

The Internet Is Not a Possibility

An Interview with Zach Blas

by Valerie Amend

Within our contemporary landscape, network hegemony and biometric surveillance are employed as tools of technological control. To bypass oppressive forces, it is becoming increasingly important to get outside of these systems. How can a curatorial approach aid in the presentation of new options? In this interview, Zach Blas shares his research that delves into what he calls “informatic opacity” and its strategic use. Our exchange details the ways in which the artist’s interest in queer and feminist theory allows him to consider new possibilities of opacity that engage audiences and offer structures of individual and communal resistance.

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VA: Many of your works outline methods that circumvent surveillance and present alternative solutions. For example, *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011–2014) employs a pedagogical approach to educate viewers about biometric facial recognition, the biases within this technology, and how to resist this form of surveillance. Your newer work, *Contra-Internet* (2014–2018), discusses ways to get outside the Internet all together. Do you think it is necessary to work entirely outside the Internet, or is it important to learn how to protect ourselves within colonized networks?

ZB: The outside is an important conceptual frame for much of my practice. It’s an idea operative in various strands of intellectual thought and philosophy, but I’m particularly interested in its queer and feminist manifestations. Here, the outside is evoked to demand the possibility of alternatives to totalizing, dominating structures. Outsides can, and often do, exist! Consider the writings of J. K. Gibson-Graham—for example, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique*



Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face*, 2012. Video still.

of *Political Economy*.¹ They put forth the concept of post-capitalist politics to argue that economic alternatives persist within the supposedly totalized reign of capitalism. Contra much political philosophy, they insist on an outside to capitalism as a feminist project.

In *Contra-Internet*, the artworks are also concerned with articulating that there are, and can continue to be, outsides to the Internet. This strikes me as a crucial claim to make, when the Internet “appears” to be totalizing the world. This is the prophecy of the Internet of Things, and also ex-Google CEO Eric Schmidt, when he stated in 2015 that the Internet will disappear into the world. It strikes me as troubling to be unable to distinguish between the world and the Internet, because the more something becomes all-consuming, the more challenging it is to criticize, let alone think, imagine or create an outside to it. But alternative network infrastructure is emerging, as ways to bypass corporate Internet options, such as the Detroit Digital Stewards Program that trains communities how to operate and maintain local mesh networks.

The outside, then, for me is about the horizon of possibility, and artistic practice can be a kind of training that keeps that space open, so possibility can be seen, felt, experienced. Practically, of course, we can’t fully abandon being online right now. But I think of my artistic practice as having a duty to imagine beyond the practical to something more utopian or queer utopian.

VA: Is there anything left for us on the Internet, like the dark web? You’ve written about the idea of the antiweb. What does this mean, how are these systems accessed, and can they resist programmed bias?

ZB: There is plenty left for us on the Internet. We still find friendship and allies there. I’m not that interested in the dark web, which is still part of the Internet. As stated above, I’m more interested in focused, political breaks from the Internet as we know it—breaks that articulate political visions of queerness, anti-racism, decolonialism, and feminism. The point for me is that the Internet is no longer a possibility. The antiweb is a variation on this, which comes from the writings of Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, particularly *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*.² It has to do with resistance and asymmetry. The Internet, composed of networks, is a primary site of global control and governance today. Thus, what is asymmetrical to those networks will be future modes of resistance. This is quite provocative because this could mean that the antiweb is not a network at all. Recall not so long ago that the idea of the rhizome was championed as a model for radical, resistant action. If the rhizome now topologically matches global networked control, then that model is no longer adequate. So what is? I can’t answer this practically, but I can use it as a starting point for doing certain imaginative work. This is a second major tenet of *Contra-Internet*: to imagine not only outsides of the Internet but also alternatives to the network form.

VA: *Contra-Internet* explores alternatives to the Internet. What tools can we use now to get “outside” the Internet? What are the differences between contra- and post-Internet practice?

ZB: Mesh networks, cryptographic practices, and other autonomous networking developments are all practical entry points to something beyond “the Internet.” At this point, I should state that I think of the meaning of the Internet broadly, more as a dominant, networked, capitalist condition, rather than something that only refers to technical infrastructure. The Internet is also a mode of subjectification, producing subjectivity through social media platforms, for instance. How does one rework such a production of subjectivity? That’s an exciting question—but one that will not be answered only through practical alternatives.

