

how to be a bad subject of the surveillance state

black bloc

by cz

“Black Bloc ... marks the point at which some of us began to pass through violence and show signs of a new kind of political being. To be sure, this transformation was personal. Nevertheless, it had practical pedagogical implications for anyone that cared to take note. And while it’s difficult to get a clear sense of the extent to which this transposition took hold, hints can be gleaned from the fact that the questions that plagued the movement in earlier periods could later be posed in new, different, and often better ways.” Black Bloc, White Riot: Anti-Globalization and the Genealogy of Dissent by AK Thompson

The first known instance of Black Bloc is usually attributed to the Automen, a group connected to West Germany’s squatting movement in the mid 80’s. The group donned complete facial coverage via ski masks, rendering their individual identities illegible. Their clashes with the police, bevy of tactics, and extremely hilarious experiments with Bloc (they once covered their faces and took to the street naked) are well established in the radical lexicon. Not only did the Automen not invent facial covering for maintaining anonymity (there are countless other examples from the Zapatistas to the KKK and everyone in between) but this approach was born a few years previous to 1986’s infamous demonstrations against the Police, when a group of feminists is credited with introducing key anarchists ideas and rhetoric to this predominantly male group, most notably autonomy and anti-statist action.

Here, in so called New York City, it is illegal to cover your face, according to Penal Code 240.35. This law, the oldest of its kind in America, was established in 1845, when a group of tenant farmers dressed as “Indians” (problematic af), covered their faces with “leather masks” and attacked the police protecting the landlord who had lowered the farmer’s wheat prices. This law has since been used by the police to arrest people during Occupy, and they have taken to threatening arrest to anyone covers their face at actions. In the J20 Trial depositions of 2016’s Inauguration protests, prosecutors argued that the act of wearing black bloc, signaled the protestors intentions to start a riot. The trails also showed the lengths the state will go to in order to identify anyone wearing Black Bloc, matching any discernible detail of clothing, a white zipper on a black hoodie, to endless photos and videos.

Concerns for remaining anonymous are nothing new, and in response to increasing technological surveillance by the state and capitalist systems, many design and art projects have popped up, exploring what it means to retain or regain some level of privacy in the 21st century. These projects tend to use the myriad of ways data collection can occur by blocking, rendering invisible and obscuring, perhaps more effectively than Black Bloc can do for us now.

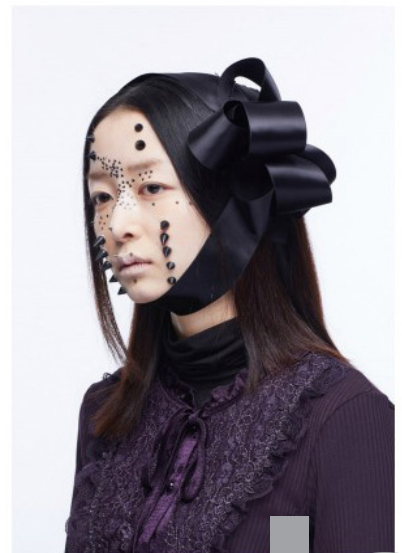
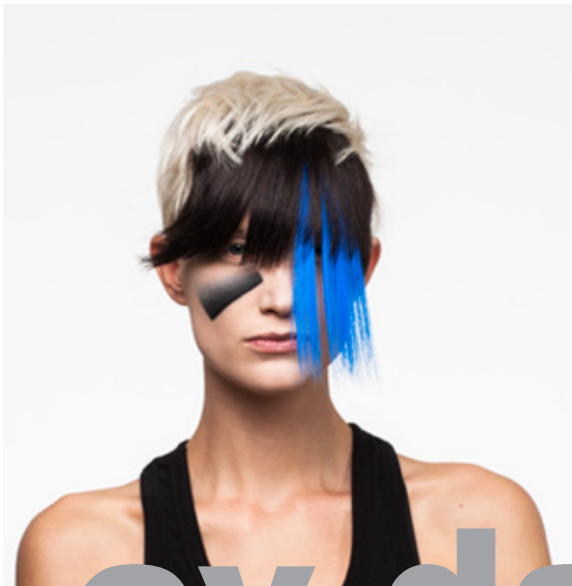
project kovr



One such instance is Project Kovr, an Anti-Surveillance Coat created by two Dutch designers (pictured left). This genderless jacket is composed of metalliferous (metal) fibers. This jacket is designed to “block every incoming and outgoing signal, keeping you and your personal data safe from radio waves and radiation.” It features one pocket made of non-signal blocking fabric to allow the wearer to be “accessible when desired”. Although omitted from the Surveillance Coat’s description, this garment also blocks RFID, enables

the wearer to re-appropriate any items that might have barcodes or sensors attached to them in stores. This garment is currently exorbitantly expensive, its newest iteration (created in 2017), is available for preorder for [\\$363.](#)

