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# Makeshift

A FIELD GUIDE TO HIDDEN CREATIVITY



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# For USD 200, you can trick surveillance cameras into thinking you're Leonardo Selvaggio —Without a Trace

**If you own a cellphone**, the US government probably has your number. Video cameras can recognize your face—Facebook certainly does. The Information Age, for all its boundless perks, makes it nearly impossible to exist without a digital trace.

Anti-surveillance advocates are continuously dreaming up ways to cover their tracks and outsmart spies. Designer Adam Harvey's pop-up Privacy Gift Shop hawks electromagnetic phone sleeves (USD 80) that block signals, and his 'stealth wear' fashion line features silver-plated burqas (USD 2,500) that thwart thermal detection by military drones. Biononymous.me, an online forum, offers DIY guides for protecting your fingerprints and skin cells from 'biological surveillance'.

Leonardo Selvaggio, a Chicago-based artist, uses 3D-printed prosthetic masks to trick video cameras and facial recognition

software. Makeshift caught up with him during his downtime installing a project at Art Souterrain in Montreal.

**Makeshift: You've said Chicago is the most-surveilled city in the US, with thousands of cameras linked to a federal network. What concerns you most about this?**

**LS:** I'm very interested in how surveillance affects how we perform our identities in public. We still cling to the idea that there's some separation between the public and private—there's not. I'm concerned about what happens when the public catches up, when everyone knows they're always being watched. This could have a detrimental effect on our ability to experiment and to create fully realized identities.

I'm also worried that surveillance is used in a prosecutory manner in our judicial system. But evidence collected via surveillance is fal-

libile; photos, videos, and DNA evidence can all be doctored. Now we're looking at facial recognition technology and biometrics as the new 'beyond a reasonable doubt' technology to bring in front of a jury. Those too will fail, and Americans will be incarcerated anyway. My work attempts to subvert this.

### **How did you come up with the idea for the prosthetic mask project, URME Surveillance?**

The idea came from a lot of research into other artist's work with facial recognition, such as Adam Harvey [of Privacy Gift Shop]. I found there seemed to be one prevailing strategy: hide the face, which means using ski masks, sunglasses, and hoodies. But all of these interventions can make you seem suspicious, which often leads to people looking at you. I realized I needed a new strategy, one that could fool a camera but be inconspicuous. It's tied to the idea of 'passing'.

For instance, I'm a gay man, but I had a relatively easy time growing up. While my other gay friends were teased or bullied in school, I could pass as straight. The key idea in passing is that you're concealed by presenting, not by covering up. So in URME Surveillance, rather than obscure the face, the prosthetics allow people to present a different face to both cameras and the public.

### **Why did you design the prosthetic in your own image?**

I chose to use my face because it's unethical to put someone other than myself at risk. The other reason is because I'm a privileged white male. There's nothing more 'passable' than a white man in a suit. So while I'm asking others to present themselves as me, the net result is that when they're tracked in public wearing my prosthetic, their actions are attributed to my own.



### **What are some complications?**

Physically speaking, the mask is hard and inflexible, so it's noticeable in face-to-face interactions. It also costs too much to make, so I can't really make a profit. It's more than most people can afford to spend for such a device.

The project also has a series of ethical and cultural problems. What does it mean for me to ask a black woman to present as a white male? Or to ask a transgender Hispanic heterosexual to be me instead? I would say these are the very questions we should be asking of surveillance as well.

### **What's next for anti-surveillance?**

I look forward to a day when I can expand URME Surveillance to include prosthetics of every race, gender, sexuality, and age, and we can all try on each others' faces and identities. How do we resist surveillance? I'm not completely sure, but I know it has to start with an 'us', and I hope that by being 'me', we can all be each other. ☒

**Artist Note: This article was redacted significantly for publication. For a full transcript scroll down to the bottom**

Leonardo's 3D-printed masks are available, starting at USD 200.

