BEYOND MATTER, WITHIN SPACE

Curatorial and Art Mediation Techniques on the Verge of Virtual Reality

Edited by Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás
with Marianne Schädler

HATJE CANTZ

TOWARDS COMPUTATIONAL BODY HORROR. In Conversation with Zach Blas

Kristaps Ancāns and Corina L. Apostol

Zach Blas is an artist, filmmaker, writer, and professor whose practice spans moving image, performance, science fiction, and computational theory. His work engages philosophies and imaginaries related to artificial intelligence, biometric recognition, predictive policing, the internet, and digital technologies, often from a queer perspective. From September 2021, Zach Blas spent two months in residency at Tallinn Art Hall. During the period of the residency, Blas commenced research, started elements of production that are screen-based, delivered a performance-lecture, conducted workshops to test and share ideas with local communities in Tallinn and lead the online conversation with Tallinn Art Hall curator Corina L. Apostol, and artist, writer, and educator Kristaps Ancāns on which the following text is based on.

In his latest projects, *576 Tears* (2022) and *Profundior (Lachryphagic Transmutation Deus-Motus-Data Network)* (2022), Blas explores religious crying as a means of communicating with an artificial intelligence god. Both artworks present a new symbolism of tears in an age of AI, in which emotions are extracted by AI systems but also willfully given up.

This online discussion also concerns one of Blas' older key projects, the *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2012–14) (see fig. 1). Consisting of masks based on collectivities of faces, including faces of queers, the artwork demands informatic opacity against facial recognition systems. Blas uses a partly pedagogical approach to illuminate prejudices in biometric technology and suggest how to resist algorithmic governance. Many of Blas's works are preoccupied with ways to resist the web of capitalism, computational surveillance, and the corporate internet of Silicon Valley.

The conversation revolved around questions such as: What is behind our desire to create AI technologies, and why we are developing AI in human form? Do we want to replicate ourselves, or rather to be a creator or god? And what happens to bodies when they are mediated by different technologies, media apparatuses, and other generic forms?

Religious Figures, Religious Systems, Silicon Valley

KRISTAPS ANCĀNS Corina and I have talked about how the political structure can change the idea of religion and replace religion. For example, how Vladimir Lenin became, in a way, the new Jesus of the Communists: in the Soviet Union religion was banned but religious structures were reshaped to fit Communism. My first question is: who or what do you think is the "new Jesus" in the emerging system?

Fig. 1
Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite*, 2012–14. Multimedia installation, plastic masks, HD video, 8:10 min, photo documentation. Installation view *Global Control and Censorship*, ZKM | Karlsruhe, 2015.

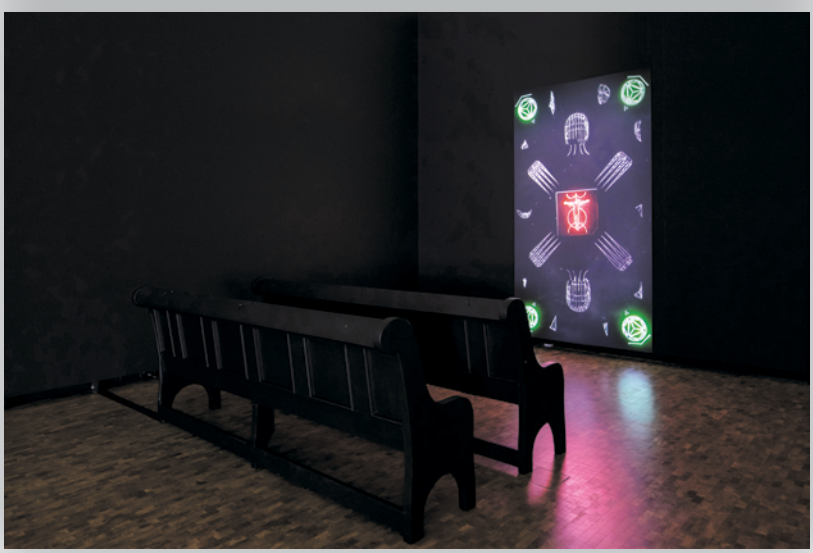

Fig. 2
Zach Blas, *IUDICIUM*, 2022. Multimedia installation. Installation view, MUNCH Triennale: *The Machine is Us, Munchmuseet*, Oslo, Norway, 2022.

ZACH BLAS It might seem unexpected to consider religion and religious figures within the context of Silicon Valley and the tech industry, but it is indeed a site where various religious and spiritual beliefs coalesce—and have for some time. There is a large Christian population in Silicon Valley, but also the influence of Buddhism alongside New Age spiritual practices.

There are also "leader" figures in Silicon Valley who prognosticate their visions—visions of technology that are often teleological, promising a pathway to progress, and sometimes something even more directly religious or spiritual, like transcendence into digital data or immortality through consciousness fusing with computers. A comparison can be made to Jesus, but it's tenuous. There is a quite specific and unique formation of religious belief emanating from Silicon Valley. I'm interested in understanding the composition of this religious belief and how it undergirds the development, creation, deployment, and use of technologies made there.

Informatic Opacity, Surveillance and Capture, Privacy and Opacity

CORINA L. APOSTOL I have known your work almost from the beginning, and every project you work on has key terms. One of the first terms you talked about in your *Facial Weaponization Suite* was "informatic opacity." I also know that you've made a distinction between surveillance and capture, and that it's very important to you. Now, years after that project, do you still consider opacity a productive form of protest or refusal to be captured?

