Rethinking Art and Visual Culture
The Poetics of Opacity

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Faceless, Nameless: Zach Blas

In the research for this book, the aesthetics of opacity has for the most part been located in various screen media. But the phenomenologically indistinct is not exclusively a feature of cinema, video, television, or contemporary art—or of sound and writing—but appears in the extra-textual world, too. A fairly pervasive site for displays of opacity is the face. From the niqab and the burqa to Anonymous's Guy Fawkes disguises, Antifa's black mask, and the KKK hoods, the veiling of the human face represents a culturally diverse practice that has confidentiality as its aim and opacity as its method.[1] During the events in Zuccotti Park in September 2011, the New York City Police Department revived an 1845 law that prohibits masked assemblies in public spaces. Some of the jailed Occupy protesters, furthermore, had to agree to iris scans, their biometric data thus being harvested even though they had not been convicted of or charged with any crime. What was all this anxiety on part of the state about? The artist and writer Zach Blas relates it to what he dubs "'global face culture,'" explained as "obsessive and paranoid impulses to know, capture, calculate, categorize, and standardize human faces."[2] Something akin to a new

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[1] For the significance of concealment for such movements, see, for instance, B. 'Butch' Mendoza, *Antifa Book of Practical Disguise#RESIST*, Steel Springs Press, 2015; for a visual representation of Anonymous, see also Anthony Tafuro, *Anonymous Million Masks*, Brooklyn: Powerhouse Books, 2018. See also Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*, New York: Verso, 2015.

[2] Zach Blas, "Escaping the Face: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Facial Weaponization Suite," *NMC: Journal of the New Media Caucus*, 9.2 (2013), http://median.newmediacau-

ocular regime, this rapidly escalating culture encompasses measures such as the application of biometric technology for visas and international travel, the extensive deployment of surveillance cameras in metropolitan clusters, individualized consumer marketing, and social media applications for facial authentication. These technologies, Blas suggests, transform our conception of the face. While there is certainly some merit to the idea that the human face was reinvented by that emblematic machine of late modernity, the cinema, it has also been considered unique and untranslatable.[3] In the age of operative forms of visuality, however, the face has been turned into "a mode of governance, a quantitative code, template, and standardized form of measure and management."[4] In short, the transecting interests of the state, the military, and commercial enterprises are mobilizing to transparenticize the face.

Attempts by protestors and other groups to respond to and oppose this biopolitical governmentality are numerous, and in the post-Arab spring climate of resistance issues of free speech, rights to assembly, visibility, and representation blend into one another. In December 2012, for example, 40,000 masked activists marched through cities in Chiapas under the auspices of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. In the art world, too, efforts have been made to address this new optical world order, and Blas himself has contributed work informed by a principle of critical opacity. His *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011–2014) opposes the practice of biometric facial recognition by producing so-called collective masks. From the amassed facial data of several participants the work generates opaque masks that modern facial recognition technology is unable to read. This aesthetics of illegibility in effect performs Chamoiseau's aspiration for a poetic approach somehow capable of political intervention, as the art project sutures its technique powerfully to pressing problems involving race, sexuality, and immigration. *Fag Face*, one of the masks that has received particular attention, has been assembled from the biometric information of the faces of homosexual men, as a riposte to scientific studies that connect the identification of sexual orientation to facial recognition technologies. Another mask contends with legislation passed in France in 2010 banning the use of face-covering outfits, such as the niqab, in public

cus.org/caa-conference-edition-2013/escaping-the-face-biometric-facial-recognition-and-the-facial-weaponization-suite/, accessed December 8, 2017.

[3] See Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

[4] Ibid.

spaces. Blas's mask, one could infer, interrogates the legitimacy of urging what might be seen as a strident form of visibility. Yet another mask engages with the notion of blackness, providing a discursive site upon which three different topics converge: the predilection for the color black in activist aesthetics, the symbolic function of black as that which eclipses information (as in redacted documents), and the failure of biometric equipment to sense dark skin (Fig. 8.1).

