

Chapter 7: Faces in Excess: Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite*

Background: A Conceptual Framework

Discussing his artwork *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2014), Zach Blas states: “I saw a coterminous rise of masked protest alongside the rise and boom of biometric industries.”¹ This connection between obscuring and scrutinizing the face in public life highlights the fact that the face is a site of confrontation between opposing political strategies. On the one side, institutional biometric technologies are employed as a means of regulating individuals through ascertaining their identities. On the other side, activist groups precisely resist identification and regulation as part of a political strategy. Through his art, Blas foregrounds a study of contemporary biometric facial recognition practices as rooted in the socio-political contexts in which they intervene. The series of masks produced as part of *Facial Weaponization Suite* utilizes both a sculptural and a performative medium, through a series of workshops and events. Blas’ critique of biometric recognition involves understanding its technology as enacting a computational process of standardization and as an extended arm of neoliberal political strategies that unequally impact already vulnerable and marginalized groups in society.² Blas’s

1 Ben Valentine, “Weaponizing Our Faces: An Interview with Zach Blas,” *Vice*, July 10, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdpzaa/weaponizing-our-faces-an-interview-with-zach-blas-715.

2 Talk given by Zach Blas as part of the symposium *Invisible/Visible*, held at the New Museum, New York, March 7, 2015.

artwork speaks directly to and confronts these aspects of biometric facial recognition, utilizing masks and performance in reference to a history of carnivalesque forms of hierarchical inversion.

Blas's critique of biometric technology is similar to that of scholar Shoshana Magnet, in particular to her call for a broader approach to technological failure.³ As Blas states:

Biometric technologies rely heavily on stable and normative conceptions of identity, and thus, structural failures are encoded in biometrics that discriminate against race, class, gender, sex, and disability. [...] Biometric failure exposes the inequalities that emerge when normative categories are forced upon populations.⁴

Blas's work is informed by the theoretical frameworks of queer theory and post-colonial theory, utilized as critical tools through which to approach technology. What Blas argues is that biometric recognition involves a computational process of standardization with set parameters produced through the biases inherent in a history of social discrimination. This computational process, Blas argues, has deeply embedded within it a visuality drawn from societal norms of gender, race and sexuality.

Blas's work speaks to a shift in political strategy in relation to activism and civil disobedience. In the 1970s in the US, the tools of visibility and political representation were the primary vehicles of political agency for people of color, gay activists and feminist groups. Visibility and political representation were, in this context, equated with political agency and legitimization, providing individuals from marginalized communities with a platform to communicate and fight for specific political goals. Along with certain other artists, Blas argues that, with the increasing pervasiveness of contemporary surveillance technologies such as biometrics, visibility and representation have instead become a tools of regulation

3 Magnet, *When Biometrics Fail*, 9.

4 Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Communiqué: Fag Face* (2012), video, <https://vimeo.com/57882032>.

and control wielded by the state.⁵ These technologies enact a form of societal control through the increasing accumulation of data produced from surveilled bodies. Blas states:

Such a digital regime profoundly inverts the political promise of visibility and representation as means toward democracy and equality. Any exposure of bodies is now usurped as a potential pathway to control and governance, and thus, undoes documentation as a purely liberatory project.⁶

The contemporary techno-political landscape of pervasive surveillance technologies and data accumulation inverts the political agency of visibility. This inversion, in turn, produces an alternative form of contemporary political agency that is rooted in the claim to the right *not* to be visible, the right not to be recognizable or made vulnerable to exposure – to be able to protect one’s identity from automated enrollment in biometric recognition operations. The threat of discrimination that unequally affects marginalized communities persists and, in many ways, has not changed through a long history of racial and gendered discrimination in the US, but the technologies of control and regulation have. Biometric recognition enacts a negation of certain identities according to normative categories, prohibiting individuals from certain spaces and actively discriminating against certain groups. This change demands new and revised strategies of political agency.

