



Figure 1. Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face Mask*—
October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA. Photo by Christopher
O'Leary. Courtesy of the artist

Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation

Zach Blas and Jacob Gaboury

One of the greatest challenges to contemporary queer and feminist scholarship is to reconcile the historical project of identity politics with neoliberalism's co-optation of identity as a means to enact power through new structures of control, such as digital media and computational technologies. While identity politics once served as a site of resistance and refusal, increasingly, such difference is cultivated by neoliberal technologies so that it can be better mobilized in the service of power. We might go so far as to argue that digital media facilitate the construction of identity precisely because identity categories are so legible to the binary logic of digital systems. Despite this problematic relationship between identity and technology, can we nonetheless use technology to transgress or refuse the anchoring of meaning necessitated by identification? Is a queer technics possible?

The following conversation between scholar Jacob Gaboury and artist Zach Blas examines this critical impasse through Blas's work on opacity, facial recognition technology, and biometrics. In a series of works that investigate the face as a site of critical

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legibility, Blas seeks to make visible practices of surveillance that both identify individual subjects and generalize broad populations. This interest in computation and the body is particularly important, given growing concerns over government surveillance and the increasing prevalence of big data. In this context, Blas can be understood as part of a growing field of artists and scholars who critique surveillance using a politics of invisibility. One of the most accessible explorations of legibility and machinic vision in this field is Adam Harvey's *CV Dazzle* (2010) project, which aims to render the body unrecognizable to surveillance technology through a variety of aesthetic techniques such as asymmetrical hairstyles and "Dazzle" camouflage makeup.¹ Likewise, Hito Steyerl's recent *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) offers a series of half-serious methods to avoid visual detection as part of a larger film essay on the value of invisibility.² Alongside these artists, scholars such as Giorgio Agamben, Tiqqun, Alexander R. Galloway, and Eugene Thacker have offered a variety of methods for producing tactical invisibility,³ suggesting that we must "develop techniques and technologies to make oneself unaccounted for."⁴

Collectively, these artists and scholars look to advance a politics that both engages with and resists digital media technology. While invisibility seems to be an alluring tactic to fight surveillance, Blas's work acknowledges that invisibility is often an unequally distributed privilege. Race, disability, gender, and sexuality form the basis for a highly visible embodied difference that exists as part of a much longer history of surveillance, structuring a set of identities that we cannot and perhaps should not seek to erase.

Jacob Gaboury: *Your principal project in the area of biometrics and visibility is the Facial Weaponization Suite (2011–14), a project that deploys biometric data in the construction of abstract masks, enabling the performance of a critical opacity. The first mask in this project is called Fag Face Mask and engages queerness as an operative form. What is at the core of Fag Face Mask?*

Zach Blas: I wanted to develop an artwork that articulated what a queer politics might look like within newly emerging digi-

tal identification technologies, like biometrics, which not only employ reductive global standards to identify people but are also used by various governing bodies to police and criminalize minority groups. The contemporary struggles transgender people experience due to identification regulation—what Dean Spade calls “administrative violence”—are a prime example of and a motivation for this work.⁵ *Fag Face Mask* suggests that a queer politics would refuse to cohere to biometrics’ standardization of identification as well as its various neoliberal uses across state, military, and commercial sectors.

I specifically chose to make masks because I wanted the artwork to directly intersect with the use of masks in protest and social movements today. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Chiapas, Mexico, the global hacker group Anonymous, the Pussy Riot members based in Russia, and the Black Bloc protesters worldwide all use masks to prevent easy identification of the individual; but in addition to this tactic, the protest mask is also an aesthetic tool that creates collective consistency. It produces a positive transformation beyond the perceptual, or quantitative, means of state-based forms of representation and biometric recognition.

The masks seem both practical and conceptual. Unlike the balaclava-style masks of the Zapatistas or Pussy Riot, they obscure the face completely; but unlike the masks of Anonymous, they are so abstracted that they no longer resemble human faces. In this sense, they produce a kind of hyper-visible anonymity that is unrecognizable to machines but highly visible to humans. What is the process of creating each mask, and how do you negotiate these two different registers of visibility?