The practices both in and beyond the art of concealment, secrecy, and defacement have previously been considered as a kind of negative aesthetics, notably in the work of Michael Taussig.[5] In his art making as well as in his writing, Blas explores the broader ethico-political ramifications of conscripting opacity as a medium of resistance:

> one can claim that political desires abound in protest today that stress tactics of escaping forms of recognition-control by abandoning, devisualizing, and defacing the face, becoming faceless through masking actions that mutate
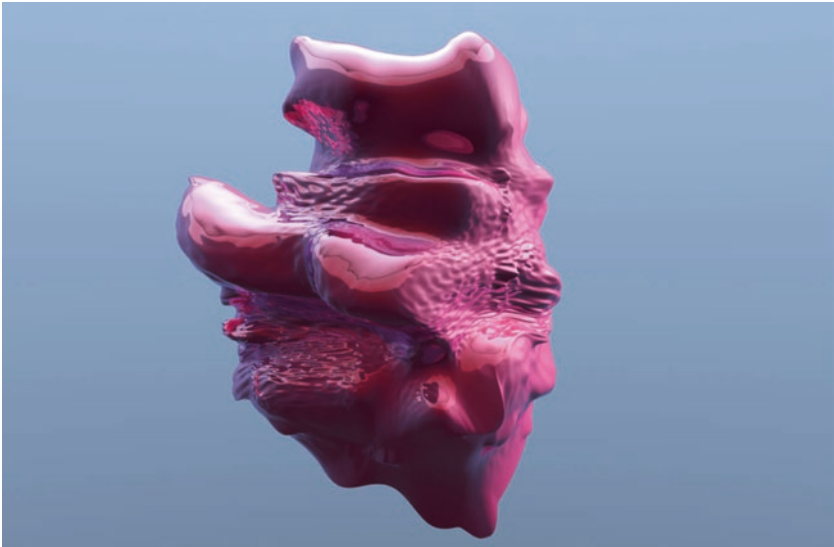
Fig. 8.1 Photo from *Facial Weaponization Suite* (Zach Blas)

[5] See Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

the face into something else entirely. Importantly, while acts of defacement are about a certain kind of political refusal and imperceptibility, they are equally concerned with hypervisible collective transformation […] As the face becomes a site of ever increasing control and governance, new ethical relations to the face are emerging that embrace defacement and escape, not necessarily mutual recognition but collective transformation that is both anarchic and commonizing. Today, the mask is the most popular implementation of defacement, a celebration of refusal and transformation.[6]

Here, Blas seems to suggest that the various processes of defacement—in effect, an aesthetics of opacity—enable "new ethical relations" to emerge, relations that contradict the disembodiment and objectification that are the outcome of biometric technologies. A work such as *Facial Weaponization Suite*, I would argue, indicates that the phenomenologically indistinct is ultimately preferable to the reductiveness of the "identity-industrial complex," in which identity is downgraded to data and capitalized.[7] It is not only that biometrics unscrupulously oversimplifies the corporeal complexity of the individual but also that it, as Shoshana Amielle Magnet has pointed out, exhibits a built-in prejudice, evident, for instance, in the system's frequent inability to scan the hands of Asian women.[8]

In the aforementioned project *Facial Weaponization Suite*, Blas intervenes in the debate about biometric methods of identification by constructing a series of amorphous masks drawn from the facial information of a number of subjects. As a result of this process, the masks—which allude to questions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationalism—cannot be perceived as human faces by facial recognition technologies. Reminiscent of the ways in which various social movements deploy masks as a form of political communication, Blas's works could be seen both as a critique of the reduction of the human to data and as an embrace of an ethics of non-transparency. Taking Blas's project as its point of departure, this chapter argues that the political methodologies of defacement evident in the work of Blas and others represent yet another instantiation of a poetics of opacity, one that speaks directly to some of the current

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[6] Blas, "Escaping the Face."

[7] Simone Browne, "Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity, and Biometrics," *Critical Sociology*, 36.1 (2010): 133.

[8] Shoshana Amielle Magnet, *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 2.

challenges facing global migration and values associated with cosmopolitanism. Glissant's work on cultural difference, colonialism, history, and geography is helpful also in this context, as it produces an understanding of ethical relationships based on his model of opacity. Glissant's philosophy rejects essentialism and universality and focuses instead on particularity and diversity. His position on ethics revolves around the recognition that opacity, for the non-Western subject, functions as a defense mechanism against the objectifying gaze of the other. Clarity is always on the side of colonial power, but history can never be transparent, and the problem with clarity is that it inevitably translates (and thus diminishes) the difference of the other into an already known cache of knowledge. To insist on opacity is then to resist the process of reducing the other to some pseudo-universal category. What the concept of opacity fundamentally contests is the assumption that one has a *right* to understand the other. Glissant instead advocates an intersubjective, participatory, and intuitive form of understanding capable of grasping its own limitations. After discussing Glissant's philosophy, the chapter turns to consider both how the notion of opacity might fruitfully inform a rethinking of the value of transparency in contemporary media culture and how artists might use a poetics of opacity as a tool of political resistance.

