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THINKING BEYOND BIOMETRICS: A PLAYFUL DANCE

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Revaluing the art of disappearing in order to think beyond the 'biometric box'

Today, digital biometrics are proliferating. Based on scans of biological traits – from faces, fingerprints and gait to vein patterns, heart rhythm, brain activity, and body odor[1] – biometrics are known to be able to establish the identity of a human subject (Pugliese 8). They have been implemented as part of the security architecture at national borders, in airports, suburbs, shopping malls, schools, etc. (Gates 4). And within the last decade biometric facial recognition, which I will be focusing on here, has ventured into our smartphones and social media apps such as FaceApp, Instagram and Snapchat. Thus, many of us are in touch with biometrics on a daily basis. As we process our faces in social media with seemingly innocent beauty effects – generating doll eyes and customizing panda emojis – we often don't think about the underlying apparatus at play. When reading humanities research on biometrics, though, it becomes evident that we are altering a lot more than just our faces.

Biometrics has been widely criticized within several fields of the humanities. Reading through this literature, there are many indications that we are currently experiencing a rise of physiognomy – an identity system from the 18th century claiming a direct relation between a human's physiognomic traits and inner character (Pugliese 35-36). [2] Even though researchers give thorough accounts of the consequences of this *physiognomic renaissance*, covering issues such as racism, social inequality, and biopolitical control, they seem to suggest (technical or legal) adjustments in order to provide a more democratic use of biometric apparatuses. However, fine-tuning biometrics risks having the opposite effect: consolidating and increasing racism, inequality and control. In this article, then, I will demonstrate how humanities research can be said to be caught in a 'biometric box' – meaning not able to think beyond biometric frameworks when suggesting solutions to the problems raised.

Consequently, I call for other strategies. I propose studying a wave of artistic counter-biometrics in order to enable thinking beyond the biometric box. Artists such as Zach Blas, Heather Dewey-Hagborg, Adam Harvey, Leo Selvaggio, Sterling Crispin, and Hito Steyerl, are practicing the 'art of disappearing' from the biometric gaze. They create shiny pink-bubbly plastic masks, face dazzle make-up, silver-plated anti-drone coats, DNA spoofing, Erase Spray, "fake face"-generating technologies and "fucking didactic educational .MOV files" in order to avoid being 'seen' by biometrics. However the critical perspectives on biometrics that this group of artists generates has been criticized within the humanities: Joseph Pugliese has described the glorification of biometric failure as naïve and privileged (75); Torin Monahan has described it as universalizing (162), aestheticizing (160), and "inviting a playful dance with [surveillance]" (171); And Patricia De Vries has pointed out that Blas' art inserts a reductive dichotomy between humans and machines (81).

I will expore a different understanding of this art of disappearing. Much can be said about the tendency of academic research to ignore or devalue artistic knowledge production. In this case, however, what is being devalued is not only artistic knowledge, but a particular kind of knowledge produced by a branch of the digital humanities which has been called *transformative digital humanities* (Lothian & Phillips), operating between disciplines such as art, activism, software design and academic critical thinking while exploring contemporary digital media. The

aforementioned artists, then, are researchers as well – even with a thorough technical and practical understanding of biometrics. This is ignored by more traditional research positions, which consequently become blind to the perspectives that more close and engaged readings of the art of disappearing might enable.

I am not suggesting not to be critical when engaging with these works. Rather, what I am suggesting is to consider that the knowledge produced by these artistic research positions might be of great value to the overall research on biometrics. What would happen if we treated these examples for what they are: knowledge structures in line with, albeit not entirely similar to, other theoretical research texts? This article should be seen as an experiment to do exactly that; as an example of what additional perspectives can come from doing so. Therefore, I analyze Zach Blas' *Face Cages* (2013-16) and his "Fag Face" mask from *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011-14) as part of a larger theoretical formation. I aim to show how doing this brings about close attention to the aesthetic qualities of biometrics, which I argue is critical to enable thinking beyond biometrics. What I call attention to is that biometrics produces, after all, an *aesthetics*, and that it should be treated as such. I thus reclaim biometrics as aesthetics in order to shift our perspective from the technical media to the narratives we inscribe in these media and the aesthetic output enabled by that. This leads me to claim that activating a counter-biometric aesthetics is far from naïve. On the contrary, engaging in the aesthetics of biometrics might be a rather clever, valuable and urgently needed research strategy for dealing with the physiognomic renaissance biometrics brings about. In other words, I am attending not only to the aesthetic value of the particular artworks mentioned, but to the value of humanities research more broadly through its attention to the aesthetics of contemporary technology.