I approach the mask as a tool for collective transformation, so with *Fag Face Mask*, I decided to make a collective mask that would be the aggregated result of many queer men’s faces. I gathered three-dimensional face scans with a Kinect, a motion-sensing device designed by Microsoft, and then compiled these scans using three-dimensional modeling software. The result is an amorphous, abstract mask because, by aggregating faces but not

averaging them, you are left with a strange, unrecognizable excess that these faces produce by coming together. While the practical takeaway of *Fag Face Mask* and other masks in the *Facial Weaponization Suite* is that they cannot be biometrically detected, the masks are also about a more general refusal of political visibility as a form of control, as well as the desire for collective transformation. I consider these masks utopian, and I like to think of them as forms of “informatic opacity,” opacity as a kind of uncategorizable alterity that no biometric can parse. Because biometric technologies have globalized an insidious politics of identity as informatic capture, we must struggle for opacity; and while transparency, visibility, and representation to the state should be used tactically, they are never the end goal for a transformative politics but are, ultimately, a trap.

This emphasis on the face seems significant. Unlike other biometric features, which are complex, invisible, or obscured from everyday forms of vision, the face is one of the most recognizable individuator in many cultures. One of the principal ways we informally identify one another is through facial features, and the face is often the focus of our attention in conversation and formal discourse. At the same time, access to the face through a kind of compulsory visibility is often a highly loaded and political demand: for example, in the debates surrounding the burqa and the veil in Islamic traditions and their encounter with Western regimes of faciality in Europe and North America. What is the significance of the face to your project, and why do you see it as the primary site through which to enact a kind of tactical opacity?

I have been struck by the transformation of what a face means today. While the face has always been a prized site for considering ethics, responsibility, and alterity in philosophy, it seems that the face is being transformed into a purely quantitative surface, a code to be scanned and read. It's not a far stretch to say that the face is now a form of governance, something to be controlled by what I describe as “governmentalities of the face,” which we now live with on an everyday, global scale. I began to consider this through the simultaneous rise of masked protest and the biomet-

rics industry—and the facial politics each proposes. Masked protest refuses to let the face be reduced to the quantitative, while biometric technologies demand the exact opposite, that the face must always be visible so that it can be computationally analyzed. Recent mask legislation in the US and Canada further stresses the state's investment in the face as always being visible so that it can be scanned and stored by these technologies.⁶

At the same time, I stumbled upon a series of “gay face” scientific studies that had been under way at various universities in the US and UK since 2008.⁷ These studies concluded time and again that test subjects could successfully determine whether a person is gay or straight based on rapid exposure to cropped faces—and at times, faces were shown at near-subliminal rates. I started the mask project with such experiments in mind. Crucially, these gay face studies do not employ biometric technologies; they just show faces very quickly to people. Unfortunately, such practices return us to the pseudoscientific endeavors of the nineteenth century, like physiognomy, anthropometry, and phrenology, wherein, for example, the skulls of dead criminals were measured to obtain an objective conception of what a criminal's head measurements were in relation to those of noncriminals.⁸ Of course, these scientists neglected to publicly consider that they were scientifically validating “fag face,” a form of LGBTIQ harassment.

In what ways is facial recognition different from other biometrics, like fingerprints or iris scans?

Facial recognition is certainly not the most reliable biometric. Fingerprint scans are more precise. Perhaps what is most striking about facial recognition is, again, the cultural implications: we are told by governments, scientists, and security experts that our faces are perfectly readable on the surface, that core truths about us can be extracted by calculations at the surface level of our bodies. This occurs constantly; our pictures are taken by cameras in urban spaces or at national border checkpoints. Over time, how can this not affect how we look at other faces on a daily basis?

In your Facial Weaponization Suite you imply we should make a weapon out of our faces. In what ways can the face be weaponized? Is this weaponization purely a response to changes in technology surrounding the face, or does it engage earlier struggles for (in)visibility?

