

Dazzles, Decoys, and Deities: The Janus Face of Anti-Facial Recognition Masks

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Over the past few years a growing number of artists have critiqued the ubiquity of identity recognition technologies. Specifically, the use of these technologies by state security programs, tech-giants and multinational corporations has met with opposition and controversy. A popular form of resistance to recognition technology is sought in strategies of masking and camouflage. Zach Blas, Leo Selvaggio, Sterling Crispin and Adam Harvey are among a group of internationally acclaimed artists who have developed subversive anti-facial recognition masks that disrupt identification technologies. This paper examines the ontological underpinnings of these popular and widely exhibited mask projects. Over and against a binary understanding and criticism of identity recognition technology, I propose to take a relational turn to reimagine these technologies not as an object for our eyes, but as a relationship between living organisms and things. A relational perspective cuts through dualist and anthropocentric conceptions of recognition technology opening pathways to intersectional forms of resistance and critique. Moreover, if human-machine relationships are to be understood as coming into being in mutual dependency, if the boundaries between online and offline are always already blurred, if the human and the machine live intertwined lives and it is no longer clear where the one stops and the other starts, we need to revise our understanding of the self. A relational understanding of recognition technology moves away from a notion of the self as an isolated and demarcated entity in favour of an understanding of the self as relationally connected, embedded and interdependent. This could alter the way we relate to machines and multiplies the lines of flight we can take out of a culture of calculated settings.

It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality – V. Woolf

We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die – W.H. Auden

Introduction

Facial recognition technology enables the algorithmic recognition of faces. It is used in drones, in CCTV cameras in cities, at airports and borders, on the subway and online. Facebook, for example, uses recognition technology for its photo-tagging service. But recognition technology can also be employed to detect and link all sorts of objects, such as automatic number plate recognition, and the tracking of people's movement and the collection of data via telematics, apps and sensors. The use of these technologies by state security programs, tech-giants and multinational corporations has been met with opposition. An "anti-facial recognition movement is on the rise," writes Joseph Cox (2014) for *The Kernel*. While it is a bit premature to call it a "movement," over the past few years a

growing number of artists and activists have expressed concern about the ubiquitous implementation and dissemination of facial and identity recognition technologies.

Recognition technology is evasive. For one, its operational mechanisms cannot be observed at work, as it runs on algorithmic routines that are largely invisible, not in the least because of the secrecy surrounding algorithms used by tech giants. Furthermore, the high speed at which these software programs calculate make them ungraspable to humans. Therefore, a critique of algorithmic computing requires imagination; it entails visualizing what is only partly visible. The artists and technologists Zach Blas, Leo Selvaggio, Sterling Crispin and Adam Harvey have developed trickster-like, subversive anti-facial recognition camouflage masks as a form of contesting this type of technology. These masked interventions express an ambiguous relation to data capturing technologies within what is often called an “Age of the Machine” and an increasingly “informational,” “datafied,” and “softwarized” society with an “algorithmic culture” (Braman, 2009; Berry, 2014). The masked interventions by which these critics position themselves, give shape to and are shaped by debates on algorithmic routines. Debates on facial recognition are often conceptualized mainly in political-economic, legal or technological terms; the ontological underpinnings of sociotechnical imaginaries of facial recognition technology are not systematically interrogated, especially when these take the form of critical artistic interventions, such as mask designs.

Borrowing from Sheila Jasanoff (2015) I understand sociotechnical imaginaries to be publicly held, community-dependent, semi-stabilized and publicly performed visions of sociotechnical developments. Sociotechnical imaginaries get re-enacted, repeated, revalidated and become more or less socialized in cultural processes through which they are made more or less robust in order to need less explication within specific communities (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4). In what follows below, I explore how sociotechnical imaginaries of facial recognition technology are imagined through an analysis of the mask designs of Zach Blas, Leo Selvaggio, Sterling Crispin and Adam Harvey. These mask projects have been on display at numerous exhibitions in Europe and the UK and the artists have received a good deal of media attention from international outlets. The critical intervention of these four artists and technologists arises from an anxiety about the state of the self vis-à-vis its sociotechnical environment. This raises the question of what underlying logic of the human self and its sociotechnical environment then leads these critical voices to opt for disappearing from view? Why take the route of concealment strategies by way of masking their faces?

