

FACIAL WEAPONIZATION SUITE

by Kyle Chayka | January 27, 2014

IN A NEW EXHIBITION BY ARTIST ZACH BLAS, THE DANGEROUS POLITICAL REACHES OF FACIAL RECOGNITION TECHNOLOGY ARE DRAWN INTO QUESTION WITH ABSTRACT LAYERED MASKS.

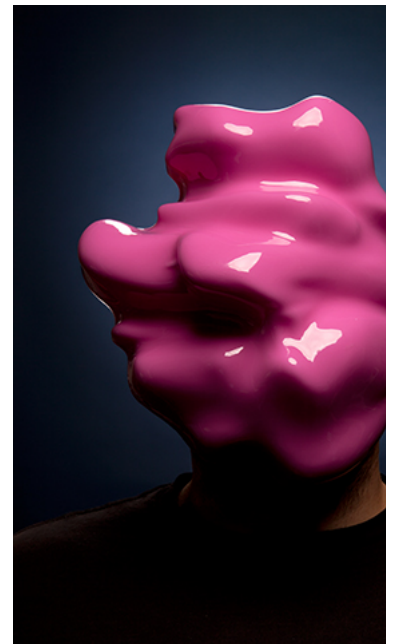


Artist Zach Blas's masks – bulbous forms made of brightly coloured plastic – have little in common with human face; at least on the surface. The masks of *Facial Weaponization Suite*, currently on display at [Eyebeam](#) in New York City, are actually the combined shapes of many faces, which have then been layered on top of one another until they create an abstract mass. The disguises are designed to be undetectable by surveillance systems, a protest against the “biometric sensibility” that Blas sees “permeating culture and all other forms of scientific inquiry,” he says.

Blas's project was inspired by a [2008 study](#) by scientists at Tufts University in which test subjects were shown small crops of faces in quick succession and asked to judge the sexuality of the person pictured. The study found that we have a remarkable ability to tell whether someone is gay or straight based on their face alone.

Biometrics, the idea that unique physical characteristics quantified by data can identify someone or determine something about their personality, is nothing new. “You can't help but connect it to 19th-century pseudo science about anthropometry, measuring criminal skulls to see which metrics make someone criminal,” Blas explains. The new studies are “history repeating itself, but wrapped up in a high-tech variation.”

In our age of constant surveillance, both digital and physical, there is the potential for cameras armed with this data to scan crowds of people and access personal information, such as sexual orientation, whether they



want to be identified or not. Blas's masks combat this technology with a "physical presence that can't be broken down by biometrics," he explains. "The mask is a catalyst for collective political transformation."

Blas's pink mask was made from the scanned faces of self-identifying gay men in San Francisco. He followed that with a black-colored mask confronting racial biometrics, and his third mask was made with female faces – commenting on feminism and the politics of concealment inherent in clothing like veils and burkhas, which can also function as facial barriers.

Blas's work is a reminder to be wary of extreme uses for technology, rather than being lulled into security by its conveniences. "Biometrics have become so domesticated in phones and computer games, people are just like, what's the problem?" the artist says. "They're not thinking that these technologies are being developed by police and military to criminalise large chunks of the population."

