

THE MASK. IT'S SOURCE / IT'S POWER

There's been an exponential spike in the widespread use of the surgical mask, the scale of which has given rise to new, accelerated marketplaces that trade and traffic in their supply. Everywhere from tobacconists to couture flagships are selling variations of the mask (some disposable, others; desirable editioned accessories). The appearance of people en masse has not only thinned and withered as 'one third of the world' is reportedly in lockdown, but has blurred and homogenised as well. Removing the bridge of your nose and the shape of your mouth from public view can substantially jeopardise your likeness and now, in turn, the elasticated gauze is both our most distinguishing and unifying wearable feature.

"The purpose of the masks will not only be social distancing of ourselves from ambient viral particulates, but also to communicate to others the terms of personal engagement. Masks are and will be both expressive and functional; they will not only ensure filtration, but also signal our personalities and communicate solidarity with the epidemiological and immunological common¹"

- Benjamin H. Bratton

If the parallel conditions in Taiwan (6 deaths) and Spain (16,606 as of this writing) are anything to go by, Covid 19 is a splintered phenomenon; adversely damaging some countries and communities and leaving others relatively unscathed. It is a bellwether for the state of an impacted nation: the resilience of its vital signs, the failsafes behind its economy and the welfare of its most vulnerable. In this miasma of injustice and negative consequence, the mask itself has emerged as maybe the only true common denominator. It cuts through the inconsistencies of a top-down federal response in that it is propagated and promulgated by the public. Not once, since we've first glimpsed the pandemic, has the Australian government mandated the mask yet it is commonly worn regardless. Unlike social distancing (which is shaped, from the beginning, by architecture, religion, custom and class) the mask circulates, first and foremost as an abstract product before particularising itself to place and person. It moves like liquid currency: mass manufactured and then released into the consumer stream where it is stocked, purchased, stolen, hoarded etc.

There has been a globalising flow between the mask as an adornment (popularised in East-Asia) and as a tool for front-line health and safety. The influx of mask wearers hasn't fundamentally altered the collective optics of a country like a South Korea for instance but has visibly impacted the normative standards of dress and display in France or Italy. The mask doesn't terra-form in Australia the way it does in China, but with more countries incorporating it into their fast-changing

¹ Benjamin H. Bratton, *18 Lessons of Quarantine Urbanism*, Strelka Mag, 04/04/20, accessed 07/04/20

image-traditions, a new era of crises costuming (involving aesthetic reciprocity) has been ushered in.

The mask stems from a deep-set desire to control and mitigate our adversarial risks before they can triumph over and against us. While taxiing on the tarmac flight attendants will remind passengers that in the event of an emergency oxygen masks will drop from above you. The assurance that a piece of safety is nestled in the over-head compartment and can be deployed as soon as danger makes itself known is as much a psychological salve as it is a pragmatic formality. The presence of oxygen masks both reifies a disaster that is improbable (air-crash) while relieving the worried subject that they will be guarded no matter the outcome. The same can be said for cyber security software. By crafting the illusion of an imminent data-breach, the software re-assures it's user that no kilo-bit of hypothetical malware will slip filtration.

After the deep black pillars of smoke rising from a string of rural Australian burnings this past summer reached eighty-percent of the population² and the nation was plunged into a state of ecological crises, the face mask was first reached for. Both cities recorded their highest levels of pollution on record and residents of Melbourne's Boxhill were, at one point, breathing in the worst air in the world³. Blown in from the Gospers mega-fire, the largest single-ignition blaze ever recorded in the country⁴ where vast swathes of Blue-Mountains forest were reduced to ash, Sydney experienced "81 days of poor or hazardous air quality ... more than the total of the previous 10 years combined⁵". The air, when unfiltered, was thick and coated the mouth; tasting of an acrid spice. Strenuous movement was discouraged and maximising time indoors advised. Our inability to *breath easy* without the assistance of a respirator triggered an array of ambient anxieties relating to other primal expectation: our freedom of movement, our right to health and, from a settler standpoint, our contrived *attunement* with country. There is an undeniable rift between appreciating the raw data of animal-killings and the hectares of pummelled eco-system (dubbed a 'culturally-neutral' stance) and grieving, as the Guardian Indigenous affairs editor and Gamilaraay and Yawalaraay women Lorena Allam wrote "our memories, our sacred places, all the

² John Pickrell, *Smoke from Australia's bushfires killed far more people than the fires did, study says*, The Guardian (Australia), 21/03/20, accessed 09/04/20

³ AAP, *Melbourne's air quality 'worst in the world' as bushfires continue to burn across Victoria*, The Guardian (Australia), 14/01/20, accessed 09/04/20

⁴ Harriet Alexander & Nick Moir, *'The monster': a short history of Australia's biggest forest fire*, Sydney Morning Herald, 20/12/19, accessed 07/04/20

⁵ John Pickrell, *Smoke from Australia's bushfires killed far more people than the fires did, study says*, The Guardian (Australia), 21/03/20, accessed 07/04/20

things which make us who we are⁶". The fire fight itself; a system that was predicated upon colonial-commonwealth strategy, military aid and federal resource management, needed to see to "Indigenous people & systems leading the process, not being tacked on, or our knowledges excerpted & cropped into failing models⁷" -

Wearing a mask in public might have elicited puzzled stares from the incredulous (as friends have testified and recounted) but the humiliation was warranted. Necessary even. Unable to picture the end of the rampant and unencumbered wild fires, we turned to honest, bruising fear and retaliated against the dangerous hope of a 'business as usual' re-orientation.

"Poor air quality contributed to 400 deaths and more than 4,000 hospital attendances⁸" a mortality rate "more than 10 times the number killed by the fires themselves⁹".

The first Australian cases of Covid 19 were identified in late January mere days before the last spot fires of NSW were extinguished. The freak coincidence of these calamities made for a distressed and disarmed public and the mask, in turn, sold out again (an estimated 30 million have been imported). It seems fortuitous that we acquainted ourselves with the respirator, its form and reason, only to then re-signify this object-subject relationship against an entirely new national threat.

In crises acting, rubber bullet-wounds, gashes and puncture-marks are prosthetically applied to role-playing victims who perform in controlled scenarios for medical and military personnel. These coaching and training events, often involving a 'search & rescue' or 'first-responder resuscitation', speak to the theatrics of disaster; the web of objects, veneers, materialisms and paramedicines that orbits them constantly. Disasters bring into sharp relief our uncanny embrace of a different catalogue of products than in 'peacetime'. Those that we crave and fetishise all the same. Of course we expect crises to have tail-ends, marking the moment when we can finally throw away the literal or proverbial mask. But Australia has been saddled between a two-pronged threat; between asphyxiating smoke and a devastating bio-threat and the mask cannot be forgotten nor re-absorbed into the tangential.

⁶ Lorena Allam, *For First Nations people the bushfires bring a particular grief, burning what makes us who we are*, The Guardian (Australia), 06/01/20, accessed 08/04/20

⁷ Vanessa Cavanagh, Bundjalung and Wonnarua women, Twitter, 07/01/20 accessed 08/04/20

⁸ John Pickrell, *Smoke from Australia's bushfires killed far more people than the fires did, study says*, The Guardian (Australia), 21/03/20, accessed 08/04/20

⁹ *ibid*, accessed 08/04/20

Let the enduringly masked face suggest that perhaps there will be no normal into which we can recede or from which we can compare; that instead of crisis as a delineated abnormality there will be a continuum of 'extraordinary times' from now onwards.

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