A Biometric Logic of Revelation: Zach Blas's *SANCTUM* (2018)

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Articles

Ubiquitous in airports, border checkpoints, and other securitised spaces throughout the world, full-body imaging scanners claim to read bodies in order to identify if they pose security threats. Millimetre-wave body imaging machines—the most common type of body scanner—display to the operating security agent a screen with a generic body outline. If an anomaly is found or if an individual does not align with the machine's understanding of an "average" body, a small box is highlighted and placed around the "problem" area, prompting further inspection in the form of pat-downs or questioning. In this complex security regime governed by such biometric, body-based technologies, it could be argued that nonalignment with bodily normativity as well as an attendant failure to reveal oneself —to become "transparent" (Hall 295)—marks a body as dangerous. As these algorithmic technologies become more pervasive, so too does the imperative to critically examine their purported neutrality and operative logic of revelation and readability.

Biometric technologies are marketed as excavators of truth, with their optic potency claiming to demask masquerading bodies. Failure and bias are, however, an inescapable aspect of such technologies that work with narrow parameters of human morphology.

Indeed, surveillance technologies have been taken to task for their inherent racial and gender biases (Browne; Pugliese). Facial recognition has, for example, been critiqued for its inability to read darker skin tones (Buolamwini and Gebru), while body scanners have been shown to target transgender bodies (Keyes; Magnet and Rodgers; Quinan). Critical security studies scholar Shoshana Magnet argues that error is endemic to the technological functioning of biometrics, particularly since they operate according to the faulty notion that bodies are "stable" and unchanging repositories of information that can be reified into code (Magnet 2).

Although body scanners are presented as being able to reliably expose concealed weapons, they are riddled with incompetencies that misidentify and over-select certain demographics as suspect. Full-body scanners have, for example, caused considerable difficulties for transgender travellers, breast cancer patients, and people who use prosthetics, such as artificial limbs, colonoscopy bags, binders, or prosthetic genitalia (Clarkson; Quinan; Spalding). While it is not in the scope of this article to detail the workings of body imaging technologies and their inconsistencies, a growing body of scholarship has substantiated the claim that these machines unfairly impact those identifying as transgender and non-binary (see, e.g., Beauchamp; Currah and Mulqueen; Magnet and Rogers; Sjoberg). Moreover, they are constructed according to a logic of binary gender: before each person enters the scanner, transportation security officers must make a quick assessment of their gender/sex by pressing either a blue (corresponding to "male") or pink (corresponding to "female") button. In this sense, biometric, computerised security systems control and monitor the boundaries between male and female.

The ability to "reveal" oneself is henceforth predicated on having a body free of "abnormalities" and fitting neatly into one of the two sex categorisations that the machine demands. Transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals, particularly those who do not have a binary gender presentation or whose presentation does not correspond to the sex marker in their documentation, also face difficulties if the machine flags anomalies (Quinan and Bresser). Drawing on a Foucauldian analysis of power as productive, Toby Beauchamp similarly illustrates how surveillance technologies not only identify but also create and reshape the figure of the dangerous subject in relation to normative configurations of gender, race, and able-bodiedness. By mobilizing narratives of concealment and disguise, heightened security measures frame gender nonconformity as dangerous (Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*). Although national and supranational authorities market biometric scanning technologies as scientifically neutral and exact methods of identification and verification and as an infallible solution to security risks, such tools of surveillance are clearly shaped by preconceptions and prejudgements about race, gender, and bodily normativity. Not only are they encoded with "prototypical whiteness" (Browne) but they are also built on "grossly stereotypical" configurations of gender (Clarkson).

Amongst this increasingly securitised landscape, creative forms of artistic resistance can

offer up a means of subverting discriminatory policing and surveillance practices by posing alternate visualisations that reveal and challenge their supposed objectivity. In his 2018 audio-video artwork installation entitled *SANCTUM*, UK-based American artist Zach Blas delves into how biometric technologies, like those described above, both reveal and (re)shape ontology by utilising the affectual resonance of sexual submission. Evoking the contradictory notions of oppression and pleasure, Blas describes *SANCTUM* as "a mystical environment that perverts sex dungeons with the apparatuses and procedures of airport body scans, biometric analysis, and predictive policing" (see full description at https://zachblas.info/works/sanctum/).Depicting generic mannequins that stand in for the digitalised rendering of the human forms that pass through body scanners, the installation transports the scanners out of the airport and into a queer environment that collapses sex, security, and weaponry; an environment that is "at once a prison-house of algorithmic capture, a sex dungeon with no genitals, a weapons factory, and a temple to security." This artistic reframing gestures towards full-body scanning technology's germination in the military, prisons, and other disciplinary systems, highlighting how its development and use has originated from punitive—rather than protective—contexts.

