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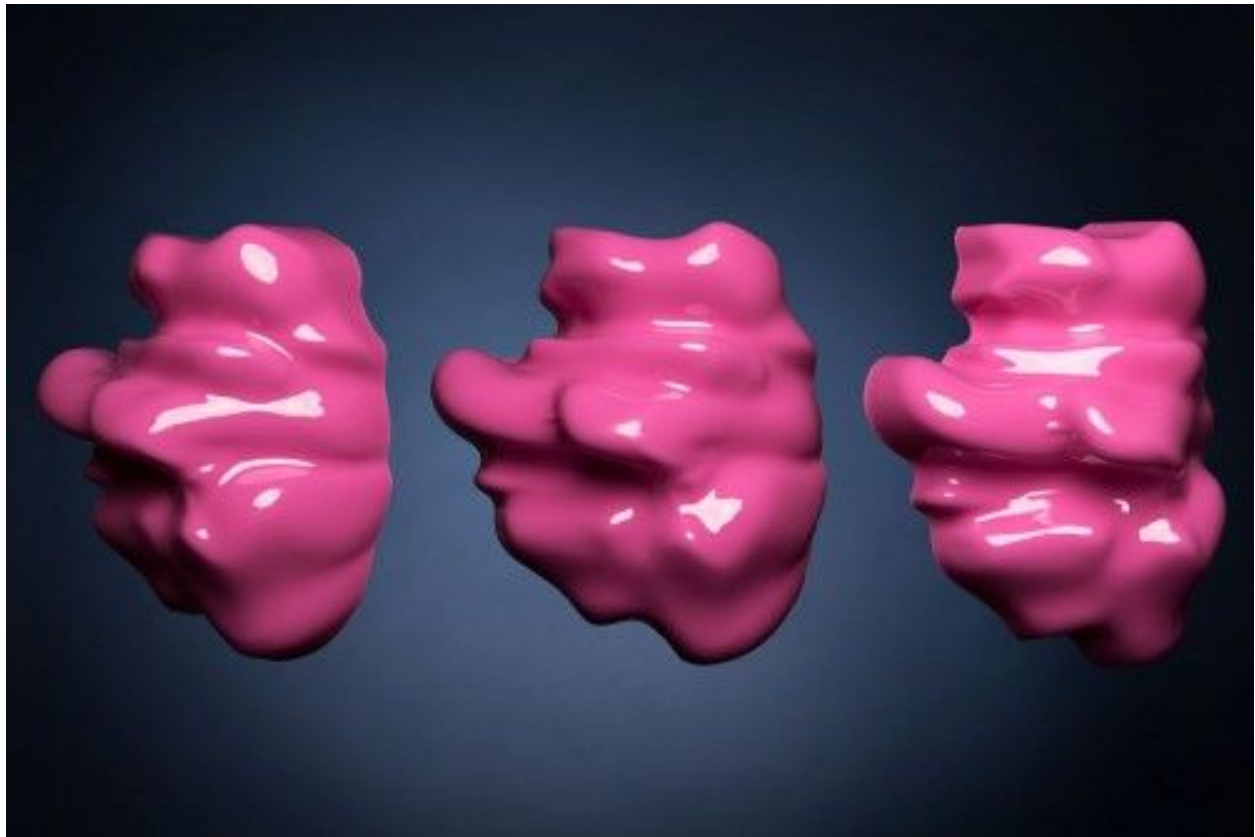
Afterthoughts on Queer Opacity

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What can a celebrity body be if not opaque? And yet what if the whole point of celebrity is the spectacle of people forced to tell transparent lies in public? We have already mentioned what we take to be a central chord in our culture of “knowingness”—the reserve force of information, the reservoir of presumptive, deniable, and unarticulated knowledge in a public that images itself also as a reservoir of ever-violable innocence. The economics of knowingness help us ask new questions about the transparent lies that constitute celebrity as well.