The Rise of Anti-Facial Recognition Masks

Camouflage, as Hanna Rose Shell (2012, p. 10) notes in *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance*, is a way of “not showing up,” to appear to disappear, to recede in the background, to become invisible. Camouflage, Shell writes, shows us how we look at the world.



Fig. 1 URME Personal Surveillance Identity Prosthetic by Leo Selvaggio (2012)

Let us consider four acclaimed identity recognition technology distorting interventions. For his URME Personal Surveillance Identity Prosthetic (2012) the artist Leo Selvaggio developed a wearable prosthetic mask of his face. Made from pigmented hard resin, using 3D printing technology and identity replacement technology, this mask is a 3D rendition of Selvaggio's facial features such as skin tone, texture and hair (URME Surveillance, 2012). Selvaggio explains: "Rather than hide from cameras, simply give them a face other than your own to track without drawing attention to yourself in a crowd" (URME Surveillance, 2012). Selvaggio explains that he feels "an overwhelming urge to protect the public from this surveillance state" (URME Surveillance, 2012). He understands recognition technology to be a form of "inspection." As a counter-move to these inspective technologies, he offers his own identity as a "decoy," and a "defense technology" (URME Surveillance, 2012).

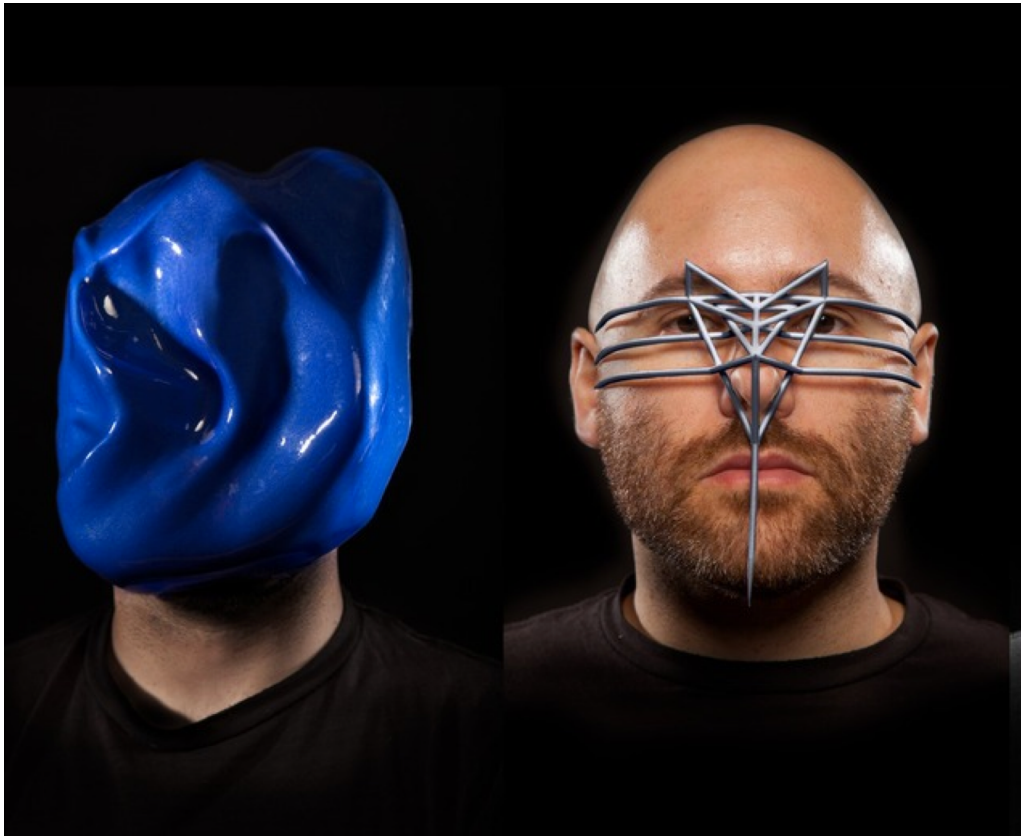


Fig. 2 Weaponization Series (left) & Face Cage (right) by Zach Blas (2012)