A physiognomic Renaissance, or what is the problem with biometrics?

Digital biometrics has a long, troubled history. It is not the aim of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of this history, since this has already been covered. But in order to clarify the problems with contemporary biometrics, I will give a brief survey of its genealogy to explain how digital biometrics can be perceived as a *physiognomic renaissance*. Joseph Pugliese (2010) and Btihaj Ajana (2013) trace digital biometrics back to a series of biometric prototypes. Pugliese goes as far back as 500 BC, when "potters pressed their fingerprint into their finished work as signs of their individuating identities" (26). He highlights a series of identity systems developed throughout history such as medieval skin-readings (26-27), renaissance mappings of the ideal body like the ones made by Leonardo da Vinci (28), and the pseudo-sciences of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries: physiognomy, phrenology, eugenics, and anthropometry (35-45). These prototypes, which I will refer to below as *analogue biometrics*, represented certain subjects, differing from a normative white body ideal, as biologically, intellectually and morally inferior. Although Ajana focuses primarily on anthropometry and fingerprints, they both agree that analogue biometrics functioned as biopolitical control apparatuses. The representations they produced were used as a means for justifying discrimination, criminalization, colonization, violence, and in some cases mass killings. For example, theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater produced

a physiognomic system and manual for reading faces as can be seen in figure 1.

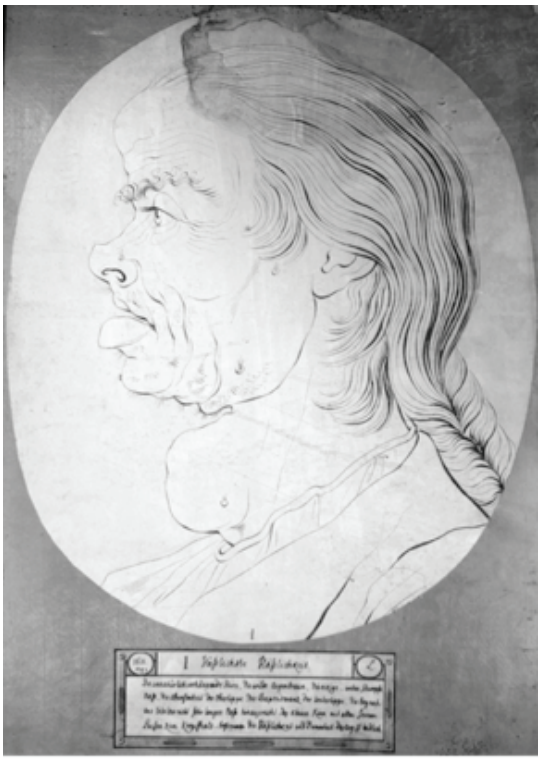

Figure 1: Johann Kaspar Lavater, "The Ugliest Ugliness" (1796).

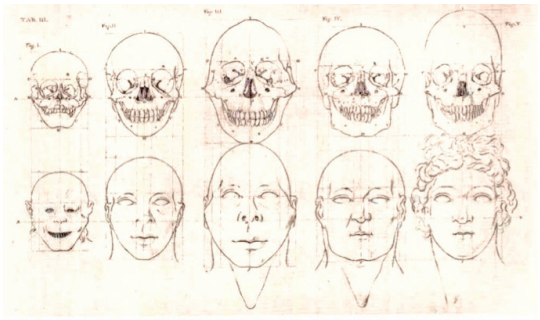

Figure 2: Petrus Camper, "From Ape to Apollo Belvedere" (1821).

