

“Capturing” a Face

Zach Blas interviewed
by Julia Kaganskiy

The following is a conversation from April 10, 2020, between artist Zach Blas (ZB) and curator Julia Kaganskiy (JK).

Julia Kaganskiy:

Let's start at the beginning. How did you first become interested in biometric surveillance as a subject of research?

Zach Blas:

I started to take an interest in biometrics—and facial recognition specifically—around 2009. I came to the technology in an indirect way. I have always had a longstanding interest in the face and queerness. For instance, when I would go to drag shows I would be so struck by the face as a site of transformation. These queer faces spoke to my interest in queerness not as an identity category but as a practice that pushes against dominant norms and hegemonies. My excitement around queer faces led me down numerous research pathways, and I eventually came upon studies of biometric facial recognition. I immediately viewed it as a queer problem, in that a major goal of the technology is to achieve a global standard for identifying, verifying, and categorizing faces. My first thought was, “This is a uniquely and extremely anti-queer approach to the face that is quickly gaining popularity around the world.” In 2009 my interest in biometrics wasn't so much about surveillance but rather the ways in which biometrics can reduce the complexities of identity—the ways this technology puts forth a definition of identity as that which can be digitally measured off the surface of a face.

JK:

So it's about the way that these technologies of computer vision tend to flatten and erase difference by using supposedly universal standards to interpret the body or the face.

ZB:

Yes, exactly. I have tended to think of this around *capture*, a term I prefer over *surveillance*, as it more directly evokes the queer critique I've explored in my artwork. Capture as modes of computational standardization that permit a digital system to recognize and interpret. Of course, biometrics has evolved so much in recent years. Biometric innovation today is heavily driven by artificial intelligence, which complicates the capture paradigm as issues of prediction and generation enter the playing field.

JK:
How does this particular form of capture differ from the photographic capture of an image, of a moment in time?

ZB:
Simply put, I think it is a difference between visuality and informatics. When a computer “sees” a face, a computational process is underway. One should not assume there is by default something visual happening, at least as the visual is typically understood by human perception and representation. Capture is informatic, and when this becomes an image as we know it, an act of mediation has occurred, which transforms the gathered data into a visual representation.

JK:
That’s a really nice distinction. I’m curious about whether there are any historical precedents you look to in your exploration of biometric technology that maybe trace the development of these two paradigms, or that you find to be particularly useful in navigating these two domains of the visual and informatic.

ZB:
For proto-biometric endeavors, the nineteenth century is rich with pseudoscientific examples from the areas of anthropometry and phrenology. Alphonse Bertillon is seen as a crucial interlocutor today, as his system for tracking recidivist criminals in France included numerous bodily measurements alongside photographs. I find that his model matches well with how biometric information and photographs of a person are now typically required by citizens of many countries, as well as travelers crossing national borders. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso offers another, perhaps more disturbing model, as he once argued that an individual is born a criminal, and that the type of crime can be determined from cranial measurements. While such “scientific research” may appear dismissible, it is easy to locate a neo-Lombrosian sentiment in AI-driven facial recognition studies of the present. A 2016 study out of Shanghai Jiao Tong University has argued that artificial intelligence can successfully predict if someone will be a criminal through facial feature analysis. This echoes earlier scientific studies I was quite taken by that claim an individual can be identified as gay or straight based on rapidly exposing their face to