Artist and scholar Zach Blas' series of mask projects are designed to, on the one hand, visualize how identity recognition technology analyses human faces, and to resist identity recognition technology by offering undetectable face masks. His series of 3D metal objects, called Face Cage, materialises the strong contrast between facial forms and biometric mathematical diagrams to visualize how identity recognition software reads a human face. His Facial Weaponization Suite is a series of community workshops, geared at LGBT and minority groups, that produces amorphous masks that by virtue of their form and cryptographic material will not be recognized as a face by identity recognition software. Identity recognition technology, as Blas sees it, "control[s] through an optical logic of making visible" to "police and criminalize populations all over the world" (Blas, 2014). His masks represent a resistance to what he calls "informatic visibility" which is reducing us to mere "aggregates of data" (Blas, 2014). The aim of these masks is to become "a faceless threat" by providing "opacity"—a concept he derived from the poet Édouard Glissant (Blas, 2014).



Fig. 3 CV Dazzle by Adam Harvey (2010)

Technologist and artist Adam Harvey tries a different tack. His CV Dazzle (2010) uses analogue camouflage to thwart face detection technology. “Dazzle” refers to a type of camouflage-patterned painting used in WWI on warships. The stripes and bold colours of this technique disrupt the outline of a ship and make it difficult to estimate a ship’s size, range and direction, preventing the enemy from targeting it. Harvey’s CV (computer vision) Dazzle uses similar facial camouflage designs. He writes: “since facial-recognition algorithms rely on the identification and spatial relationship of key facial features, like symmetry and tonal contours, one can block detection by creating an ‘anti-face’” (Harvey, 2010). Harvey (2014) compares the effect of recognition technology to “knowing somebody could be watching...you always have a chaperone”.



Fig. 4 Data-Masks by Sterling Crispin (2012)

The Data-Masks of the artist and technologist Sterling Crispin have been produced by reverse engineering facial recognition algorithms. His face masks are 3D printed masks that visualize what robust models' recognition and detection algorithms recognize and detect as a face—what passes as a face online. They “show the machine what it’s looking for,” holding up a mirror to the machine (Crispin, 2014). These Data-Masks are “animistic deities, brought out of the algorithmic spirit-world of the machine and into our material world, ready to tell us their secrets, or warn us of what’s to come” (Crispin, 2013). Crispin (2014) writes about how we are “always already being seen, watched and analysed” by what he calls a “Technological Other,” that is “peering into our bodies”.

Imagining Recognition Technology

Our dependence on images is parasitical; we cannot cope without images, yet they turn on themselves. Which is to say, there is a gap between the world “out there” and the images with which we think to make sense of that world. They are representations, not “re-presences” (Preziosi, 2009, p. 15). Various scholars have pointed out that we therefore need to be critical of classificatory notions and the social imaginaries that are emerging around these technologies (Beer, 2013; Taylor, 2003; boyd & Crawford, 2011).

To mask is to camouflage, a tactic to disappear from view. The question this raises is “from what?” Who is imagined to be watching? Blas, Harvey, Selvaggio and Crispin use visual metaphors to represent facial recognition technology—spies, God-like eyes, Big Brothers, panopticons, and

spectres are ubiquitous. In different ways their masks represent the encounter between the human eye and the alleged mechanical “eye” of identity recognition technology. Or, and more to the point, the encounter between the alleged “eye” of the machine and the “I” that is supposedly being looked at. Such anthropomorphizing of computation has a long history (Wiener, 1988; Reeves and Nass, 1996; Anderson, 2008; Epstein, 2016). Here, this understanding ascribes to recognition technology the transgressive capacity to “peer through your body,” “to follow you,” to “inspect you” and to make you “informatically visible.”