—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, “Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion”

‘I think there are four kinds of gays in Hollywood,’ explains Howard Bragman, CEO of the PR firm Fifteen Minutes. ‘There’s the openly gay; the gay and everybody knows it but nobody talks about it; the married, closeted gay who doesn’t talk about it; and the screaming ‘I’ll sue you if you say I’m gay’ person.’ In other words, the no closet, the glass closet, the cast iron closet, and the closet you get buried in.

—Michael Musto, “The Glass Closet”

I must admit I've always been struck by the sense of disappointment often provoked by Laura Mulvey's "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," in which she responds to the many readers who asked why she limited her approach to the heterosexual male spectator, and attempts to address "the 'woman in the audience' issue" and the woman-as-protagonist in "the melodrama issue."¹ Yet the proof that Mulvey's original text was truly *transdiscursive* can be seen in the way these lingering questions, and possibly disappointing answers about "transvestite" spectatorship, along with other "lines of thought" (if not, Steven Shaviro laments, "lines of flight"²), have been so productive for the fields of feminist psychoanalytic film theory and queer film theory (see, for example, Ellis Hanson's introduction to *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*³). In this way, I actually appreciate the result of the disappointment. While I would never presume to compare myself to Mulvey and her transdiscursive author function, I hope in these few "Afterthoughts" to my book *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*, to address similar questions regarding my limited focus on deceased queer white men.⁴ In his review of my book, Owen Heathcote encouragingly hopes that I will "now write a further, less obviously canonical, 'queer opacity' volume on female and/or transgender figures."⁵ In this present "Afterthoughts" piece, I want to linger over the meaning and uses of *disappointment* as it relates to newer and more diverse examples of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer tactics of "opacity" that offer alternatives to the confessional metaphor of coming out of the closet. These more contemporary figures include: Anderson Cooper, Jodie Foster, Sally Ride, Vivian Maier, Ellen Page, Queen Latifah, and Lana Wachowski. I will conclude with a discussion of queer opacity in the work of artist and theorist Zach Blas.

Opacity and the Closet offers a retrospective assessment of Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol's shared historical context (the 1960s-'70s) and their critical hesitation faced with the emergent demand to "come out" with its attendant politics of gay visibility, a politics that is now ubiquitous, but in a neoliberal era with new strategies wherein queer people are controlled less by homophobic exclusion than by a politics of inclusion and legalization, therefore regulation, commercialization, and, ironically, "privatization" (on this transition, and the shifting meanings of "public" and "private," see Didier Eribon's "To Tell or Not to Tell" and Lisa Duggan's "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism"⁶). Rather than seeing Foucault, Barthes, or Warhol's "opacity" as symptomatic of "the closet" and internalized homophobia—where opacity would be merely a reactive desire for "privacy" that is ultimately complicit with homophobia and repressive silence—I was

interested in their tactical negotiation of their public personas in interviews and published texts where they are visible, but opaque (not “see-through” or easily deciphered). For example, art historian Robert Hughes once described Warhol as “an abnormal figure (silent, withdrawn, eminently visible but opaque, and a bit malevolent).”⁷ I find such opacity remarkably “queer” as a means of resisting both confession and homophobia; I suggest that homophobia can involve anxiously insisting on knowing rather than refusing to know about the sexuality of gay people, demanding transparency to the gaze of the interrogator, indicating a fear of the hidden and the unknown.

