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How to hide from Big Brother

Meet the artists and writers using masks and makeup to thwart government surveillance

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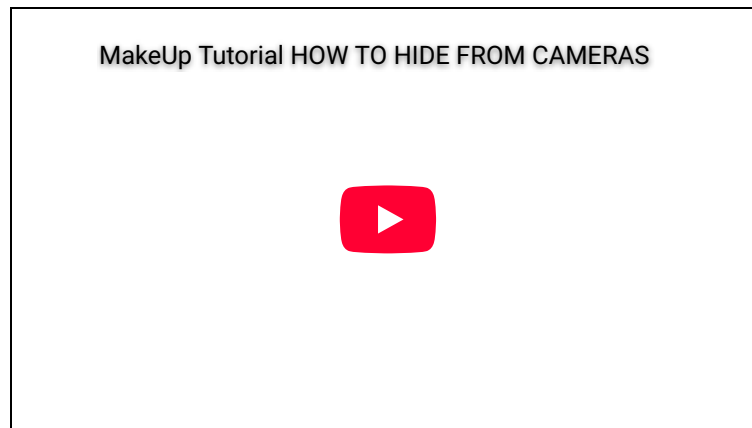
ARTS+CULTURE

HOW TO

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If Facebook can tag you, so can the government. Big Brother was never mere fiction, but thanks to improved technologies, the Orwellian lens has never been sharper. Janus, a recently launched U.S Intelligence program, aims to radically improve facial recognition technologies, mapping your expression like a fingerprint and tagging it to a biometric profile to track your movements and keep a watchful eye – even as yours avert their omnipresent cameras.

But what does government surveillance have to do with lipstick? Recently, I joined several self-described young female poets in a Brooklyn apartment to take on the question. The invitation to our gathering read "[Anti-Surveillance Feminist Poet Hair and Make Up Party](#)". There were snacks and stickers, some acrylic paints – blue, green, white, black – and an open laptop looping either Beyonce or [a YouTube tutorial](#) by performance artist Jillian Mayer teaching us how to use makeup to hide from the machines.



The goal, the video advises, is to break up symmetry. If the conventions of cosmetics ask for certain regions of facial structure to be highlighted – cheekbones, nose bridges, lashes, lips – cosmetic camouflage necessitates the opposite. Contours must be masked by irregular misshapes. Blobs of black should travel from the bottom chin up into the cheeks while dark strips should swathe the nose, and perhaps a portion of the upper lip. Hair must cover the face, preferably in spiky streaks, to fall over the forehead and barely reveal the eyes (the locus of facial recognition).

"This isn't about blending in," Mayer reminds us. "This is about sticking out yet remaining undetected by cameras." Whatever we

do, we must avert the machine's gaze while performing.

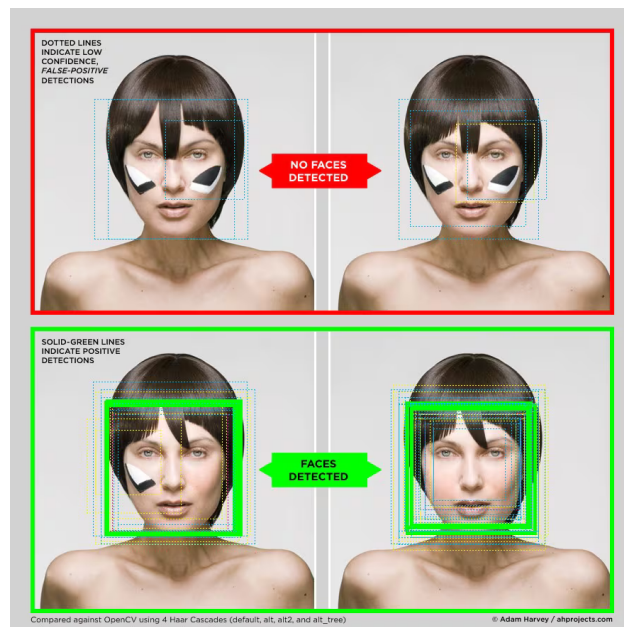


One woman tests her surveillance makeup
Emily Raw

There's a science behind this dystopic tribal warrior look. Artist and researcher Adam Harvey's [CV Dazzle](#) approximates this cosmetic approach towards what he deems the "anti face". The name of the project comes from [OpenCV](#), one of the most widely utilized facial recognition software apps, as well as Dazzle camouflage, a black and white striped pattern developed during World War One to prevent enemy detection of military submarines. Harvey researched facial recognition technology – the same technology that marks little red boxes around the faces of your friends when you upload images to Facebook – and developed various aestheticized forms of camouflage that circumvent detection by mechanised scanners.