To these critics, visibility finds its counterpoint in invisibility. Blas, Harvey, Selvaggio and Crispin maintain that you can undermine capture technology by becoming imperceptible to it. This invisibility is sought in concealment, in becoming undetectable and unidentifiable to identity recognition technology used in CCTV cameras, both online and offline, by way of camouflage. Kathryn Schulz (2015) writes: “[T]he dream of invisibility is not about attaining power but escaping it.” From what form of domination are they trying to escape? “The world is becoming increasingly surveilled,” Selvaggio (2012) argues in the Indiegogo video he made to seek funding for his masks. “Virtual Shield, a database that has over 25K cameras in Chicago all networked into a single hub, comprises facial recognition software that can track you and pull up all of your corresponding data....There isn’t that much privacy anymore,” Selvaggio (2012) laments. According to Sterling Crispin (2014) “we live under the shadow of a totalitarian police state.” He claims we are “witnessing the rise of a Globally Networked Technological Organism” that will “exceed the human mind,” and that “human[ity] is lost in all this” (Crispin, 2014). For Harvey (2013) the problem is the “imbalance of power between the surveillant and the surveilled [sic].” It is the “ubiquitous and unregulated profiling and cataloguing aspect” of these identification technologies that he considers a threat to privacy (Harvey, 2013). Blas (2014) fears that “the global standards” recognition technology relies on “return us to the classist, racist, sexist scientific endeavours of the 19th century” and lead toward “Total Quantification” annihilating “alterity.” Selvaggio (2012) claims the omnipresence of surveillance technologies affects our relationship to identity. Identity has come to be thought of “as data: highly manipulable [sic], editable, and corruptible.” According to Blas (2014) these technologies “produce a conception of the human as that which is fully measurable, quantifiable and knowable.” Identity is “reduced to disembodied aggregates of data,” he argues (Blas, 2014). Crispin (2014) argues that these networked systems “see human beings as abstract things, patterns, and numbers, not as individual people whose lives matter....[These systems] define the human as a what, not as a who.” Their masks provide a “fire wall” between the Eye of facial recognition technology and its quantifying, objectifying, commodifying effects.

The utopian dream and idealism projected onto the “cyber world” of the 1990s, the idea of networked media as a free, decentralized, boundless, separate world of infinite possibilities and endless connections, a world in a world, where you could be someone else and act out multiple selves, turned out to be no more than a dream. The vision of computer networks “as vehicles to escape ‘official reality,’ design alternative futures, enhance bodies, and extend minds” (Lovink, 2011, p. 39), a separate space, an autonomous zone with revolutionary potential, has become a relic, outpaced, as Real Life space became ubiquitously networked, centralized, corporatized, appropriated.

In *Postscript on the Societies of Control* Deleuze (1992, p. 3) argues “individuals have become ‘dividuals,’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’” Drawing from Deleuze, Adam Morris (2012, p. 7) argues that, engulfed by processes of appropriation and encroached by data clusters as a “method of control”, identity has become a “commodity,” managed by the “two super-institutional

poles of Empire,” namely “surveillance and marketing.” The individual, he argues, functions “as a conduit of wealth” and “a mine of data” to the twin imperatives of marketing and surveillance, which “gives transparency to the fundamental opacity of the population” (Morris, 2012, p. 107). Resistance to this “accumulation of biopolitical information,” with which populations are delineated and managed, can be found in anonymity (Morris, 2012, p. 107). “[H]ide within the silent majority,” “de-activate” oneself as a political and economic subject (Morris, 2012, p. 107). Or, as Alexander Galloway (2008, p. 224) puts it: “we are witnessing a rise in 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.” Galloway (2008, p. 224) calls this politicization of absence the “black boxing of the self.” The unlimited and unprecedented data gathering and analysis by the state and its corporate consorts brought an end to the utopianism of the early days of cyber culture: anonymity and pseudonymity in a decentralized parallel world outside of the Orwellian institution of the state and its corporations. Online and offline identity is now linked, made visible and trapped in a tracking culture with no exits. The black box becomes an ideal hiding place.

