

Interview

The Facelessness of Tomorrow Begins Today



Alicia Eler June 24, 2013



Facial Weaponization Suite: Mask – May 31, 2013, San Diego, CA (all images courtesy the artist)

CHICAGO — It is impossible to go back to a world without biometrics and facial recognition tools, but it is not too late for a political act against the idea of allowing our faces to be scanned for the purpose of surveillance or informatic capture. In an age of selfies, apps like Grindr and Brenda and social networks with facial recognition tools galore, the second to last images of ourselves on the internet that we'll own, before those of our bodies, will be of our faces. And so it would make sense that the media attempts to convince us that masked people are the enemies of the state, the perpetrators of political turmoil and unrest — those

who don plastic molds over their faces while attending protest rallies, or wear knit caps or hoods over their heads when doing something as mundane as walking to the convenience store.

This is exactly what artist Zach Blas's project *Facial Weaponization Suite* digs into. Through community-focused workshops, Blas engages people who similarly disagree with the way our government surveils us, without our permission, by putting the mask back on, and morphing it into something utterly unrecognizable by biometrics technology and facial recognition tools. Good guys wear masks. Or, rather, guys who are instead interested in reaching beyond the dichotomies of "good/evil" or "safe/unsafe," instead transcending the binary completely. We got in touch with Zach via internet.

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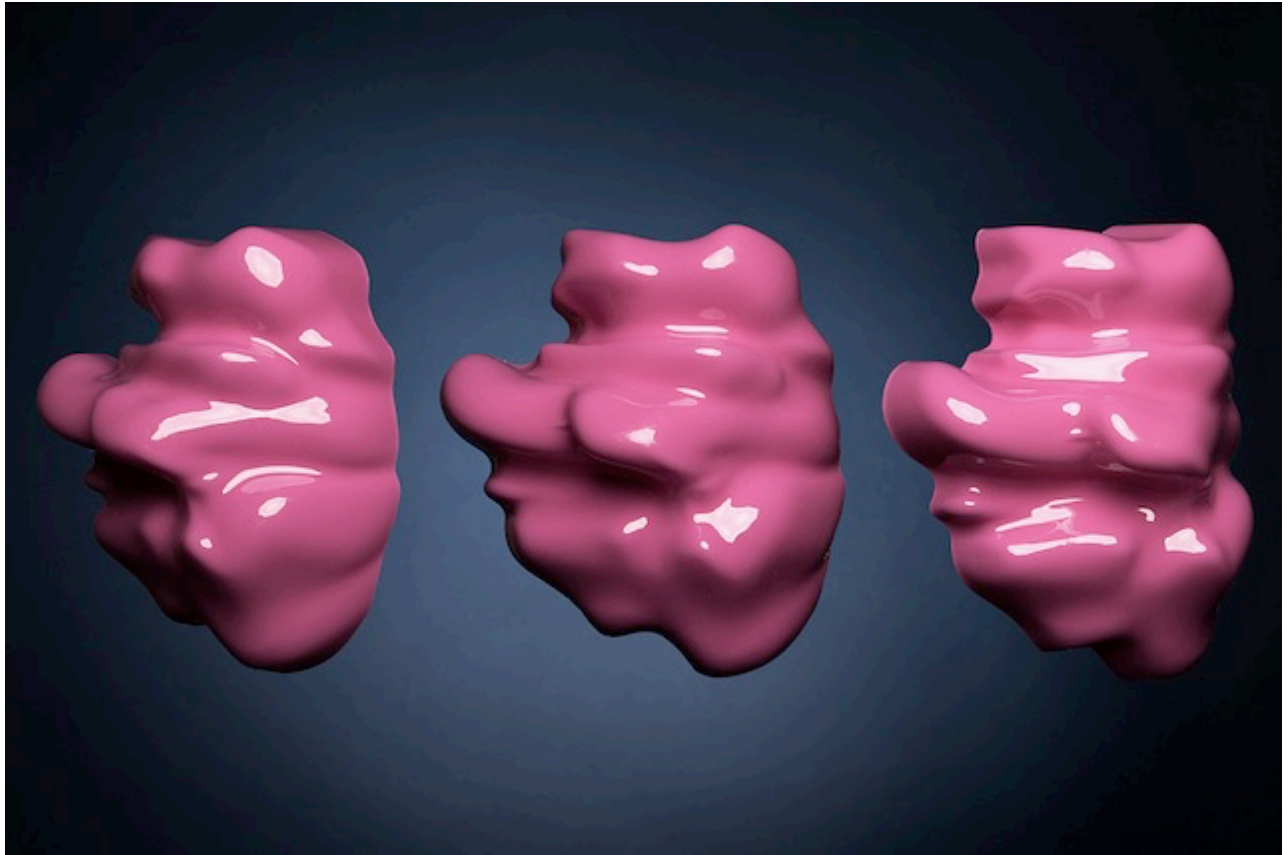
Alicia Eler: I think this conversation has to begin with a discussion of the word "queer." Today "queer" is thought of as a pretty fluid term, with anyone on the spectrum defining it as they see fit—but let us not forget the feminist beginnings of the term. That said, I am wondering how you differentiate between the idea of "queer," a new queerness, post-queer and queer futurities for yourself and in relation to your work?