Foucault was perhaps most famously skeptical about the idea that sexual confession is liberating: sarcastically, he reports, “Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a ‘political history of truth’ would have to overturn” by showing how confessional truth is thoroughly imbued with relations of power.⁸ David Halperin has extended this “political history of truth,” drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*,⁹ to account for the ways “coming out” also implies relations of power and privilege:

if there is something self-affirming and indeed *liberating* about coming *out* of the closet, that is not because coming out enables one to emerge from a state of servitude to a state of untrammelled liberty. On the contrary: to come out is precisely to expose oneself to a different set of dangers and constraints, to make oneself into a convenient screen onto which straight people can project all the fantasies they routinely entertain about gay people, and to suffer one’s every gesture, statement, expression, and opinion to be totally and irrevocably marked by the overwhelming social significance of one’s openly acknowledged homosexual identity.¹⁰

Halperin also notes the double bind whereby, when you do come out, it is always simultaneously too soon (“why do you have to shove it in our faces?”) and too late (“if you had been honest you would have come out earlier”).¹¹ Yet this paradoxically heightens the queer speaking subject’s awareness of what in rhetoric is called *kairos*: timing, the propitious moment.

As in the case of Foucault’s “masked philosopher” role, I am interested in the way Warhol’s famously opaque persona in interviews (his monosyllabic style, but also the way he let others speak for him by proxy) and Barthes’s self-fragmenting writing

present particular *tactics* in response to their specific historical situation, and in relation to the changing landscape of journalism and “the media.”¹²

In a 1979 interview titled “Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes,” Barthes asked, “Should one struggle to wear out meaning, destroy it, transmute it ... or should one turn away from this struggle? I think that the answers to these questions can only be tactical ones, and that they will depend on the way one judges our current historical situation and the combat at hand.”¹³ In his course on *The Neutral* a couple years earlier, Barthes pursued the Neutral as a queer tactic when faced with the demand to “take sides” or the interviewer’s demand in which “every question is indiscreet ... inquiry about the sexuality of the other -> = what is your sexuality -> voyeurism, coerced exhibitionism.”¹⁴ Barthes explored “the possibility of silence” as one of the desired figures of the neutral, but was well aware that this silence could be seen as cowardly, shirking responsibility, and could easily take on unwanted meaning. He cites Maurice Blanchot on a problem in Kafka: “Kafka wondered at what moment and how many times, when eight people are seated within the horizon of conversation, it is appropriate to speak if one does not wish to be considered silent.”¹⁵ Throughout his career, Barthes was fascinated by the way non-meaning or silence could acquire meaning: the meaning of non-meaning, the appearance of being noticeably silent.

This is where my case studies brought me back to the present state of “the closet” and “outness” in the age of social media and *Gawker Media* (and clearly the present status quo is what made the difference—indeed *différance*—offered by Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol interesting to me). “No comment” about sexual orientation might once have been taken as confirming an assumption of heteronormativity, but as heterosexuality becomes increasingly named in response to the public naming of gayness, my sense is that “undeclared” becomes a homosexuality-connoting placeholder, a kind of “glass closet.” As Michael Musto puts it, “Whenever a subject tells me, ‘I won’t discuss who I’m dating’ or ‘I resent labels,’ I generally know not so much that they’re passionate about privacy but that they’re gay, gay, gay.”¹⁶ This is where the inexhaustible operation of *knowingness* and speculation is set in motion (by both straight and gay participants, though privileged heterosexuals can always act surprised and innocent, whereas gay people are frequently *unwilling* to be surprised in their assumptions, especially with regard to bisexuals¹⁷). In the case of celebrities, this is where *Gawker* has a field day.

Before Anderson Cooper “came out” in an email to gay conservative Andrew Sullivan¹⁸ that was shared with the public—in which he explained that staying private about

being gay was doing more harm than good (apparently a calculated disclosure that he had been considering with his PR team for months¹⁹)—*Gawker* frequently “outed” Cooper and his then-boyfriend Benjamin Maisani. Brian Moylan’s October 2009 column “Anderson Cooper Is a Giant Homosexual and Everyone Knows It” responded to a *knowing* “not-very-thinly-veiled” Page Six item about Cooper on vacation with Maisani. Moylan argues that saying Cooper is gay is no longer a scoop or a scandal. He does, however, call for Cooper to “man up” and say—in a kind of “performative” speech act—what everyone already knows (he too deploys *knowingness* when he mentions Cooper’s love of Kathy Griffin and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*). He also lists a set of other contemporary figures that I will go on to discuss (in a hopefully less gossipy way):