In what follows, we adopt a methodological approach that applies visual analysis and close reading to scrutinise a selection of scenes from *SANCTUM* that underscore the sadomasochistic power inherent in surveillance technologies. Analysing visual and aural elements of the artistic intervention allows us to complicate the relationship between transparency and recognition and to problematise the dynamic of mandatory complicity and revelation that body scanners warrant. In contrast to a discourse of visibility that characterises algorithmically driven surveillance technology, Blas suggests opacity as a resistance strategy to biometrics' standardisation of identity. Taking an approach informed by critical security studies and queer theory, we also argue that *SANCTUM* highlights the violence inherent to the practice of reducing the body to a flat, inert surface that purports to align with some sort of "core" identity, a notion that contradicts feminist and queer approaches to identity and corporeality as fluid and changing. In close reading this artistic installation alongside emerging scholarship on the discriminatory effects of biometric technology, this article aims to highlight the potential of art to queer the supposed objectivity and neutrality of biometric surveillance and to critically challenge normative logics of revelation and readability.

Corporeal Fetishism and Body Horror

Throughout both his artistic practice and scholarly work, Blas has been critical of the above narrative of biometrics as objective extractors of information. Rather than looking to dominant forms of representation as a means for recognition and social change, Blas's work asks that we strive for creative techniques that precisely queer biometric and legal systems in order to make oneself *unaccounted for*. For him, "transparency, visibility, and representation to the state should be used tactically, they are never the end goal for a transformative politics but are, ultimately, a trap" (Blas and Gaboury 158). While we

would simultaneously argue that invisibility is itself a privilege that is unevenly distributed, his creative work attempts to refuse a politics of visibility and to embrace an "informatic opacity" that is attuned to differences in bodies and identities (Blas).

In particular, Blas's artistic interventions titled *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011-14) and *Face Cages* (2013-16) protest against biometric recognition and the inequalities that these technologies propagate by making masks and wearable metal objects that cannot be detected as human faces. This artistic-activist project contests biometric facial recognition and their attendant inequalities by, as detailed on the artist's website,

> making 'collective masks' in workshops that are modelled from the aggregated facial data of participants, resulting in amorphous masks that cannot be detected as human faces by biometric facial recognition technologies. The masks are used for public interventions and performances.

One mask explores blackness and the racist implications that undergird biometric technologies' inability to detect dark skin. Meanwhile another mask, which he calls the "Fag Face Mask", points to the heteronormative underpinnings of facial recognition. Created from the aggregated facial data of queer men, this amorphous pink mask implicitly references—and contests—scientific studies that have attempted to link the identification of sexual orientation through rapid facial recognition techniques.

Building on this body of creative work that has advocated for opacity as a tool of social and political transformation, *SANCTUM* resists the revelatory impulses of biometric technology by turning to the use and abuse of full-body imaging. The installation opens with a shot of a large, dark industrial space. At the far end of a red, spotlighted corridor, a black mask flickers on a screen. A shimmering, oscillating sound reverberates—the opening bars of a techno track—that breaks down in rhythm while the mask evaporates into a cloud of smoke. The camera swivels, and a white figure—the generic mannequin of the body scanner screen—is pummelled by invisible forces as if in a wind tunnel. These ghostly silhouettes appear and reappear in different positions, with some being whipped and others stretched and penetrated by a steel anal hook. Rather than conjuring a traditional horror trope of the body's terrifying, bloody interior, *SANCTUM* evokes a new kind of feared and fetishized trope that is endemic to the current era of surveillance capitalism: the abstracted body, standardised and datafied, created through the supposedly objective and efficient gaze of AI-driven machinery.

Resting on the floor in front of the ominous animated mask are neon fragments arranged in an occultist formation—hands or half a face. By breaking the body down into component parts— "from retina to fingerprints"—biometric technologies "purport to make individual bodies endlessly replicable, segmentable and transmissible in the transnational spaces of global capital" (Magnet 8). The notion that bodies can be seamlessly turned into blueprints extracted from biological and cultural contexts has been described by Donna

Haraway as "corporeal fetishism" (Haraway, *Modest*). In the context of *SANCTUM*, Blas illustrates the dangers of mistaking a model for a "concrete entity" (Haraway, "Situated" 147). Indeed, the digital cartography of the generic mannequin becomes no longer a mode of representation but instead a technoscientific truth.

