



Locating Technology Against Recognition

By Emily K. Holmes April 16, 2014

Locating Technology considers technology and artworks in rather broad terms, such as: mechanical objects, analog and digital photography and video, and computer and web-based work. Through these types of works, writers explore the evolution of technology and its effects on artists' processes, disciplinarity, and the larger social context of media creation, dispersal, access and interactivity.

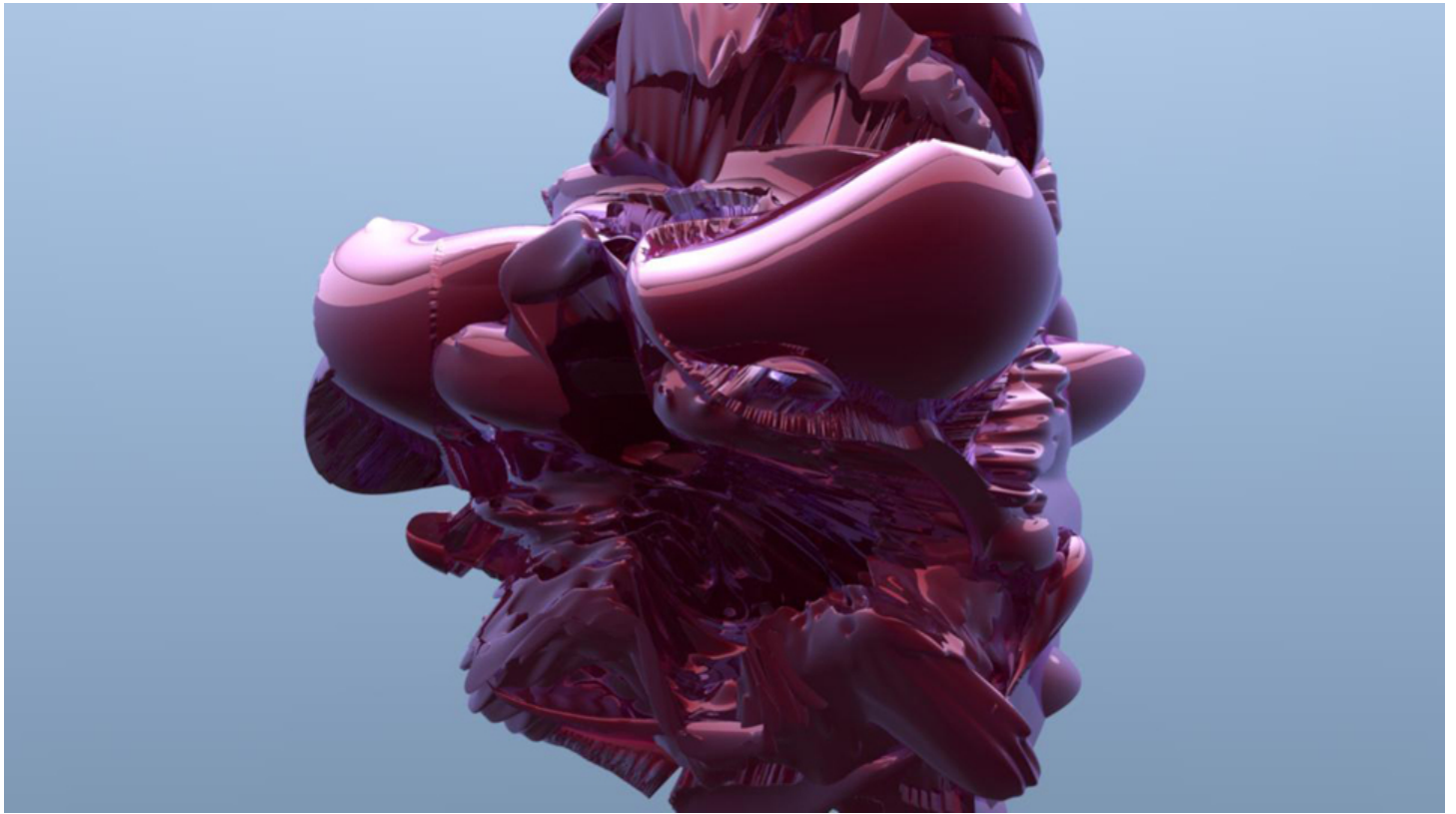
Biometric technologies aim to “authenticate” and “verify” individuals by digitally scanning physical traits on the body, ranging from iris scans to fingerprint matching and facial-recognition technology.¹ These technologies scan bodies at borders to administer international mobility in the form of digitized passports, and act as proxy guards in high-security workplaces. Biometric technologies also appear in popular social media, such as when Facebook asks us to tag our friends when we upload photographs (the company is researching ways to increase accuracy), as well as in smartphones, tablets, and some gaming consoles.² Before we get too swept up in the excitement of unlocking iPhones with our grinning faces, artist Zach Blas suggests we question the normalization of facial-recognition technology.