As we have seen in a previous chapter, in the work of Glissant and some of his Antillean colleagues, opacity as a theoretical concept is closely aligned with a method of thick description known as *épaisseur* and with what Patrick Chamoiseau terms "the poetic approach." This method, or stance, is at least potentially capable of functioning as a tool of political resistance against the encroachment of neo-imperialism and global capitalism. Chamoiseau's support of this approach, while evidently rooted in the postcolonial tradition, also speaks to broader contemporary issues that have arisen with the emergence of what Clare Birchall calls the "datatariat," understood as "a 'class' encouraged to make use of and be used as data; a mass connected through data access, production, accumulation, and exploitation."[9] "For the datatariat," Birchall claims, data constitute "the prime currency, vector, commodity, lifeblood."[10] The poetic approach, to Chamoiseau, is a way of mobilizing against a myopic economic logic and the management of life by data. "We're facing a rationality

[9] Clare Birchall, "Aesthetics of the Secret," *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 83 (2014): 25–46; 26.

[10] Ibid.

that has forgotten about the poetic," Chamoiseau complains, "[w]hat Glissant and I have tried to do in most of our work is to reinstate the forgotten, poetic dimension of the political… that which organizes the city of men and allows peoples to come into their own."[11] We might consider the poetic as a particular vernacular within whose remit the thickness of experience is conveyed. The Caribbean philosophers' use of the term *épaisseur* certainly evokes the ethnographic concept of thick description, associated with Gilbert Ryle and popularized by Clifford Geertz, who in a key text on the subject defines the objective of anthropology as "the enlargement of the universe of human discourse."[12] Here, I would like to suggest that *épaisseur* as both a hermeneutic and communicative practice would seem to complement the deployment of opacity in Glissant's and Chamoiseau's thinking. In the context of their work, opacity is not principally about uncommunicativeness or the deliberate withholding or vitiation of information. It is, rather, an approach, an attitude—and possibly even an aesthetics—that seeks to safeguard a subject or a phenomenon against the threat of reducibility. On this view, unknowability is preferable to essentialism.

The migration of the concept of opacity from a postcolonial to a neoliberal setting has provided an opportunity for reexamining its critical potential. For contemporary technocratic cultures, transparency appears to be so much of an ideal that not only open-endedness and ambiguity but even the practices of reading and interpretation themselves have become disagreeable to the system. There is also a sense in which the neoliberal governance of populations by transparency is perceived as apolitical management, thus dubiously muddling the boundary between politics and administration. In this scenario, the purview of opacity extends beyond the protection of the irreducibility of the colonial subject to encompass every individual confronted with new regimes of monitoring, surveillance, and observability or with what I above have termed the "ominous politics of luminosity."[13] In *24/7*, to return again to Crary's book, he discusses these regimes in terms of their "institutional intolerance of whatever obscures or prevents an instrumentalized and unending condition of

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[11] Patrick Chamoiseau as quoted and translated by Nicole Simek, "Stubborn Shadows," *symploke*, 23.1–2 (2015): 363–373; 367.

[12] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, 14.

[13] See page X above.

visibility."[14] On Crary's reading, we recall, neoliberal politics wages a war against what he calls "the otherness that is the motor of historical change."[15] Such a dismal diagnosis implies that transparency can be an oppressive force, suggesting as its unsurprising antithesis opacity. But, as Nicole Simek has argued, to endow the concept with a uniquely transgressive power would be a mistake; in this matter, too, the point is perhaps not so much what opacity really *is* as *how* it materializes.[16] There is not necessarily anything *intrinsically* seditious or progressive about, for instance, opaque images. We are likewise wrong to assume that opacity can only mean total impenetrability. Wisely, Simek ties the notion of the opaque to reading as a political act, to the possibilities for discernment that reading provides. This is how Simek encourages us to consider the notion of opacity:

> the idea of a stubborn density, of something layered, something partially penetrable but with a mind of its own, seems to me a more productive way of thinking about opacity, a more productive way of harnessing its power of critique its ability to shift assumptions and feelings so that new modes of relating, new criteria of evaluation can be developed.[17]

For Simek, reading as a cultural practice represents exposure to "conflict and ambiguity as a facet of social interaction," whereas non-reading entails "a faith in the evacuation of conflict and opacity altogether through technical means."[18] The basic conflict drawn up here seems to be the one between the transparency of big data and the complexity of hermeneutic interpretation.