Blas draws his central concept of “opacity” from the work of the Martiniquan philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant, who was active in the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The art historian and novelist Teju Cole, in a *New York Times* article on photography and the representation of black skin, offers this insightful description of the term:

5 See also artist, Paolo Cirio, *Obscurity* (2016), inkjet prints, <https://paolocirio.net/work/obscurity/>.

6 Zach Blas, “A Cage of Information, or, What is a Biometric Diagram?” in *Documentary across Disciplines*, ed. Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 82. [80–90]

Glissant defined it as a right to not have to be understood on others' terms, a right to be misunderstood if need be. The argument was rooted in linguistic considerations: It was a stance against certain expectations of transparency embedded in the French language. Glissant sought to defend the opacity, obscurity and inscrutability of Caribbean blacks and other marginalized peoples. External pressures insisted on everything being illuminated, simplified and explained. Glissant's response: No.⁷

Blas situates Glissant's concept of opacity within a contemporary, Information Age techno-political landscape and applies it to the language of data production – specifically to the surveilling of bodies and the transformation of physical embodiment into data. In the contemporary context, the “expectations of transparency” and an insistence on “everything being illuminated, simplified and explained” is enacted through the “forced visibility” of individuals through surveillance and biometric recognition technologies. Marginalized groups, such as people of color, immigrants and the LGBTQ community, are particularly vulnerable to state regulatory practices and standardization practices, which negate their identities through biometric recognition while, at the same time, forcing them to be, as Blas puts it, “informatically visible.”⁸ Through the use of Glissant's concept of opacity, the right not to be seen takes on an ethical and concrete significance. In a nod to Glissant, Blas coins the term “informatic opacity,” which he defines as

a refusal to visually cohere to digital surveillance and capture technologies' gaze. A theory and practice whose goal is maintaining the autonomous determination of alterity and difference [...] evading

7 Teju Cole, “A True Picture of Black Skin,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/magazine/a-true-picture-of-black-skin.html>.

8 Zachary Marshall Blas, “Informatic Opacity: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Aesthetics and Politics of Defacement,” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2014), iv.

the quantification, standardization, and regulation of identity imposed by biometrics and the state.⁹

In this way, informatic opacity can function as both a tactic and a material condition. It can serve as a tool of political activism, within the discourses of identity politics, in enabling people to oppose a politics of *identification*. The right not to be visible equals a right to self-determination, to be able to “self-generate” an identity that would otherwise be negated through processes of biometric recognition.

Facial Weaponization Suite (2011–2014)

Blas produces a materialization of “informatic opacity” in his masks and through a vehicle of “excess.” Blas describes how he constructs the masks from the faces of multiple participants who attend workshops he runs in collective art spaces. The participants at the workshop agree to be scanned using a Kinect 3D scanning device, which yields data relating to each person’s face. Blas then collaborates with a modeler to generate a mold of a mask from the compiled facial data from all the participants. Blas states that this facial data is “not averaged” but rather compiled into a formless shape. He describes how this results in an “amorphous mask that resembles only abstract surfaces,” making it “biometrically unrecognizable.”¹⁰ The mold is produced through a process of CNC milling, that is, “computer numerical controlled” machining, which relies on programmed code to determine the movements that create the mold. This method allows for a high degree of precision in movement. CNC milling utilizes a rotating cylindrical cutting tool; the piece is moved across the milling tool in different directions, making it possible to create the amorphous, customized shapes of Blas’s masks. This mold is then used to vacuum form multiple masks.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Blas, *Informatic Opacity*, 78.

