

'Fag Face' Mask Protests Sex Discrimination in Facial-Scanning Tech

By [Rebecca Hiscott](#) on March 7, 2014



Digital artist Zach Blas models three masks created in protest of biometric and facial-recognition technologies: Two masks from 'Facial Weaponization Suite' (left and right), and the Face Cage (center). Credit: Christopher O'Leary

If you were in a corner of the West Hollywood Public Library parking garage one weekend in June 2013, you may have encountered artist Zach Blas. He wore a neon pink, amorphous mask, his face totally invisible save for two tiny eyeholes poked through the plastic.

If you talked to him, Blas would speak to you about biometrics. He might tell you that those innocuous fingerprint and facial recognition technologies on your smartphone are actually rather insidious. He might say that these technologies, used by governments to police border security, are programmed with racial biases.

He'd cite a [study](#) that determined humans can make fairly accurate snap judgments about individuals' sexual orientation based on facial recognition alone, even when those faces were stripped of surrounding markers such as dress and hairstyle. Then he'd sit you down in front of a [Kinect](#) and scan your face. He'd glance at the results and say you had "Fag Face."

The neon pink Fag Face Mask, as Blas calls it, is one of five masks in the digital artist's yet unfinished collection, [Facial Weaponization Suite](#). By aggregating biometric facial scans from queer men, Blas created a single facial composite, which he manipulated to create something excessive and shapeless. It protests the notion that a face is something inherently familiar and totally knowable, by humans or by technology.

"I wanted that process of collectivization to produce some kind of excess," says Blas. "When you first see those masks, there's something incredibly 'othering' about them that you can't really parse. It's just a weirdness."

Speaking with Mashable at a Williamsburg coffee shop, not far from where he's lived since September, Blas cuts a familiar sort of Brooklyn figure: grey beanie, plaid shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, glasses with ombre frames, a neatly trimmed, ruddy beard. But he's actually more comfortable in California, where he completed his Master's degree. Now he's wrapping up a six-month artist's fellowship at New York's [Eyebeam](#).

Blas founded the art group [Queer Technologies](#) in 2007, a five-year project that produced strange physical artifacts designed to challenge the notion of technology as objective. Facial Weaponization Suite began during the Queer Technologies project, but quickly ballooned and was folded out of the group. In addition to the pink Fag Face Mask, Blas has produced two others: a black mask and a blue mask, which tackle racism and feminist theory, respectively. Each is generated in a community-based workshop, where Blas leads a discussion about biometrics and queer theory.

The significance of each mask hinges on the discussion that emerges out of the workshop, Blas explains. When he workshopped the black mask in San Diego, the conversation turned to border security and institutionalized racism, compounded by the fact that biometric technologies are normalized according to racially changed standards. When the Kinect was first released, it had a great deal of trouble detecting dark skin.

"These technologies are being developed by humans, so there are sociopolitical biases being programmed into these technical architectures," he maintains.

His project uses the masks as tools of protest. "In social movements, the mask becomes this force of collectivization," says Blas. "It's hiding the individual face so this other, collective demand emerges." Simultaneously, the mask fights our increased visibility in a biometric world. "A lot of the common rhetoric around minoritarian political struggles is about gaining visibility, gaining recognition. Biometrics complicate that, because now you have political tactics that are invested in the opposite. Gaining visibility can also mean being subjected to surveillance, being entered into databases."



Blas's black mask is activated during a performative tableau staged in San Diego, Calif. Credit: Tanner Cook

To produce the masks, Blas scans workshop members' faces with the very Kinect they have just been discussing. "After having this intense discussion, people have become very uneasy," he says. "I like how the workshop can generate that discomfort because it means people are being reflective." He then aggregates participants' facial data in a 3D modeling program, manipulating and exaggerating the results until the composite face becomes distinctly inhuman. Blas commissions a manufacturer to vacuum-mold the masks out of clear plastic, then he paints them and reconvenes the workshop. The mask is "activated" with a performance: For the Fag Face Mask, it was the "Fag Face Scanning Station" in West Hollywood; for the black mask, a public tableau in which members assumed poses to evoke military persecution.

The blue "Feminist Mask" has not been activated. The fourth and fifth masks, one already workshopped in Portland and the other scheduled for a workshop in Mexico City, have not yet been created.

Blas checks his [iPhone](#) -- no fingerprint scanner -- and realizes he is late for his next appointment. He is moving to London in a few days for another residency, and he needs to pack. Abruptly, our time is up.

The European Union's [e-passport](#) technology uses automated face scanning to confirm citizens' identities. Blas will soon see it firsthand at London's Heathrow Airport.