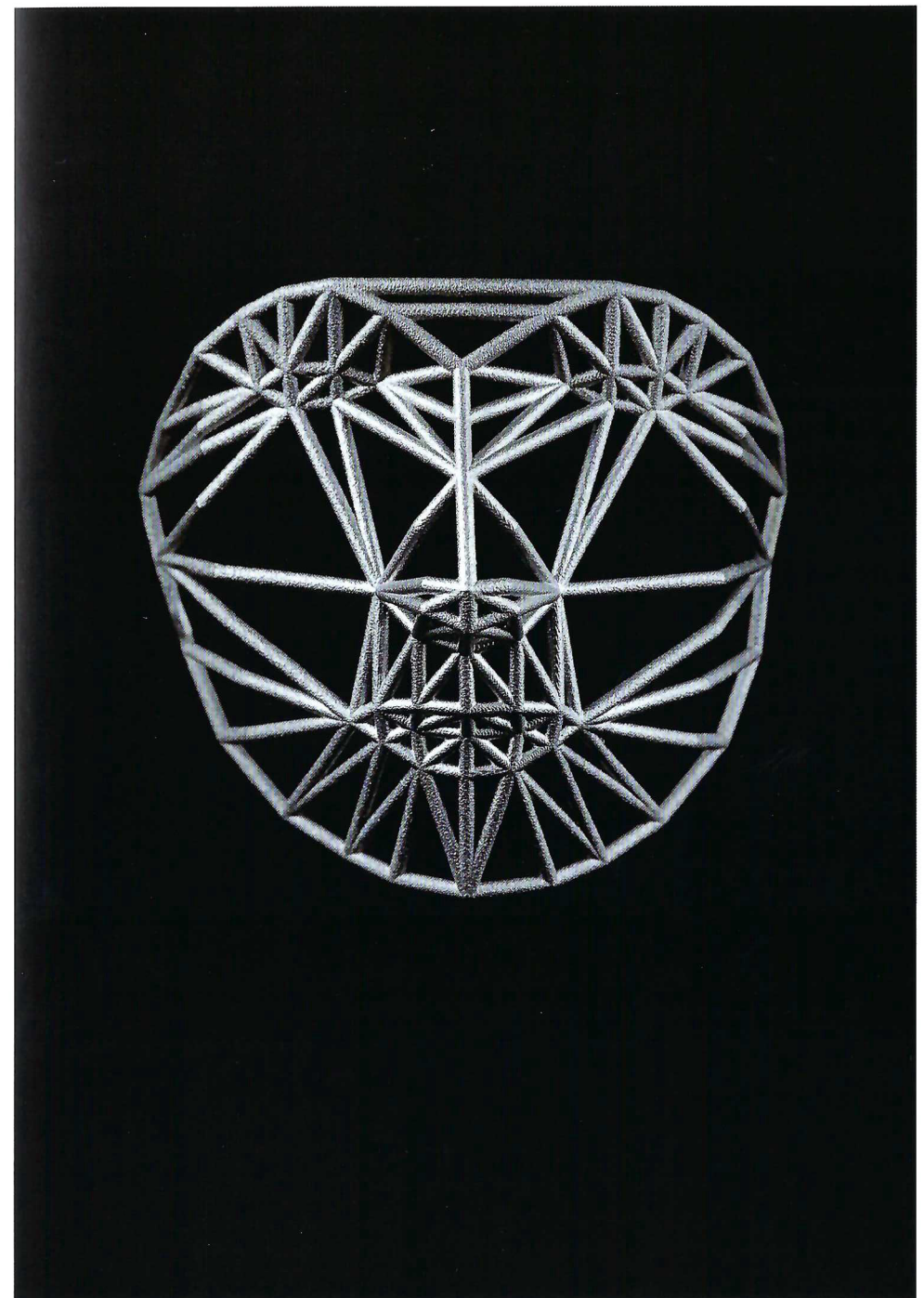
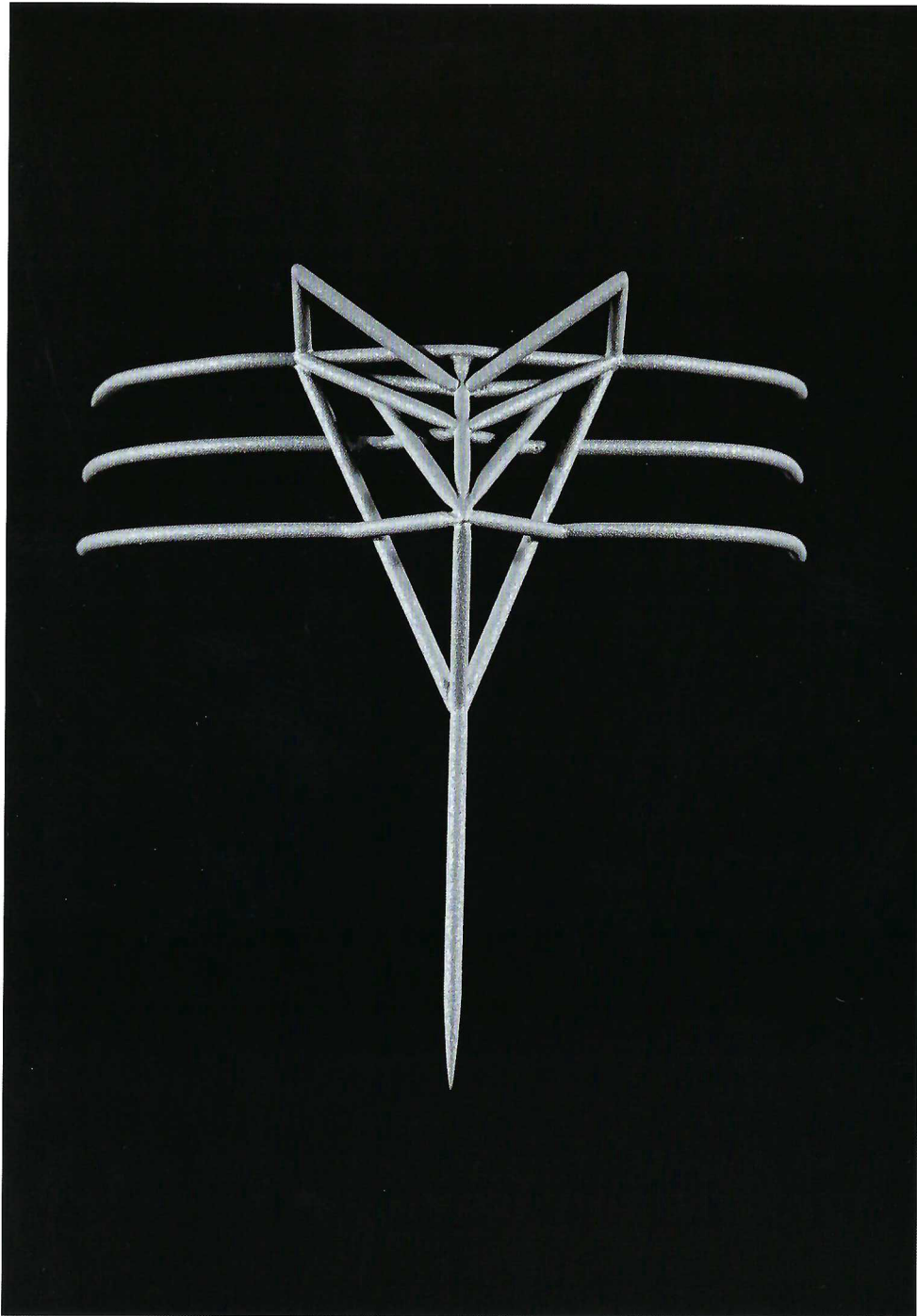
another person. This all provokes vast, pressing questions about the implications of understanding faces as primarily biometric.