Several contemporary painters, photographers, filmmakers, and media artists participate in aesthetic practices that all in different ways confront and critique the "thin description" of the datatariat. In what follows, I want to draw attention to the work of the aforementioned Blas as well as to that of Adam Harvey, Leo Selvaggio, and Sterling Crispin, who share a common interest in the construction of anti-facial recognition masks. Used in CCTV cameras throughout urban spaces, in subways and airports, in drones, as well as for automatic number plate detection, facial

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[14] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London: Verso, 2013, 9.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Simek, 372.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

recognition technology facilitates the algorithmic identification of faces. It is also found in Facebook's photo-tagging service. The thing about this kind of technology is that its mechanisms remain invisible. Algorithmic operations compute data at an astonishing speed, rendering the phenomena unobservable and thereby, as Patricia de Vries has noted, "ungraspable."[19] The relationship between the subject and technologies for data capture is oddly asymmetrical. On the one hand, facial recognition devices gather and stockpile biopolitical information about the individual; on the other, these technologies are themselves phenomenologically unavailable to us. This imbalance generates a particular form of unease concerning the integrity of the self in the face of data capture technologies. The datafied, information-driven regime of which facial recognition tools are a symptom could be seen as one materialization of what Gilles Deleuze calls *societies of control*, embodied by the corporation and replacing what Michel Foucault terms *disciplinary societies*, embodied by institutions like the school, the factory, and the prison. In his "Postscript on the Societies of Control," Deleuze works through a set of oppositions that differentiate the former from the latter. Where disciplinary societies are marked by enclosures, machines, numbers, products, and labor, societies of control are defined by dispersion, computers, code, services, and debt. But most pertinent to the current issue, Deleuze's societies of control turn individuals into "masses, samples, data, markets, or '*banks*'."[20] In short, societies of control essentially commodify identity and reduce subjectivity to data.[21]

For some critics and artists, resisting the new control regimes entails imaginative acts of concealment and escape. The process of making visible that undergirds data capture technology motivates various methods of disappearance as well as enactments of invisibility. Adam Harvey's project *CV Dazzle* (2010) makes use of computer vision camouflage inspired by the so-called dazzle painting applied to World War I warships to dodge surveillance systems. The object is not to hide but rather to baffle the

[19] Patricia de Vries, "Dazzles, Decoys, and Deities: The Janus Face of Anti-Facial Recognition Masks," *Platform: Journal of Media and Communication*, 8.1 (2017): 72–86.

[20] Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," October, 59: 1992, 3–7; 5.

[21] For a comprehensive study of the colonization of contemporary life by economical models under neoliberalism, see Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. See also Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight For a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London: Profile Books, 2019.

software so that it fails to read a face. In his *CV Dazzle Workshop*, Harvey invites the patrons to design and try out their own maquillage and hairstyles, resulting in the manufacture of a kind of negative face. A different aesthetics informs the masks created by Leo Selvaggio for his URME project (2014), which lets users wear a 3D-printed hard resin prosthetic of the artist's face so that whenever they are exposed to facial recognition software their face gets identified as that of Selvaggio himself, thus concealing their own identities from the cameras. Sterling Crispin's *Data-Masks* series (2013–2015) crafts face masks from reverse engineering facial detection algorithms. The human-like visages that form the basis of the 3D-printed masks are generated by the operations of the algorithms, and the artist has described these masks as "animistic deities brought out of the algorithmic-spirit-world of the machine."[22] Crispin's aim is to make tangible the procedures of a *technological other* that reads us and configures our identity according to its own parameters.[23] His *Data-Masks* undertaking inverts the relationship alluded to above between facial recognition systems and the individual, in that the masks make visible certain components of the "invisible power structures" that govern the technology while at the same time hiding the identity of the person who wears them.[24] A similar intention characterizes the work of Blas, which could be understood as his response to the possible threat facial recognition technologies pose with regard to reproducing the odious pseudoscientific practices of the nineteenth century. Like Crispin, Blas is committed to visualizing how data capture systems scan human faces and to thwarting their computation by manufacturing face masks that are unreadable to the technology. The masks that comprise his *Facial Weaponization Suite* are nebulous objects devised to safeguard the self against the perils of *informatics visibility* and *total quantification*, which both are phenomena that crush alterity and reduce the self to mere data.[25]