Cooper’s see-through closet is such a joke that it doesn’t make sense to call him in the closet anymore. If he won’t say it, we will: Anderson Cooper is officially out. ... It’s not like Cooper’s in a club all of his own, either. He is part of an increasingly large crowd of notables who won’t come out but have given up trying to hide that they are gay. Queen Latifah denied that she was going to marry her girlfriend, a girlfriend who she tries to pass off as her “trainer.” ... Ricky Martin has stopped even trying to fight the gay rumors. Jodie Foster has never said she’s a lesbian out loud, but she basically came out when she thanked her partner in an acceptance speech. ²⁰

In fact, this piece was published after Michael Musto’s similar article for *Out* on “The Glass Closet” [Figure 1] spotlighting Foster and Cooper (along with Clay Aiken): “Jodie, it turns out, is one of the foremost residents of a glass closet—that complex but popular contraption that allows public figures to avoid the career repercussions of any personal disclosure while living their lives with a certain degree of integrity. Such a device enables the public to see right in while not allowing them to actually open the latch unless the celebrity eventually decides to do so herself.”²¹ Since this piece was published, Cooper, Martin, Aiken, and Foster have all “come out” more publicly which seems to vindicate both the *knowingness* of those looking for a “scoop” and those looking for a more out-and-proud refusal to let being gay be a scandal anymore.



Figure 1. Out magazine cover "The Class Closet."

I was delighted to see *Opacity* and *the Closet* mentioned by two bloggers in response to Cooper and Foster's public "coming out" moments.²² In "Anderson Cooper, *Opacity*,

and the Loss that Is Queerness,” Thaddeus Andracki rehearses the critiques of the closet metaphor—“you may have heard some of the objections: it limits coming out to a singular event; it produces discourses of shame/confession; it’s a ‘colorblind’ paradigm that ignores nuances of race/class” (here we can recognize the critiques of the hegemonic closet metaphor by Judith Butler, David Van Leer, Marlon Ross, and Carlos Ulises Decena²³). This is followed by a link to my work:

If we all “knew” Cooper was gay, but no one knew it, can we really say there was a closet at all? Perhaps we could read Cooper better through a lens of opacity. (Haha, that sounds funny.) But really, I wonder how much the closet breaks down as a metaphor in this case. If the closet doesn’t have walls and a ceiling, was it really there at all? De Villiers insists that by employing the idea of opacity, we open up new modes for queerness that don’t depend on the closet. What happens when we force Cooper back into a closet that wasn’t there in the first place, then make him come back out? (I don’t have an answer, I just think it’s an interesting question.) It reinforces the tyranny of the closet, I think.²⁴

This was my critique of the ironic effect of D.A. Miller’s *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*: in my reading of his work, Barthes was not closeted, but may *have been* closeted and subsequently “outed” posthumously.²⁵ Andracki mentions the two common responses to Cooper’s “official” coming out: “Well, duh” and “Damn, now I don’t have a shot” (the latter deeming Cooper’s homosexuality a “loss” of masculinity and desirability). Another response that he doesn’t address was from those who found Cooper’s coming out to Sullivan “classy” because it was understated. Bryan Safi and Erin Gibson on the *Throwing Shade* podcast brilliantly mock the implications of this classy coming out (and speculate on other classy ways to come out: on a yacht, to Ina Garten in the Hamptons, etc.).²⁶ But beyond these smart cracks, what I think people admired in Cooper’s coming out was his sense of timing, precisely the rhetorical sense of *kairos* and the historical responsibility of tactics with regard to meaning that was emphasized by Barthes above. In the letter, Cooper states that,

