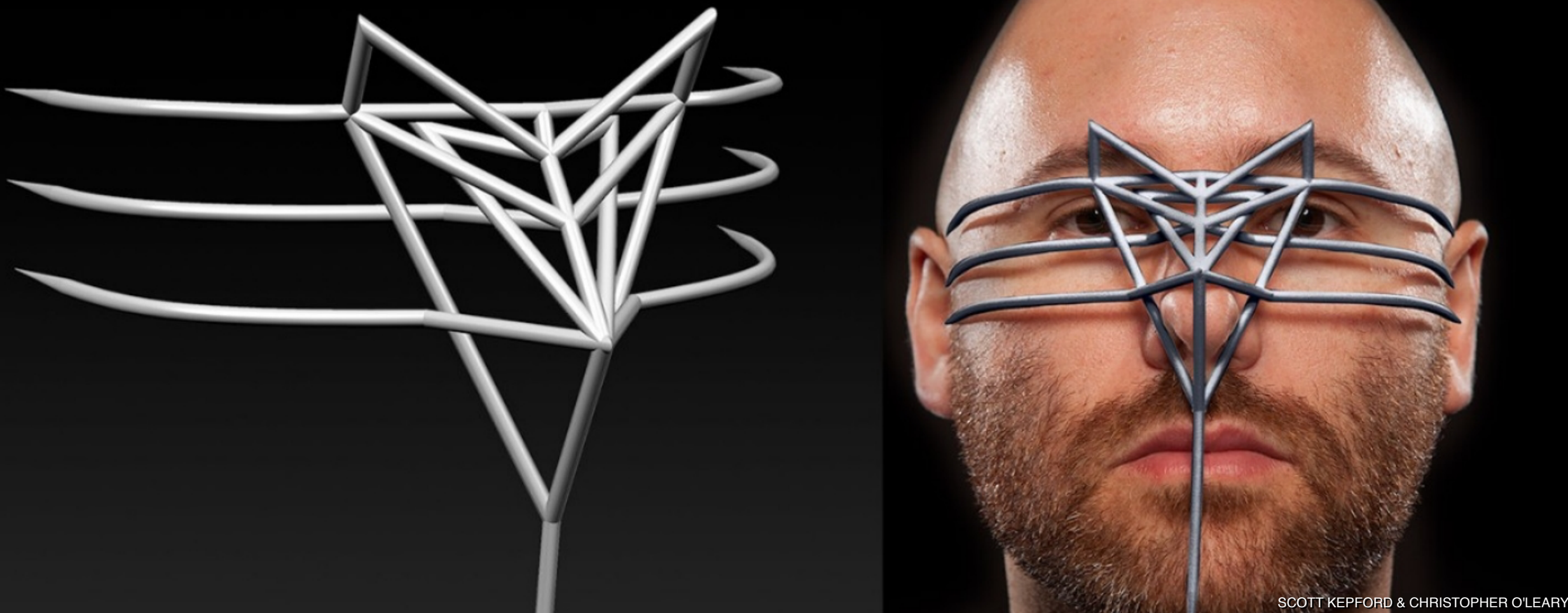




SCOTT KEPLFORD & CHRISTOPHER O'LEARY

Fight surveillance by making it visible

No one does that better than artists

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by **Kyle Chayka** - [Twitter](#) [@chaykak](#)

As former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden's leaks have revealed, the surveillance nets are everywhere. The agency [intercepts data](#) to cellphones and computers, [tracks the Web browsing habits](#) of millions of individuals worldwide and, through its [Optic Nerve program](#), downloaded private webcam footage from innocent people. It has even [embedded bugs](#) within consumer technology products after intercepting and opening packages shipped through the mail.

These are shameful betrayals of the privacy of Americans as well as technology users around the world. In response, Washington is taking up the fight: On June 19, the House of Representatives voted to cut funding for two of the NSA's programs. But while the citizenry waits for implementable change from the Hill (the Senate still has to weigh in, as does President Barack Obama), other efforts to resist the effects of surveillance are afoot — and they hail from a very different social sphere.

Art has long swiveled viewers' heads to make them see the world in a different way. In the case of NSA snooping, that's a powerful capability. As troubling as the actions of the NSA are, it's difficult for ordinary people to grasp how we are affected. Digital surveillance is invisible. We can see its effects, but due to the undetectable nature of hacked technology (which looks like any normal product) and the lack of transparency of government programs, it is hard to see the system that is monitoring us. Thankfully, contemporary artists are producing work that actually visualizes the surveillance net — and even gives citizens tools to fight back until something more can be done.

