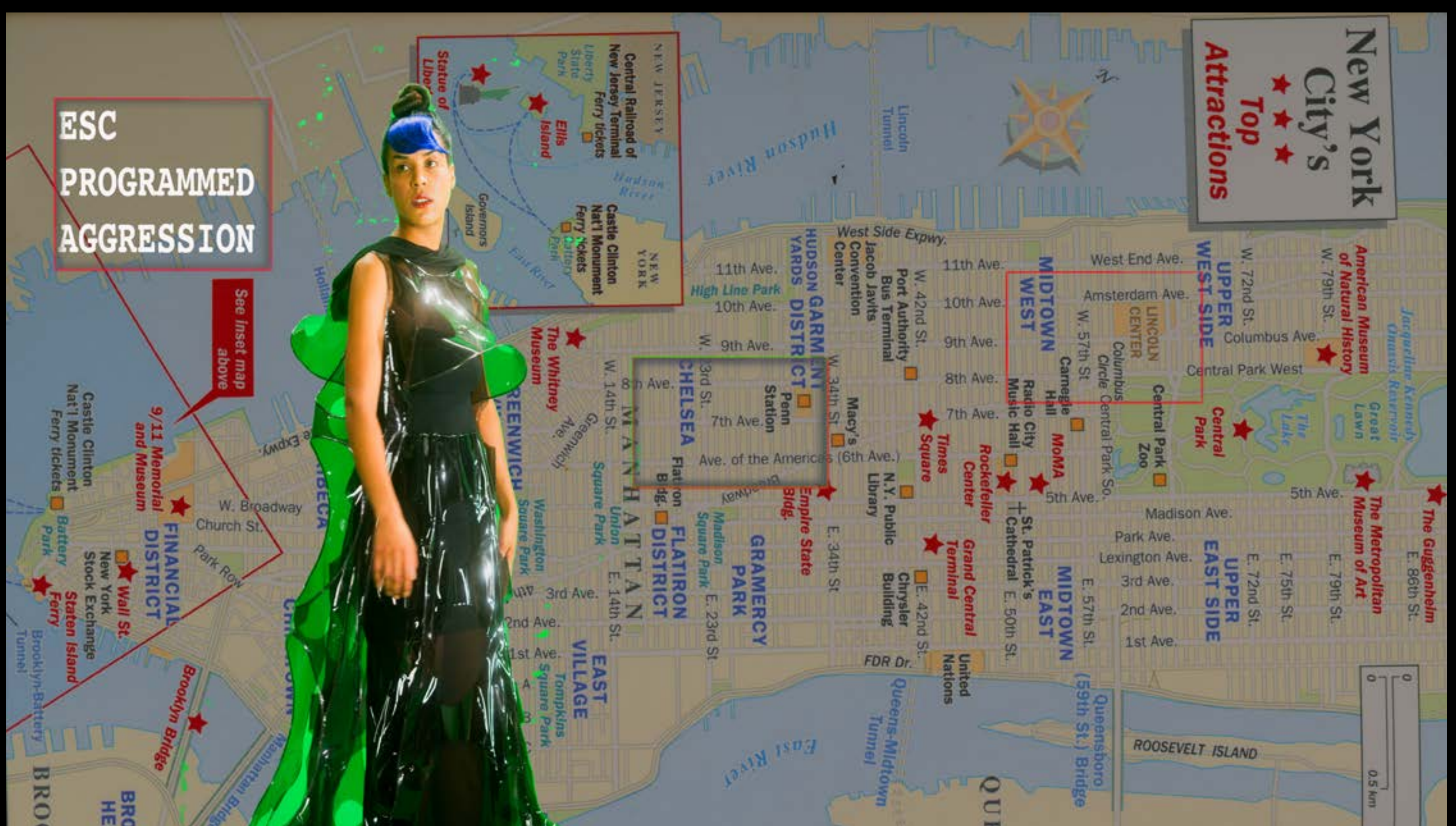
Installation view: Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Shadow Stalker*, 2019, in *Manual Override* at The Shed, New York, November 13, 2019 – January 12, 2020. Photo: Dan Bradica.