A series of community workshops geared toward LGBT groups and other minorities also form part of the *Facial Weaponization Suite* project, and the activist underpinnings of all these works are clear enough. The masks are made in order to be worn by protesters occasionally taking part

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[22] Sterling Crispin, "*Data-Masks* (Series)," http://sterlingcrispin.com/data-masks.html, accessed October 9, 2018.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] de Vries, 75, 78.

in acts of civil disobedience. In this, artists like Blas, Crispin, Selvaggio, and Harvey inscribe themselves into a larger iconoclastic tradition of dissenters like the Zapatistas, Anonymous, and Pussy Riot. The masks are one instantiation of what de Vries calls "sociotechnical imaginaries," which we might comprehend as critical and creative interpolations, performances, or mediations that reconfigure the fraught territory between emergent technologies and the social sphere.[26] They partake in what Alexander Galloway sees as "the politicization of absence- and presence-oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance."[27] What seems at stake for artists-activists like Blas is nothing less than the political-legal state as well as the ontological status of the human itself, which as a result of smart technologies, artificial intelligence, and robotics have arrived at a point of existential crisis. While de Vries is ultimately skeptical of projects like *Data-Masks* and *Facial Weaponization Suite*, claiming that the artists merely replicate the fallacious binary logic of human and machine that they wanted to suspend, the masks nonetheless enact a form of identity revision that challenges the classificatory regimes of technological rationality and neoliberal capitalism. Ethnicity, race, and gender get largely obfuscated by the wearing of these masks, which represent a mode of unidentifiability and unrecognizability that chimes with Glissant's and Chamoiseau's belief in opacity as an instrument of political and existential emancipation.

What I also want to suggest is that the performance of opacity that the face masks of Blas, Selvaggio, Harvey, and Crispin enable could also be seen as an expression of a cosmopolitan ethics. The emphasis on global citizenship that threads through philosophies of cosmopolitanism from Diogenes of Sinope and St. Paul to the Immanuel Kant of *Perpetual Peace* (1795) and onto modern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and Kwame Anthony Appiah presupposes a universal morality and equality that in order to work has to be, in a metaphorical sense, faceless. But the larger point that I would like to make here involves a different facet of the notion of cosmopolitanism, one that surfaces in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and, later, in that of Paul Gilroy. As I have shown elsewhere, Levinas's ethics—grounded in the irreducibility and vulnerability of the

[26] de Vries, 73.
[27] Alexander Galloway, "Black Box Black Bloc," in *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader*, eds. Arthur Kroker & Marilouise Kroker, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 224.

Other and the demands that this makes on the subject—shares a close affinity with Glissant's poetics of opacity.[28] For both Levinas and Glissant, in our encounter with the Other, her alterity needs to be preserved; for the latter, as we have seen, this becomes possible through techniques of opacity and thick description. In his text "The Planet," Paul Gilroy argues that exposure to Otherness is essential to the task of fostering the value of diversity. For him, a commitment to cosmopolitanism thus entails a "methodical cultivation of a degree of estrangement from one's own culture and history."[29] The simultaneous spectacle and opacity of the face masks visualize at once the alterity and universality of the self; in the words of Appiah, they are "universality plus difference."[30]

In the remainder of this chapter I want to examine more closely how the staging of opacity through the use of facemasks disrupts both the principles of neoliberal governance and the intransigent subscription to the techniques of datafication that tends to accompany it. But in order to grasp the wider context for this disruption, it is apposite first to assess the nature of the philosophy of devaluation that undergirds neoliberal doctrine. As Wendy Brown has compellingly argued, neoliberalism is something more than just a particular rationale for conducting economic affairs, routinely associated with deregulation, privatization, free markets, tax reduction, and cuts in welfare. In addition, and far more ominously, it also represents "a normative order of reason" that "configures all aspects of existence in economic terms."[31] This order, which in its fundamental mode of operation resembles a Foucauldian regime, poses a threat to the conditions of democracy itself, which is an overarching concern in Brown's research. When "all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics," she writes, the political essence of the democratic is evacuated and supplanted by an economic one.[32] One telling indication of this shift, for Brown, is Obama's State of the Union speech in January 2013, in which the president in no uncertain terms conveyed

[28] See Asbjørn Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 200.

[29] Paul Gilroy, "The Planet," *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia*, London: Routledge, 2004, 75.

