

# Weaponizing Our Faces: An Interview with Zach Blas

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The desire to be in control of how we are watched and by whom has grown in the year after the Snowden revelations. Everyday people are downloading private messaging apps in droves, educating themselves about encryption, switching to private browsers, and much more. We've become collectively spooked by the sheer magnitude of the dragnet surveillance in place in this country and abroad by governments and corporations. Even if we feel we have nothing illegal to hide, the thought of an algorithm collecting our most personal emails, intimate texts, video chats, and creating a map of our every move and connection is unsettling.

Sadly, the people who feel the brunt of this insidious gaze aren't only criminals; minority groups and activists are also

subjected to this oppressive watching. Security cameras, aerial surveillance, larger police presences, warrantless surveillance, border checks, stop and frisks, and more are all commonplace in certain regions or populations in this country. It's no wonder that even before Snowden, many activists had adopted protest masks as part of their toolbox of political action. Pussy Riot, black blocs, the Zapatistas, Anonymous, and more have taken the mask as a tool to hide and also a means to self-empower.

In 2011, taken by the emergence of mass protest movements around the world, artist Zach Blas began making his “Facial Weaponization Suite,” a series of community workshops that discuss and resist biometric facial recognition technologies and the larger political ethos that supports and enforces them. The workshop participants then have their own faces scanned and compiled into a collective mask, a mask which resists any biometric quantification. I got Blas on the phone to learn a little more about the project.

**VICE: The algorithmic gaze of the surveillance apparatus is binary-literally ones and zeros-but also in terms of its treatment of human beings as binary. We are seen as**

**either terrorist or not, posing a threat or not, gay or not.  
What's at stake if this type of machine logic completely  
permeates our society?**

**Zach Blas:** There are many instances of the machinic gaze or machine vision. You have drones and biometrics, but you can also be more metaphorical and think about data-mining and our data-bodies, which are products of data that are stored and aggregated about us on social media networks.

I just finished my dissertation, called “Informatic Opacity,” which is about this. I use the concept of opacity as an ethical, political, and aesthetic tactic to counter the turn towards standardization that these algorithms produce. I approach machine vision, specifically biometrics, not just from surveillance issues but as a neoliberal entanglement of government, military, and commercial ventures that all come together to produce these technologies. At a technical level, such technologies are reliant on a standardized way of identifying and accounting for human life. A really good way to think about this is through biometrics and the standardization this type of algorithmic gaze enacts and produces.

For instance, the way technologists and scientists construct parameters to detect things like smiles are through normative means such as averaging. Time and again when you look at these scientists' data pools, the images and portraits they're using are quite homogeneous and err towards caucasian persons. An example of identification standardization is with blink detection in digital cameras, which has detected that Asian users had blinked when they hadn't. This is a powerful example of the biases that are built into these technologies, which get exposed when they fail to work properly.

The people who most experience the violence of this technical standardization are a broad set of minoritarian persons. An example of this would be the struggles that transgender persons face. For instance, when transgender persons go through airports and are subject to full-body scanners, there have been incidents when they are flagged as risks if their genitals do not match the listed sex on their identification card. When you look to other examples of biometrics failing to recognize people, it's often minoritarian persons.

**Within this system, refusing to show your identity calls**

**even more attention to yourself. For instance, Janet Vertesi, an associate professor of sociology at Princeton, tried to hide her pregnancy from marketers and was thus put under suspicion of illegal activity. It's an anomaly within a system created to document and identify. Can you talk about the role your masks play as a tactic for counter-surveillance?**

My problem with some of the recent surveillance work with masks is that it is technologically deterministic and only

considering technological functionality. This doesn't exactly make sense because, in many moments when you are heavily subjected to biometric scrutiny, it is illegal to wear a mask (like at airports, and even public protests in some countries). So this artwork gives itself too much power; it needs to be a bit more humble. I'm not going to fool myself about the work that I'm doing: The masks I make can evade biometric detection (that is, the masks do not authenticate as human faces), but they have limited applicability. So my work is also about political desire, pedagogy, collective experiences. There is a difference between technical utility and political usefulness, but recent works with surveillance and masks collapse these two, suggesting that the best technical option is also the best political option. Yet technical and political usefulness often do not align, so a balance between the two is required.

When I started making masks in 2011, it was really important for me to have the work intersect with social movements' aspirations and their use of masking. I saw a coterminous rise of masked protest alongside the rise and boom of biometric industries. Today, my work is heavily interpreted through the NSA revelations, but when I started the work, this was not yet

exposed. I was more focused on the standardization of identification in technology as a kind of global governance, which is not just about surveillance. The Facial Weaponization Suite masks are about articulating a presence that can't be reduced to those standards-they refuse that technical standardization. And that's exactly what the protest mask does today. From Anonymous, the Zapatistas, Pussy Riot, or black blocs, the mask in these contexts is not only or primarily about hiding; that would be to largely misread the power of the protest mask.

**The protest mask does conceal in some ways, but it also gives hyper-visibility as collective consistency. This isn't hiding but political transformation with a group of people who refuse to be visually reduced by that machinic gaze. In the Facial Weaponization Suite, I see it as very utopian, because it's demanding to be seen in a different way, a way of refusing the visibility of the state, of which the algorithmic gaze or machine vision is a part. So it's about not seeking legitimacy through the state, because that would mean validation from the very thing you were fighting against.**

Historically, many minority struggles have always had a rhetoric about gaining visibility to the state. Now, when you look at protests today, you see something very different happening. Bringing those two together is really complicated because of these histories of minoritarian erasure by the state. And as I've produced masks in workshop, I have encountered resistance and hesitation to wearing masks from different persons, specifically because of political investments in visibility or gaining recognition from the state.

**I'm very interested in these workshops. They seem like possibly the most important part of the work in terms of that political transformation. Can you talk about them and the process?**

I get the most out of the workshops, for sure, even though when the work moves into an art context you don't see that aspect of it as much. The workshops are lengthy-they last for up to a month-because they're also about building community. I learned that one-day workshops don't get you that far with people. The first meeting is getting to know everyone and learning about whether there are any personal histories or connections to this subject. Almost every



workshop I've led, someone has been identified by CCTV footage at a protest and arrested retroactively.

They are also site-specific. I just did one in Mexico City for the month of May. We spent a lot of time talking about a biometric identification card that the Mexican government has recently put into circulation for children, but mostly we focused on the border. Biometrics is the world's number-one border security technology, and an immense amount of biometric data is gathered at the US-Mexico border. Interestingly, biometric data gathered by the Mexican government is frequently given to the US Department of Homeland Security.

In the workshops, we spend a lot of time talking about larger global issues of how identification gets technically standardized as a means of control and governance. Then we look at how that is actually operating where we are currently, and then we go through a series of meetings where we collectively decide what we want to do with the masks. All the decisions are collective, from the color of the mask as well as its approximate shape. I don't use a preset algorithm to produce the masks. I gather all of the facial data and layer it

“by hand” in 3-D modeling software, which gives a lot of possibility to construct the formal aspects of the mask.

*Zach Blas is an artist, writer, and curator whose work engages technology, queerness, and politics. He has shown and lectured internationally, and is currently an Assistant Professor in the department of art at the University at Buffalo.*

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*Read more about Zach Blas’ work on **The Creators Project**.*