Recently, however, I’ve begun to consider whether the unintended outcomes of maintaining my privacy outweigh personal and professional principle. It’s become clear to me that by remaining silent on certain aspects of my personal life for so long, I have given some the mistaken impression that I am trying to hide something – something that makes me uncomfortable, ashamed or even afraid. This is distressing because it is simply not true. I’ve also been reminded recently that while as a society we are moving toward greater inclusion and equality for all

people, the tide of history only advances when people make themselves fully visible. There continue to be far too many incidences of bullying of young people, as well as discrimination and violence against people of all ages, based on their sexual orientation, and I believe there is value in making clear where I stand. The fact is, I'm gay, always have been, always will be, and I couldn't be any more happy, comfortable with myself, and proud.²⁷

This slippage between “silence” and “invisibility” (from the verbal to the visible register) is quite common in such coming out rhetoric, and the idea of “queer opacity” responds to this rhetorical ambiguity between speech and vision (indeed, the lens of opacity does sound funny). The demand for full visibility is a good measure of the current status quo of gay identity politics (and the demand that we be happy, comfortable, and proud, no less!).

Cooper's originally stated desire for privacy was echoed in Jodie Foster's Golden Globes speech, a speech that many found to be a rather convoluted way to come out, since she spent much of her speech critiquing the kind of publicity and fanfare she believes is now required “with a press conference, a fragrance and a prime-time reality show.” Many people were disappointed by Foster's roundabout “kind of coming out,” and her speech and its reception was the subject of a brilliant parody video by *The Onion*, “Jodie Foster Inspires Teens to Come Out Using Vague, Rambling Riddles.”²⁸

But I was nonetheless happy to see my work used to consider a different value to this anticlimactic speech:

Instead, I want to think through de Villiers in relationship to the recent acceptance speech given by Jodie Foster. Ms. Foster's speech was anything but clear. At times it seemed to ramble, she feigned nervousness, she performed the ... ellipsis...asking for the audience's support so she can “put it out there, loud and proud”, announcing that she is...single. Like one of Warhol's interviews in David Bailey's documentary on Warhol – addressed by de Villiers – Foster, in that moment, illuminated “the art of the anticlimax” (153). Instead, she announces she is single. Yes, all the build up when she says [e]nds up anti-climatically with people on the edge of their seats (particularly the editors of *Out* magazine that inanely argue that Foster is in the “The Glass Closet” and after Foster's speech “The Glass Closet Revisited”) falling off because she didn't say what she was expected to say, instead saying something else while still saying what it is people expected. She said it “Loud and Proud” (a mantra of gay rights) and even mentioned that she

came out “a thousand years ago, in the Stone Age”. Yet, she refused to abide by the lesson other celebrity-gays-and-lesbians have learned which is that they are “expected to honor the details of their private life”. Jodie Foster, I would argue, made an intervention – perhaps one that will inevitably fail – to contest the idea that one has to “confess”, that one must “tell it to the world”.²⁹

Like Barthes’s fascination in *The Neutral* with the tactics employed by the Skeptics to evade the direct statement, Foster did not say exactly what she was expected to say (after years of evasion and speculation dating back to *The Silence of the Lambs*³⁰). I also appreciate the Warhol connection: despite Warhol’s own love of gossip, he consistently practiced the art of the anticlimax in interviews and on film. There is something to be said here for queer failure.³¹

We can compare Foster’s desire for privacy to the posthumous “outing” of the “elusive and enigmatic” astronaut Sally Ride when an official statement from *Sally Ride Science* named Tam O’Shaughnessy as her partner of 27 years.³² In fact, thinking tactically about the sometimes surprising effects of queer opacity, I appreciated the ironic way that Twitter managed to spring a trap on anti-gay conservative politicians who patriotically praised Ride as a hero, as covered in the *Huffington Post*, “Mitt Romney Tweets Condolences on Sally Ride’s Death, Drawing Fiery Response from Gay Advocates”: “The indie-rock group Mountain Goats were among the first to respond, noting: ‘Kind of despicable & grotesque that her partner of 27 years will be denied federal benefits, don’t you think?’”³³

