Sanctum, 2018, video installation detail

Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033, 2018, video installation detail

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Zach Blas

The US-born, Toronto-based artist interrogates AI policing, biometric facial recognition and surveillance technologies, and predictive language, positing new forms of resistance and escape.

Over the past decade, multidisciplinary artist and writer Zach Blas has built a career at the intersections of critical philosophy and artistic inquiry, drawing on the desires, ideologies, dreams and mythologies that are intrinsic to the way we interface with digital and technological systems. Throughout his diverse film and installation work, Blas seeks to critique AI's predictive policing, techno-security, and the progressivist philosophical underbelly of Silicon Valley through a celebration of queer resistance, escape and futurity.
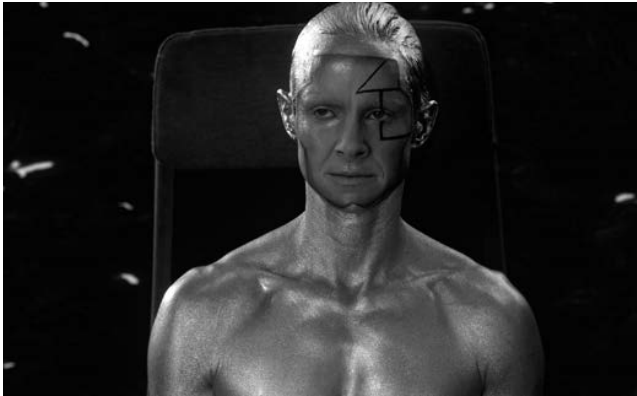
Blas's *Facial Weaponisation Suite*, 2012-14, is one example of his uniquely conceptual-material mode of inquiry. In this early work, Blas created an intervention into biometric facial-recognition technologies by designing a series of amorphous-looking masks that incorporated an aggregate of facial data from several participatory workshops. Through these data points, Blas created composite 'types' of face-altering masks; for instance, the combination of facial data from a cluster of queer men to create a non-representational mask that evades the increased biometric surveillance of queer lives. The work also highlights how the faces of people of colour cannot be accurately read by surveillance technology, revealing the ingrained racial biases written into the very codes of our state-crafted worlds.

In *Unknown Ideals*, writer and media theorist Alexander R Galloway posits a critical difference between abstraction as 'compressing the world by universalising it' and 'obliteration', which tends towards 'fuzzinesss or cloudiness' or erasing the world by making it 'less distinct'. Blas's masks evoke the latter, realising that queer and people of colour's survival might be through an obliteration of their legibility to state apparatuses. In the field of biometric surveillance, the human face is often weaponised against the person to whom it belongs; in Blas's work, the face – through abstraction and obliteration – becomes a weapon against those same systems of control and power. In turning pools of data on themselves, Blas imagines a biometric resistance, one attuned to the bodies and facial features of those subject to increased surveillance.

Blas's *Face Cages*, 2014–16, dramatises what the artist calls the 'abstract violence of the biometric diagram' by creating technological schemas of people most vulnerable to biometric scrutiny. Blas's series of three-dimensional metal 'cages' are painful and uncomfortable for their wearers, even though, following biometric logic, they should rest perfectly on the surfaces of the faces they were designed for. The pain and discomfort of these metal objects – which are shown in a video of four performers tasked with wearing the masks – exemplifies the ways in which bodies are not aligned even to their own biometrics. If *Facial Weaponisation Suite* obliterates the face, the abstractions of *Face Cages* reduce and extend the face as a vehicle of liberation and oppression. The ill-fitting masks mirror the failure of computerised biometric diagrams, signalling the physical rupture produced at the site of the biometric scan.
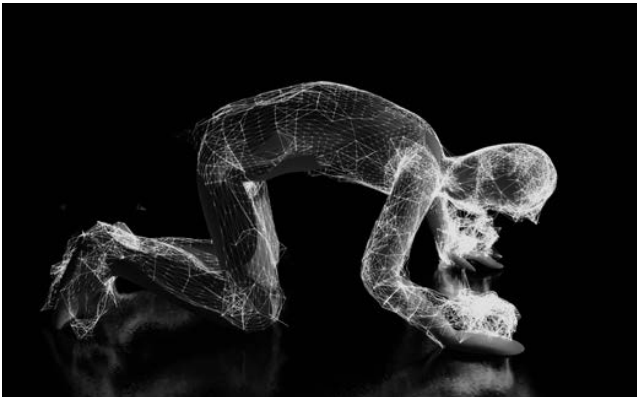
Facial Weaponisation Suite, 2012-14, workshop

Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033, 2018, a reimagination of Derek Jarman's 1978 film *Jubilee* and Paul B Preciado's cult 2016 book *Manifesto Contrasexual*, is a dizzyingly retro-punk alternative to the corporately owned surveillance networks that we are forced to engage in. Through live action and CGI, the film traverses nine discrete 'sections', each representing a distinct hybrid digital-physical space through which the characters travel. We see the writer Ayn Rand and her contemporaries on an acid trip at her New York apartment in 1955, a war-torn dystopian Silicon Valley and 3D-rendered spaces of network flows and a hallucinatory Silicon Beach. The film realises a future – or, indeed, our present – in which Rand's objectivist doctrine has now been fully realised, positing self-interest, selfishness and individual genius as its core values. The work ridicules Rand's 'perfect' moral and rational realisation of *laissez-faire* capitalism. In a particularly memorable scene, for instance, we see the group meet the character Nootropix (played by the performance artist Cassils), a naked silver-skinned prophet who shows them the wreckage of tech giants Google, Facebook and Apple. Throughout the film, Blas smartly reclaims Silicon Valley's co-option of the language of mysticism in order to imagine an internet beyond neoliberal values and network practices.

Further forms of magic and mysticism are found in Blas's *Icosahedron*, 2019, an artificially intelligent crystal ball that bafflingly reveals 'the future of prediction' and reflects on a world in which the supernatural is replaced with the artificial. Modelled after the mechanisms of a Magic 8 Ball, *Icosahedron* is programmed to spew visions of futurity, incorporating over 20 texts in the familiar Californian ideology-speak of Silicon Valley. *Icosahedron* is a materialist critique of the predictive language technologies that determine our realities and futures under late-stage capitalism.

Blas's playful take on futurity, as communicated to us through an 'immortal elf', finds absurdity in what he calls 'metric mysticism', a conglomeration of the spiritual and the technical.

In *Sanctum*, 2018, viewers are guided through an immersive, technologically advanced installation in which we hear an accompanying text by Blas entitled *Generic Mannequin Gets Fucked* – a digital-born crash-test dummy whose humanoid form is continuously subject to torture, capture and restraint. Blas seems to indicate how libidinal power dynamics are core facets of contemporary surveillance systems and, in our sugar-coated, sexualised rush to buy corporately sold technological freedoms, how ambivalence to another's pain – and perhaps even our own – is hardwired into them. The generic mannequin convulses and flails within its constraints, surrounded by BDSM instruments and tools reminiscent of a David Cronenberg film. The resulting affect is one of pleasure and pain, desire and constraint, hedonism and punishment.

In foregrounding speculative fiction and design in his art practice, Blas ponders what it means to think beyond and outside contemporary systems of surveillance and control. By conceptualising maker technologies as mechanisms that might be leveraged against capitalism and state oppression, Blas leaves viewers to consider how resistance might be leveraged beyond the gallery or the museum, moving from aesthetic to community-engaged modes of intervention.

Zach Blas's monograph *Unknown Ideals*, 2022, is published by Sternberg Press. His latest work will premiere at the MUNCH Triennale: 'The Machine is Us', at Munchmuseet, Oslo, from 1 October to 11 December.

Camille Intson is a Toronto-based artist and researcher.