Let us return to the masks. How is “black boxing” connected to the masking of the face? Harvey’s CV Dazzle camouflage make-up claims to provide “more control over your privacy” by “protecting your data” (Harvey, 2013). Selvaggio asserts his URME masks “create a safe space,” and function as decoy by having his face captured instead of your own (URME Surveillance, 2012). His masks “are best activated by a group of people in public space, like activists or protestors,” Selvaggio (2014) claims. They are a “statement on the right to assert yourself in public space” (URME Surveillance, 2012). Crispin, too, likes to cater to the supposed needs of protestors. His Data-Masks are “intended for use in acts of protest and civil disobedience,” and are themselves “an act of political protest” by means of “giving form to an otherwise invisible network of control” (Crispin, 2014). Blas sees his masks as a tool in the tradition of collective protest movements like Anonymous, the Zapatistas and Pussy Riot. “Facelessness and becoming imperceptible are serious threats to the state and to capitalism,” Blas (2013) claims in a video communiqué.

These cryptographic mask designs are an attempt to reassert the obfuscated lines between virtual and material, human and machine, private and public life. The revolutionary potential of self-assertion and protest is sought offline, on real life streets, in temporal zones of invisible non-identity provided by facial concealment strategies. Blas’ Facial Weaponization Series turn the logic of identification technologies around by making our faces undetectable blobs producing what he calls “non-existence” (Blas, 2013). CV Dazzle defies detection by solarization, creating a negative form, an “anti-face,” as Harvey (2013) calls it. URME Prosthetics work by turning an individual face into a collective face. Meanwhile, Crispin’s Data-Masks reverse engineer and “hold a mirror up to the all-seeing eye of the digital-panopticon” (Crispin, 2013). To an important degree these works are reversals, mirror opposites, that make an argument about how identification technologies “work,” and take a stand against such workings. These masks express their understanding of recognition technology and their critique of it by way of negation, by forming its logical opposite. These masks are *non-human*, *amorphous*, *unrecognizable*, *unidentifiable* and *undetectable* to recognition technology—invisible to the algorithmic routines of recognition software, yet hyper-visible in public space, to human eyes.

Reproducing Dualism: the Janus Face of Masking Tactics

Unpacking the underlying assumptions of concealment strategies to counteract recognition technology, it seems that these critics' concern is focused on the supposed effects of recognition technology on the "self", on how it allegedly inhibits political freedom, erodes privacy, robs us of our autonomy, and disables dissent. The networked systems of identity recognition technology are imagined here as an important element of social structures, one that both enables and disables human action and political freedom. This too amounts to a form of technological determinism: their masks are there to fix what has been broken, to regain what allegedly got lost in the appropriation and colonization of the borderless and control-free cyberworld by the State-Corporation. A multi-layered and multi-dimensional field is cast into a binary between Good and Bad. For Harvey recognition technology works in the service of the powerful, it is made to serve specific ends. Recognition technology increases its power by regimenting people through "following" them. For Crispin, the use and dissemination of capture technology is objectifying, it turns people into mere objects shaped by a technological rationality on the path towards the disenchantment of the world. For Blas, capture technology is a form of government imposing standardized models upon singularities, it is shaped by its scientific rationality, one that is, according to Blas, built upon 19th-century scientific convictions and endeavours. Whether it is capitalism, asymmetric power relations or technological rationality, these critics are concerned about a possibly ensuing crisis of the status of the human.