Several scenes in *SANCTUM* also illustrate a process whereby substances are extracted from the mannequins and used as tools to enact violence. In one such instance, a silver webbing is generated over a kneeling figure. Upon closer inspection, this geometric structure, which is reminiscent of Blas's earlier *Face Cages* project, is a replication of the triangulated patterns produced by facial recognition software in its mapping of distance between eyes, nose, and mouth. In the next scene, this "map" breaks apart into singular shapes that float and transform into a metallic whip, before eventually reconstituting themselves as a penetrative douche hose that causes the mannequin to spasm and vomit a pixelated liquid. Its secretions levitate and become the webbing, and then the sequence begins anew.

In another scene, a mannequin is held upside-down and force-fed a bubbling liquid that is being pumped through tubes from its arms, legs, and stomach. These depictions visualise Magnet's argument that biometric renderings of bodies are understood not to be "tropic" or "historically specific" but are instead presented as "plumbing individual depths in order to extract core identity" (5). In this sense, this visual representation calls to mind biometrics' reification of body and identity, obfuscating what Haraway would describe as the "situatedness of knowledge". Blas's work, however, forces a critique of these very systems, as the materials extracted from the bodies of the mannequins in *SANCTUM* allude to how biometric cartographies drawn from travellers are utilised to justify detainment. These security technologies employ what Magnet has referred to as "surveillant scopophilia," that is, new ways and forms of looking at the human body "disassembled into component parts while simultaneously working to assuage individual anxieties about safety and security through the promise of surveillance" (17). The transparent body—the body that can submit and reveal itself—is ironically represented by the distinctly genderless translucent mannequins. Although the generic mannequins are seemingly blank slates, the installation simultaneously forces a conversation about the ways in which biometrics draw upon and perpetuate assumptions about gender, race, and sexuality.

Biometric Subjugation

On her 2016 critically acclaimed album *HOPELESSNESS*, openly transgender singer, composer, and visual artist Anohni performs a deviant subjectivity that highlights the above dynamics that mark the contemporary surveillance discourse. To an imagined "daddy" technocrat, she sings:

> Watch me… I know you love me

'Cause you're always watching me
'Case I'm involved in evil
'Case I'm involved in terrorism
'Case I'm involved in child molesters

Evoking a queer sexual frisson, Anohni describes how, as a trans woman, she is hyper-visible to state institutions. She narrates a voyeuristic relation where trans bodies are policed as threats to public safety rather than protected from systemic discrimination. Through the seemingly benevolent "daddy" character and the play on *'cause* (i.e., because) and *'case* (i.e., in case), she highlights how gender-nonconforming individuals are predictively surveilled and assumed to already be guilty. Reflecting on daddy-boy sexual paradigms, Jack Halberstam reads the "sideways" relations of queer practices as an enactment of "rupture as substitution" to create a new project that "holds on to vestiges of the old but distorts" (226). Upending power and control, queer art has the capacity to both reveal and undermine hegemonic structures while simultaneously allowing for the distortion of the old to create something new.

Employing the sublimatory relations of bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism (BDSM), Blas's queer installation similarly creates a sideways representation that re-orientates the logic of the biometric scanners, thereby unveiling the always already sexualised relations of scrutiny and interrogation as well as the submissive complicity they demand. Replacing the airport environment with a dark and foreboding mise-en-scène allows Blas to focus on capture rather than mobility, highlighting the ways in which border checkpoints (including those instantiated by the airport) encourage free travel for some while foreclosing movement for others. Building on Sara Ahmed's "phenomenology of being stopped", Magnet considers what happens when we turn our gaze to those "who fail to pass the checkpoint" (107). In *SANCTUM,* the same actions are played out again and again on spectral beings who are trapped in various states: they shudder in cages, are chained to the floor, or are projected against the parameters of mounted screens. One ghostly figure, for instance, lies pinned down by metallic grappling hooks, arms raised above the head in a recognisable stance of surrender, conjuring up the now-familiar image of a traveller standing in the cylindrical scanner machine, waiting to be screened. In portraying this extended moment of immobility, Blas lays bare the deep contradictions in the rhetoric of "freedom of movement" that underlies such spaces.