The text beneath the image says:

> *The unnaturally prominent forehead; the wild eyebrows; the angular and blunt nose; the lacking upper lip; the preponderant lower lip, which almost reaches the end of the rather short nose; the small chin becoming a goiter; [all these characteristics] determine ugliness and stupidity. The eye is goodish. (Wegenstein 10)*

As one can tell, this biometric system not only claimed that it is possible to read faces like open books – that you can judge the book by its cover – but also that some appearances signaled less value than others. Face readings became quite popular. According to Lucy Hartley they quickly evolved into a European epidemic, which lead to the use of masks in public spaces as a means of protection against the readings (42). Analogue biometrics began establishing a hierarchy of faces as exemplified in figure 2. This phrenological scheme created by anatomists Petrus Camper put the face of what he termed "the African" at the bottom of a biometric hierarchy, comparing it to an ape, and a male Caucasian face at the top, indicating a higher evolutionary status. According to Pugliese such representations were later used by slavery apologetics in the U.S. (33). At the same time, so called head hunters slaughtered and decapitated indigenous peoples in Australia in order to send their skulls to Europe for western anatomists to conduct such phrenological investigations (Pugliese 34-35). Later again, the biometrics of criminologist Cesare Lombroso and eugenicist Francis Galton developed biometric systems that represented certain minorities as being biologically predisposed to crime (Pugliese 51). Analogue biometrics has thus been used throughout history to devalue and violently subjugate particular subjects.

Pugliese and Shoshana Magnet (2011) have thoroughly mapped how newly developed digital biometrics operate with the same kind of normative body ideal – now algorithmically encoded in the infrastructures of digital biometrics. To take an example, an entire debate evolved around the social

media app FaceApp, which was released in January 2017. FaceApp can alter your face in ways that make you look younger or older, more feminine or masculine etc. When released, the app contained a so called 'Hot'-filter (Cresci; McGoogan). Applying this filter, the app would brighten the skin and enlarge the eyes, resulting in a "whitening" of the subject using it. This made explicit in figure 3:

Figure 3: Screenshot from Twitter following #FaceApp.

In this case, the subject's face is not only altered to a whiter version – as in a haunted digital imitation of the physical decapitations caused by analogue biometrics – it is entirely replaced by a white mask; whiteness is promoted at the expense of non-white bodies. In the spirit of Lavater's physiognomy and Camper's phrenology, a hierarchy of faces occurs which deems white faces more beautiful than non-white faces. Even though these kinds of biometric representations do not directly lead to physical violence like analogue biometrics did, they can certainly be said to violate the subject. Having your face replaced with a white face as a non-white subject is representational violence. Thus, while altering our faces using media such as FaceApp what really is pulling the strings is a historically constructed normative whiteness, which not only affects our faces in normative ways, but also affects how we value human beings (differently).

Of course, as Pugliese points out, the idea is not to argue that digital biometrics produce the *same kind* of lethal violence as analogue biometrics did (74), nor to argue that corporations or states intentionally develop racist technologies that discriminate against certain subjects in some sort of conspiracy. Rather, what is suggested, is that the normative whiteness of analogue biometrics resides in digital biometrics as an *infrastructural whiteness* (Pugliese 62),[3] – an in-built normative white "goldilocks subject who is 'jussstright'" (Magnet 31) which produces infrastructural racisms. This has consequences far beyond the realm of social media. Both Magnet, Kelly Gates (2011) and David Lyon (2008) describe how biometrics since 9/11 has been framed and implemented as a tool in the hunt for the so-called "face of terror" – a deeply worrisome, stereotypical representation often targeting Arab bodies (Gates 106). Moreover, being *unbiometrifiable* (Magnet 5) – meaning being a subject that biometrics has difficulties understanding – can result in being temporarily deprived of one's civil mobility rights and free access to particular spaces:

> *For example, biometric technologies that rely upon erroneous assumptions about the biological nature of race, gender, and sexuality produce unbiometrifiable bodies, resulting in individuals who are denied their basic*

> *human rights to mobility, employment, food, and housing. Although biometric scientists often speak of "false accept" or "false reject" biometric errors, we lack language for thinking about the failures of biometric technologies to contribute to substantive equality. (Magnet 151)*

The normative whiteness built into the infrastructures of digital biometrics, then, produces racial profiling and social inequalities. By now, I hope it is clear that digital biometrics can be understood as a physiognomic renaissance, and that this is problematic because it – whether intentional or not – (re)produces hierarchical and stereotypical subject representations, racial profiling and social inequalities.