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In Blas' digital video *Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face Communiqué* (2012; HD video; 8:10 minutes), he presents a montage of clips to survey the current uses of facial-recognition technology, similar to those listed above.³ Other than sheer proliferation, why should we rethink facial-recognition technology? In one scene, a clip taken from a biometric company's promotional video shows the possibility of detecting an “unwanted individual.” A slender white man enters through the doors of a building's lobby; we see through the CCTV monitor as a square latches onto his face as he walks through the space. The man's face triggers a match in a database, and the screen shows a previously stored image paired with the words “unwanted individual detected.” Although this use of biometrics is situated as protective and beneficial, Blas imagines a possible future in which detecting “unwanted” individuals might collide with socially marginalized groups.

Biometric technologies used for surveillance systems are promoted as highly objective systems. That is, whereas human surveyors in positions of authority are susceptible to cultural biases such as racial and ethnic profiling, supposedly a biometric-equipped CCTV cannot be swayed by stereotypes.⁴ Ostensibly, facial-recognition technologies merely measure points of data and won't judge a body based on baggy jeans or skin color. However, recent scholarship has shown that biometrics do not detect all bodies equally.⁵ Blas notes that such systems often fail to account for the bodily differences among people of color, including skin-color reflectivity and even fingerprint sizes. Media theorist Shoshana Amielle Magnet affirms that “culture is always encoded into technology.”⁶

The video is one component of an ongoing project titled *Facial Weaponization Suite*, which manifests, through small-scale workshops, a collectively produced mask. Each workshop begins with a theme tailored to the political issues affecting the participants. Masks are made from the combined biometric data of all the workshop participants, though no coherent facial features are recognizable; in fact, the masks are only a success when they fail to be recognized as faces at all by facial-recognition technologies. Both in its plastic form and as an animated character in the video, the *Fag Face Mask* is bulbous, a bright, synthetic, bubblegum pink. The shape and color are reminiscent of the gelatinous, magenta creature from the cult sci-fi film *The Blob* (1958), as well as the ectoplasmic, floating cartoon character Morph from Disney's *Treasure Planet* (2002). The mask carries some of Morph's playfulness in its vibrant color and organic shape, as well as a little of the devouring threat engendered by *The Blob*.

