Yes, this looks very familiar…

No I had nothing to do with it, I was not consulted or cited, and I’m not surprised.

It isn’t surprising that an ad agency copied an artist’s work with no remuneration or citation.

And it isn’t surprising that an ad agency press release was recycled from one media outlet to the next as “news” without research or problematization of the obvious issues here around surveillance, genetic privacy, and public shaming as a technique of social control.

Finally, it isn’t surprising that DNA might be used to monitor, survey, and publicly shame individuals deemed deviant.

But what is the “face of litter” campaign really? DNA phenotyping isn’t cheap, and it’s telling to contemplate why a Parabon Nanolabs, a small biotech startup, would donate this expensive technology to an ad agency for a pro bono ecological project. It’s called PR.

Parabon is pushing hard to make DNA phenotyping – a technology still in its infancy – into mainstream use in police departments. This campaign is an attempt to normalize the technology, to get the public accustomed to seeing it, to believing it, and even to associate it with cleaner streets, order over chaos, cleanliness over filth.

The point of Stranger Visions was to alert us that a new kind of surveillance was just around the corner; that governments, police, corporations, and even other individuals were becoming increasingly capable of not only monitoring us but also learning intimate details of our genetics without our permission or knowledge.

This campaign confirms and furthers these concerns in its creation of a simulated scenario in which we are all potential subjects of genetic surveillance.

We tend to accept new models of social control as long as we think the benefits outweigh the risks and as long as we can view the potential victims as ‘other’ – not us. We don’t mind surveillance because we have nothing to hide, or in this case, we don’t litter. Who will defend the rights of the litterbug after all?

But the probability of mistakes here is obvious. A cigarette butt or a coffee cup can easily fly out of a trash bin implicating someone who was not littering at all. And DNA phenotyping technology is still in its infancy, far from creating the kind of accurate portraits one could use to actually connect a sample
to a face. I'll write more about this soon.

Despite the inflated media rhetoric celebrating the campaign as an innovative solution to prevent littering, I do think the project inadvertently reinforces my own message as much as their own. The idea isn’t to point to a specific individual but to create a public disturbance, a sense that that could be me, that could be my DNA.

Combine this with recent news of tech giants Apple, Google, and Microsoft’s forays into biotech, and the launch of “Swab Stories” on VH1, and it becomes all the more clear:

Pervasive genetic surveillance is fast approaching from all sides. The question is, what are we going to do about it?