Seeing what is hard to see

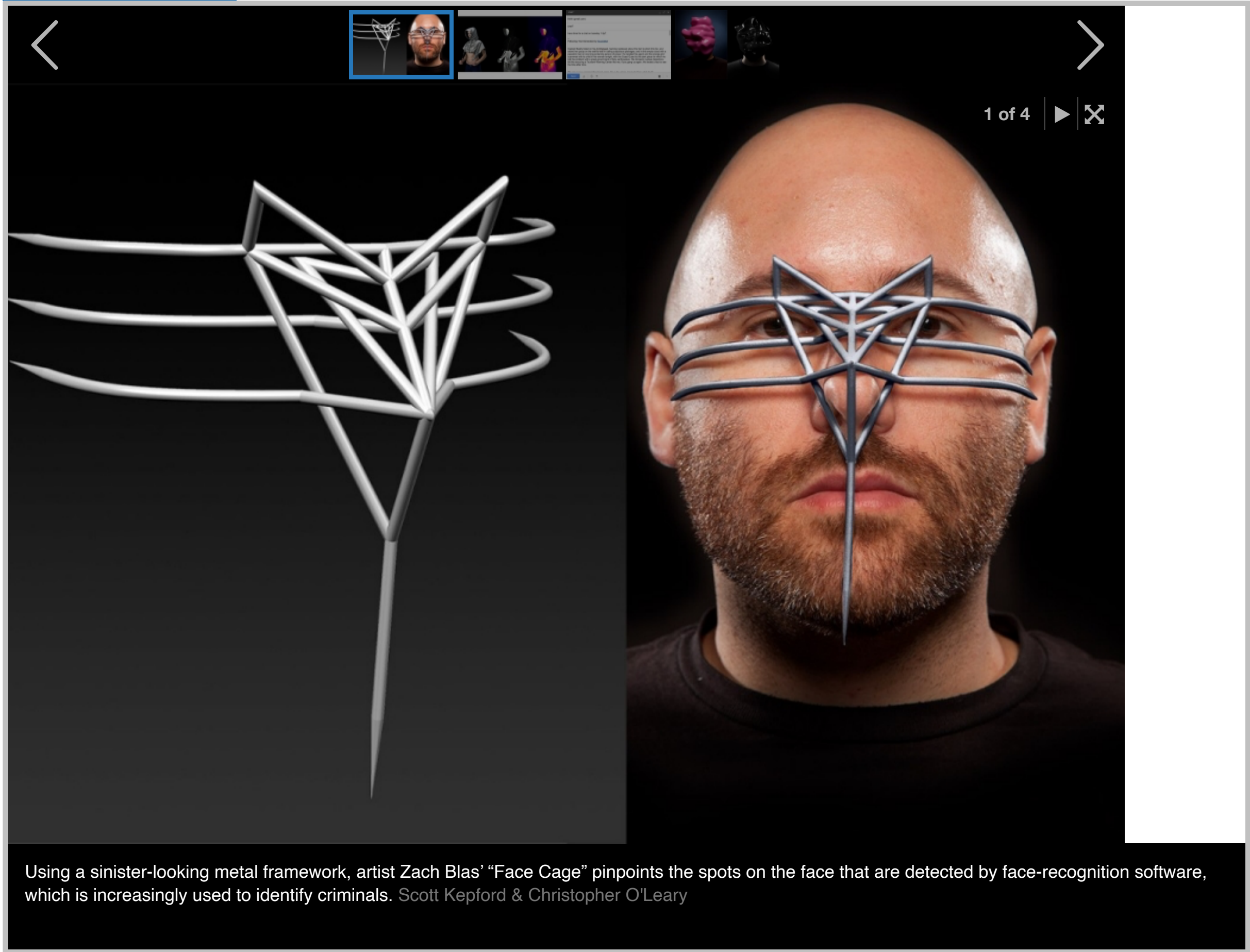
Artists are unearthing and exposing how networked technologies spy on us — and in some cases, actually catching some (un)wanted attention.

The sculpture “[PRISM: The Beacon Frame](#),” named after the NSA's own data-mining program and created by artists and developers Julian Oliver and Daniil Vasiliev, intercepts data flowing from phones in its vicinity and projects it for all to see. When it was in action, viewers could see IP addresses, host names and user names of those in the room. The project was so effective in exposing this personal information that technical contractors working for the Berlin festival where it was installed threatened to [call the federal police](#) if the artists didn't deactivate the machine. The artists eventually shut it down, but the irony is that the NSA was likely collecting the same data all along.

