

Artist Profile: Zach Blas

by Katrina Sluis

Katrina Sluis: In *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011-14) you explore facial recognition technologies and their relationship to neoliberal governance, dataveillance, and biopower. Can you explain how your concept of “*informatic opacity*” emerged from this project, and how it departs from conventional narratives of individual privacy and surveillance?

Zach Blas: *Facial Weaponization Suite* is a series of mask-making workshops, in which I aggregated 3D scans of participants’ faces and then used that data to create “collective masks.” Resultantly, the masks are not identifiable as human faces by biometric facial recognition technologies. The masks are worn in performances, actions, and interventions that comment on the politics of biometrics and also experiment with other modes of recognition.



Installation at “transmediale: CAPTURE ALL,” curated by Daphne Dragona and Robert Sakrowski, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, 2015. Photo: Paco Neumann.

I began this project in 2011, but interest in the work came in 2013, after the Snowden leaks. Most people wanted to engage *Facial Weaponization Suite* around discussions of surveillance and privacy; yet, these terms were not the focal points for me. In fact, I find surveillance and privacy, as conceptions of power and resistance, lacking in complexity and transformative potential. Surveillance etymologically means to oversee or watch from above; I find this emphasis on vision insufficient to characterize the informatic nature of “surveillance” today. The same goes for the overuse of the panopticon as an accurate diagram of contemporary power relations. The computer is not a panopticon. We need other concepts, new terms, and politics invested in radical change.

That said, I was drawn to approach biometrics through “capture,” a term that describes how bodies and identities become algorithmically standardized in order to be informatically legible. In particular, I was influenced by Philip Agre’s 1994 essay “Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy,” in which he differentiates between surveillance and capture, explaining that what we think of as contemporary surveillance could be more aptly termed capture. Agre argues that capture is more linguistic than visual, emphasizing computation, algorithms, and the need to develop a method for informatically standardizing the assessment of bodies, identities, behavior, and movement. Broadly, capture is the technical precondition for something like global surveillance to emerge, as algorithmic evaluation of persons must be compatible between various governments, militaries, private security companies, etc. Capture is the basis for biometric governance. From a minoritarian perspective, capture is compelling to consider because this means attending to how technical norms—or protocols—get produced and then sedimented into digital logics and machines (for biometrics, these are technical norms of identity and identification). When a machine identifies a face, this might seem technically objective, but when researching capture, one learns that there are always certain norms and statistical averages that constitute what a face is for the machine (like being white or cisgender). Humans write capture algorithms, and that means that human bias is often found in the very technical architectures of capture. I became interested in exploring who is negatively impacted by biometric capture. As it turns out, unsurprisingly, a broad set of minoritarian persons suffer the structural violence of biometric governance, such as people of color, transgender persons, and immigrants.

In *Facial Weaponization Suite* and *Face Cages*, I focused specifically on biometrics’ continuous efforts to capture the face. The biometric face signals the transformation of the face into a digital code for the purposes of control. The biometric face is a surface that can be instantly digitally assessed, and this calculation can reveal a core truth about an individual. Such an idea of the face contributed to a booming biometrics industry post-9/11, as politicians and technocrats became obsessed with preemptively identifying terrorist faces. This now widespread understanding of the biometric face stands in stark contrast to philosophies of the face throughout the 20th century, which often theorize the face as a site of ethics and alterity. Emmanuel Levinas once famously argued that the face of the Other says, “thou shalt not kill.” The biometric face returns us to pseudo-scientific endeavors, like physiognomy and anthropometry, which gained popularity in 19th century.

For instance, 19th-century Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso argued, in his physiognomic treatise *Criminal Man*, that criminals' cranial structures are more akin to monkeys than other, more civilized human beings.