“Elusive and enigmatic” are often code words for queer women, and this might best be demonstrated by the queer opacity of Vivian Maier, the posthumously discovered genius of street photography, in the documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* (2013).³⁴ In calling Maier “queer” I am not necessarily outing her as a lesbian (in fact her “asexuality” is queer enough), simply noting that this is the unsaid and unsayable in the documentary (which speculates a great deal about why she was so private), and, paradoxically, this is what makes her a fascinating example of queer opacity. Rose Lichter-Marck’s “Vivian Maier and the Problem of Difficult Women,” is a brilliant response to those who see Maier’s “purposeful obscurity” and the way she “actively cultivated her own unknowability” as a tragedy or a problem that needs solving.³⁵

But given the legacy of the deployment of sexuality whereby one’s sexual identity is seen as the core truth of one’s being, and the attendant confessional discourse of “coming out,” such forms of privacy, invisibility, or silence often look like “the sin of

omission.” This was echoed in Ellen Page’s recent coming out at the Human Rights Campaign’s conference “Time to Thrive” benefitting LGBT youth, where she stated “I am tired of lying by omission.”³⁶ Page’s speech is also somewhat roundabout at first, but then includes the declarative (actually *performative*) “I am gay” missing from Jodie Foster’s speech. She argues that she feels a sense of responsibility, but also that her motive for coming out is “selfish” because she is tired of hiding and lying by omission. Her voice shakes and she performs an interesting generational reversal and act of humility in which she thanks the young people and advocates at the conference, inverting the apparently privileged position accorded to the HRC guest speaker. While clearly experienced as liberating, her televised coming out is a *timely* response to the “responsibilization” of the individual in the current regime of gay visibility represented by the HRC (or the surveillance of GLAAD as a “media watchdog”³⁷).

My last example is another moving HRC speech, in which transgender film director Lana Wachowski received a “Visibility Award.”³⁸ What I appreciate about Wachowski’s speech is her inclusion of metacommentary on the constraints and format of the speech itself and the ambivalent meanings of visibility in the lives of transgender people.³⁹

While she narrates the emotional turmoil and suicide attempt that we have sadly come to expect in such a heartfelt “coming out” speech, she also challenges many assumptions about how visibility, outness, and transition work: like Foster she explains that she has already been out to those close to her (her wife, family, and friends) for a decade, and she questions the gender binary implicit in the term “transition.” Like Foster, she is critical of the discursive conventions of coming out:

I knew I was going to come out but I knew when I finally did come out I didn’t want it to be about my coming out. I am completely horrified by the “talk show,” the interrogation and confession format, the weeping, the tears of the host [applause] whose sympathy underscores the inherent tragedy of my life as a transgender person. And this moment fulfilling the cathartic arc of rejection to acceptance without ever interrogating the pathology of a society that refuses to acknowledge the spectrum of gender in the exact same blind way they have refused to see a spectrum of race or sexuality.⁴⁰

Needless to say, I fully agree with this critique of confessional discourse. I also find her comments regarding anonymity and visibility to be quite complex in ways that resonate with what interested me about Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol’s queer

experiments with the value, effects, and tactics of anonymity in response to the press machinery that demands interviews with authors and directors. Wachowski explains how, for her and her brother, “Anonymity allows you access to civic space, to a form of participation in public life, to an egalitarian invisibility that neither of us wanted to give up.”⁴¹ Like the coming out stories above, her decision to sacrifice her “private civic life” is due to an overwhelming sense of *kairos*: confronting news of anti-trans violence and recollecting the need she felt to see others like herself as symbols of possibility. She poetically explains “Invisibility is indivisible from visibility; for the transgender this is not simply a philosophical conundrum — it can be the difference between life and death.”⁴²

