



A group of people take part in a 'dazzle club' silent walk in the King's Cross area of London, UK, applying colorful face make-up to avoid facial recognition by CCTV cameras. —Reuters photos



Super-realistic face masks are displayed at factory of REAL-f Co. in Otsu, western Japan.

Face masks to decoy t-shirts: The rise of anti-surveillance fashion

As top designers wrapped up London Fashion Week and made their way to Paris to grab the world's attention with their lavish creations, a group of artists in London were making their own fashion statement, in a bid to become invisible. Emily Roderick, 23, and her cohorts in "The Dazzle Club" walked around the British capital last week with blue, red and black stripes painted across their faces in an effort to escape the watchful eye of facial-recognition cameras.

The artists took their silent stroll through the city's King's Cross area hoping their bold make-up would act as camouflage and confuse the cameras. "We're hiding in plain sight," Roderick told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, explaining that bright colors and dark shades of make-up are known to hamper a camera's ability to accurately recognize faces. Computers have become adept at identifying people in recent years, unlocking a myriad of applications for facial recognition, from tracking criminals to counting truants.

But as cameras appear at unlikely spots across the globe, activists raise fears about lost privacy and say society might be on the doorstep of a dystopia where Big Brother sees all. Altering people's looks to cheat cameras has become increasingly popular with artists and designers in recent years, as the use of facial recognition has grown more pervasive, raising fears over privacy, according to fashion experts.

From sunglasses to face masks, numerous wearable devices promising a veil of anonymity are making their way into the mainstream, said Henry Navarro Delgado, an art and fashion professor at Canada's Ryerson University. "There has always been something subversive about streetwear, and one of the new areas of subversion is definitely surveillance and, in particular, facial recognition," he said.

Masks and t-shirts

The Dazzle Club's monthly decorative walks take place in different parts of London to raise awareness about the growing use of facial-recognition technology in public spaces, said Roderick. Last month, Britain's data protection

watchdog launched an investigation into the use of surveillance cameras by a property developer in the King's Cross area. The revelation that the cameras were capturing and analyzing images of people who passed through the site without their permission triggered a public backlash and led to the start of the Dazzle Club walks.

In a statement released in September, developer Argent said it had turned off the software, and had been using the technology "only to help the (police) prevent and detect crime in the neighborhood". The bright face paint Roderick and her associates wore was pioneered by US artist Adam Harvey in 2010 for an art project called CV Dazzle. The project's name is a nod to a camouflage technique first used in World War One, when British ships were painted in zig-zag patterns to stop German U-boats from being able to tell how big they were or which way they were heading.

Harvey, 38, said he drew inspiration from the London "BoomBox" party scene of the early 2000s and tribal make-up from Papua New Guinea to develop a series of eccentric looks combining face paint and spiky hair fringes that bamboozle cameras. In 2016, he doubled up with a "decoy" textile pattern featuring stylized faces that caused face detectors to register false hits. Some online clothing stores have since printed the pattern onto clothing to sell on their websites.

"The main objective of this project is to show people that surveillance is not invincible," Harvey told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a phone interview. Other designers have since joined the quest to use fashion to help people keep private in public. Online retailer Adversarial Fashion sells shirts, skirts and other garments emblazoned with fake license plates that it says are picked up by traffic surveillance cameras, "injecting junk data" into a system used "to monitor and track civilians".

Chicago-based designer Scott Urban has developed sunglasses that block infrared facial recognition cameras. Urban said his main concern was the potential hacking of facial feature data that is collected by cameras and tied to people's identities. "If someone steals your credit card, you can cancel it and get a new one ... (but) most of us are not going to do plastic surgery to rearrange our identity," he

said by phone.

US artist Leonardo Selvaggio took the mask concept one step further, developing a 3D prosthetic copy of his own face that anyone could buy online for about \$200 until the company manufacturing it folded earlier this year. Besides shielding users from cameras, the device aimed to mess up facial recognition systems by tying Selvaggio's face and identity to a multitude of different bodies, the artist said. "My hypothesis was that if we could do that large enough - and hopefully eventually with other faces - then we could call into question facial recognition's ability to do its job," he explained.

Selvaggio said he was aware of similar prosthetic masks that had been used to commit crimes. In 2010, a white man pleaded guilty to carrying out six robberies in Ohio wearing a mask of a black man's face - a ploy that initially led police to arrest the wrong man. The aim of his project, he added, was to show that no technology used to catch criminals was "infallible".

New normal?

While anti-surveillance accessories offer some degree of disguise, many designers warn their creations are tools for social commentary rather than invisibility. Harvey, for example, acknowledged that his many-faced textile pattern worked on a system that was widely used a few years ago but has since been surpassed. "It does not work for modern face detection systems that would be used by law enforcement," he said.

Anti-facial recognition fashion has also drawn some criticism, with one academic saying it risked "normalizing" surveillance. "These artworks are accepting pervasive surveillance as being inevitable," said Torin Monahan, a professor of communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Meanwhile, the Dazzle Club walkers in London say camera camouflage is helping people reclaim their identities and hope the initiative will spread to other cities, said Roderick. "There's definitely something important about being able to take ownership of our own image and understand when we want to put that out into the public space," she said.—Reuters