Caught in a 'biometric box'

Humanities research covers the genealogy of biometrics and the problems raised much more thoroughly than I have been able to do here. In that way, a huge and valuable knowledge resource has already been developed. If we think of this resource as a box, consisting of the perspectives on biometrics provided by humanities research, it is possible to detect an inherent paradox. Despite the expansive criticisms of biometrics, when it comes to dealing with the problems they raise, humanities research can't seem to think outside of this box. In other words, it stays within a biometric framework. As an example, in the quote above Magnet is calling for equality to biometrics. In that way, one might say that she implicitly asks for a more democratic use of biometrics: For the biometric failures she investigates and criticizes throughout her book to be fixed. Similarly, in an article about algorithmic surveillance, Introna and Wood conclude with a bunch of solution-bullets, three of which I include here:

> A need for more detailed studies of FR algorithms with a particular emphasis on biases. We need to understand why these biases emerge and what we ought to do to eliminate or limit them. […] The development of an appropriate legal framework to prevent the misuse of the technology (especially as private installations increase). […] A very strong legal framework that prohibit or control the circulation of individuals facial biometric ('face prints') without due process. (195-196)

Here, Introna and Wood call for technical and legal adjustments of biometrics, explicitly calling to finetune the very same apparatus they criticize. Moreover, Pugliese is interested in the Japanese researchers Lao and Kawade (2004) who try to develop biometrics that are not calibrated to whiteness:

> What is interesting about this work is that it signals an attempt reflexively to integrate racial and ethnic differences into the operational software of biometric systems, and thus override homogenizing white templates. (76)

Implicitly or explicitly proposing technical and legal adjustments to biometrics in order to provide a more democratic use might be the ethical and reasonable thing to do. After all, the current inaccuracy of biometrics has problematic consequences for particular groups in society. On the other hand, these positions seem to suggest that being biometrifiable is a privilege. But is that in fact true? The genealogy these researchers present and refer to indicates the opposite. Being biometrifiable has always meant being subject to stereotypification, discrimination, violence, surveillance, and control. Indeed humanities research acknowledges that being biometrifiable today means being subject to biopolitical control:

> [T]he body is now subject to an intensification of instrumentalising techniques and procedures. As digitised bits of information, the body-as-information can now be inserted within networked relations of biopower that traverse the local, the national and the *global. The purchase on identity, in this digital landscape, has lost none of its biopolitical salience of power. (Pugliese 55)*

Here Pugliese describes how biometrics links the biological human being to the digital infrastructure, and thereby makes it amenable to surveillance, control and marketing. One might say that biometrics transforms the individual to *dividual* (Deleuze 5). Once the "living network" gets linked to the "information network" through biometrics, the subject consequently becomes subject to control, to *protocols* (Galloway & Thacker 77). As Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker imagine:

> *In the future, there will be a coincidence between happening and storage. After universal standards of identification are agreed on, real-time tracking technologies will increase exponentially, such that almost any space will be iteratively archived over time using Agre's "grammars of action." Space will become rewindable, fully simulated at all available time codes. Henceforth the lived environment will be divided into identifiable zones and nonidentifiable zones, and the nonidentifiables will be the shadowy new criminal classes. (132)*

What Galloway and Thacker observe in the technological identity systems currently being developed, is a potential of pervasive control. With the biometric systems underway, one might begin to register a shift from Deleuze's notion of *control societies* to a notion of *hyper-control societies*. In that way, even though being unbiometrifiable is not desirable, being biometrifiable is not a favorable situation either. The paradox, then, is that humanities research realizes the control potential of biometric apparatuses, but still suggests improving them. In that way, they seem to more or less intentionally take part in reproducing the very same apparatus they criticize at length. With increasing biometric data collection across the globe – not least through social media – this finetuning must already be taking place. Biometric data are definitely accumulating quickly but this will not necessarily lead to a more democratic use of biometrics. On the contrary, you can easily imagine how adjusting and finetuning biometrics would only increase and intensify their potential for control and discrimination, fortifying the physiognomic renaissance.

This is not meant as an unambiguous critique of the above-mentioned proposals. I fully recognize the importance of the struggle for human rights and social justice when it comes to digital technologies. But rather it is meant as an initiation of an ongoing, parallel research on long-term strategies for dealing with biometrics. Strategies that take us beyond the biometric box, and beyond the reproduction of biometrics.