This line of criticism is in itself reductive, reproducing the binary oppositions at play in surveillance technology. Reductionism begins with dualism: human/non-human, visible/invisible, power/powerless, quantitative/qualitative, existence/non-existence, individual/collective and cyber/real. Such binary oppositions tend to result in static oppositions, polarizations and antagonisms; hence the references by these pugnacious critics to WWI dazzle strategies, weaponization, revolt, and technological Frankensteins. A dualist approach, too, leads to what Richard Bernstein (1983, p.18) has identified as a "Cartesian anxiety," the "grand Either/Or": either you are visible and powerless, or invisible and powerful. Either you are a quantified and steered piece of data or an autonomous, revolting human being. Furthermore, these mask projects are an illustrative example of the now dominant reactionary counter-surveillance strategies proliferating in today's tech- and art scene. An underdog position is assumed, and the tactic of resistance to the top dog is oppositional.

Such binary logic is problematic, because it reifies a logical law; it treats an abstraction as if it is a concrete thing. Abstract conceptions reduce a multiplicity to a singular, monochromatic object, resulting in what Alfred Whitehead (1953, p.64) has called in *Science and the Modern World* the "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness": an abstract concept is here regarded as an existing reality. Consequently, it implicitly assumes that identity recognition technology can be grasped through the interplay between opposites and contested by reversing these opposites.

It is here, too, where we can see how the self is understood in relation to recognition technology. Crispin, Harvey and Selvaggio present recognition technology as an Other threatening an idealized Self. The Self is here envisioned to be autonomous, sovereign, self-assertive, revolting—these are grandiose assumptions that are presented as givens; they are neither explained nor defined. As N. Katherine Hayles (1999, p. 290) argued, as long as the human subject is envisioned as an autonomous self with clear boundaries completely independent of its environment, the human-machine relation can only be understood as one of clear-cut division and opposition. What is considered to be an autonomous self can be maintained only as long as it is "free from any transgression of the demarcated boundary between the two"—any compromise is likely to be

perceived as a threat to the self (Hayles, 1999, p. 291), as weakening the sovereignty of the self. “This view of the self authorizes the fear that if the boundaries are breached at all, there will be nothing to stop the self’s complete dissolution” (Hayles, 1999, p. 291).

In the name of humanity, alterity, and privacy these critics attempt to safeguard this abstracted and idealized notion of the self against a system that supposedly threatens its independence and humanity. It suggests that for the self to remain autonomous and independent, to safeguard it from quantifying and dehumanizing forces, it needs to thwart recognition technology. Within such an understanding, recognition technology comes to be associated with a threat, and the assumption undergirding their concerns is a loss of the allegedly autonomous self.

This fear of loss of self at play in the concealment from recognition technology echoes both a modernist obsession with uniqueness and originals, as well as what Hans Harbers describes as the endemic Romantic narrative of despair. “It is the story of being overrun by a technological juggernaut, which is guided only by instrumental values...” (2005, p. 12). The quest to protect the self from the encroachment of datafication, quantification and dehumanization reduces resistance to a polarized opposition. Such an understanding assumes the primacy of the human over the machine, the superiority of the self over the other-as-machine—which is equally problematic as the converse. As a result, both sides become monumentalized.

Blas does express concern over how recognition technology forces normative categories upon minority groups. He explains that his masks represent a desire to cultivate “ways of living otherwise” (Blas as cited in Burks, 2015). “Alterity,” he argues, “exists within the cracks and fissures of quantification” (Blas as cited in Burks, 2015). One could argue that his Facial Weaponization series vie for heterogeneity, opacity and non-normative subjectivity, that they attempt to open up a space where one is not consumed by these technologies and experiment with ways of opting out and escaping from the logic of the visible. And they do. But they do so in opposition to a homogenous conception of recognition technology as a monumentalized “apparatus”—yet another dualism. Blas’ series of masks are purportedly about what lies outside of the protocolized, normative templates of identity and activity, about the reductionism of quantification, and a desire to “let exist as such that which is immeasurable, unidentifiable” (Blas, 2014). He calls for alterity and opacity, but he does so in opposition to “*the*” surveillance state, taken as a gigantic unifier. His “autonomous visibilities”, as he calls them, are posited in firm opposition to a technological “Enemy-Other.” So, though Blas clamours for the immeasurability and alterity of people, and emphasizes a minority politics, he represents recognition technology as a homogenous monolith, and sets up the human-versus-machine relation as one of opposition.

