



Facial Weaponization Communiqué: Fag Face by Zach Blas

The Art of Surveillance

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"Mr. Anderton, you could use a Guinness beer right now!" – I remember being a teenager and watching with excitement how iris recognition devices scan Mr. Anderton as he moves swiftly through the crowd while being flooded by personally targeted advertisements. It all seemed very exciting until the moment that he is forced to substitute his eyes with a pair bought on the black market, just to avoid being caught by crazy arachnid robots working as sentinels for the police forces. It's been several years since the release of *Minority Report*, a blockbuster film exploring growing concerns about techno-ethics as the development of technology such as facial and iris recognition approaches rapidly.

In compass with contemporary crises such as the revelations of the NSA's invasive monitoring of online activities, many believe to be witnessing the death of privacy. This idea strongly reminds me of the Panopticon model envisioned by the social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. Just like Foucault's Panopticism theorized Bentham's institution, artists like Harun Farocki or Steven Mann have responded to contemporary surveillance technology, using it as an artistic medium and thus initiating a discourse on Surveillance Art. Following this path, I propose an overview of biometrics as one example of surveillance mechanisms, paving way to insights into the work of media artists like Zach Blas, Adam Harvey and Hito Steyerl, who have established an important grounding for a critical consciousness of identity within a surveillance culture whilst suggesting and exploring tactics to reclaim privacy through the medium of art.

In an era of increasing techno-surveillance and info-militarism, we realize that the targets of this oppressive gaze (defined by Lacan as the state of unease and anxiety provoked by the feeling that one might be under observation) are not only state-proclaimed criminals (like Mr. Anderton), but all citizens, all potential deviants to the state order with taxes to pay. From CCTV, drones, border checks, police raids, the immense dragnet surveillance extends to even more intimate mechanisms, collecting data and metadata from personal emails, social media and clouds, amongst others. With the latest technologies of biometric surveillance, such as heart rate monitors and facial recognition, we might be transforming ourselves into cybernetic surveillance systems.

In Medicine, biometrics have a long history of being used as a form of authority to define what is wrong or right, unhealthy and healthy. As a tool for monitoring people's bodies it has also shaped an ideal body, a

norm that endorses an idea of archetypal bodies, discriminating against race, gender, sex, class and disability. Biometric recognition technologies raise questions around our safety and privacy when being photographed, while walking in the streets, taking part in protests, or by assuming positions of nonconformity and of non-normativity. Human facial features are likely the obvious taxonomic feature to identify a person, whether socially (e.g. portraits, selfies, social networks; just note Facebook's acquisition of face.com, the Israeli facial recognition technology company) or by the state (e.g. Identity cards, mug shots). So how do we build our social subjectivity and how can we manipulate it? In his essay "The Social Skin" (1980), the anthropologist Terence Turner refers to the "surface of the body as a common frontier of society, the social self" – the stage where socialization is enacted. Adornments used on our bodies, from body-painting to clothing and from cosmetics to facial masks, become the social language themselves. Groups like the hacktivists Anonymous or the feminist punk rock band Pussy Riot have shown the potential of using adornments; facial masks that transformed them from citizens (order) to protesters (anti- order), conferring the subjects relationships of horizontal nature, resulting in empowered collectives with the capability to repel biometric facial recognition.

Acknowledging the power of masks to structurally change the self, the artist Zach Blas has created Facial Weaponization Suite, a series of community workshops dedicated to the discussion and resistance of biometric facial recognition technologies. Blas scans the participant faces and compiles the sum of their facial features into a collective-amorphous mask resistant to these technologies. The grotesque design of this mask consists of a clever, yet ironical use of the algorithmic supremacism of facial recognition as a weapon to counter technology itself, as it is only capable to detect "standard" faces. Algorithm fighting algorithm. One fine example is his response to a social psychology study that investigates people's capacity to identify homosexual men by looking at their faces. Questioning the intentions (or any possible benefits) of the creation of an algorithm capable to detect "gay faces", he created a queer-mask aggregating the information of several self- identified gay people. The result, a pink bubblegum amorphous mask, allows one to hide beneath an overload of information created by a salad of data that cannot be detected by facial recognition. This queer-tech mask protests against the idea of using technology to find supposed biological and psychological markers of sexual orientation, providing yet another tool to pigeonhole minorities. If on one hand visibility has been used by minorities as a political tool to gain recognition, invisibility and privacy became vital for those who intend to maintain nonconforming identities. As concealment becomes forbidden within the neo-liberal order, obligating bodies to be citizens and to assume a position of availability to be profiled and identified, marginalized minorities – such as women in burkas, trans people, disabled bodies – see their identities exposed to biometric scrutiny under the excuse of being threats, terrorists or deviants to the civil order.

So isn't (the attempted) invisibility the new hyper-visibility? While refusing to show our identity might call extra attention to ourselves, Blas recognizes his masks' limited applicability. Although, by creating a 3D modeled pink mask that gives hyper-visibility, his artwork conceptually holds a political transformation, a demand to be different, defying the algorithmic standardization. Another example of this political stance can be seen in the work of the artist Adam Harvey. His project CV (computer vision) Dazzle, a highly stylized camouflage, brings other possibilities of militarizing our faces against surveillance through the use of day to day fashion as a resource. By knowing the algorithm of the OpenCV software in detail, widely used for real-time face detection in mobile phones, web apps, robotics and scientific research, Harvey shows that by concealing key markers of the face, such as shading lighter spots on our face (i.e. the nose) creates visual noise that turns the face into an anti-face.

Despite both Blas and Harvey's works being intended to criticize the system, rather than having technical utility, we could still question if these tactics would be really effective against techno- surveillance. And if so, until when? Even though representing forms of escaping surveillance, they only work as a response to the prevailing system. As an example, advanced cybernetics might not be far from being capable to read and identify soft biometrics such as behavioral characteristics, which would make facial masks and make-up useless tools. It is a constant escalation in opposition to technological evolution that we cannot slow down. Considering the fast decay of these solutions, we might need to embrace this question through another perspective.

A different insight is offered by the artist Hito Steyerl in her parody instructional video How Not to Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .mov File. Steyerl suggests that, as we merge into a world made of images, images have stopped being representative of truth and became independent and dynamic ontologies. So, maybe in the immense world of images of ourselves, we might be turning invisible. As our bodies now exist in a both material and virtual world, we are becoming faceless figures, rendered to vanish in a virtual desert in which we can become small pixels (as choreographically depicted in Steyerl's video), "becoming invisible by disappearing"; by "being in an airport, factory or museum"; by "being a female and over 50".