Artist Ben Grosser draws attention to NSA overreach by introducing false targets for surveillance. His project [ScareMail](#), a Web browser extension that makes email messages “scary” by adding probable NSA search terms to them, was shown as part of PRISMBreakup, a series of art and technology events for artists seeking to disrupt the NSA's surveillance. Grosser explained that his project sought to emphasize PRISM and XKeyscore's “futile effort to predict behaviors based on words in emails.”

Other artists are focusing instead on the human body. Brooklyn artist Adam Harvey recently launched a series of accessories that offer privacy and anonymity in the physical world as well as the digital. Harvey's online store, the Privacy Gift Shop, sells objects such as [Stealth Wear](#), a line of clothing created with fashion designer Johanna Bloomfield that masks the thermal radiation that drones use to track their human targets. Another object, the [Off Pocket iPhone case](#), blocks all signals coming to and from any iPhone encased in it. It's a nifty tool, especially for a journalist or protester wishing to remain completely off the Internet, but it's also a provocation that reminds users of the data their phones transmit, which can be easily intercepted. With these projects, Harvey hopes to illustrate ways of resisting governmental monitoring. “I'm frustrated by the imbalance of power between those who are surveilled and those who are doing it,” Harvey told me.

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Using a sinister-looking metal framework, artist Zach Blas' “Face Cage” pinpoints the spots on the face that are detected by face-recognition software, which is increasingly used to identify criminals. Scott Keplford & Christopher O'Leary

“**Citizens looking to resist governmental surveillance should pay attention as these artists expose the technical infrastructure of spying and, perchance, even follow their strategic lead.**”

To illustrate the government's invasive use of facial recognition technology, artist Zach Blas shows us just what such surveillance looks like with his “[Face Cage](#),” a skeletal mask made of pointed slivers of metal that rests atop the wearer's face — rather like a medieval torture device — and highlights the features biometric technology uses to identify individuals. (It's the same technique that Facebook employs when it suggests whom to tag in photos that users upload.) The U.S. government is currently hard at work on Next Generation Identification, the world's largest biometrics database, which will compile mountains of face-recognition information, among other data. Once it's active, anonymity will effectively be a luxury of the past. (The database, according to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, is also [gathering other biometric information](#), such as the fingerprints and iris scans not only of convicted criminals but of innocent civilians as well. Each time the police or government agents seek to identify a criminal using the database, software will scan the database for matches — but the system runs the risk of incorrectly identifying an individual who shouldn't be in the database in the first place, perhaps leading to a series of catastrophic mistakes.)

Blas' metal mask forces us to be aware of how we are ceding control of our faces to cameras and sensors; he literalizes the biometric tracking that technology scholar Shoshanna Magnet has compared to a “cage of information from which the criminalized body [cannot] escape.” He also makes a mask that hides the face from being detected, digitally collaging together multiple faces until the result is unrecognizable as any individual human being — the “[Facial Weaponization Suite](#).” Blas frames it as a tool for protesters. The mask, he explained, “produces physical presence that can't be broken down by biometrics.”

Society's watchdogs

Citizens looking to resist governmental surveillance should pay attention as these artists expose the technical infrastructure of spying and, perchance, even follow their strategic lead. Indeed, art has a record of speaking truth to power well before problems enter the mainstream discourse. In 2005, the painter Fernando Botero depicted torture scenes from [Abu Ghraib prison](#), bringing another horrific government secret to light and increasing public attention on the injustices of the U.S. government: The sympathetic paintings prompt a much more engaged, emotional reading of the subject matter than the original Abu Ghraib photos do.

The haunting images stood by themselves as works of art, but doubled as a stinging indictment of the United States' injustice. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the 1960s, Botero satirized the excesses of the government in his native Colombia.)

In the early 2000s, Trevor Paglen pushed photography to its limit attempting to [shoot images](#) of confidential government compounds such as Area 51 in New Mexico. The resulting photos render the invisible visible. Paglen also catalogued the military's secret [badge system](#) that identifies the achievements and affiliations of those who, due to their occupations in the so-called black world of classified programs, aren't supposed to officially exist.

Artists — and what they choose to highlight, tweak or subvert — are litmus tests for their times. As Dada artists reacted to the horrors of World War I with absurdism and compulsive, machine-inspired imagery that hinted at the horrors of industrialization, so too are artists today spotlighting the darker reaches of our technological infrastructure and the government's use of it to intrude on our lives.

Though we might not all start wearing Blas' metal masks or put Chris Poole's 3-D-printed [webcam guard](#) on top of our laptops, we should be paying close attention to how artists are making surveillance visible. Playful though some of them appear to be, we must remember that awareness is the first step to action.

Kyle Chayka is a writer on technology and culture who has contributed to publications including Newsweek, Pacific Standard and The Guardian.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.