New weapons are needed in political struggles against biometrics and surveillance. Recent developments in cryptography, such as Tor, a free software program for anonymous communication, or HTTPS Everywhere, a free and open source Web browser extension that improves website security, are good examples.⁹ When the face becomes a weapon, it turns into a force of antagonism, spurring a kind of militancy. And some people must turn their faces into weapons to survive. Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa writes about “making face” as a strategy many women of color use against oppression and patriarchy.¹⁰ The female Algerian freedom fighters in the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers* (dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, Italy and Algeria) are another powerful example: they perform a kind of terrorist drag by dressing up like Western European women; that is, they wear the faces of their oppressors and are able to break into colonized territory as a result. The mask is also a weapon. It protects, defends, and enacts transformation; no one ever stays the same after they put a mask on.

Is it dangerous to weaponize technologies that are often used as tools of oppression and control? In weaponizing the face do we make it dangerous, or do we simply offer new sites for refusal and critique?

Not necessarily. The concern is about how we understand what a face is and what it communicates and reveals. Understanding the face as a biometric code is highly dangerous because it transforms the face into something that can be controlled and regulated, and it grossly reduces the complexities of the face. The face as opaque, on the other hand, might be an ethical mandate to follow. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once wrote that if human beings have a destiny, it is to escape their faces and transform into something unknown.¹¹ I love this. In my work, the face is simply a norm of interpretation; the materiality of the head can never be reduced to the face, which is purely signification.

Your project suggests a politics of refusal. The mask refuses the visibility of the face, but it also refuses the visibility of any one identity category. Like many earlier debates surrounding queerness as a nonidentity, the mask mobilizes a political position based largely on a person's refusal to be made legible. There seems to be here a radical critique, in that the masked figure refuses to enter into formal public discourse as an identifiable subject. The masked figure is a collective figure, and in this sense your work evokes the tactics of groups like Occupy Wall Street or Anonymous. What is the relationship between visibility and anonymity in this project?

Implementing biometric technologies in governance is partly about prediction and preemption, that is, the elimination of what is unknown. It has been argued that technologies like biometrics, GPS, cloud computing, and data-mining algorithms, in their drive to more precisely pin down, locate, and identify human presence, will divide the world into identifiable and unidentifiable zones. In this state of affairs, the unidentifiable zone becomes the space for resistance.¹² Of course, the state wants to find you, so you must constantly adapt to remain unidentifiable, anonymous, or imperceptible. This is a serious challenge, and one that not everyone can afford to invest in.

Rather than the concept of anonymity, I prefer the notion of opacity as it is developed in the writings of the late Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant. Glissant rather counter-intuitively critiques transparency, labeling it barbaric and bound to Western-centric universalisms. It doesn't take much to consider biometrics as one such universalism that produces a kind of supposed transparency. Opacity, by contrast, is unassigned difference, what Glissant calls the foundational quality of the world.¹³ Here, the challenge is to accept the opacity of the world and find ways to maintain it as a right. As biometrics continues to eradicate difference, something like opacity becomes all the more radical.

It is often argued by surveillance scholars that biometrics is a post-9/11 phenomenon, in that the biometrics industry really began to boom in response to terrorism and the US's frustration with failing to identify the 9/11 hijackers.¹⁴ In our continuous war on terror, anonymity and opacity always seem to line up on the side of the enemy.

What about privacy? Privacy seems a much more popular and legally discernable solution to concerns over surveillance and big data. Organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and scholars like Helen Nissenbaum and Daniel Solove have pushed to support privacy as an essential feature of our technologies.¹⁵ At the same time, many tech companies look to leverage privacy as a service to be bought and sold in ways that could easily lead to the exploitation of marginalized groups online.

While I applaud the efforts of organizations like EFF that fight for privacy rights, the idea of privacy can too easily slip into a petit-bourgeois individualism. It is a concept used at the level of state intervention. Anonymity (or opacity) is something that does not exist at the level of the state; it is a foundation for human existence; it is an anti-identity politics. It's an embrace of what is always transforming, what is always unknown within us. The benefit of working on these issues from an arts context is that one is not beholden to operate at the level of state politics. The arts allow us to open these problems to the speculative and utopic realms.