[thatsmyface.com](https://thatsmyface.com)



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# Interview Questions for Makeshift Magazine

*Leonardo Selvaggio*

## **1. When did you initially become aware of & concerned about privacy issues? Did you have any personal experiences with being surveilled?**

I first really started thinking about Surveillance when I started my graduate degree at Columbia College Chicago's Interdisciplinary Arts program. There, I was introduced to the open-source movement in software, which I found fascinating, that software could be distributed with the intention of community engagement resulting in better, more inclusive programming. With my work traditionally centered around themes of gender and identity, I became curious how these ideas could be implemented in something other than software. This resulted in YouAreMe.net, an interactive web project in which I open my cyber identity to others by allowing them to log into my social media accounts and, in general, use my identity as material. This resulted in a huge discussion about what is public and what is private, and after doing some research, I learned that Chicago was the most widely surveilled city in the nation; consisting of 25,000 federal cameras all linked to a central hub called Virtual Shield. So it seemed natural for my work to progress in that direction. I became interested in how surveillance affects our identity, specifically how we perform those identities in public spaces. I myself have never been "surveilled", at least not in the traditional sense, in the way that several of my friends who are Black or Arab have, and that is primarily because I am white and privileged. What I have experienced a little bit of is the structure of power, or, what I like to call the prejudicial architecture of surveillance. Though I am a gay man, I had a relatively easy time growing up. While my other gay friends were teased or bullied in school, I was safe, because I could pass as straight. What working on URME Surveillance has shown me in retrospect was how much of an active process "passing" was, that I chose to behave in a way that was in accordance with a patriarchy. Even though I was white and privileged, I feared: feared my family finding out, feared being beaten up, or killed the way Mathew Sheppard was. This fear, which circumscribed my choices toward hetero-normative behavior, had a detrimental effect of my development. To this day as an adult, I see it in my unwillingness to express myself in anything other than male. That being said, my experience pales in comparison to the systemic racism and prejudice non-

white, non-male, non-hetero-normative, and several other groups experience from birth. It is important to remember that the topic Surveillance is not just about privacy issues, its about a system of power. Its about a value system that doesn't value democracy.

## **2. Why is it so concerning to you that our daily actions can be captured on camera, no matter where we are? What's most disturbing about that?**

There are two primary concerns for me, though I am sure there are several more. The first is a concern for its ramification on the public consciousness. The second is a concern for the use of surveillance in the evidentiary process of our justice system. As I alluded to earlier, I am very interested in how surveillance affects how we perform our identities in public. While the idea of performing identity have been well covered by feminists like Judith Butler and artists like Cindy Sherman, what I do think is a game changer is that surveillance offers an omni-present audience. Several psychological studies have shown that we change our behavior when we are watched. What I would like to point to, is that in our current, post 9-11, state of surveillance, we ARE being watched ALL THE TIME. Privacy is dead, there are no more spaces to be private in, not when all of our phones are tapped, emails are scanned, and satellites or drones are reading our texts. What has not yet happened however is a general awareness of this fact. Snowden has done much to educate us, but as a public, we still cling to the idea that there is some separation between public and private. There is not. What I am concerned with is, What happens when the public catches up? What happens when everyone knows they are always being watched? The detriment this will have to our ability to experiment, to create fully realized identities, to simply be will forever change human actualization. I truly believe the "self" has never been in more peril than it is today.

The second is how surveillance is and will continue to be used as a part of our judicial system almost solely in a prosecutory manner. We have several examples of governments, police forces, and the like gaining more and more access to surveillance technologies, yet the public's rights to do the same is greatly diminishing. Some argue that those surveillance devices are there to protect to the public, by documenting the actions of police officers, thus deterring police brutality or abuses of power. My rebuttal to this argument is who controls the power buttons on those devices? The answer of course is the very officers they are supposed to keep honest. Conversely, if my cell phone, after documenting such brutality, can be confiscated or smashed to bits, whether legally or illegally, then how am I pro-