Zach Blas: Today, queer is popularly used as just another descriptor for an LGBT identity category, but historically, it is a concept—a practice—that extends far beyond that to a radical, non-normative, anti-capitalist politics of transgression, desire, experimentation and collectivity. I'm thinking of [ACT UP](#) and [Queer Nation](#), for instance. This said, I find queerness most productive when approached as an aesthetic and political practice—not an identity category—that is passionately invested in resisting and subverting forces of normativity, standardization, and various attempts at control and domination that aim to subjugate minoritarian persons. That said, this queerness absolutely continues to engage struggles centered on class, gender, sexuality, and race—but also expands to attack other normalizing forces that make minoritarian persons vulnerable or subject to violence. Here, I'm thinking of various technologies, like biometrics and data-mining applications. A "new queerness" would directly combat such forces of standardization and normalization that are operating at a global, technical scale, which requires queerness to engage materiality beyond the human. I'm not suggesting that queerness has never done this before, but queerness' conception of power is (often rightly) human centric; if the technical and nonhuman are truly

brought to bear on queerness—and it is my opinion that the technical, nonhuman realm is where some of the most pressing political concerns of the contemporary era are located—queer politics will undoubtedly mutate. I see this move as crucial and necessary. We need to reconsider what cyberfeminism began teaching us in the 1990s.

If there is a “new queerness” now—or a “post-queerness,” (I’m usually resistant to using “post”), one aspect that interests me and plays out in my work is tensions and drives towards visibility and invisibility, recognition and illegibility. Certainly, an older queer politics was concerned with creating a coherent presence, a visibility, that was crucial for survival and existence. Yet, today, in light of global surveillance/datavveillance and other surreptitious forms of recognition-control, there is a burgeoning political investment in opacity, imperceptibility, and escape. You can think of queer critiques of gay marriage here, as refusals of the neoliberal recognition and visibility offered by the state to legitimate homosexuality. Or take Dean Spade’s transgender theory and activism that articulates a critical trans resistance that strives for a transformative justice that does not aim for state-based forms of recognition but something more utopian, even “impossible.” In queer theory, recent conceptualizations like Nicholas de Villiers’ queer opacity, Jack Halberstam’s queer darkness, and José Muñoz’s queer escape all gesture toward the illegible and nonrecognizable.

I am exploring a queerness that invests and takes seriously such refusals of recognition and visibility; here, queerness is an illegibility or opacity, a refusal that remakes visibility and regimes of recognition outside of standardization through speculative and utopian experimentation and fantasy. And perhaps this brings us to queer futurity: I find much of the so-called “anti-social” queer theory a political dead-end. Sure, it’s an exhilarating theoretical read, but a new queerness needs—calls forth—alternatives in its refusals. This is not just theoretical negativity. As an artist, queerness is what conceptualizes both the political refusal and the utopian imaginaries in my artwork.



“Fag Face Mask” in Facial Weaponization Suite (2012)

***AE:** I’m fascinated by your Facial Weaponization Suite project in which you work against biometric facial recognition by making facial masks that can’t be read by any technologies. How many masks have you made to date? How are they being distributed and used, both in art circles and in activist spaces both queer and otherwise?*

ZB: Currently, there are three masks in *Facial Weaponization Suite*. The masks are produced out of community-based workshops that consist of group experimentation and an intervention or disturbance responding to local contexts. The masks themselves are made by gathering 3D facial scans from all participants in a workshop, usually with a Kinect. This facial data is then brought together with 3D modeling software—but not averaged, which results in an abstract, unhuman “face.” I think of these masks as collectivizations, as literally wearing the faces of the group simultaneously. The masks are like singularities of collectivity—a certain group of people at a particular time and place. The masks are fabricated by CNC milling a mold and vacuum forming with plastic. Importantly, everyone in the workshop gets to keep a mask!