In my studio practice, I wanted to develop artwork that pushed against the ability to biometrically capture the face, and I found the mask a simple yet powerful example of this. Masking in social movements, protests, and autonomous communities (like Anonymous, black blocs, and the Zapatistas) popularly indicate a political stance that is anti-capture or anti-biometrics. These groups not only refuse the biometric gaze through masking, but their use of the mask is also a larger refusal of being politically visible to the state or to power. The mask here is not just an individual disappearing act; it is a catalyst for collective transformation, a collective demand. The Zapatistas articulate this sentiment well when they claim that they hide their faces so that they may be seen.

In *Facial Weaponization Suite*, I interpreted the masked collective's demand against biometrics as a demand for opacity. The artwork is heavily influenced by the writings of Édouard Glissant. In his text "For Opacity," Glissant argues that we must "clamor for the right to opacity for everyone." Opacity, he writes, is both the protector of the Diverse and also the aesthetics of the Other. Opacity is "a positive value to be opposed to any pseudo-humanist attempt to reduce us to the scale of some universal model." I am moved by Glissant's theory of opacity because it actively goes beyond the terrain of identity and difference. Opacity is not an identity politics. Rather, it might describe something like the ontological relation of the world (Glissant wrote another text titled "The Thinking of the Opacity of the World.") Interestingly, Glissant positions opacity against transparency, which he defines as models of harmful universalism. Following Glissant, biometrics could be understood as such a transparency. Currently, I'm writing a book titled *Informatic Opacity*, which considers how the demand for opacity must manifest differently when confronted with digital, automated machines, not just humans.

Opacity, as a political horizon, stresses something collective, more akin to communism (or the commons), than the individualizing tendencies of privacy. I do think that activist work around privacy is extremely important and crucial, but I do not consider privacy as a horizon of political potentiality. Rather, privacy is something to be worked with and used tactically, out of practical necessity. Opacity offers a different kind of politics. Of course, opacity could be considered impractical, lofty, or ideal, but within an arts practice, a more utopian politics can be evoked, experimented with, and even loved.

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Contra-Internet Inversion Practice #3: Modeling Paranodal Space, 2016

KS: *Queer Technologies* (2007-12) and *Contra-Internet* (2014-) are (also) projects informed by queer, cyberfeminist and transgender responses to technology, drawing on the traditions and methods of tactical media. What initially drew you to these discourses and artistic strategies?

ZB: There's not exactly a straight line to trace for this answer. Looking back, I was queer from a very young age. Of course, I had no idea about that term—not its histories or varied theoretical meanings. I lived in a rural Appalachia, and those who were different were subject to its crushing, brutalizing normalcy and conformity. I was constantly reacting against this, but I can't really cite an origin as to where this desire to be otherwise comes from—it was there before any awareness of sexuality. I carried this rural queerness with me to the city when I went to film school. There, I gravitated towards filmmakers like Pasolini and Fassbinder, but I also became obsessed with early video art, as I was particularly inspired by how artists, at the time of video's emergence, were experimenting with this new technical form. As film school came to an end, I felt a need to abandon film for the computer, to experiment with digital media and the world wide web—the media technologies of our time—just like the early video artists had done.

Yet, the more immersed I became in “new media art,” the more I felt myself being pulled further and further away from queerness, which composes the very core of my artistic sensibilities. Usually, these were forced apart. Some of the powerful male new media artists that I was made to study under ridiculed my investment in queerness. (I'm tempted to name them, but I don't have time to deal with them trolling me.) Many queer artists / teachers I encountered were just off-put by my curiosity in anything digital, as if it somehow betrayed queer art's focus on the body, identity, and sexuality. For some years, I felt stranded somewhere between queer art and digital art. Luckily, I found extraordinary