On a global level, media reporting, scientific studies, and policy documents proclaim that biometrics are essential to ensuring personal safety and national security. Within the public imagination, these technologies become seductive because of their marked ability to identify terrorist attackers—to reveal threatening bodies—thereby appealing to the anxious citizen's fear of the disguised suicide bomber. Yet for marginalised identities prefigured as criminal or deceptive—including transgender and black and brown bodies—the inability to perform such acts of revelation via submission to screening can result in humiliation and further discrimination, public shaming, and even tortuous inquiry – acts

that are played out in *SANCTUM*.

Masked Genitals

Feminist surveillance studies scholar Rachel Hall has referred to the impetus for revelation in the post-9/11 era as a desire for a universal "aesthetics of transparency" in which the world and the body is turned inside-out so that there are no longer "secrets or interiors … in which terrorists or terrorist threats might find refuge" (127). Hall takes up the case study of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (infamously known as "the Underwear Bomber") who attempted to detonate plastic explosives hidden in his underwear while onboard a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on 25 December 2009. Hall argues that this event signified a coalescence of fears surrounding bodies of colour, genitalia, and terrorism. News reports following the incident stated that Abdulmutallab tucked his penis to make room for the explosive, thereby "queer[ing] the aspiring terrorist by indirectly referencing his willingness … to make room for a substitute phallus" (Hall 289).

Overtly manifested in the Underwear Bomber incident is also a desire to voyeuristically expose a hidden, threatening interiority, which is inherently implicated with anxieties surrounding gender deviance. Beauchamp elaborates on how gender deviance and transgression have coalesced with terrorism, which was exemplified in the wake of the 9/11 attacks when the United States Department of Homeland Security issued a memo that male terrorists "may dress as females in order to discourage scrutiny" ("Artful" 359). Although this advisory did not explicitly reference transgender populations, it linked "deviant" gender presentation—to which we could also add Abdulmutallab's tucking of his penis—with threats to national security (Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*). This also calls to mind a broader discussion of the ways in which genitalia feature in the screening process. Prior to the introduction of millimetre-wave body scanning technology, the most common form of scanner used was the backscatter imaging machine, which displayed "naked" body images of each passenger to the security agent. Due to privacy concerns, these machines were replaced by the scanners currently in place which use a generic outline of a passenger (exemplified in *SANCTUM*) to detect possible threats.

It is here worth returning to Blas's installation, as it also implicitly critiques the security protocols that attempt to reveal genitalia as both threatening and as evidence of an inner truth about a body. At one moment in the installation a bayonet-like object pierces the blank crotch of the mannequin, shattering it into holographic fragments. The apparent genderlessness of the mannequins is contrasted with these graphic sexual acts. The penetrating metallic instrument that breaks into the loin of the mannequin, combined with the camera shot that slowly zooms in on this action, draws attention to a surveillant fascination with genitalia and revelation. As Nicholas L. Clarkson documents in his analysis of airport security protocols governing prostheses, including limbs and packies (silicone penis prostheses), genitals are a central component of the screening process. While it is stipulated that physical searches should not require travellers to remove items

of clothing, such as underwear, or to expose their genitals to staff for inspection, prosthetics are routinely screened and examined. This practice can create tensions for trans or disabled passengers with prosthetics in so-called "sensitive" areas, particularly as guidelines for security measures are often implemented by airport staff who are not properly trained in transgender-sensitive protocols.

Conclusion

According to media technologies scholar Jeremy Packer, "rather than being treated as one to be protected from an exterior force and one's self, the citizen is now treated as an always potential threat, a becoming bomb" (382). Although this technological policing impacts all who are subjected to security regimes (which is to say, everyone), this amalgamation of body and bomb has exacerbated the ways in which bodies socially coded as threatening or deceptive are targeted by security and surveillance regimes. Nonetheless, others have argued that the use of invasive forms of surveillance can be justified by the state as an exchange: that citizens should willingly give up their right to privacy in exchange for safety (Monahan 1). Rather than subscribing to this paradigm, Blas' *SANCTUM* critiques the violence of mandatory complicity in this "trade-off" narrative. Because their operationalisation rests on normative notions of embodiment that are governed by preconceptions around gender, race, sexuality and ability, surveillance systems demand that bodies become transparent. This disproportionally affects those whose bodies do not match norms, with trans and queer bodies often becoming unreadable (Kafer and Grinberg). The shadowy realm of *SANCTUM* illustrates this tension between biometric revelation and resistance, but also suggests that opacity may be a tool of transformation in the face of such discriminatory violations that are built into surveillance.

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