In “Trans, but not like you think,” Thomas Page McBee cites an understated appearance by Wachowski before this more cathartic speech as an example of a shift away from conventional ways of framing transgender narratives that resort to “dumbed down” formulas about suffering in the “wrong body”: “As gender transitions become more visible, it’s tempting to think all our stories are the same. They’re not.”⁴³ Like McBee’s rejection of cliché narrative formulas and knowingness associated with “more visible” gender transitions, I wrote *Opacity and the Closet* against what I perceived as the routinized aspects of the closet’s confessional discourse. But as Barthes noted in the interview I quoted above, tactics must always be in response to a specific historical situation, and perhaps the queer tactics of opacity deployed by Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol are no longer possible in quite the same way; they are no longer seen as a timely critical hesitation but will be perceived as irresponsible or “backward” by the gay critics in *Gawker* and *Out*. But along with Marlon Ross, I want to question this teleology (and the race and class biases it often implies).⁴⁴ Moving away from famous white subjects but still considering the uniquely paradoxical “public privacy” of celebrities: Must we see Queen Latifah’s stated refusal to talk about her sexuality on her new talk show as a sign of her lack of courage, lying by omission, the glass closet, or the “open closet”?⁴⁵ What about André Leon Talley, who dis-identifies with the label “gay” but is undeniably queer?⁴⁶

My book offers queer opacity as an alternative to the hermeneutic tendency of “the closet.” These afterthoughts are my attempt to think about how the queer tactics of opacity might meet new challenges and thus function differently in our contemporary time. My focus thus far has been primarily on discursive tactics and textual practices, but queer opacity is indeed a visual metaphor, and tries to envision alternatives to commands to be “visible” but also “transparent” to a gaze that seeks a clear,

responsible identity. I am happy to see that one of the most “visual” but also “opaque” engagements with the theory of queer opacity in the present also questions the demand for easy legibility in a new historical context marked by new regimes of surveillance. In “The Facelessness of Tomorrow Begins Today,” Alicia Eler interviews Zach Blas about his *Facial Weaponization Suite*:

Certainly, an older queer politics was concerned with creating a coherent presence, a visibility, that was crucial for survival and existence. Yet, today, in light of global surveillance/datavallance and other surreptitious forms of recognition-control, there is a burgeoning political investment in opacity, imperceptibility, and escape. You can think of queer critiques of gay marriage here, as refusals of the neoliberal recognition and visibility offered by the state to legitimate homosexuality. Or take Dean Spade’s transgender theory and activism that articulates a critical trans resistance that strives for a transformative justice that does not aim for state-based forms of recognition but something more utopian, even “impossible.” In queer theory, recent conceptualizations like Nicholas de Villiers’ queer opacity, Jack Halberstam’s queer darkness, and José Muñoz’s queer escape all gesture toward the illegible and nonrecognizable. I am exploring a queerness that invests and takes seriously such refusals of recognition and visibility; here, queerness is an illegibility or opacity, a refusal that remakes visibility and regimes of recognition outside of standardization through speculative and utopian experimentation and fantasy.⁴⁷

It is great to be in such good company. I am particularly struck by Blas’s “Fag Face Mask” [Figure 2] that offers a form of resistance to facial recognition technology and specifically subverts the new phrenology of “gay face” in recent scientific studies, popularized in an article “There’s Something Queer About that Face”⁴⁸ (which cannot help but recall Foucault’s famous historicization of the nineteenth century homosexual whose sexuality was “written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away”).⁴⁹