The discourse on post-Internet practices is a bit overlapped at this point, and I’m not so interested in

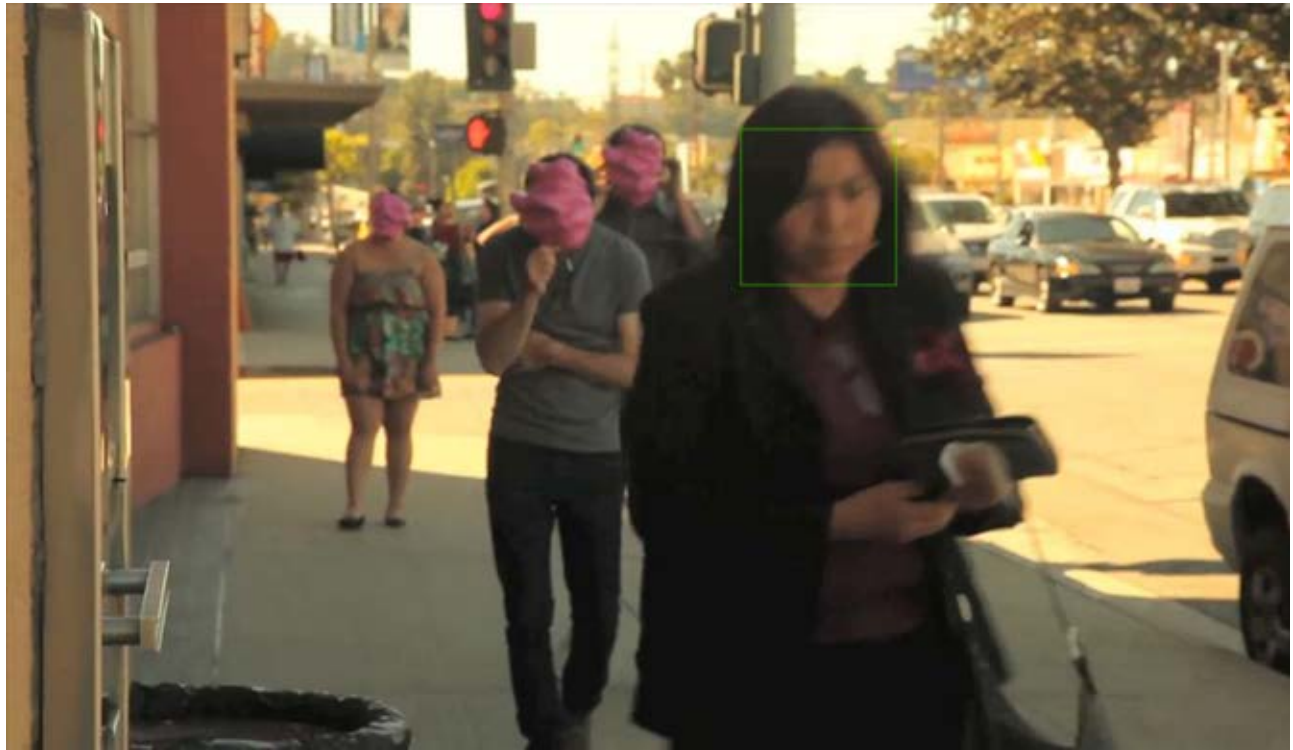


Zach Blas, *Fag Face Mask*, 2012. 3D-modeled plastic. Image courtesy of the artist.

having *Contra-Internet* be framed as simply a reaction to post-Internet. What I can say is that “post-Internet” doesn’t strike me as a useful term for imagining outsides or being invested in political alternatives. Post-Internet as a concept totalizes the Internet, just like Eric Schmidt’s thinking about the Internet of Things. *Contra-Internet* practices, beyond my work, seem to be more in line with histories of tactical media, hacktivism, cyberfeminism, and electronic disturbance, which are all directly invested in political change.

VA: Can you define what capture and opacity mean to you, and why you see a new vocabulary surrounding surveillance to be necessary? How can users identify situations of capture and practice resistance?

ZB: Surveillance is a frustrating catch-all word that seems to articulate not much in the end. Capture, on the other hand, is precise. It’s a technical term that refers to how a computational system is able to identify and interpret something, be it a face, body or behavior. Capture is about developing algorithmic



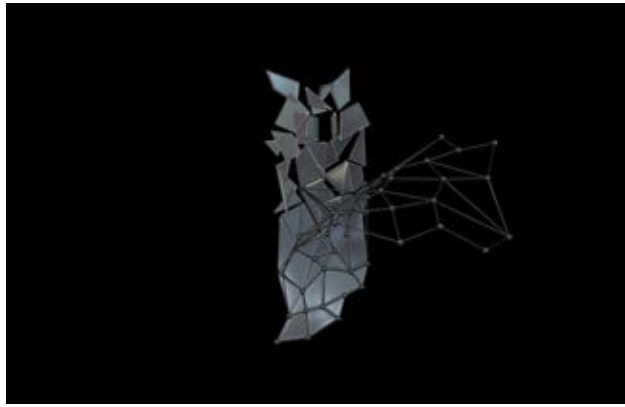
Zach Blas, *CI-00, Contra-Internet Totality Study #2: Internet*, 2015. .gif triptych image still. Image courtesy of the artist.