One could object, of course, that these projects make present what otherwise remains invisible. Crispin’s Data-Masks could be understood to “actualize” the virtual, showing the rudimentary oval shapes that pass for a human face online. Nevertheless, these Data-Masks rely on a dichotomy between human/machine, virtual/real identities, and on a positivist optical logic. These classic dualist categories with which we navigate the world are not neutral; they are historical implements of hierarchy and oppression.

Furthermore, black boxing as a response plays into the “informatic visibility” paradigms of the so-called societies of control. It enacts the public face of surveillance. Black boxing is too limited an approach as it reifies the logic of the problem it aims to tackle, while glossing over the ontological assumptions inside the black box, fortifying a stronghold for identity and self, instead of opening a wider playing field that welcomes relational multiplicities, counteracting the Janus-faced logic of binary opposites.

DEL + [SELF]: Conclusion

These mask projects imply profound questions, requiring us to consider whether it is in fact the very notion of the self that needs to “stop showing up” and be “de-activated.” Perhaps it is the anthropocentric conception of the indivisible, original, copyrighted, sovereign, white, secular, Western, autonomous and individual Man of singular yet universal value that should be discarded. Is it possible to entertain a refusal both of identity recognition technology *and* a stable sense of self? It could certainly be argued that Blas and Selvaggio are anxious about the consequences, the possible normative effects of the trust in recognition technology on the “alterity” of people. And yet, their cryptographic anti-recognition masks participate in its underlying logic. Their work is, effectively, reproducing the very logic it aims to evade and break out of.

Contestation in terms of reversal of opposites misses precisely what is specific to these technologies and remains tied to a Romantic idealization of the self as demarcated from and unmediated by its sociotechnical surroundings. We need to de-codify contestation in order to multiply “the lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 3). We need different forms of contestation. As Karen Barad (2007) argues in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, we are not situated in the world, but part of the world, inseparable from it. As various scholars have noted, sociotechnical objects establish relations between disparate actors, settings, and things—both human and non-human, material and immaterial, and all the layers between. As Paul Dourish (2014) explains, “[i]nformation systems are material objects, but so too is information as it is manifest within them. Its specific materialities shape the forms of processing that it allows. Any account of what information is, or what it does within social, cultural, or institutional settings must, then, be grounded in an examination of these material considerations.”

What is specific about recognition technology are its multi-layered and cartographic aspects, from air strainers, fiber optic cables, relay switches, coltan miners, urban planners, airport security systems, data-farms, bio-chip transponders, clunky CCTV boxes, zombie networks, water, “the war on terror”, hard disk failures, privacy law, electricity plugs, overheated processors, 404s, satellites high up in the sky all the way to the submarine cables at the bottom of the ocean floor. Furthermore, the software programs on which recognition technology run cluster, draw connections, draw apart, label, categorize and classify, and this must also be considered as human labour. Black boxing by way of masking obscures an entire socio-technical infrastructural ecology of people and interfaces that program, calculate, read, create, interpret, value, process, vet, sift through, pass on and manipulate data. Interpretation is at the core of this ecology as is the human bias and errors that are inherently part of these processes (Gray, Gerlitz Bounegru 2016; Arnall, 2013).