Thinking outside the biometric box with the art of disappearing

How do we get out of the biometric box? This question is what originally sparked my interest in artistic responses to biometrics, because artists are working with cultivating different strategies for circumventing biometrics. Before I analyze Blas' masks, I will provide a short description of them. With

Figure 4: Zach Blas, Face Cages #1, endurance performance with Zach Blas, 2015, Face Cages #2, Elle Mehrmand, 2014, Face Cages #3, Micha Cárdenas, 2014, Face Cages #4, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, 2016, photos by Christopher O'Leary.

Figure 5: Zach Blas, Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face Mask, October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA, Mask, November 20, 2013, New York, NY, Mask, May 31, 2013, San Diego, CA, Mask, May 19, 2014, Mexico City, Mexico, photos by Christopher O'Leary.

Face Cages Blas investigates how biometrics affects us in a very bodily and sensuous way. As part of his investigation of biometrics, Blas has 3D-printed biometric templates and wears them together with three other artists in four performance videos.

When watching the videos, illustrated in figure 4, the faces hardly move, but if you look carefully their eyes blink from time to time, they occasionally wet their lips and their chests move up and down. The human subjects are never stable. They are very lively, organic beings. Saliva is floating. Air is entering and leaving their lungs as they breath. Their lips get dry if they don't wet them. In contrast, the metallic, glittery systems of symmetrical lines are completely stable and inorganic. They cover and stick to the subjects' faces. It looks uncomfortable, claustrophobic. These cages allude both to being detained at borders and being caught up in stereotypes. With the physical templates Blas draws our attention to the reductive representations that biometrics produce, to the clash between biometric identity and the subject. As he states:

> *[W]hen I […] tried to put it on I was really struck because it actually did not fit my face very well, and you can see there is these inner points that were basically stabbing my eyeballs (Blas, "Informatic Opacity" 51:55-52:05).*

Translated from digital infrastructure to physical object the biometric template literally hurts its subject. It almost penetrates the body, as if it wanted to cut open and lay bare what is hiding under the skin.

In *Facial Weaponization Suite*, which is the counterpart to *Face Cages*, Blas creates counter-biometric masks as a weapon against such biometric attacks. The counter-mask functions as a way of shielding oneself from biometrics' hurtful representations, much like they did in the 18th and 19th centuries to avoid physiognomic face readings. As part of his creative process Blas arranged a series of workshops in which he discussed biometrics with the participants, collected and aggregated their biometric face data and manipulated them in a 3D-modelling program (Hiscott). Contrary to the face cages it is not possible to detect any faces behind the masks in *Facial Weaponization Suite*. As figure 5 shows, they appear more organic and soft. They are colorful and almost humorous, and playful. And although they probably don't fit perfectly, there is something much more spacious and inclusive about their shape.

In an accompanying video manifesto entitled *Facial Weaponization Communiqué: Fag Face* (2012), an anonymous computer animated voice suggests using the first mask – the glossy, pink candy floss-like one – as a political tool. Evoking the political tradition of the mask – e.g. Anonymous, Pussy Riot,

the Zapatistas and Black Bloc (Blas, FWC 06:28-06:52) – Blas investigates the potential of being unbiometrifiable and uses the counter-masks to exploit biometric failures rather than trying to fix them. Wearing this mask, a biometric face recognition technology would continually slide along the smooth surface of the mask; its curves and depths, its dead ends. It would search in vain for a face in the pink, non-signifying landscape. In figure 6, a scene from the video illustrates the counter-masks in action.

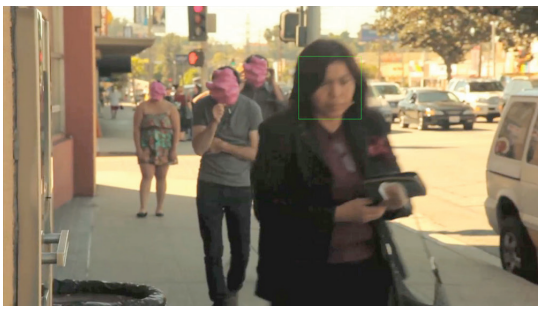

Figure 6: Screenshot from Zach Blas' video Facial Weaponization Communiqué: Fag Face (2012).