[30] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Education for Global Citizenship," *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 107.1 (2008): 83–99.

[31] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015, 10; 17.

[32] Ibid., 10.

that the primary aim of his administration was economic growth and that democratic ideals such as liberty and equality were simply means toward the attainment of that objective. The repercussions of such a transference of power from the political to the economic are potentially severe. At stake is the sheer capacity to imagine a specific content for democratic institutions in the future. For all its plasticity and historically variable appearances, what epitomizes neoliberalism is its anti-Keynesianism and its construal of the individual and the state on the model of the corporation. Like the firm, the individual is seen as a project to be managed for the optimalization of capital value. What Koray Caliskan and Michel Callon term "economization" have momentous consequences for present-day democracies.[33] As delineated by Brown, these are rising inequality (documented in research by Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, Thomas Piketty, Amartya Sen, Robert Reich, and others); monetization of sectors considered to be external to the logic of the Market, such as education and health care; corporatization of the state; and, finally, global financial volatility. Whether intended or not, the ideology of reduction that vitally informs the neoliberal regime is anathema to realizing the possibilities of the human, which, in the words of Brown, are attainable "not through" but "beyond" the realm of the economic.

An ideological order founded on the omnipotence of the economic has no use for any notion of the social,[34] but it requires a particular kind of governance, one that subscribes to the same totalitarian imaginary problematized by Crary as well as to the "soft power" intrinsic to Deleuze's societies of control. Central to this managerial logic are the tangled techniques of transparency, quantification, and datafication, practices designed to root out forces of complexity and uncertainty; in short, anything that might pose a threat to and undermine the depthlessness of neoliberalism's economic regime. As a classificatory enterprise, the computationally enabled detection of faces utilized in CCTV and other surveillance systems, as well as in a range of social media and smartphone applications, constitutes just such a practice of quantitative measurement, devised to translate particularity into pre-existing taxonomies. While critics have been

[33] Koray Caliskan and Michel Callon, "Economization, Part 1: Shifting Attention from the Economy Towards Processes of Economization," *Economy and Society*, 38.3 (2009): 369–398.

[34] See Wendy Brown, "The Big Picture: Defending Society," *Public Books*, October 10, 2017, https://www.publicbooks.org/the-big-picture-defending-society/, accessed January 17, 2019.

quick to point out the similarity of such systems of biopolitical cataloguing to the disgraced science of physiognomy,[35] the fact remains that some computational technologies (e.g., Affectiva) for facial detection have adopted the historically contingent constellation of basic emotions originally put forward by Charles Darwin.[36] But the concern over facial recognition systems goes deeper, one problem being that the technology is grounded in a set of presuppositions that have proven dubious, if not untenable. The digital coding of both facial identity and emotion is fraught with equivocality, but the latter is particularly tentative because uncertainties exist already on a semantic, pre-computational level and, not the least, because the coded image is ill equipped to register the temporal dimension of the human face as an expressive medium. As communication scholars Thomas Bjørnsten and Mette-Marie Sørensen point out, technologies such as Affectiva rely on a model which presumes that emotions are "traceable as fixed points in the face," not "socially contingent and relational."[37] The human face is subject to the variabilities of a continuous temporal unfolding, and hence its expressive qualities cannot be adequately captured by inert images. Even leaving aside the questionable assumption that the site of emotion is the face rather than the body, the implicit premise underlying facial recognition technology that the face possesses an invariable, static identity seems rather infelicitous. Although the body is an entity from which various data can be extracted effortlessly, this does not mean that the body is isomorphic with these data.[38]

Besides duration, another aspect of the face not easily acquirable for automated detection systems is its cultural sculpting. For the Deleuze and

[35] See, for instance, Joseph Pugliese, *Biometrics: Bodies, Technologies, Biopolitics*, New York: Routledge, 2010, and Shoshana Magnet, *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Consult also Zach Blas, "Informatic Opacity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, 9 (2014), http://www.joaap.org/issue9/zachblas.htm, accessed January 21, 2019.

[36] Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* [1872], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

[37] Thomas Bøgevald Bjørnsten and Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen, "Uncertainties of Facial Emotion Recognition Technologies and the Automation of Emotional Labour," *Digital Creativity*, 28.4 (2017): 297–307; 299.