Blas has exhibited both the masks themselves and highly stylized studio color photographs of the masks. The masks themselves are glossy, highly reflective and brilliant in color. The monochrome colors of the masks are significant. Most of Blas's masks are simply titled *Mask*, with the date and location of the mask's production, but the colors allude to specific cultural contexts and symbolize the normative categories that these masks work to obfuscate. For example, the creation of a blue mask came out of a workshop Blas held that was attended by artists, intellectuals, curators, activists and technologists on the subject of feminist theory. The workshop covered issues of visibility, recognition and concealment, and a particular issue arose concerning the use of the veil by Muslim women and how this "complicates western feminism's investment in visibility politics."¹¹ They discussed a particular incident that had become a kind of inflection point in relation to these issues. The incident occurred in 2011 during the uprisings in Cairo, Egypt, and is referred to as the "blue bra" incident. A woman wearing an abaya was participating in the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, and she was brutally beaten by Egyptian soldiers. As she was dragged off, her clothes were ripped away, revealing a blue bra (figure 22).¹² The image of the blue bra became a feminist rallying symbol for Egyptian women protesting oppression.¹³ In reference to this incident, the color blue was chosen for the mask that was produced following the workshop (figure 23). The form and shape of the mask also recalls the veil worn by Muslim women. The use of blue in Blas's mask symbolizes the issues that sit at the intersections of feminist resistance in the cultural context of the Middle East, the wearing of the veil and investment in both concealment and exposure.

11 Ibid., 163.

12 Kainaz Amaria, "The 'Girl in the Blue Bra,'" *NPR*, December 21, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2011/12/21/144098384/the-girl-in-the-blue-bra>.

13 Blas, "Informatic Opacity," 162.

Figure 22: Egyptian army soldiers arrest a female protester during clashes at Tahrir Square in Cairo on Dec. 17. © Stringer/Reuters/Landov



Figure 23: Zach Blas, Mask- November 20, 2013, New York, NY, Facial Weaponization Suite, Photo by Christopher O'Leary. Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 24: Zach Blas, *Fag Face*, *Facial Weaponization Communiqué: Fag Face*, video still (2012) Image courtesy of the artist



The first mask Blas created in the suite is one of the few to be given a name other than “mask.” It is titled *Fag Face* (2012) (figure 24). (The figure shows an image of a virtual model of the mask, taken as a video still from Blas’s short film “Facial Weaponization Communiqué: *Fag Face*.”) In constructing this mask, Blas had in mind certain scientific studies, such as one conducted at Tufts University, on the recognition of homosexuality. These studies tested for an ability to identify homosexuality through a rapid recognition exercise using photographs of men’s faces. There has since been much controversy over similar research into the machinic recognition of homosexuality, in particular studies conducted at Stanford University by Michal Kosinski and Yilun Wang.¹⁴ Blas zeros in on the most pertinent question one might have upon learning of the existence of these studies, which is: why? To what ultimate end will these tests contribute? Of all the possible purposes to which these tests could contribute, the primary and most obvious is the control and regulation of homosexuals through the utilization of the technological acts of sorting and categorizing. Blas constructed the mask *Fag Face* as a direct response to the scientific studies at Tufts on rapid facial recognition of sexual orientation. Like the other masks in the suite, it was generated by scanning multiple faces, but in this case specif-

14 See “Keeping a straight face,” *The Economist*, September 9, 2017, 67–68.

ically gay men's faces. The resulting physical mask is a candy-pink blob of gloss (figure 25). Although constructed from data about the faces of gay men, this mask obscures the identity of each individual face and that of the wearer of the mask. In response to the Tufts test, the mask accelerates the "rapid recognition" aspect by expressing the faces of multiple gay men at once. Through both the elucidative material of the mask and its instantaneous projection of a multitude of facial forms, it renders a kind of play between full-on visibility and concealment.