ZB *Facial Weaponization Suite* is outdated, for sure. I made that work before AI was integrated into biometrics. Biometrics is configured differently now. A newer paradigm of biometric calculation includes automation, data training, and generation. But opacity is not a matter that becomes outdated, and nor is it a question of trying to become opaque. We are all already opaque. It's an ontological and relational condition of existence, which I take from the Caribbean philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant. We are opaque, but forces in the world violate our opacity. Glissant would call these forces a kind of barbarism. Opacity shifts the political stakes of how we might imagine resisting or refusing biometric surveillance. How can tactics or techniques be developed that fight against the violations of opacity that biometric governance enacts?

Mask, Machine Vision and Learning, Computation

ZB If opacity is a fundamental condition that constitutes us all, then following Glissant a core political goal is to create the conditions for opacity to flourish and shine in its fullest capacities. The protest masks in *Facial Weaponization Suite* (see fig. 3) were created as a tactic and technique for protecting and celebrating opacity. They are not just about individual hiding or subtraction but rather about refusing the biometric gaze that violates the opacity of the world. I was particularly interested in informatic opacity. Humans and computers see differently. One might be legible to a machine but completely obscure to a human, and vice versa. I wanted to make a work that fought for opacity on that informatic, computational front.

Privacy and Anti-Surveillance

ZB I don't see privacy as the horizon of political transformation in an anti-surveillance project. This is not to say that privacy isn't important in certain contexts, but the larger vision here is anti-capitalist, anti-police, anti-corporate, etc. Anti-surveillance politics should sync with the aspirations of social justice movements, including feminism, anticolonial politics, queerness, and antiracism.

Roe v. Wade, Biometrics, Surveillance v. Privacy, Capture v. Opacity

CA I have thought about this in the context of the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the US with, and how people who can get pregnant are now under scrutiny. Forms of surveillance are being reformed based on whether you have a uterus or not, so privacy and surveillance are already being used against us in ways that you wouldn't think would be legal.

Fig. 3
Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite*, 2012–14. Multimedia installation, plastic masks, HD video, 8:10 min, photo documentation. Installation view *Global Control and Censorship*, ZKM | Karlsruhe, 2015. Detail.

ZB I think this flags that there are many dynamics to what we call surveillance, which we don't often even think of as surveillance, like certain approaches to women's healthcare. Framing biometrics as a struggle with opacity likewise productively expands our perception of the issue of surveillance, to see it not only in some generic sense of powering looking and watching but as the standardization of identity and identification in and through data.

Hacked Organisms, Generations, Decision Making, Cybernetic Frameworks, Human Flesh, Embodiment, Being Non-Algorithmic

KA Historian Yuval Noah Harari has talked about the value of data and the people who hold it. All living things can be hacked, and if the body can be hacked, it can be communicated, it can be synthesized. How do you see a generation growing up with these ideas? How do you see a

change when some algorithms can tell you what you like and don't like? I've always wondered if that leaves an imprint on our imagination. How does it relate to decision making?

ZB The human body can certainly be hacked—we see this with transhumanism and biohacking movements today. And there is the older idea of humanity being in a cybernetic feedback loop with technology. Perhaps the more interesting question here is what conception of the human one begins with and how that conception influences or determines the possibilities and limitations of hacking the body. Mediation can also be viewed as a kind of body hacking. What I mean is that the mediation of a body through a technological device often hacks—reconfigures—that body to a degree. Again, biometrics is an example, one in which a tension emerges between ↘ embodiment and mediation. Media theorist N. Katherine Hayles described embodiment as non-algorithmic in her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), which suggests that the human body can never be fully mediated. Perhaps the lesson is that hacking can only be done within the confines of embodiment and materiality, the flesh. In the end, the idea of hacking human bodies beyond the flesh is more of a fantasy.

Subjectivity, Algorithms, Technological Devices, Corporate Interests

ZB Your comment made me think about the production of subjectivity, how subjectivity relates to technological devices, platforms, corporate interests, and attention economies. Both Netflix and Amazon hack, impact, and shape human subjectivity. Humans are in a co-evolutionary relationship with technology—technogenesis—after all. I'd rather not be in a technogenetic spiral with these companies, but it's not as simple as opting out.

Generations, Deep and Hyper Attention, a Digital Media Era, a Print-Dominant Era, Neuroscience

ZB Staying with Hayles a bit longer, the subjectivity question is a historical one too, so the technogenetic production of humans and their subjectivity looks different in different historical eras. For instance, Hayles related argument on deep and hyper attention. From a neuroscientific point of view, those born in a print-dominant era have a different wiring of neural pathways in their brain than those born in a digital-media-dominant era. Those born in a print-dominant era are thus more inclined towards deep attention (reading a book and doing nothing else for several hours), while those born in a digital era have hyper attention (reading an article, texting, watching a video, and sending an email all at the same time). Hayles is not making a moral judgment about deep and hyper forms of attention. Rather, she draws our attention to the ways in which media can mark and form us. But again, it's not completely deterministic; it's a co-evolutionary, non-teleological relationship. There is always the possibility for action, intervention, and change.

Anxiety, Fear, Digital Dictatorship, Education, Body Horror

KA As a final question, I would like to draw attention to the anxiety around and fear of digital dictatorship in society. Would you like to elaborate on that?

ZB Fear and anxiety are mobilized in so many differing modes and capacities, depending on class, race, gender, religion, nation, and many other factors. Sure, some people out there fear a digital dictatorship, but plenty of other people want—desire—that. Some people love and worship Elon Musk, while others hate him. I suppose levels of fear and anxiety are also determined by to how informed or educated one is concerning the composition of power in tech today. I think it's quite reasonable to feel fear and anxiety today, but I'm very interested in those who feel the opposite, those who feel something more like joy. I've been working through these dynamics by creating a new kind of genre, what I call computational body horror, to attend to the various horrors our digital bodies are subjected to, biometric and all.