The film's narrator, actor Tessa Thompson, is seen vignettted against a red wall. She is sitting on a leopard print couch. Her voice has the same soothing-yet-threatening cadence as an AI voice

assistant. She sketches out PredPol's history and the way it crunches crime data to identify areas where crimes are likely to occur. The software then provides police departments who have licensed the program with daily hotspots, demarcated by 500 red squares overlaid onto Google Maps. The company recommends officers spend approximately 10 percent of their time, or six minutes of every hour, patrolling these areas as a deterrent. Thompson goes on to discuss artist Mimi Onuoha's pertinent concept of *algorithmic violence*, adding that "the Red Square puts us inside a coded prison." We might more precisely understand this as a kind of algorithmic incarceration.

The thing about data is that it can be selectively pulled and selectively mobilized. After all, as Hershman Leeson's video tells us, last year data surpassed oil to be the most valuable asset in the world. We're only beginning to comprehend the magnitude of oil, and by extension, plastic's effect on the world. Predictive policing is one example of what the coming regime of data will bring. At its close, the film exhorts the viewer to escape biased histories, to disinfect the future and build a place of unselfish solidarity. So what is to be done? At the risk of taking anything PredPol says at face value, the

company does state that its predictions come from only three data points. It jettisons any personally identifiable or demographic information and takes into account only the type, location and date/time of any reported crime. While this may or may not be true, it's dangerous to think that this, or any software that works in a vacuum, *doesn't* rely on violent, oppressive structures just to function. How could it not? Take cloud storage, for example: Amazon Web Services, which may well be hosting this PDF you're reading right now, notoriously also hosts Palantir, the data analytics company that makes software for ICE. Amazon's facial recognition arm, dubiously named Rekognition—evoking a



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Shadow Stalker*, 2019. HD color video with sound, 10 min. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York City; and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.

conscious rap outfit—contracts directly with immigration and police agencies. Still, it's worth emphasizing the data source: if the software does do what it claims to on its red-faviconed website, its recommendations are based only upon crimes that are reported.

One obvious way to lessen predictive policing's impact would be to not report crime. (It's worth a reminder here that sexual violence is especially underreported.) A no-brainer, perhaps, given that calling the police disproportionately leads to Black deaths, to the tune of an estimated one in every thousand Black men and boys. It's a strategy already in place in a number of neighborhoods—those with predominantly immigrant populations and especially those in that brutal, centuries-long wake so beautifully theorized by Christina Sharpe in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016)—in what is grossly euphemized as an “officer-involved shooting.” A better solution would be to radically defund, disarm, and demilitarize police forces.

There's work to be done after arrests are made, too. One especially egregious instance of algorithmic incarceration is New York City's bail system. Online bail is rarely granted, and the bail system is set up in a way so as to apply a minimum bail of one dollar when a person

has multiple charges. In practice, this means that someone can be held for months for minor “quality of life” crimes for a grand total of one or two dollars, with no way of paying it themselves. One group I volunteer with, the Bronx Freedom Fund’s **Dollar Bail Brigade**, does valuable work in this regard, sending volunteers to pay strangers’ bails as a first step towards abolishing cash bail—which disproportionately hurts the poor—and moving towards decarceration.¹ (Last year, California abolished cash bail, replacing it instead with an algorithm, to **chilling effect**.²)

Before watching *Shadow Stalker*, an unfilled red outline ■ was so benignly indexical. Now I think of Malevich, of course, but also the red-adjacent works in Josef Albers’s long-running, 25-year “Homage to the Square” series, begun in 1950. Vermillion, cerise, cardinal, cochineal, claret, rufous, vermeil, damask, sanguine? Even the synonyms for red seem suspect now. Albers’s concentric squares are recast as a stop-motion optical zoom that zeroes in on a target. Then there’s Moscow’s Red Square, and the red squares of fabric, pinned to lapels and shirt fronts in the 2012 Quebec protests against university tuition increases, and the square red wax seals that originated in early Chinese and Mongol empires that quite literally sealed someone’s fate.