mentors that helped me find my path. In 2006, I took a class on “Theories of Sexualities and Genders” by art historian David Getsy at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which unlocked so much for me. I remember that David spoke with me about queering technology by making it strange. While I was at UCLA in 2007, I saw a lecture by Ricardo Dominguez, on hacktivism, Zapatismo, Mayan technology, and electronic disturbance. Seeing Ricardo’s lecture was one of those life-changing moments: he rearranged everything and made the impossible seem more than possible. Shortly after, I became acquainted with various histories of queerness and feminism in science and technology, like cyberfeminism, Alan Turing (the homosexual computer scientist), and Donna Haraway. Everything just came together around this time, and I started the *Queer Technologies* project. Over the years, my commitment to queerly engaging computers, emerging technologies, and new scientific claims has only strengthened, as so many contemporary forms of hegemony and domination are technical, informatic, digital. Yet, at the close of 2016, I am looping back to film (or video, more precisely), as I prepare to go into production on the video centerpiece for my current project *Contra-Internet*. I appreciate more and more the moving image’s ability to get to a level of complexity and depth—in time, duration.



Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face Mask - October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: Christopher O'Leary.

KS: *Contra-Internet* is inspired by our collective failure to imagine life outside of the totality of the internet. How important is it to give agency to your audience and open up possibilities for new ways of thinking? Is it possible for contemporary art to subvert, rather than reflect the spectacle of the military-entertainment complex?

ZB: I typically begin a project with a concept. This might be a neologism, a reworking of an idea, or something found in a legal document. I use this as the starting point—or better, a portal—for developing a project. With this approach, I’m extremely interested in making something different thinkable and sensible. For me, opening up thought and experience is also the cultivating of agency. Consider how some of the biggest challenges we, as human beings on earth, face today can seem staggeringly impossible to combat or alter: climate change and global surveillance are certainly two urgencies that can overwhelm people into acquiescence, denial, or disinterest. Activism has its practices to advance struggles on these fronts, but I think art adds a necessary imagination here—an imagination that enables one to believe in—or envision—change, transformation, and more viable futures. Some will dismiss this as silly, but I have always come to politics through imagination, not the reverse.

The concept “contra-internet” is an example of this for me. The word came together accidentally. (I was reading Paul Preciado’s *Manifiesto Contrasexual* alongside some post-internet articles, and the two concepts merged into a third.) I was so excited about this because “contra-internet” made something new thinkable for me, and because of that, the concept activated my own desire to search for something other to—or outside of—the internet. This then led me to research an array of activist projects focused on building infrastructural alternatives to the internet.

I think my work makes this rather clear, but I feel strongly about art’s ability to offer an otherwise, which, in part, is to be subversive. Of course, contemporary art is a global industry, and much art is about maintaining—not disrupting—that world. This is not new. What is the alternative? I can’t help but think of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney here—that to exist otherwise in the arts might mean having a criminal relation to the art world.



Contra-Internet Inversion Practice #2: Social Media Exodus (Call), screenshot, 2015.

KS: As an artist and writer you create performances, run workshops, make art objects, organize events, and write books. How do these different roles and practices inform the development of your work (if at all)?

ZB: This one is quite simple for me. I think of everything I do as one stream of research and practice. Each manifestation—whether a text or video, a performance or object—has its affordances. An art object can do something a text cannot, and vice versa. I think of what I do as variations on a theme. In order to adequately confront or engage something, I often feel that I need to do this through various media and forms, which is like harnessing different affordances to more intensely get at what a project is trying to do. Importantly, I engage form but not arbitrarily. I am not interested in randomly imposing formal limitations (such as to only write, to only make video). The political stakes determine the forms. As I work within a university, such an approach can be confusing to academia because the university is more and more a place that shuts down experimentation and risk-taking. This is not to say that I don't fall under the university's spell of disciplinarity and professionalization (the art world also casts its own dazzling version of this); these are difficult to escape. I do strive to have a practice that is not delimited by neoliberal values.

Questionnaire

Age: 34

Location: London, United Kingdom

How/when did you begin working creatively with technology?