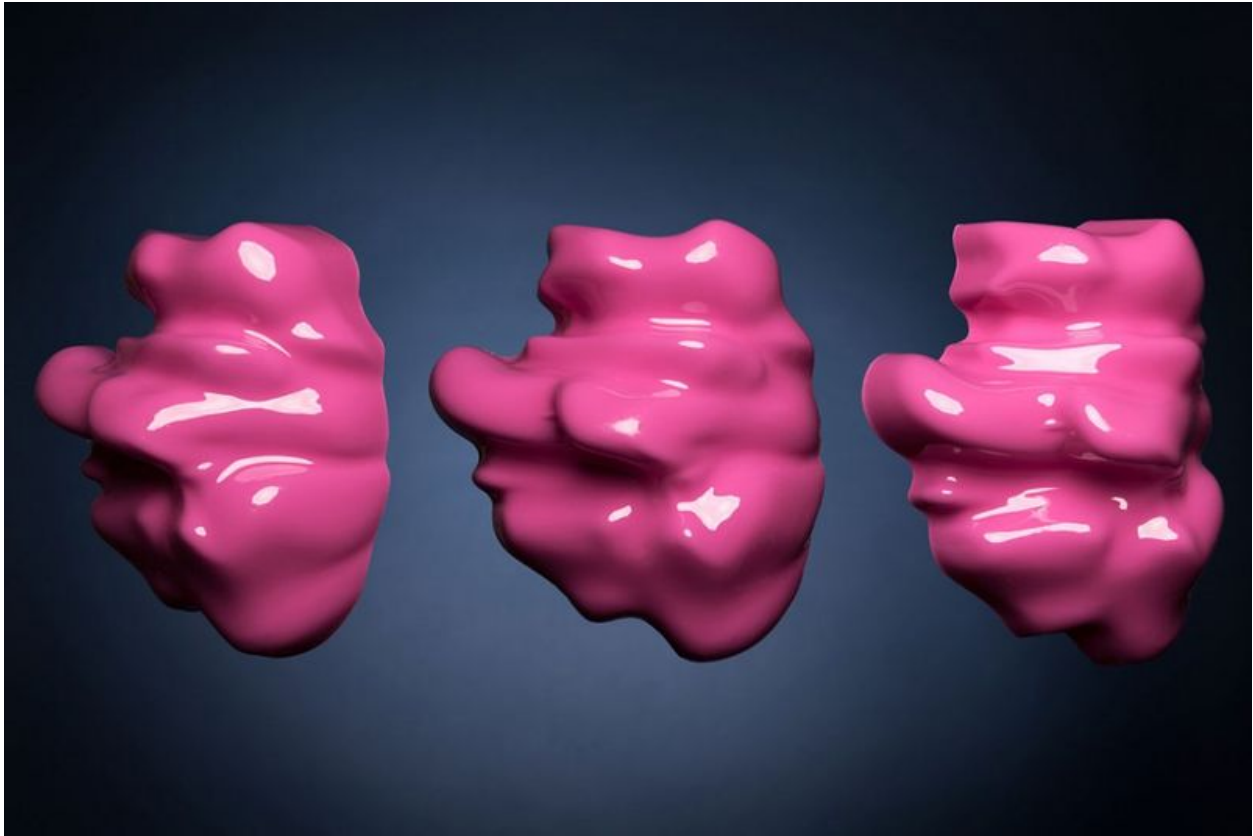


Figure 2. Zach Blas, Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face Mask – October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA, photo by Christopher O’Leary.

The queer opacity of Blas’s work offers an exciting form of resistance to a now ubiquitous regime of facial recognition—part of what Gilles Deleuze, in a postscript on Foucault, envisioned as the “societies of control,”⁵⁰ with corresponding strategies and tactics of resistance (including anonymity and facelessness) which Blas explains in a video on his website.⁵¹ Blas also draws on the work of Édouard Glissant, the Martinican writer whose postcolonial theory of “opacity” as a form of resistance to surveillance—but also as a “right” and an ethical form of relation to the Other—predates and complicates my queer deployment of the term (albeit with shared links to 1960s French theory).⁵² Seeing this array of new directions and lines of thought, including possible lines of flight, I don’t mind if my own “afterthoughts” might disappoint.

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