

[Magazine](#)[TV](#)[News](#)[Life](#)[Tech](#)[Munchies](#)[Music](#)[Waypoint](#)[Shop](#)[Members](#)[Newsletters](#)

Is Facial Recognition Technology Racist?

By Johnny Magdaleno February 4, 2014, 1:47pm

The biometrics industry, according to theorist and artist Zach Blas, is one of the most profitable, unpublicized industries of the 21st century's tech-based economy. But even though we're not seeing retina scanners advertised on highway billboards, we *are* seeing the growth of incognito appearances throughout personal technologies: fingerprint scanners on ATMs, facial identification programs built into social media sites, and much more.

Yet even though these tools have undergone some serious evolutions, the mask is still an effective method for preventing

identification technologies from analyzing one of our most unique characteristics: our face. But that's not entirely why Blas' crafted his **"Facial Weaponization Suite" project**. What inspired (and troubled) him most was the way certain physical characteristics are programmed into these technologies as bases, "normalities" that are applied as archetypes for identifying richly diverse populations.

His series of masks aggregate the biometric facial data of people who are associated with minority groups into wildly distorted, plastic globes, which successfully thwart facial recognition software. It's a challenge against the same archaic mindset behind pseudo-sciences like Phrenology—that certain superficial characteristics correlate or result from belonging to any specific gender, race, or sexuality.

The exhibition recently finished its run at **Eyebeam** in New York, displayed in tandem with a

workshop that allowed participants to design masks based on distortions of their own facial structures. Blending cultural commentary with tech-dissent, Blas' masks take the institutionalization of biometric data processing and flip it on its back by using the data itself to create weapons for its defeat.

Fag Face Mask

For example: the Fag Face Mask. Created by compiling the biometric data of queer men living in San Francisco, the Fag Face Mask's outcome exaggerates and distorts the facial structures of gay men, to satirize the conception that participants' facial structures are as such because of their homosexuality. Researchers hinted at this when they attempted to prove a correlation between the two sets of traits in 2008, during a study which asked participants to identify faces shown on a computer screen as either

homosexual or heterosexual.

“Biometric technologies rely heavily on stable and normative conceptions of identity and thus structural failures are encoded in biometrics that discriminate against race, class, gender, sex and disability,” says a robotic voice in the video above, which describes the motivation behind and implications of “Facial Weaponization Suite.” “For example, fingerprint devices often fail to scan the hands of Asian women and iris scans work poorly if the eye has cataracts.”

Which is why Blas has also experimented with masks that tackle gender and racial issues. A mask made from the biometric data of women contemplates the Western debate to criminalize veils or *burqas*, like what we saw in France back in 2011. Another mask of glossy black tackles the problem of racist biometric technologies that are unable to detect identities of people of color

because programs use “white” or “fair” skin as principles to their functionality.

Because these technologies are often implemented in social and civil institutions without any forewarning or previous notice, they assimilate smoothly into our lives to the point where, eventually, we can’t even remember how long they’ve been with us. And the biometric technology industry’s economic climb suggests they’ll continue that silent infiltration. The United States, for example, already has the largest facial recognition system in the world, with more than 75 million facial photographs archived for visa processing, according to Blas’ video.

And with the revival of an antiquated mask law in New York, which prevents more than two people wearing masks from gathering in public demonstrations, or a law enacted in Canada last year which slams mask-wearers with a maximum 10-

year prison sentence if they're concealed during a riot or illegal public assembly, it seems that Blas' venture into the "politics of escape" will become more and more necessary as disassociation becomes a prerequisite for privacy.

All Images via Zach Blas.