There is a certain discomfort or unease with the inaccessible face. It destabilizes, frightens, even terrorizes. What does this facelessness mean to you, and what is it for?

I turn to the Zapatistas, who say that they hide their faces so that they may be seen.¹⁶ To do away with the face, to escape it, is to break free from the oppressive logic that attempts to control it, define it, and categorize it. Facelessness is a political transformation into what is unknown, unidentified, and opaque. This is something joyful, something to be celebrated.

Notes

1. Harvey explains that his “Dazzle” camouflage makeup is based on a form of camouflage that was used on battleships during the First World War, also called “Dazzle,” which employed “cubist-inspired designs to break apart the visual continuity of a battleship and conceal its orientation and size.” Adam Harvey, “*CV Dazzle*: Camouflage from Face Detection,” *CV Dazzle*, cvdazzle.com (accessed 24 October 2014).
2. Berlin-based artist Hito Steyerl first exhibited this piece as a single-channel video at the 2013 Vienna Biennale. The video is available to view online at artforum.com/video/id=51651%26mode=large%26page_id=0 (accessed 10 August 2016).
3. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010); Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
4. Galloway and Thacker, *Exploit*, 135.
5. Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* (New York: South End Press, 2011).
6. Sean Gardiner and Jessica Firger, “Rare Charge Is Unmasked,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 September 2011, online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB1000142405311190419460457658117144315156; Bill C-309, Preventing Persons from Concealing Their Identity during Riots and Unlawful Assemblies Act, 2013 S.C., ch. 15, parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&DocId=5804538.
7. Nicholas O. Rule and Nalini Ambady, “Brief Exposures: Male’s Sexual Orientation Is Accurately Perceived at 50 ms,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2008): 1100–5; Joshua A. Tabak and Vivian Zayas, “The Roles of Featural and Configural Face Processing in Snap Judgments of Sexual Orientation,” *PLOS ONE* 7, no. 5 (2012): 1–7.
8. Lorraine J. Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2007), 201.

9. "Tor Project: Anonymity Online," Tor, www.torproject.org (accessed 24 February 2016); "HTTPS Everywhere," Electronic Frontier Foundation, www.eff.org/https-everywhere%20 (accessed 24 February 2016).
10. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Haciendo Cara, una entrada" [Making face, an introduction], in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), xv–xxvii.
11. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 171.
12. Galloway and Thacker, *Exploit*, 132.
13. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–94. See also Édouard Glissant, "The Thinking of the Opacity of the World," *frieze d/e*, no. 7 (2012): 77.
14. Kelly A. Gates, *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Toby Beauchamp, "Artful Concealment and Strategic Visibility: Transgender Bodies and US State Surveillance after 9/11," *Surveillance and Society* 6, no. 4 (2009): 356–66.
15. Helen Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Daniel J. Solove, *Nothing to Hide: The False Tradeoff between Privacy and Security* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).
16. Juana Ponce de León, "Editor's Note: Traveling Back for Tomorrow," in *Our Word Is Our Weapon: Selected Writings*, ed. Juana Ponce de León (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), xxvi.

Zach Blas is an artist and lecturer in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. His artwork has recently been exhibited at Whitechapel Gallery, London; the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City; and Transmediale, Berlin. He has two forthcoming books: *Escaping the Face*, an artist monograph to be published by Rhizome and Sternberg Press, and *Informatic Opacity: The Art of Defacement in Biometric Times*, a theoretical study of biometric facial recognition and refusals of recognition. His current art project *Contra-Internet* is supported by a 2016 Creative Capital grant in emerging fields.

Jacob Gaboury is an assistant professor of digital media and visual culture in the Department of Cultural Analysis and Theory at Stony Brook University. His forthcoming book, *Image Objects*, offers an archaeology of early three-dimensional computer graphics and visualization in the 1960s and 1970s, while his current manuscript, “On Uncomputable Numbers,” explores the queer history of computation. His research has been supported by fellowships from the Smithsonian Institute, the Charles Babbage Institute, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery, and his work has recently been published in the *Journal of Visual Culture* and *Media-N*.