Figure 25: Zach Blas, Fag Face Mask – October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA. Facial Weaponization Suite. Photo by Christopher O'Leary. Image courtesy of the artist



On another level, Blas's work is performative. After a mask is completed, the workshop participants create a masked public performance that highlights the inequalities inherent in biometric facial recognition use. Blas has chosen to hold these performances in areas of particular relevance to the issue of facial recognition. For example, one performance, titled *Procession of Biometric Sorrows*, was held at the US–Mexico border on June 5, 2014. (figure 26). It called attention to the immense amount of biometric data that is gathered at borders and in particular at the US–Mexico border. Blas notes that a central subject of discussion in the workshop preceding this performance was the fact that the Mexican government had recently introduced biometric identification cards for children.¹⁵

Figure 26: Zach Blas, Facial Weaponization Suite: Procession of Biometric Sorrows, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) Mexico City, Mexico (5 June 2014). Photo by Orestes Montero Cruz. Image courtesy of the artist



¹⁵ This issue of biometric identification cards for children foreshadows the more recent incidents of mistreatment of Mexican children at the US–Mexico border. Children have been separated from their parents and detained by US authorities in camps at the border, a practice that has been understood as a gross abuse of power by the Trump administration.

A Collective Excess

These performances, as well as the creation of the masks themselves, highlight Blas's collectivist strategy. In drawing on this strategy, he references contemporary political movements that rely on a social collectivity to confront the widespread abuse of institutional and governance powers, such as the Occupy movement, Pussy Riot and the Zapatista movement in Mexico. These particular movements rely on a strategy of masking or facial concealment: Occupy with the use of the Guy Fawkes mask, the pink baklavas of Pussy Riot and the Zapatistas' bandanas, which conceal the lower half of the face. Blas's reference to a "weaponization" of the face is an acknowledgment of these movements; what he calls the "power of the collective face" merges a socio-political apparatus of collectivity with faciality. He is pinpointing the face as a site of politics. In these movements, the face is recreated; it is reconstructable and interchangeable, rather than being a source of recognition and thereby a means of regulation by the state. Removing the recognizable features of the face, the members of these movements become a faceless threat to the asymmetrical systems of power that they confront. In this context, facelessness is a source of power. The use of masks in Blas's performances draws on a historical use in the context of the carnival, where members of the populace were able to speak truth to power and where social and political hierarchies were inverted through satire.¹⁶ In this context, masked performances play with the distinction between what is seen and unseen. They at once make the wearer highly visible, giving their performer a platform, and at the same time erase individual identity. This allows for the wearer of the mask, and so the speaker of truth, to be anonymous.

Blas's masks are constructed from the forms of many faces, and as such they merge the individual wearer of a mask with the masses. In this way, for me, the masks recall Philip K. Dick's "scramble suit" in his psychotropic sci-fi novel *A Scanner Darkly*. In Dick's novel, the

16 The use of masks in these sorts of contexts spans many different cultures. See, for example, the use of "tal" masks in Korea; the etymology of the word derives from the Chinese character meaning "to be free."

“scramble suit” is worn by narcotics officers, and thus is a technology of policing. He writes:

The scramble suit was an invention of the Bell laboratories, conjured up by accident by an employee named S. A. Powers [...] Basically, his design consisted of a multifaceted quartz lens hooked up to a million and a half physiognomic fraction-representations of various people: men and women, children, with every variant encoded and then projected outward in all directions equally onto a super-thin shroudlike membrane large enough to fit around an average human.

As the computer looped through its banks, it projected every conceivable eye color, hair color, shape and type of nose, formation of teeth, configuration of facial bone – the entire shroudlike membrane took on whatever physical characteristics were projected at any nanosecond, then switched to the next [...]

In any case, the wearer of a scramble suit was Everyman and in every combination (up to combinations of a million and a half sub-bits) during the course of each hour. Hence, any description of him – or her – was meaningless.¹⁷

The description of the “scramble suit,” with the “everyman” projection of every face obscuring the wearer’s identity, could be a description of Blas’s masks. Blas’s masks, like the “scramble suit,” present a representation of multiple identities as a strategy of camouflage. It is interesting to think about the use of “Everyman” in Dick’s scramble suit in relation to Blas’s strategy of “collectivism.” Both erase any characteristic features through an excess of features. In other words, in showing too much one cannot see anything at all. This is a tool used by certain artists in the Information Age¹⁸ to confound systems of surveillance and control. It is a tool that makes

17 Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 22-23.