We can also understand the Red Square as a literalization of a historical phenomenon known as redlining, specifically when it refers to the denial of loans and insurance coverage. Social credit systems transpose this insidious geographic discrimination to your online friend networks in what is often called online or digital redlining. Might we analogously understand certain forms of network-based surveillance and policing—especially in the shadowy realms of counterterrorism—as digital *red squaring*? Consider the NYPD’s **monitoring** of Muslim students and professors all over the northeast, profiling those it deemed to be a threat.³ And also consider all those outside the red border, those who, when they do commit violent crimes like mass shootings, are deemed statistical aberrations and lone wolves. How does every school in America not have a red square around it?

The Red Square is, quite literally, a red outline on a map. I think of *Time* magazine, which **says** its “iconic red border symbolizes a bold, even arrogant idea.”⁴ Everything inside that red border is worth knowing and whatever is outside of it, well, not so much. To be worth knowing is to be worth surveilling; to exist outside these red borders is to be granted a get out of jail free pass. When yellow and slightly elongated, it serves

as *National Geographic's* calling card, evoking a different kind of point-and-shoot. We can readily understand how design can be inherently violent regardless of intention or application, from the anti-homeless spikes and sprinklers of hostile architecture to 3-D-printed guns. Less easily legible is the devastating, weaponized efficacy of a simple square in digital space, in part because we are socialized to see the grid as neutral.

We might turn to Michel Foucault who, in the preface to *The Order of Things*, suggests that we filter the world via a tripartite scheme of grids. On the basic level, which he calls “primary codes,” are cultural subroutines like language, sense perception, and various practices, techniques, and values.⁵ On the next level are the grids of the “episteme,” knowledge production which we might describe as an experience of order, a baseline, or more casually, the way things are.⁶ Overlaid onto this level is a third set, comprising complex concepts, ideologies, and theories—interpretations of the episteme, essentially. It is these grids, which make the world intelligible through its various strategies and taxonomies of classification that create the conditions for power—and, by extension, state violence—to be exerted. Put another way: let's say we were to try to reverse engineer the

concept of police brutality, to work towards its undoing. We need to first become aware of both the primary codes that underwrite it and the often-imperceptible biases that they hardcode into everything that they affect.

Take, for example, the internet. I was born in India and grew up in Dubai, attending a British school. To this date, despite having lived in the US for the better part of the last 13 years, I feel most comfortable with British spellings and feel a certain affection for the passive voice. I don't remember when we got the internet at home, but it was relatively late—1999 or so, when I was already well into middle school. I taught myself the basics of HTML via a 1990s site developed by tween Alyssa Daniels, named *Lissa Explains it All*. The reference to the early 1990s Nickelodeon show *Clarissa Explains it All*, which I had never seen, was somewhat lost on me at the time. At some point several years down the line, however, I realized that the two had become conflated in my mind, so thoroughly fused that I was surprised today to learn that Daniels was neither blonde nor Melissa Joan Hart.

It was from this iconic yellow and pink website that I learned that the internet was written in American English. Let's say I wanted my

website to say UNDER CONSTRUCTION in gray text that was centered on the screen. Simple bits of code that used British spellings like *centre*, or *colour*, or *grey* just didn't work. For example, the value `<center>TEXT</center>` centers that bit of text, but `<centre>` does absolutely nothing. At the time I mostly found it annoying—when something didn't work, it was usually because I hadn't “spelled it in American,” as my young self thought of it. *English*, for me, without any modifiers, of course referred to British English—totally neutral, unloaded, the epistemic baseline from which any further valuations were to be made.

Today, the advent of WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) text editors means that we rarely even use HTML or its children anymore, except as a clunky manual override. These easy-to-use interfaces allow us to make text bolder or bigger, or create links by clicking a button instead of coding it in. Alignment and hue of text are much more likely to be specified in a master CSS file, which each webpage pulls from and is among the first things it loads. To create colored texts or backgrounds, which used to be created by using color names like *red*, *blue*, or the aforementioned *gray*, we use more precise color values like RGB or hexcodes. But still the Americentrism remains.

It was only years later that I learned that the internet was developed by the US military, that the default top-level domain *.com* corresponds to *US commercial*. I learned about the techtopic cowboy optimism of the California Ideology, which believed that computers and global capitalism would liberate the individual from all kinds of domination and control—a belief that the intervening years have thoroughly refuted. And I thought about the way that this framing of the internet as a kind of empty frontier or savannah or open ocean was reflected in the very names of the browsers that we used to, well, surf it: Netscape Navigator, Safari, and Internet Explorer.