These scanners, such as OpenCV, are coded with algorithms that [employ the Viola Jones](#) method of facial recognition: identifying a potential face and performing calculations on areas identified by black and white rectangles to analyse, and thereby identify, the dark and light regions of the face. CV Dazzle's makeup strategy uses shapes that darken normally lightened areas of the face to confuse detectors. The resulting look is somehow half-reminiscent of both mohawk-punk and on-duty-soldier.

As the faces of Harvey's models attest, the patterns that subvert computational detection are simultaneously hyper-visible – almost outright performative in their demand for attention. This attention is antagonistic: at once subverting systems of surveillance while publicly protesting their very existence. But the use of cosmetics begs the question: are these forms of protest only drawing more attention and stares?



Adam Harvey's CV Dazzle
Adam Harvey

That question was levelled at the women who participated in the anti-surveillance makeup meeting. A piece in *The New York Daily News* featuring some of those writers spurred inter-feminist policing from fellow female poets, spawning into a back-and-forth dialogue of “who wears feminism best”: the girls wearing crop tops and lipstick, or the girls wearing sweatpants?

More than using the gal pal party as means to challenge the omnipresent state watch, these women organised the meet to address how women police one another. The makeup party, a trope of suburban housewife-era female bonding, aimed to re-direct the energy spent on feminist in-fighting to address the larger threat of “the male gaze”.

In cinema, the original concept of the male gaze proposes that the camera lens is always masculine: stalking, following, and sneaking up on the female body. The “state gaze” is similarly voyeuristic towards the movement of its citizens. And while all bodies, male or female, are watched, the “quality of the gaze” differs. Women are cultured to assume observation and identification in public space – hence the ubiquity of street harassment and cat calling. The “state gaze” might create a new imposition on male bodies, but female bodies have grown accustomed to hiding in public.

For Harvey, the beauty of CV Dazzle as a form of camouflage is that it doesn't require hiding. Wearing a hoodie or a mask, he argues, ousts those who want to avoid detection and stifles their creativity by making them anonymous. But who's granted the privilege of creative activism?



The group of young women take their anti-surveillance looks to Brooklyn's streets
Emily Raw

While surveillance is omnipresent, its watch is not universally aimed. As these detection technologies become more exact, our identity categories – our race, gender, sexual preference, or religious affiliations – will be used to monitor and police specific subsets of the population. Certain faces are the subjects of protection while others are criminalized before they are even surveilled. It wasn't lost on the anti-surveillance makeup participants that they were all white (or at least fair-skinned) women performing their dazzles in a predominantly African-American neighborhood.

Stephanie Young, organizer of the first surveillance makeup party in Oakland questioned the political uses of the project. "Certain faces are the subjects of protection," Young said, "while others are criminalized before they are even surveilled."

Only some faces – mainly young, female, and white – can hide through cosmetic decoration. Others can't afford to be seen.

Perhaps instead of an anti-face, we need no face at all. Instead of performative antagonism, we need opaqueness. Working from similar research on facial recognition technologies, artist [Zach Blas](#) recognized that not only do these technologies surveill, they also propagate inequality by coding idealized complexions. Biometric technologies, for example, do not detect darker skin tones. Blas proposes the mask, instead of makeup, as the tool to weaponise our complexions. Standing with other mask-wearing protestors like the Zapatistas and [Pussy Riot](#), Blas created "collective masks" modeled from the aggregated facial data of participants from community workshops. [Fag Face Mask](#), a bright pink amorphous, bubbling blob was, for example, generated from the data of queer male faces. Compiling individuals into one collective face, creating a faceless mass that threatens the state.

If we are to hide, we need to make sure our methods of

concealment don't get co-opted as fashionably friendly antagonisms by the systems we hope to avoid. Aesthetic approaches to antagonize surveillance systems need to take into account the layers of privilege that render some subjects more visible than others. While anti-surveillance makeup proposes such antagonism, its focus on "individuality" and "creativity" at best feeds the entitlement of certain faces and, at worst, can be all too easily absorbed as a beauty trend. Masks provide more a effective aesthetic of revolt, turning the freedom of anonymity into Big Brother's greatest threat.