18 See work of artist Hasan Elahi. Hasan Elahi website, accessed June 3, 2019, <http://elahi.umd.edu> and Karen Kedmey, “Hasan Elahi vs. The FBI: The Art

use of the original material of surveillance, that is, the information itself, and overloads the system with it. Like Dick's "scramble suit," which "projected every conceivable eye color, hair color, shape and type of nose, formation of teeth," Blas's masks use the distinctive characteristics and endless variability of the face as information, before combining it in order to produce indistinction. Blas's masks project this mutability as an opaque form all at once, however, rather than in nanoseconds. Instead of a multifaceted quartz lens, the material of Blas's masks is opaque and reflects only light, rather than faces, from off of its glossy surface. This difference also reveals that Blas's masks play with the notion of the surface. What can be seen in his masks is only surface, and because that surface is highly glossed and vividly colored, the observer's attention is drawn to it rather than to anything underneath. This mirrors the fact that facial recognition technologies can only recognize surface qualities and that surface can be dressed up however an individual chooses. In Dick's novel, this is used as a method of concealing the identities of members of the police. In Blas's work, it is used as an aesthetico-political tool to conceal the identity of the individual from dominant systems of population control. Instead of being a tool of policing, Blas's masks are a weapon for the proletariat. As the title of Blas's project makes clear, when used as a tool of resistance, the collective *is* the weapon.

In their opposition to standardization and in their formlessness, Blas's masks exhibit a strategy of excess. Blas has described his masks as a "collective excess, that exceeds the boundaries of the individual."¹⁹ In a written piece titled "Fag Face," Blas has explained this excess further, using terms that are physical, subjective, bodily and embodied. Excess is utilized here as a defiant response to the inherent violence in the use of the term "fag" as a derogatory label for gay men:

of Self-Surveillance," *Artsy*, May 27, 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-hasan-elahi-vs-the-fbi-the-art-of-self-surveillance>.

19 Blas, "Informatic Opacity," 79.

Fag face captures me into an identity that is not my own, a grid that legislates me.

How do I escape this face? How do I desire to escape this gridding of my head? How can I open, make into a mystery, liberate my fag face?

Force the face forward. Bring the face to the limit of these grids, so that it can de-code its boundaries, break them open, to enter again into the swarming chaos of matter that resists recognition.

If fag fucking is what fag face visualizes to the other, push this further.

Accumulate cum so that your face becomes a volatile liquid surface with no eyes, nose, or mouth; keep the smell from rimming so that your face and ass are irreducible; let the pubic hair gather into different consistencies of stickiness; wipe the shit left on your fingers under your hidden, cum-filled eyes like war paint. Transform your face into a hypertrophized state of fag-ness. Let these new excesses dissolve readability. Let your fag face configure with these materials into that which is not identifiable

Once 1000 cocks have cum on my head and 1000 asses have wiped their shit and sweat there, try to tell me what my face is.²⁰

Like his masks, Blas's text opposes the standardization mechanisms of facial recognition through a tactic and materialization of opacity. In this case, opacity comes in the form of excess, an excess expression of that which underlies homophobia. Opposing the mechanized and automated processes of a biometric operation, this text, as lyrical poem, is unapologetically human in all its corporeal glory, both in flesh and liquid form, and in its tenor of punk-rock revolt. The text references the bodily sense that cannot be measured,

20 Zach Blas, "Fag Face," *Recaps Magazine*, accessed May 3, 2019, <http://recapsmagazine.com/review/fag-face-by-zach-blas/>.

including desire. The text is not only a statement of resistance to an operation of facial recognition but confronts the individuation of recognition and the regulation of gay male sexuality with an excess of it: I will meet your homophobia with my cock – 1000, to be precise. Strength in numbers. Through Blas’s textual work and in his production of masks, he inverts an essential dilemma and demand to which biometric technology is so often called upon to respond – the problem of volume, or specifically the problem of ascertaining identity from a massive amount of information. Blas utilizes the problem of volume and transforms it into an aesthetic, solidifies it in sculptural form as a materialization of opacity.