JK:
You’ve talked about this idea of “computational violence” in the past. I’m thinking about it now in connection to informatics, measurement, calculation, and standardization through metrics. Is the attempt to create some sort of rational, calculable understanding of the body what creates “computational violence” as enacted through algorithms and machines?

ZB:
I think there is a philosophical dimension worth considering further here. In my work *Face Cages* I was exploring computational violence through biometric capture. Capture is a technical term, but it also comes with a worldview: that things can indeed be successfully measured, which in turn provides access to truth. The trick here is that something is *not* always captured. So what is left out, excluded, even punished by this worldview?

JK:
It’s also interesting to think about how biometrics is increasingly moving below the surface. Today, for instance, we’re talking in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic when governments and companies are using biometric technology to detect fever in individuals and populations, or to track their movement across borders. So above-the-skin biometric analysis is now paired with below-the-skin biometric analysis, adding another layer of information and supposedly making these technologies even more precise, thus opening the door to techniques like “affective computing,” which claim to be able to read people’s emotions.

ZB:
Such an important point to raise. I started work on *Face Cages* in 2013, and we are some years ahead of that now. In the meantime, biometrics have further developed and even shifted focus. At the level of the body there are still gestural biometrics, like gait recognition, and also the continuous refining of “soft” biometrics like age, gender, and race. So *Face Cages* is already a bit outdated! But I hope the work



still evokes this politicized issue of standardized measurement and the violence that comes from reducing the embodied situatedness of people. Today, a robust engagement with biometrics would need to move at these different scales above, below, and at the body. I stayed with the face given my queer interests, and the face really is a battleground these days.

JK:

I know that your thinking evolved quite a bit from the *Face Cages* work to *SANCTUM*, and I was hoping you could speak about that. What changed for you?

ZB:

Face Cages took a biometric mode of measuring that people often do not see and physicalized it as weighty, violent objects. When these computational calculations of faces were turned into steel face cages, amazingly, they did not fit the faces of the performers well at all, which contradicts the entire premise of biometrics as accurately apprehending the surface of faces. The artwork is performing this disjunction between the violence of biometric abstraction and the messy fleshiness of being human. The metal face cages were meant to formally and historically resonate with prison bars, handcuffs, torture devices used on slaves—a long history of facial violence and punishment. The installation itself is like a police lineup, and the portraits a kind of biometric mug shot.