tected? How do we have access to a credible defense? Furthermore, there is a history of evidentiary fallibility. We are constantly looking for a new “beyond-a-reasonable-doubt” technology to present in front of jury. It used to be photos, but then we realized those could be doctored; same with video. I remember DNA evidence being infallible, until it wasn't. Now we are looking at things like facial recognition technology, biometrics, which my work attempts to subvert. Those too will fail, and several Americans will be incarcerated anyways. What is even more disturbing about this is how automated these technologies are becoming and how the results obfuscate the process because a human isn't making these decisions, machines are. How does a defense attorney even begin to question the validity of a facial recognition match? I think Jason Bigs of Tech Crunch hit the nail right on the head when stated “What Leo is really doing here is allowing us to have the option of not ending up in that ineptly run database. That's what I'm really afraid of. I'm afraid of the Kafka-esque situation of being the guy everyone is after because some bad SQL query changed my last name. That, in the end, is what we should all fear: the banality of government IT. ”

**3. How did you come up with the idea for the prosthetic masks? And one thing I'm not clear on: Are the masks supposed to be different than the wearers' face, in order to confuse facial recognition software? Could you expand a bit on that, and the idea behind “identity replacement technology”?**

The idea of the prosthetic came from a lot of research into other artists working with facial recognition, such as Adam Harvey and Zach Blas, as well as scouring the internet for DIY solutions and the such. What I realized is that in everything I saw there seemed to be one prevailing strategy: hide the face. Out of the art world this is manifested with ski masks, sunglasses, and hoodies. The problem with this is that wearing a hoodie is associated with criminality, as is in the tragic and senseless death of Trayvon Martin. So all of these interventions required you to look or be interpreted as suspicious, which often led to people looking at you. I realized that I needed a new strategy: one that could fool a camera, and yet be inconspicuous. My conclusion was very tied to the idea of “passing” I discussed above. The key component in passing is that you are concealing by presenting, rather than hiding by occluding. In my instance, I presented as straight, to hide that I was gay. So in URME Surveillance rather than obscure the face, I decided to show both cameras and people in the crowd a face other than the actual face I was trying to conceal. Thus a prosthetic seemed the

natural choice, because it has all the features required for facial recognition. However, because facial recognition systems are able to pull up a person's information, I also needed a face that belonged to a real person, otherwise it would draw suspicion. I chose my face for several reasons, one of which being it is unethical to put someone other than myself at risk. The other is because I am a privileged white male. There is nothing more “passable” than a white man in a suit. So what we are really talking about is asking others to present themselves at me, the net result being that when they are tracked in public wearing my prosthetic, their actions are attributed as my own. Thus URME Surveillance creates disinformation within the surveillance system by allowing individual users to walk in public spaces inconspicuously among other pedestrians while still protecting their identities from being recognized. Of course, there are several issues with the prosthetic. Some of the problems are physical, such as the fact that it is hard and not flexible like latex mask, meaning that it can be detected as prosthetic during one-on-one interaction. It also costs too much to make even though I make no profit from their distribution. They are sold at cost through ThatsMyFace.com for \$200, which while less expensive than a \$800 latex mask, is more than most can afford to spend for such a device. There are also a series of ethical and cultural problems that I find fantastically problematic and where the art portion of this project lives. URME Surveillance is riddled with questions of beauty, class, privilege, agism, sexism, racism, and nationality, to name a few, What does it mean for me to ask a black woman to present as a white male? Or a hispanic transgendered heterosexual to be me instead? One might ask, how is this helping me be myself if I am being you? The answer of course is that it doesn't, at least not yet, but I would answer that question by saying, that these are the very questions we should be asking of surveillance as well. By starting this project with my face, the face of a white privileged male, I hope it will expose the schema that surveillance's prejudicial architecture is built on which is that Surveillance and the power structure behind it, in one way or another, wants us all to be white men. That is wrong. My work tries to produce dialogue around this idea because I look forward to a day when I can expand URME Surveillance to include prosthetics of every different race, gender identification, sexuality, age, etc. I look forward to a day when we are all trying on each others' faces and identities. Imagine a one-to-one ratio of everyone having access to any prosthetic they want to wear that day, including their own. How do we resist Surveillance? I am not completely sure, but I know it has to start with an “us”, and I hope that by being “me”, we can all be each other.