[38] For another illuminating study of the biopolitical management of the individual and its rendering of people into categories, see also Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

Guattari of *A Thousand Plateaus*, the face is nothing if not political,[39] and in his magisterial work on the twin histories of the face and the mask, art historian Hans Belting contends that the face "is just as much the expression that we give it as it is the result of evolution."[40] Through this expressivity, fueled in part by paint, make-up, tattoos, glasses, piercings, veils, and various surgical procedures, the face becomes something malleable, an unfinished project. For Belting, the mask and its attendant cultural histories also form part of the history of the face, which in turn trails the anthropological history of media.[41] Seen in this context, the different masks that Blas, Crispin, Selvaggio, and Harvey engineer etch themselves into a long tradition of regarding the mask as an intrinsic part of the concept of the face, a proxy or facsimile that gradually became a disguise. But then again, in relation to the subject's interiority, the face is always also a mask. What is more, the obsession with facial modification through biomedical techniques is revealing of the extent to which the face is a cultural object defined by plasticity rather than just a biological entity with fixed features easily scanned by facial detection systems.[42]

From the Facial Action Coding Systems developed by Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen in the late 1970s to the Affdex apps, the method of managing the human face as an unvarying image composed of distinctive segments and points brushes up against a number of problems, then. Not only is the face subject to the changes that inevitably occur in durative conditions—and not only are the emotions that manifest themselves through it far from straightforwardly interpretable—but it is also powerfully shaped by cultural affects that are too convoluted for machine-based analysis. But even this is not the whole story. An image is never completely isomorphic with the pre-photographic object, no matter how high the resolution. A face, Agamben writes, is the site of a profound openness.[43]

[39] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, London: Athlone Press, 1987. See also Jenny Edkins, *Face Politics*, London: Routledge 2015, and Heather Laine Talley, *Saving Face: Disfigurement and the Politics of Appearance*, New York: New York University Press, 2014.

[40] Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History*, trans. Thomas S. Hansen & Abby J. Hansen, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, 3.

[41] Ibid., 6; 1.

[42] Heather Laine Talley, *Saving Face: Disfigurement and the Politics of Appearance*, New York: New York University Press, 2014.

[43] Giorgio Agamben, "The Face," *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000, 98.

In a way, it is a representation even before it is being represented in any given medium. But when this site becomes an image, if anything its complexity deepens. As Paul Coates observes, the filmic face is self-referential; it becomes "a surface haunted by intimations of concealment, interiority and exteriority."[44] Such a surface forms a zone of indetermination. However, this is not how the modern, digital image has come to be seen. On the contrary, as the editors of a special issue of the journal *Digital Creativity* hold, "discursive and practical employments of images today can very often be seen as affirming and reaffirming certainty via marked returns to emphasizing high resolution, sharpness, clarity and realistic representation."[45] But as easily manipulable digital images proliferate, so does their liability. The apparent surge in technologically enhanced clarity is offset by a correlated intensification of murky images, which introduce a certain level of "representational undecidability."[46] These "uncertain images," which is the term the aforementioned editors use to describe current forms of opacity, shape visual culture on many levels: they influence the production of knowledge, institute themselves into various power relations, reshuffle ethical values, and function as arbiters in all kinds of socially and politically precarious contexts.

The human face is also a specimen of the uncertain image. Its emotional content never fully available to linguistic paraphrase, as Béla Balázs notes in *Visible Man*, the face likewise resists the computational measurements of Affdex and similar systems.[47] "We do not gain any useful interpretation of the actual face," Bjørnsten and Sørensen state, "but rather the result of an algorithmic idea of mapped features that align with metrics optimized for efficient calculations."[48] But if the face is already touched by an untranslatable inscrutability, are not the contestatory masks of Blas, Crispin, Harvey, Selvaggio, and others redundant or even gratuitous? Here, I want to argue that the masks might not only be tasked with preventing identification, but that another purpose is to trouble the flagrant reductionism inherent in facial recognition systems. The kind of reading this technology promulgates is shallow and based on correspondences of

[44] Paul Coates, *Screening the Face*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 2.

[45] Ulrik Ekman, Daniela Agostinho, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup & Kristin Veel, "The Uncertainty of the Uncertain Image," *Digital Creativity*, 28.4 (2017): 255–264; 255.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010.

[48] Bjørnsten & Sørensen, 306.

an exterior nature. It records and registers surface information; data that not only capture a mere fraction of the subject's identity but which could also potentially be misleading when it comes to suggesting or relaying information of a more inferential kind. In short, facial detection practices generate information without knowledge.