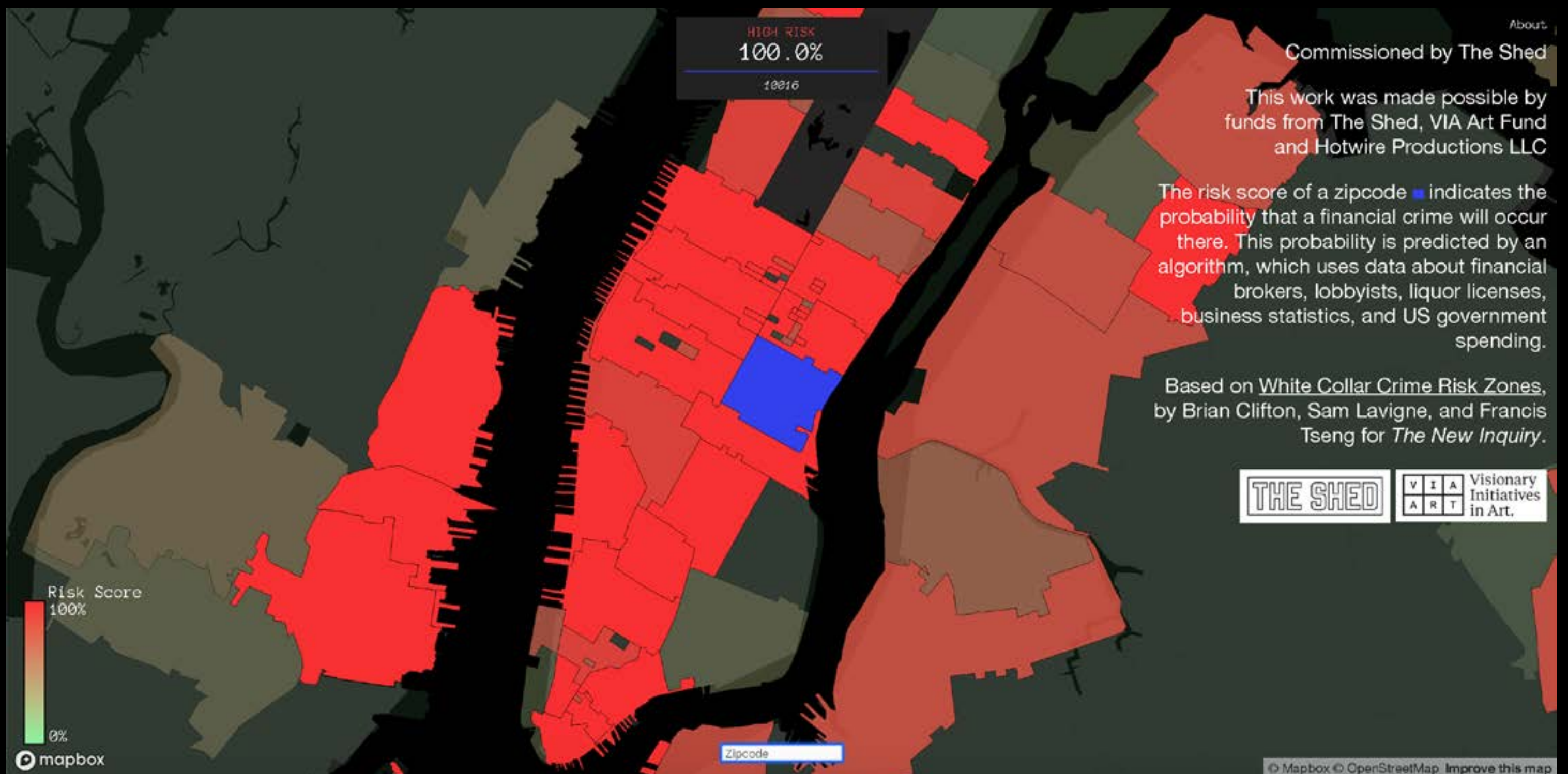
But what do HTML and the internet have to do with predictive policing algorithms? I believe it's important to understand code as a contemporary literary tradition, just like Symbolism, chashtushki, ghazals, or sonnets, and indeed there's a growing body of code poetry which integrates bits of code with English except here—with apologies to Mallarmé—we aren't writing the disaster, so much as programming it. Because code, like any literature, is inescapably a product of its place and time: we certainly can and should work towards prison abolition and various expressions of solidarity, but “escaping biased histories” is not so easy.