Blas’s artwork is particularly significant when considered in relation to the eigenface algorithm and the composite form analyzed in the previous section. Through his work, the composite form itself is made operational. His approach to designing the masks references a history of facial recognition techniques, as he makes clear in his dissertation.²¹ Blas directly references the work of Francis Galton and his composite portraits. He describes his masks and the corresponding processes of “digital collectivization” as the “antithesis” to Galton’s composites of criminals and production of types.²² He states: “In contrast, the collectivizing process in *Facial Weaponization Suite* reveals that Galton’s compositing method can be employed to arrive at the exact opposite of his intentions [...] it can also generate a collective excess that exceeds the boundaries of the individual.”²³ This brings to mind a passage from Galton’s description of his composite portraiture practice: “No statistician dreams of combining objects into the same generic group that do not cluster towards a common centre; no more should we attempt to compose generic portraits out of heterogeneous elements, for if we do so the result is monstrous and meaningless.”²⁴ With his sculptural composites, Blas injects meaning into the “monstrous.” Although Blas sees his work as the antithesis of Galton’s production of a type, his

21 Blas, “Informatic Opacity.”

22 Ibid., 79.

23 Ibid.

24 Galton, *Inquiries*, 230.

practice nonetheless involves, I argue, a similar process of production and creates a similar structure to Galton's composite. In the bringing together of people under categories of identity such as "gay men," Blas also produces a composite. It is this similarity of structure that makes Blas's work a fascinating study in this regard: Blas then takes the composite form and produces something that is the opposite of a "type." Blas's rejection of Galton's type through his masks and through what he calls the "collective excess that exceeds the boundaries of the individual" results in a sculptural formation of the Galton composite.

The masks visualize something very similar to Wittgenstein's concept of "aspect perception." Both "aspect perception" and "collective excess" turn the aesthetic focus of the composite form on to the mutability and fluidity of forms. They both reveal a kind of relationship between disparate forms. The notion of collective excess operationalizes the notion of aspect perception in contemporary politics. Blas's masks can be understood, in this way, as solidifying a mutability of forms and activating the composite precisely to resist an automated (and reductive) recognition process. To return to the topic of eigenface, we might imagine Blas's masks as what would happen were one to produce an eigenvector in physical form and then reflect it back into the eigenface algorithm. In this way, I see Blas as taking the output data from an algorithm and projecting it on to its front end. It is like an algorithmic mirror in which the algorithm cannot recognize itself or what it has produced. It is as if the algorithm cannot read its own form of representation.

Concluding Remarks

Blas's *Facial Weaponization Suite* is not practical; it does not offer a strategy for actual *informatic opacity* in the face of non-consensual biometric enrollment – unless, that is, we were all to walk around with masks over our faces in our daily lives. Yet what I find most important about his piece and the many forms it has taken – workshop, performance, short film, text and masks – is that they all point toward the production of another form of subjectivity, one that is the

result of a “collective excess.” Discussing *Facial Weaponization Suite*, Blas has said that the masks “articulate a presence.”²⁵ The presence is formed through a collective. In Blas’s strategy of negating the process of biometric recognition – albeit in a symbolic fashion, through performativity and masking – there is the formation of a kind of collective subjectivity, one that is not defined by individuation. This has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the parameters of future forms of political, ethical and social organization. Blas’s masks are a conglomerate of a multiplicity of angles and perspectives from different faces, depicting a kind of endless variation. Their construction draws on the concepts, strategies and discourses of queer theory, feminist critical theory and post-colonial theory. They propose an alternative representational mechanism to the one found in AFR systems, a mechanism that captures a mutable human form. The result is a representation of a subjectivity that is manifold and self-generated. The representation found in Blas’s work is of a collective figure, reflecting a collective subjectivity.

25 Valentine, “Weaponizing Our Faces.”