grammars, or standards, for analyzing the world. When a face is captured by a computational system, it does not mean that the computer has magically discovered a face. Rather, an algorithm for facial recognition analyzes a given image, and when a face is recognized or captured, it all seems simple enough. But when a capture algorithm does not work correctly, certain norms are exposed. For instance, there are numerous examples of biometric recognition technologies failing to recognize various minoritarian persons, such as transgender individuals and people of color. When this is considered from the perspective of capture, one would critically attend to why and how certain norms of recognition get standardized in algorithms and software as scientifically objective. Capture, simply put, makes us question the existence of norms, standards, and biases in algorithmic architectures, which are often used for surveillance and policing purposes. Such a critique of norms is, of course, at the heart of much queer theory, but this critique must be inflected at a technical level, which queer theory has not adequately addressed. Privacy is often presented as the go-to for all political moves against surveillance, but this is not visionary enough. Privacy is not the horizon of possibility here. Rather, I turn to opacity, particularly through the writings of Édouard Glissant, such as *Poetics of Relation*, in which he famously claims we must clamor for

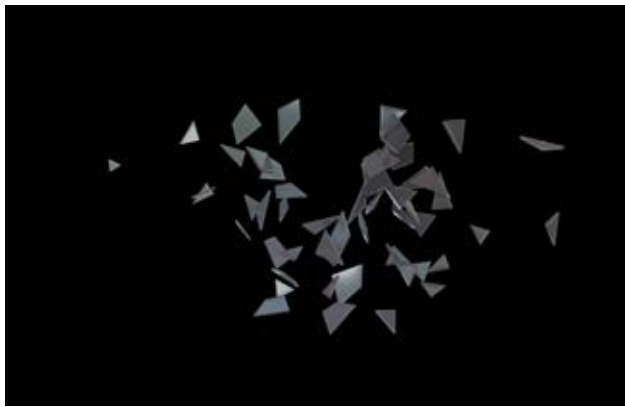
the right to opacity for everyone. Opacity, as an alterity that cuts through our relations to others as well as ourselves, is that which we must let exist. When opacity is violated, Glissant tells us, we enter imperialism and barbarism.

Capture, if it does anything, attempts to annihilate opacity. Thus, opacity strikes me as a robust conception against capture that can generously hold together various minoritarian politics and positions. For some time now, I have been articulating and imagining an “informatic opacity” that pushes against the ways in which computational machines destroy opacity in order to control populations. By investing in the struggle over opacity, we might arrive at something like the commons, whereas privacy can easily keep us in the realm of private property and individualism.

VA: Informatic opacity as a concept and practice is implemented in *Facial Weaponization Suite* through the realization of the *Fag Face Mask*. This mask was created and compiled using the data of multiple queer men’s facial scans. The result is an amalgamated mass of unreadable data that prevents capture when worn over the face. What forms of informatic opacity can we employ in our everyday lives? Do you consider opacity a form of protest or refusal? Can opacity create sanctuary in addition to resistance?



Zach Blas, *CI-16, Contra-Internet Inversion Practice #3: Modeling Paranodal Space*, 2016. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.



Zach Blas, *CI-17, Contra-Internet Inversion Practice #3: Modeling Paranodal Space*, 2016. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.



Zach Blas, *CI-18, Contra-Internet Inversion Practice #3: Modeling Paranodal Space*, 2016. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

ZB: We are always already opaque because opacity has an ontological dimension to it. For Glissant, opacity is precisely the world in relation. That said, Glissant never directly discusses opacity as a tactic, tool or form of protest. Opacity is a way of being and relating that is at once aesthetic, ethical, political—and ontological. However, I'm willing to understand opacity as something tactical and ontological. For instance, one attempts to become informatically opaque, in order to protect the opacity of the other. Put another way, one might mask in order to struggle for the right to opacity. Glissant once wrote, "That which protects the Diverse, we call opacity."³ How is this protection done in the everyday, against informatic control? Providing false data, obfuscating, encrypting, and refusing to be recognized are all potential options. But importantly, opacity is more than this kind of action; it is a worldly condition that must be protected, a kind of poetic and material necessity for minoritarian life to thrive.

Notes

- 1 J. K. Gibson-Graham. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006.
- 2 Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2007.
- 3 Édouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor. 1999.

Valerie Amend is an independent researcher and curator. She is the founder of *Fluidity Online*, [<https://www.fluidity.online/>] a digital platform custom built for online exhibitions. Her recent projects include the Curators Workshop on the occasion of the 10th Berlin Biennale and the exhibition *Where is the Eternal Expanse?* [<https://www.fluidity.online/>] Additional roles include working as a curatorial assistant at TRANSFER Gallery and producing the Artist Web Project Series at Dia Art Foundation. She holds a master's degree in Curatorial Practice from the School of Visual Arts.

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