Such systems betray a faith in the transparency of data so blind that it ironically threatens to stifle their informational value. The reliance on analogical correspondences, on matching identities, breeds only repetition, the dull reoccurrence of the same. Works like *Data-Masks*, *CV Dazzle*, *Facial Weaponization Suite*, and the URME project, in contradistinction, seem related to what Janet Wolff has called the aesthetics of uncertainty, art whose deliberate or unintentional opacities massage our imagination in productive ways.[49] Pondering the function and meanings of the masks that Blas, Crispin, and the others manufacture, I was reminded of the existence of other masks; more specifically, my own. It was my oldest daughter who made them for me. The first one was my Snapchat avatar. She thought my account looked a little slipshod without one, so she constructed a face for me. There was some resemblance there. She got my hairstyle just about right, although the color was a tad darker. Against the square, yellow, and punctured Snapchat background, my new face stared back at me with vivid yet ultimately expressionless blue eyes. She was eleven or twelve at the time, and I thought she did a great job. For Christmas a year or two later, she gave me a new face, this time an analog one. It was a mask made of clay, a sturdy and fairly heavy object the crafting of which seemed to have required a certain level of effort and care. I noticed right away that the color of the hair and the eyebrows was almost exactly the same as that of my Snapchat avatar. My ceramic lips were a bright burgundy, my somewhat protruding eyes a severe blue. If a particular look could be extrapolated from my handcrafted countenance, I would say it was one of minor worry. Delighted to receive a present that was not, say, a tie, but instead something so endearingly homespun, I still wondered what to do with it. So I brought it to my office. I tried wearing it, my new face, but it was not quite compatible, size-wise. If it were to replace my old face, I would look chronically concerned.

Being a solid, tree-dimensional object, my new mask occasioned a meditation upon the relationship between, on the one hand, opacity and, on the other, the density and tactility of things. Unlike screen images, the

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[49] Janet Wolff, *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

mask is not a surface. It has a certain volume. There is a force of resistance embedded within its materiality. If I wore it in real life, it would serve as a disguise; an unchanging, motionless, uncommunicative face, a frozen grimace negating all transparency. Although entirely different media, there is a peculiar equivalence between ceramic masks and photography. Both embalm the face. Both represent stasis. Belting talks about this relationship in the context of technological history:

> Instead of creating faces that are reproducible in the photograph with an immediacy and mechanical precision never before achieved (apparently without the intervention of the human eye), modern technology was ultimately just creating masks. As a result, the nearly obsessive invention of new image media (beginning with film) from the turn of the twentieth century on was triggered by a flight from the mask. The hope was to banish the inert mask from the moving picture. Photography had shown something that was no longer a face, but in the next moment had already become a memory in life. The so-called live image (the concept is deceptive) competed with life in the gap that photography had left behind.[50]

If one were to follow Belting's argument, photography—including identificatory images—is a creator of masks. As a stasis-inducing technology, photography is naturally incapable of capturing the flow of time, the power of duration without which experience and being become impossible.[51] When biopolitical governance is converting the face into "a quantitative code, template, and standardized form of measure,"[52] what is being refashioned is something that in a way is already a mask. In light of such image philosophical considerations, the masks of the artists referred to above might be found to disguise something that is itself a disguise. What, then, is their real purpose? I want to suggest, first of all, that even though these artistic objects and, say, a passport photo could all conceptually be regarded as masks, they vastly differ in terms of usage. While the sole value of the latter lies in its referential and identificational function, the former's shapeless features grant its wearer at least temporary anonymity. Put differently,

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[50] Belting, 205.

[51] For a vivid example of the dynamics of cinematic duration and faciality, consider Abbas Kiarostami's 2008 film *Shirin*, as well as my reading of it. See Asbjørn Grønstad, "Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin* and the Aesthetics of Ethical Intimacy, *Film Criticism*, 37.2 (2012): 22–37.

[52] Blas, "Escaping."

the photograph as a biopolitical mask arrests identity, while the facemasks release it. Secondly, the artificial masks must be understood, I would like to contend, in the context both of play and playfulness as well as of resistance and revolt. There is a hint of the carnivalesque in Selvaggio's URME project and in Crispin's *Data-Masks*, for instance, a desire to overturn social expectations about the locus of agency and the nature of the face. This ludic dimension suggests a kinship with Chamoiseau's "poetic approach," or *épaisseur*, the thickness of a heterogeneous experience of the world in which relations are always liquid and shifting.