With *SANCTUM* I reworked my previous artworks on biometric facial recognition, including *Face Cages*, to make an immersive, environmental piece that is much more morally complex because desire is at its center. *SANCTUM* looks like a BDSM dungeon but also a detention center, club, and religious temple (see pp. 70–71). There is a black mask control figure in the space that watches over a group of “generic mannequins”—which are the cartoon-like figures found on the interfaces of airport body scanners—as they get ambiguously pleased and punished. *SANCTUM* is about the desire to submit oneself to digital surveillance systems, even if one is aware such acquiescence might have an adverse, negative impact. It is about the very pleasure one takes in performing such a submission. This could look like providing free data to a corporate and/or governmental

platform, or enjoying a pat-down by a security agent at the airport. At its core, *SANCTUM* is trying to tap into how dynamics of BDSM have been appropriated and reimagined by surveillance and security systems today. About ten years ago I saw a drag king performance in Oakland based on a TSA agent and an airport passenger. This really stayed with me, as queer culture is always fast to pick up on the desire and sexuality lurking in power dynamics.

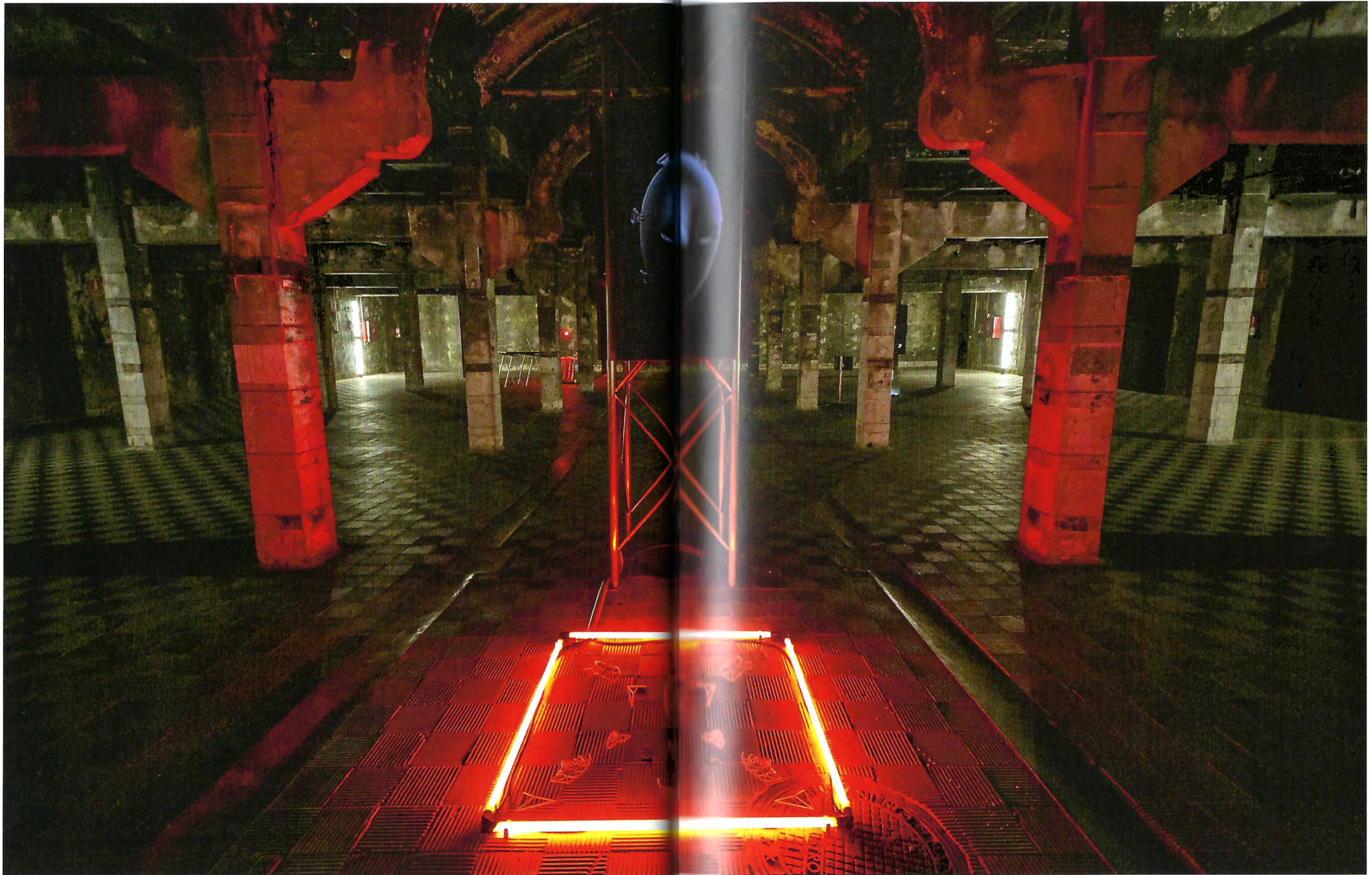
At certain moments in *SANCTUM*, the black mask figure explodes into a dizzying rollercoaster of biometric diagrams, like a face cage blowing up to form a whole environment. As the biometric facial forms swirl about, a demonic voice chants “Ride my face.” Desire, as we know, is rarely politically correct.