Another project is CV Dazzle from artist and anti-surveillance researcher Adam Harvey, which uses wild makeup, colorful extensions and an outlandish approach to obstructing the legibility of faces for facial scanning technology. “CV Dazzle works by altering the expected dark and light areas of a face (or object) according to the vulnerabilities of a specific computer vision algorithm.” The project, started in 2010, was Harvey’s thesis project during his studies at NYU’s ITP program, and has been reprised with institutional support from DIS Magazine and NY Times (bummer). Thankfully, all the resources, including how to test the effectiveness of these methodologies (obscuring one eye, using hair to make an asymmetrical face etc.) to software such as the Viola-Jones haarcascade method for face detection. As Harvey’s website states, “this ongoing project is motivated by a need to reclaim privacy in a world of increased visual surveillance and data collection” and will undoubtedly have more iterations as facial scanning technology changes.



cv dazzle

hyper

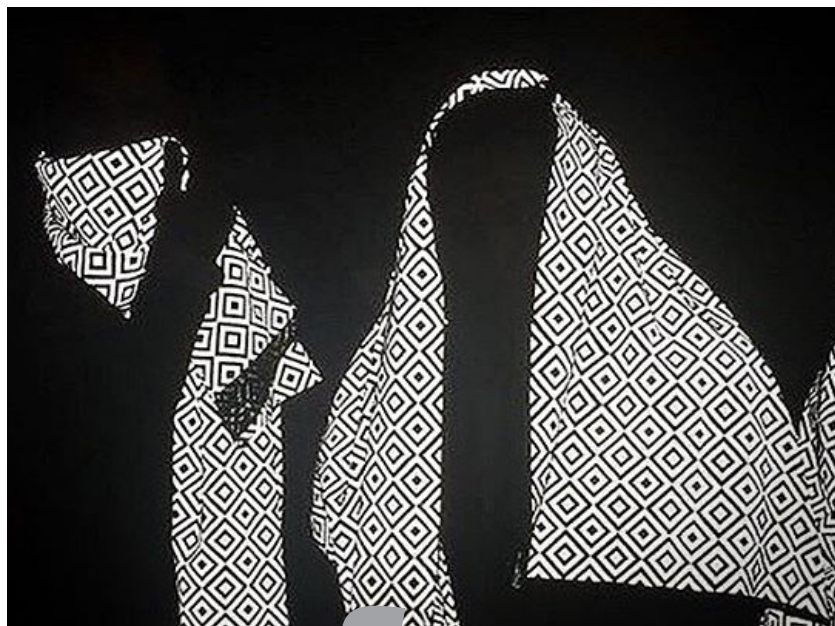
An extension of CV Dazzle is Harvey's newest project, Hyperface. As "a new kind of camouflage that aims to reduce the confidence score of facial detection and recognition by providing false faces



that distract computer vision algorithms," it gives the technology too much of what it wants, overwhelming it completely. These scarves, textiles and patterns take the form of extremely dense pixelated camo made entirely of smiles [\(pictured above\)](#). As the project is still in production, it has not been made available for sale, or shared on any open source networks.

face

With a very different end-goal in mind, the Ishu was conceived of as an anti-paparazzi scarf (pictured right). It's designed to obscure the wearers' face and body when exposed to the flash of a camera. Using high-reflective fibers and a minimal concentric square pattern, the scarf also falls into the category of the extremely unobtainable, selling at 500 dollars each. It is shown below, on the right with no flash and on the left with flash, rendering the entire frame black, including the figures.



ishu scarf

There are a multitude of other projects such as these, imbued with the intention to protect users from the high octane surveillance that we are succumb to everyday; walking in our neighborhoods, in street actions, existing in private or public space. Can we combine the effective aspects of these disparate project's capacities to help actualize a future in which we can maintain some form of anonymity? Can we remain or regain plausible anonymity? Also, who gets to be anonymous? Who is this for? Most of these projects (with CV Dazzle's free online resource as the one exception) are interested in provocation folks to think about their relationship to surveillance, and allowing them those with incredible privilege to explore the possibility of what that looks like (hint: it looks fashionably techy). [The debate around privacy](#) is inherently tied to class, and the state wages war, collecting information in highly different ways depending on our class, race, gender, ability and economic and housing insecurity. None of aforementioned projects confront this reality or begin to contend with the myriad issues and intersections of class and access posed by our current surveillance state. Rather, these projects seem content to sit comfortably in the pantheon of art and design, as small scale projects for internet fodder, or a piece for an exhibition of topical and 'edgy' concerns. What would it look like to make these garments together, for free, thinking about how best they might be used and who in fact needs them, all the while infusing into their creation conversations around access and the desire for anonymity in the struggle of the everyday?

can we be 2gether? anonymous

If you're interested in more wild imaginings, or just want to hang out and cover our faces with rhinestones, get at me: **247lol@protonmail.com**



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