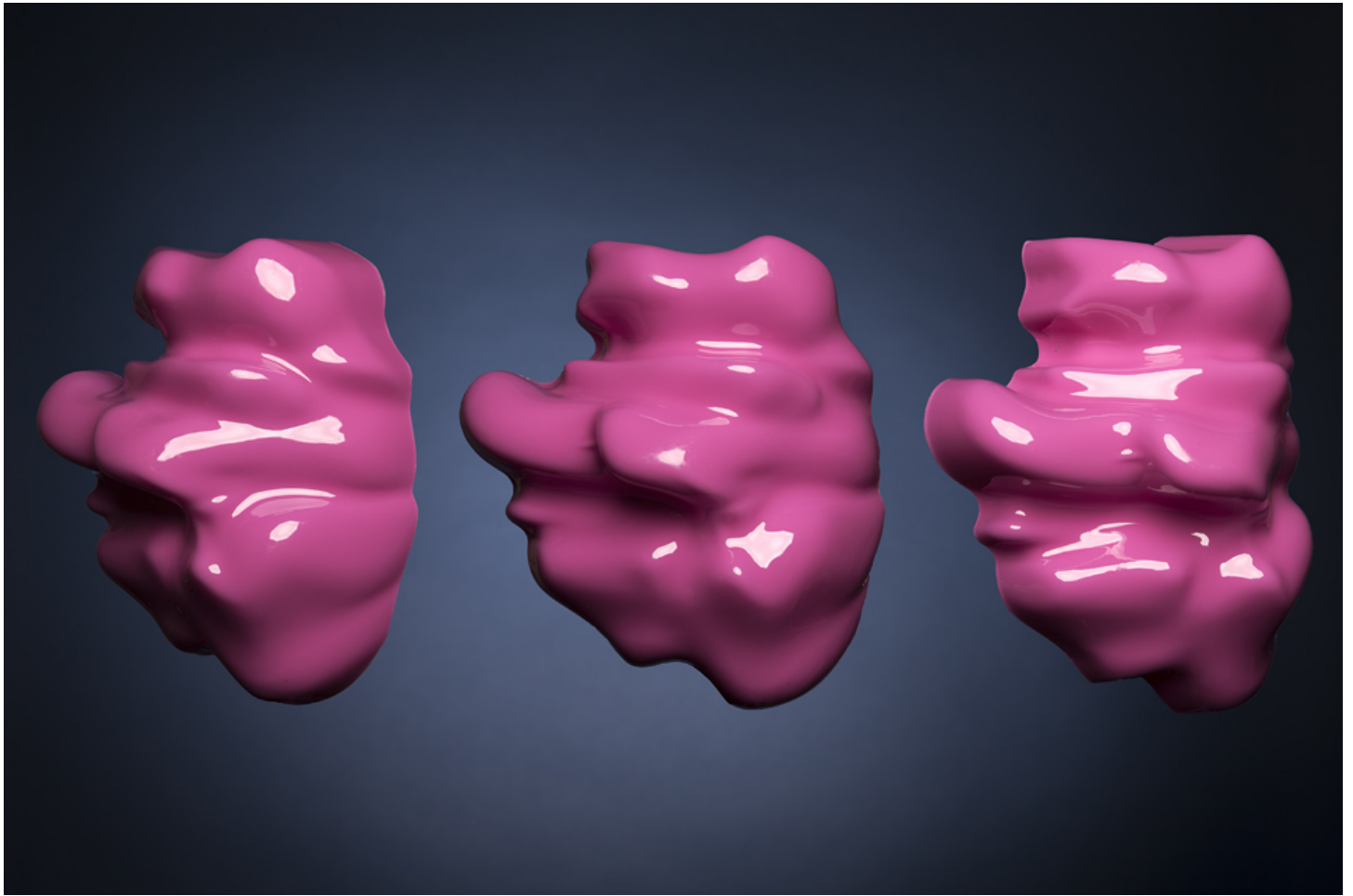


Zach Blas. *Facial Weaponization Suite Communiqué: Fag Face*, 2012 (video still); HD video; 08:10. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Zach Blas.

Blas uses two different computerized voices, identifiable as conventionally “male” and “female,” to narrate the video. While the narration occurs, the male voice is shown as a masked person sitting against a white wall. The mask covers the face and much of the head, with no visible holes for eyes, nose, or mouth. When the female voice speaks, the related visual is the same mask, rendered in 3D animation, floating by itself. Although no mouth appears, the surface of the mask changes with the voice; sometimes the surface subtly vibrates with sound, and at other times the sound visualizes as stalagmites fast-erupting from the “skin.”

For the *Fag Face Mask*, the workshop theme was queer visibility. The phrase itself is a homophobic slur, one that Blas had hurled at him while growing up in West Virginia, that implies that a man’s “too effeminate” appearance (or voice) necessarily reflects a corresponding non-normative sexuality.⁷ Being told that one has a fag face can, depending on the context, be an insult or a physically threatening, even life-endangering experience. For example, in the video piece, the montage shows a slowed-down, dimly lit scene of a man’s body being held in a headlock by an unseen aggressor, as white subtitles appear: “Is that what you want, huh? You want your fag face bashed?”