And yet, these are computational processes too. The speed at which these software programs make mathematical computations is so high and the amount of numerical data with which it works is so large that it exceeds the phenomenological bounds of human comprehension. However, recognition technology is not a technological problem waiting for a best-practices technical solution, but a “complex stack.” “A technology that might seem an indissoluble whole breaks into countless actors, pieces and alignments” (Venturini, 2010, p. 261).

In *The Limits of Critique* Rita Felski (2015) argues that we should re-describe the relation between the object of critique and its context. The object must be understood as a mediator. We should trace the interconnections and conflicts among mediators, she argues. Tracing the lines of

connection, without the primacy of one over the other, cuts through abstract and dualist conceptions, cuts off the dead-end road of body-versus-machines and the human and the non-human, and works toward more complex sociotechnical relations and understandings. By multiplying the relations and layers of the spaces we inhabit, you multiply the avenues for change. It would be hyperbolic to think this amounts to relativism—we should not fall victim to the “Grand Either/Or” (Bernstein, 1983, p.18). A relational approach, Bernstein (1983) has shown in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* does not preclude acting on strong convictions, but it demands an open view. Looking at recognition technology through a relational “lens” makes it more complex, multiform, ambiguous, but also gives us a lot more to work with. We are in need of movements that resist the temptations of a binary universe in favour of emancipating, productive, affective and relational forms of critique. We need critics that resist branches of neo-positivism, aestheticism, and individualism. Over and against a binary thinking of neat demarcations and isolated domains, thinking in terms of relations opens pathways to intersectional forms of critique. A relational approach opens recognition technology up to explore the different social imaginaries with which it has come to be associated and might help us to ask questions often side-lined by a predominant focus on the Self and its “privacy.” Why is it that we think life can be calculated? What bolsters the persistent trust in the objectivity of numbers and neutrality of mathematics? What aspects load recognition technology with God-like qualities—Knowing All and Seeing All? Can we liberate ourselves from the notion of the self as a demarcated, autonomous unit and instead increase our capacity to relate to other people and things? How can we learn to embrace the enigmatic, the flawed, the partial, the impure, the unpredictable within life? Turning once again to Karen Barad (2007, p. 91), convictions are about making worlds, “it is about making specific worldly configurations—not in the sense of making them up *ex nihilo*, or out of language, beliefs or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form” (2007, p. 91). This raises the question of how to give form to an envisioning of the self as a multiform process of relation, as the sum of these ever-changing relations, and of how to embrace the exigencies of the sociotechnical.

My point is not to dismiss these masked interventions, nor to downplay the role recognition technology plays in our prediction- and control-obsessed culture. These masks may neither engender invisible power, nor safeguard “privacy” and “autonomy.” Nonetheless, they are exhibited, people engage with these masks at exhibitions, they are valued and written about. What is more, what they ultimately reflect in their hyper-visible invisibility—invisible to recognition technology, but hyper visual on the street—is their necessary and inevitable failure. Their masqueraded battle for invisibility points to all of that which spills over and falls through data-hungry collection and recognition technologies. All of that which cannot be reduced to data points. As it cuts through categories and disciplines, recognition technology as a social, geopolitical, epistemological, economic, legal, technological, scientific and cultural “cartography” is not “fixable” by masks. And yet, we can trace its contingencies, point out its Achilles’ heel, and imagine different ways of relating to one another. This is a strategy of affirmative *presence*, as a process of imagining otherwise, of making worlds, constantly opening the doors to unknown futures outside of algorithmic tracking wars and calculated settings.

By taking a relational turn we can come to understand recognition technology not as an object for our eyes but as a relationship between people, settings and non-human objects and things. Once you start tracing these alignments, every supposed self and every piece of technology betrays its myth of unity, linearity, and forks into countless interconnections. The relationship

between human and machine is an infinite map of connections, a manifold of ambiguous, contradictory and competitive connections that can be traced from the micro to the macro level. The black boxing of the self merely caps these connections. A relational understanding of recognition technology will help to engage with a range of avenues, things, people and practices in which the relation between humans and machines can be reshaped, re-imagined and renegotiated.

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