JK:

I’ve always loved how *SANCTUM* brings in this idea of pleasure and performativity in terms of the way that we perform for capture systems and the tension between visibility and invisibility, between violence and desire. Thinking about the violence of capture, it strikes me that there’s a double violence that occurs for bodies that are not seen or are seen as deviant—both when they are rendered invisible, and then again through the process of capture itself.

ZB:

I call this a paradox of recognition. On the one hand, people fall out of being seen, of being biometrically recognized, and this can cause serious problems and political vulnerabilities. For instance, transgender people may be misgendered at a security checkpoint. There are plenty of practical reasons for why one would want to be visible to the state. Yet, on the other hand, even under the threat of the potential dangers of invisibility, there is a desire—or even a utopian drive—to fully escape these modes of recognition, or all forms of dominant recognition. The collective, masked protests of Anonymous, the Zapatistas, and black blocs in France all communicate this in various ways. There is a real tangle of vectors of recognition and opacity here that can’t be undone so easily. *SANCTUM* evokes this knot: are the generic mannequins being pleased or detained or both? Impossible to determine.



Installation view of Zach Blas, *SANCTUM*, 2018, Abierto x Obras, Madrid, Spain,



JK:

Do you see works like *SANCTUM* as attempting to open up some sort of new possibilities in terms of how we might navigate a world that is increasingly policed through biometric surveillance? I think we've gotten to a point where artists simply exposing these invisible systems and power dynamics feels like not enough.

ZB:

SANCTUM isn't about new possibilities. Rather, I'd say it's about laying certain fantasies bare and creating spaces where power is in a state of contestation. This isn't so much about pointing to invisible systems but instead making experiential the political unconscious of security. *SANCTUM* is that political unconscious spatialized, formed as a world. The key fantasy I see operative here is a digital reimagining of the cinematic genre of body horror. The generic mannequin of airport body scanners is the protagonist in this body horror remake. This is fascinating to me because classic body horror films from the 1980s, like David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *The Fly*, are quite gory and depict bodies getting ripped open, oozing, bleeding. But in the digital body horror of *SANCTUM*, there are no blood and guts, only silent, digital figures. The aim here is for the artwork to make the link between the fantasies of digital body horror and the workings of security and surveillance intensively sensorial.

JK:

That's interesting because *SANCTUM* is a work you feel very viscerally. You enter into a dungeon-like space and immediately a dark industrial soundtrack literally pumps through your body, and I'm sure for many there is a palpable discomfort at being confronted with BDSM, torture chamber-like aesthetics. I think there is a lot about that piece that produces strong physical sensations and makes you experience the work in an embodied way.

ZB:

I'm really happy to hear that. *SANCTUM* is a queer, digital body horror work for me, and I wanted that dynamic and genre to be felt and experienced in an immersive way. The same way an airport can feel immersive and all-consuming, or the same way trying to wrap your head around the workings of digital surveillance can feel

overwhelming. A mixture of horror and sex really nails this—at least for me.

JK:

As we wrap this up, I'm curious about how your experience with biometric research might affect the way you move through the world. Is it something that you think about? Do you try to modulate your own encounters with these systems?

ZB:

These questions always make me laugh. The expected virtuous response! I think there should be a difference, divide, or gap between the artwork and the lived reality. When I have made tools of resistance in my art practice, those are trying to touch something that is difficult to actually reach in the historical present. My work *Facial Weaponization Suite* is a case in point. These anti-biometric masks that I made were about evading detection from biometric recognition, but to think that the masks are just a disappearing device is to miss the bigger political demand, which is a claim for a right to opacity. And the thing is, one can't wear those masks in plenty of locations where one would want to, such as airport security. For me, the work is about longing for a world that is not possible to arrive at just yet. Because the point is not to be masked for the rest of one's life; the mask is a gesture or prop on the way to a transformative political horizon. That said, of course in my day-to-day realities I sometimes use encrypted messaging services but then some days I write to friends on Facebook Messenger. The modulation of my behavior is scattered at best and more likely chaotic. This is because critique and desire do not always align, which is what *SANCTUM* is all about. I'm just being honest, and that looks messy, contradictory, and vulnerable.