I've always been creative since a young age, making videos, photo collages, writing stories, etc. I was even classically trained on piano. I had a working class upbringing in

rural West Virginia and, thus, little to no access to media technologies until I went to college. Maybe the first time I experimented with technology was when, as a child, I made a Freddy Krueger glove from nails and a gardening glove. I would wear this and pretend to be both Freddy and the female heroines from the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* movies. I think I properly began experimenting with digital technology and art in the fall of 2004, when I took a multimedia installation continuing education class at MassArt in Boston. I used a TiVo and live video feedback to create a streaming video image of visitors to the installation. Within a year, I was making interactive installation about anal fisting.

Where did you go to school? What did you study?

I went to a crumbling public high school in West Virginia in the late 90s. It was the kind of place where honors students laughed in disbelief at evolution, the few queer kids were beaten up daily, and we were all forced to pray to Jesus. I tried my best to be a good student in those conditions, because I knew a college scholarship was my only way out. But during this period, I learned more from Gregg Araki movies, the fiction of Kafka, and Tori Amos albums. In fact, when I was sixteen, I became something of a Tori Amos groupie, and within two years, I had probably seen fifty Tori concerts. In the end, I somehow graduated at the top of my class and got to give a speech based on Kafka's writings on conformity, which felt amazing (although I later received death threats for it). In 2000, I got a scholarship to study film at Boston University. When I arrived, my advisor informed me that they had hit the jackpot with me. I was confused by this and asked her to explain. *You're from Appalachia, so you're a minority*, she said. *Also, you're gay and Puerto Rican—no wonder you got a scholarship!* (My father is Puerto Rican.) Four years later, I completed a BS (yes, Bachelor of Science) in Film with a minor in philosophy. I think my most important moment there was getting introduced to Derek Jarman's films—*Jubilee*, in particular. Yet, feeling alienated from the economic viability of making a film, I ended up doing a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Art and Technology Studies at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2006. It just seemed much more reasonable at the time to become a hacker! Next, I did a MFA in the Design Media Arts department at UCLA in 2008. During this period in LA, I got introduced to media theory by Kate Hayles and also started studying with Jack Halberstam at USC and Ricardo Dominguez at UCSD, which had the biggest impact on my artistic and intellectual developments. After this, I just dived into a PhD, mostly because I did not want to start paying back student loans and I also thought it would be like a long-term artist residency (it is absolutely not that). I started my PhD in the film/media track of the Rhetoric department at UC Berkeley but transferred to the Literature Program at Duke University, where I (amazingly) got to continue studying with Kate Hayles, Jack Halberstam, Ricardo Dominguez, and also Michael Hardt. During my first semester at Duke, I took a seminar taught by Fredric Jameson on Nietzsche and Wagner. Jameson made us watch the entire Ring Cycle on DVD, and I found it unbearable. I began to panic because I was convinced that I could write nothing on this material. However, one day during a screening of the musical, the DVD kept skipping uncontrollably. It was infuriating Jameson, but this made me extremely happy. I wrote my

entire seminar paper on this glitch. Unfortunately, I never received comments about it from Jameson.

What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously?

I make my living primarily as a university professor. Currently, I lecture in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, and luckily, I get to teach around my research interests, to both artists and art history students. I teach undergraduate classes on the face, surveillance, feminist and queer technoscience, and the internet. Before that, I taught in the department of Art at the University at Buffalo, which was quite special because I got to work with one of my best friends, art historian Jasmina Tumbas. In the arts, I also support myself through exhibitions, lectures, and commissions. While a student, I held a variety of jobs, my favorite being an assistant at the Video Data Bank. Working at the VDB was definitely a transformative experience because I was exposed to so much incredible video art, by people like Walid Raad, George Kuchar, Martha Rosler, and Harun Farocki.

What does your desktop or workspace look like? (Pics or screenshots please!)

See screenshot attached. My “studio” consists of my bedroom, Goldsmiths office, and cafes around southeast London. I should also highlight applications like Skype and FaceTime, as I use those almost daily to think through ideas and test work with friends and collaborators.