Looking at the picture, it seems like only the woman in the front is detected by biometrics as there are no identifying thin green squares around the mask-wearing subjects. In return, the pink masks make are even more eye-catching and visible than the biometrified woman. Watching the video, there is something disquieting about their slow-motion stroll through the city streets (Blas, *FWC* 07:18-07:25). In which city or airport would such mask-wearing subjects not be asked to take them off? Given that it is probably difficult to see anything when wearing the masks, it would be a clumsy tool in an actual political action, and bearing in mind that biometrics are able to identify subjects from many other biological traits than the face, the strategy of wearing a *Fag Face* mask seems somewhat impractical. So, what are we to do with these seemingly useless masks?

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, these kinds of masks have been criticized for being naïve and aestheticizing. As Torin Monahan states:

> *In the case of the examples covered in this paper, it is clear that while some of the signifiers of critical art are present, for instance with the Fag Face Mask's blurring of institutionally imposed identities, the primary message is nonetheless one of accommodating pervasive surveillance and inviting a playful dance with it. Recognition of the violent, unequal, and marginalizing applications of surveillance is bracketed or denied in the presentation of universal, neoliberal subjects in search of a modicum of (fashionable) control over their exposure.*

What I want to point out in this quote, is Monahan's phrasing: *playful dance with surveillance* and *fashionable control over exposure*. With this, Monahan first of all implies that because the artists are white men – here one might notice that he has chosen not to include women artists like Heather Dewey-Hagborg – we are dealing with privileged artistic play rather than the precariousness of being unbiometrifiable. Monahan here considers the art of disappearing, including Blas' masks, as art, which he then identifies as either critical or not. As I have mentioned, though, the art of disappearing cannot really be detached from its underlying research practice, in which we find acknowledgement of "the violent, unequal, and marginalizing applications of surveillance". Secondly, Monahan criticizes the tools they provide for hiding as fashionable, as aesthetic objects, rather than practical solutions.

But maybe these readings take the masks too literally. What if we don't think of them as hands-on tools for solving the

practical issues raised by biometrics? After all, Blas is well-informed on biometric research. He has his own research practice and a thorough technical understanding of biometrics. Then, why does his art insist on disappearing? What should we read into the stubborn insistence on the practical use of these counter-masks? I suggest understanding Blas' masks as epistemological tools for opening and thinking outside the "biometric box". We can think of the masks as not necessarily meant for *actually* concealing the subject. Instead we can understand them as an aesthetic gesture, articulating a stubborn refusal of biometrics' reductive and dehumanizing conceptualizations of what a human being is, as well as a stubborn insistence on the possibility of conceptualizing the human otherwise. What we are dealing with here might not be practical but rather epistemological strategies for critically imagining difference. In other words, we can regard the masks as a creation of knowledge structures in line with academic texts, which are counteracting biometric knowledge structures, rather than reproducing them. In the final paragraph, then, I will articulate them in this this way.

Reclaiming biometrics: Aesthetics through the mask as knowledge structure

Concerning the biometric box and current research, I am interested in the value of stepping outside of academic conventions and onto unknown grounds – even if they seem naïve. Turning to Jack Halberstam's continuation on Foucault's concept of *naïve* or *subjugated knowledges* (Foucault 7-8; Halberstam 11), I want to propose that we investigate the naïve terrain Blas' counter-masks open up. As Halberstam writes in his critique of academic conventions:

> *Indeed terms like* serious *and* rigorous *tend to be code words […] they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing. […] Training of any kind, in fact, is a way of refusing a kind of Benjaminian relation to knowing, a stroll down uncharted streets in the "wrong" direction. […] I propose that instead the goal is to lose one's way. (6)*

Instead of confirming what we already know, and instead of learning biometric knowledge structures, what might come from inventing new knowledge structures? What could come from strolling along with Blas' mask-wearing subjects? What becomes very obvious when studying the masks, is the aesthetic dimension of biometrics. When studying the face cages, we might realize that a digital template can be seen as an aesthetic artifact much like Blas' own masks. A grid, a network, a scheme. A system organized in a particular way. On Blas' webpage one can find an interesting description of *Face Cages*:

> *When these diagrams are extracted from the humans they cover over, they appear as harsh and sharp incongruous structures; they are, in fact, digital portraits of dehumanization (Blas,* Face Cages*).*

Here I want to draw attention to his use of the word 'portrait'. Because it points to the fact that with digital as well as analogue biometrics we have always been and are still dealing with portrayals, representations,

aesthetic expressions. We are dealing with aesthetic structures, schemes, diagrams. with particular systems organized and lead by human hands. When studying the *Fag Face* mask, it becomes clear that it is possible to manipulate and use the template data to produce a very different aesthetic artifact. This artifact might seem amorphous, monstrous, anonymizing, but it is still subject to a particular system. This is not a new acknowledgement. As both Pugliese (36) and Cynthia Freeland (119) point to in their research, biometrics has always been developed in between disciplines. Scientists, artists and philosophers have tried to map the relation between body and identity since antiquity (Freeland 119; Pugliese 36). Lavater's physiognomic system, for example, used painted illustrations of facial types. Galton's eugenics used the technology of composite photography to develop his criminal types. But even though biometrics are mediated by human subjects, they pose as scientific systems revealing "natural facts" (Pugliese 38). With digital biometrics the observer and producer of the system is even more hidden, making digital biometrics seem like neutral "conduits". But even though humanities research pays attention to how biometrics has been dangerously misconceived as science, they still suggest finetuning them. Should we not instead try to escape this physiognomic illusion entirely? Instead of *training* biometric structures, allowing biometrics to become even more pervasive, should we not be doing something completely different?

Following this example, I advocate cultivating an uncompromising critique of biometrics, reclaiming it as aesthetics. Even though we can map a genealogy of biometrics, tracing its analogue predecessors – medieval skin-readings, renaissance mappings of the ideal body, physiognomy, phrenology, eugenics, and anthropometry – it is important to emphasize that biometrics as such has actually not progressively developed over time. Rather, it should be seen as the recurrence of the same line of thought, exploiting different media – be it skin, drawings on paper, composite photography, mugshots or contemporary algorithmic scanners in airports or smartphones. A new conception of biometrics, then, would reclaim it as an aesthetic phenomenon. Biometrics in that sense would cover a specific aesthetic system that feeds on technological development – on the analogue and digital media available at a given moment – in order to produce a normative representation of a human subject. Although this subject might wear different masks, dress up in different media, it is the absolute same. Every new type of media developed throughout history has seemingly enabled new aesthetic possibilities for biometrics to reproduce itself. Hence the notion of physiognomic renaissance. Today, with digital media, biometrics expresses itself and is perceived to be something new. But it is rather the media that is new, and not biometrics as such. We can still oppose, resist, and set our faces against the validity of this aesthetic. In that sense, Blas' masks could be seen as a model for research to deal with biometrics and the physiognomic renaissance.

Blas creates a temporary aesthetic interruption that makes room for other ways of perceiving the human. This disturbance may be more of an aesthetic than practical strategy for dealing with biometrics, but that does not mean it cannot be politically effective. It is of course hard to know if these kinds of artistic research projects – in comparison with more traditional research forms – reach and create change outside of the academic world. But maybe. Given that these works are exhibited in order to generate public debate, this kind of research indeed has some potential to do just that. In the end, reclaiming biometrics as aesthetics, the only strategy left might be

to counteract the dominant aesthetics with another aesthetics, insisting on alternative knowledge structures. This is an early stage of stepping into the masquerade of biometrics, its play of masking and unmasking, and of asking the apparatus to dance. According to Halberstam new knowledge can come from lingering in the naïve, the fallible and the unknowable, and so I propose that we let ourselves lose our way in the knowledge structures of the mask. I propose to play along with Blas' masks and follow through to the dead ends, to dream recklessly in the hope that we can release ourselves from the biometric box and evoke different knowledge structures that help to dismantle biometrics in the longer term.

Notes

[1] This list is not exhaustive. For example, one might also add DNA to the list, as do Pugliese later in his book (96-97).

[2] Even though physiognomy was framed as a science, it was later refuted as pseudo-science (Kemp 106).

[3] *Infrastructural whiteness* essentially means that digital biometrics are technically calibrated to understand and therefore privilege white normative subjects.

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