Though the concept of one’s sexuality being inherently marked on one’s body calls for serious scrutiny, recent experimental psychology studies have attempted to prove this very possibility. In a controversial turn, Blas cites this in *Facial Weaponization Suite*, commenting, “Facial recognition has even ventured into the terrain of sexual orientation.” The (male) narrator then describes a 2008 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* that attempted to validate the subconscious “science” of gaydar. Blas is deeply critical of these studies, and for good reason; they resonate with 19th-century pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology, which claimed that the intellectual and moral character of an individual was determined from the morphology of the face and skull. This kind of stereotyping was entrenched in socially created hierarchies of race, class, and ability that were fostered by eugenicists.⁸



Zach Blas. *Fag Face Mask* – October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA, from *Facial Weaponization Suite*, 2011-present; Mask generated from the biometric data of queer men's faces, undetectable by facial recognition technologies. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Christopher O'Leary.

But when Blas poses that such problematic studies be considered, he does so with an unexpected leap into dystopia, returning to the driving question of how ideological power employs facial-recognition technologies. With the concept of culturally biased technologies in mind, Blas takes biometrics one step further into the future. If—and that's not actually a very big "if"—it could be done, would facial recognition be used to detect other kinds of "unwanted" individuals or groups? That is, subjects whose bodily traits mark them as "others"? In *Facial Weaponization Suite*, Blas effectively asks: How is difference marked on the body, read by us, and in turn, read by machines (made by us)? And how can we complicate all of the naturalized assumptions underlying each of those ideas?

The mask is made from a composite of "many queer men's faces," which Blas suggests allows the queer individual to wear the face of many, a gesture related to the collectivity of activist protests. The video visualizes the process of compiling five men into one. The resultant face morphs spastically as the CGI-rendering combines the faces. The surface of the mask boils hot-pink bubbles, swells, reduces, and balloons again as it transforms. The final mask is a pink blob that Blas describes as a "mutated alien face."

Blas' methodology of creating the masks pulls directly from the 19th-century practice of Francis Galton, whose composite faces notoriously attempted to identify "types" of ethnic and moral character.⁹ Yet through using a parallel method, Blas reaches an entirely different end. Once he has the composite face, Blas works with the subjects in a collective way to mutate the form into a facial-recognition-defying mask, thereby purposefully abusing the process of generating a composite "type."¹⁰



Zach Blas. *Fag Face Scanning Station*, 2013; Installation view, reclaim:pride with the ONE Archives and RECAPS Magazine, Christopher Street West Pride Festival, West Hollywood, CA, June 8, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: David Evans Frantz.

With this twist, "recognition" simultaneously signals biometric legibility as well as the limits of normative political visibility.

Blas asserts that by wearing the mask, radical queers can resist both heteronormative society as well as homonormativity with mainstream gay and lesbian demands for political recognition in the public sphere. (When articulating the radical queer agenda, the female narrator's CGI mask speaks in extra jagged peaks.) Blas calls for a queer identity that desires to not be recognized—"let's call it a politics of escape." With this twist, "recognition" simultaneously signals biometric legibility as well as the limits of normative political visibility. Blas merges the need to critique facial recognition technology, for its real and possible collusion with ideologies of race and sexuality, with his queer politics that seek to destabilize naturalized categorizations of identity.

Wearing the mask, however, does not prevent one's body from stigmatization (in fact, doing so renders one's body highly visible). Should queers actually wear the mask in public? This question, though relevant, misses the other, more pressing points raised by Blas when he queers biometrics by forcing connections between seemingly unrelated realms: the actual technology of surveillance and the social technology of difference. Blas creates space for facial-recognition technology to be not only strange, but dangerous and deserving of our critical questioning.

Notes

1. Joseph Pugliese, *Biometrics: Bodies, Technologies, Biopolitics*, (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.
2. Darrell Etherington, "Facebook's DeepFace Project Nears Human Accuracy in Identifying Faces," *TechCrunch.com*, March 18, 2014, <http://techcrunch.com/2014/03/18/facebook-deepface-facial-recognition/> (accessed April 6, 2014).
3. Video can be watched online at <http://vimeo.com/57882032>
4. Shoshana Amielle Magnet, *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity* (Durham: Duke University, 2011), 11.
5. Ibid. See also Pugliese, *Biometrics*.
6. Ibid., 20.
7. Jacob Gaboury, "Interview With Zach Blas," Rhizome.org, August 18, 2010, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2010/aug/18/interview-with-zach-blas/> (accessed March 31, 2014).
8. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Ed. Richard Bolton. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 343-88.
9. Ibid.
10. Conversation with the artist, March 24, 2014.

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