Consider programming languages more broadly. There have been some attempts to code in other scripts, like the popular Chinese Easy Programming Language (EPL), the Russian Rapira, the Bengali, Hindi, and Gujarati Hindawi Programming System, and the Japanese Dolittle. It is hard to accurately gauge their popularity (for instance, is EPL considered popular because of the sheer number of Mandarin speakers?), but more importantly, these languages are limited and don't have much practical application beyond making it easier for someone to grasp the basics of programming in their own language. Programming languages are overwhelmingly written in the roman script-derived ASCII character set. One might even go so far as to say they emphasize a certain Anglicized mode of communication, from their fussiness about various accented characters, like the umlauts in a phrase like "Bröther may I have some öats," to the rather loaded best practices they inherit, including a fetish of speed—processing time is money—and being "clean," which might be understood as an artifact of the Industrial Revolution. Even as clean refers to code that is spare, lean (think "clean eating"), and contains no excess or unnecessary bits, it is hard not to see the vestiges of both Puritanism and colonial imaginaries of

the “dirty” native or savage, recast today as the brown scare of immigration. Put another way, ideal code looks more like a screenplay than a closet drama.

Some of the most common object-oriented programming languages such as Python, PHP, Java, and C derivatives are predicated on four main principles of abstraction, inheritance, encapsulation, and polymorphism. At risk of oversimplification, the first three operate as a kind of streamlining via hiding irrelevant data, analogous to the phrases “need-to-know” or “keep it simple.” Polymorphism means that objects can have multiple meanings, which the program parses based on context. Let’s extrapolate this to the word *crime*, as deployed by PredPol. Tellingly, its preferred word is *victimization*, which reveals the kinds of future crimes it concerns itself with. The website mentions “property crimes, gang activity, gun violence, and traffic accidents.” White collar crimes—like money laundering, embezzlement, fraud, and cybercrime—perhaps because of their mediated, disembodied nature, aren’t even on the table. (Francis Tseng, Sam Lavigne, and Brian Clifton’s excellent 2015 *White Collar Crime Risk Zones* provides an excellent corrective.) One suspects that increased police presence in a white collar crime hotspot, would—like having

cops stationed in subway stations and fast-gentrifying neighborhoods to create a sensation of “safety”—only facilitate more of these crimes.



A screenshot of the website for White Collar Crime Zones. Courtesy Francis Tseng, Sam Lavigne, and Brian Clifton.

Just as anyone living in the United States today—and I include myself in this number—inescapably inherits all of these historical biases that have congealed as culture, so too does the code that they produce. Predictive policing algorithms are similarly a product of the white supremacist, settler colonial, classist society that birthed them. Like the Americentrism of the internet, these biases are disappeared through design, through aestheticization, abstraction, and easy-to-use-ness. Through drag-and-drop or point-and-click interfaces, through user-friendly design strategies like skeuomorphism, through a simple red square on a map.

1 “What Is the Dollar Bail Brigade?”,
The Dollar Bail Brigade, <https://www.dollarbailbrigade.com>.

2 Sam Levin, “Imprisoned by Algorithms: The Dark Side of California Ending Cash Bail,” The Guardian, September 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/07/imprisoned-by-algorithms-the-dark-side-of-california-ending-cash-bail>.

3 Chris Hawley, “NYPD Monitored Muslim Students All Over Northeast,” Associated Press, February 18, 2012, <https://www.ap.org/ap-in-the-news/2012/nypd-monitored-muslim-students-all-over-northeast>.

4 “Inside the Red Border,” Time, updated June 28, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1997446,00.html>.

5 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxii.

6 Ibid., xxiii.

This essay is part of a digital publication produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Manual Override* at The Shed, New York, November 13, 2019 – January 12, 2020, organized by Nora N. Khan, Guest Curator, with Alessandra Gómez, Curatorial Assistant.

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