The *Fag Face Mask* is the first in the series, made in the fall of 2012 in Los Angeles with a group of queer men. The mask was produced as a response to recent scientific studies on homosexual faces carried out at various universities, such as Tufts and the University of

Washington. Basically, these studies claim that test subjects could determine whether a face was gay or straight based on exposure to a face for a certain number of microseconds! Of course, these studies triumphantly fail to realize they are attempts at scientifically validating an older form of harassment and stereotyping, often referred to as “fag face.” In this context, I found collectivization quite humorous with the *Fag Face Mask*; I liked the idea that if one homosexual face can supposedly be rapidly identified, then wearing the faces of 30 queer men at the same time produces something unrecognizable.

Crucially, the masks are not just simple refusals of biometrics and surveillance; they are equally concerned with positive collective transformation, a process that exceeds the measurability of biometrics and other governmentalities of visibility, a process of collectivization that produces an illegible excess. I like to think of the masks as proposing and experimenting with ways of relating and being together that are not bound to norms of measuring, seeing and identifying. Ultimately, I chose the mask to work with because of its vital role in social movements and protest today, such as with the Zapatistas, Anonymous, Pussy Riot solidarity protests, black blocs, and general carnivalesque tendencies in protests and occupations today.

AE: The ideas in Facial Weaponization Suite of course make me think about the latest iteration of the NSA spying on Americans via Edward Snowden going public about how much information he is able to glean about ordinary Americans. Does this body of work relate at all to the challenges of sharing personal information through the internet? How so? Why or why not?

ZB: Absolutely. Biometrics is one specific technology amidst a cluster of rapidly developing apparatuses of surveillance and identification standardization. Media theorists Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker wrote not so long ago that the 21st century will be defined by “universal standards of identification,” such as biometrics, GPS and real-time tracking devices, data-mining tools, cloud computing, social networks and even genomics. I find this conception incredibly helpful because it directly ties together processes of standardization with increases in surveillance. Also, like NSA’s PRISM, biometrics is about constructing massive global databases for surveillance: India and United Arab Emirates already have country-wide initiatives in place to gather biometric data on every citizen, and the US has recently conducted massive biometric data sweeps in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East. Currently, biometrics remains the most popular border security technology.

Practices of encryption and imperceptibility have emerged as a preferred way to resist these universal standards. I think of Tiquun and the Invisible Committee's writings on cybernetic capitalism and calls to faceless action but also Wikileaks and Julian Assange's philosophy of the cypherpunk, in which "cryptography is the ultimate form of non-violent direct action." The Tor Project is a clear illustration of such a cypherpunk ethos.

There are numerous other political projects and artworks that are concerned with escaping such neoliberal technologies of standardization and informatic capture (I prefer informatic capture to surveillance). With networking, for instance, there is Anonymous' AnonPlus, a variety of autonomous mesh network projects, as well as Sean Dockray's "Facebook Suicide (Bomb) Manifesto."

Crucially, minoritarian and non-normative persons are subject to increases in policing and criminalization with the advent of these universal standards of identification. I won't go in-depth with this here, but the writings of Shoshana Magnet, Toby Beauchamp, Simone Browne, and Kelly Gates make this unmistakably clear. But this is why queerness must intervene here. So as a queer informatic opacity comes to be, it would certainly be engaged in an illegible practice that unravels the normalizing / standardizing impulses of these technologies and also participates in the exposure of unjust surveilling, like whistleblowers Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden.



Zach Blas at [Risky Business, The HTMiles 10](#), Montreal 2012

***AE:** People seem to be fascinated with cloning, specifically projects like the [DNA portraits](#) and the whole [Japanese cloning craze](#) that's going on. Your work seems to be in opposition to this idea of cloning, as you are making masks and performance-oriented sculptural objects that are interested in ways the body and face can be obscured and abstracted in order to evade biometrics rather than to be reproduced and cloned at will. It's like an ongoing conversation between and . What are your thoughts about DNA projects and cloning in relation to your work? Do you see a potential danger in the DNA and cloning projects, which are typically presented to the internet public as pretty playful and just BuzzFeed weird?*

ZB: It's not reproduction or cloning per say that I'm against; in fact, the masks are a kind of cloning, a reproduction of the biometric data I gather from peoples' faces. I just remake that in a non-normative/non-standardized way.

The main point for me is the problem of the universal standardization of identification and accompanying administration, regulation, and surveillance that pushes forth a neoliberal agenda and works against minoritarian persons.

I see the DNA / cloning artwork you mention as visualizations and dramatizations of what is possible, which is important work. They appear as open projects to me: this could be a good thing, it could be bad. In my work, however, I attempt to take more of a directly political stance.

*To learn more about Facial Weaponization Suite, visit [**Zach Blas on the internets.**](#)*