

Upload



Print



image capture an exercise in self-thinging

Having explored scanning as a curator and minimally in my own work, I want to look at and play with the capture process and the tools that enable the simulation of objects in space. Advances in 3D capture and printing technology have been rapid over the last 10 years. Human tissue, prosthetic limbs, teeth and bones can be printed and customised to fit individuals and working organ structures look likely to soon follow. Artists including Corey Archangel, Hito Steyerl, Marilène Oliver, London Fieldworks and Rachel Whiteread have used this technology for animating data for many years. Oliver Laric has made the sharing and customising of 3D data central to his practice. For the 2016 Liverpool Biennale, Laric created variously patterned printouts of *Sleeping Shepherd Boy* (2016) that were placed in several sites across the city. Built with data obtained by scanning of a sculpture of the same name by John Gibson (1790–1866) from the Walker Art Gallery, the thoughts of time travel and appropriation these customised clones provoke really interest me.²⁸

It is January 2016 and I decide to “voxelize”²⁹ myself, to understand a tool, which I have tried to use at regular intervals since 2000, always pushing the limits of what it is possible to scan and always defeated by the complexities of processing the subsequent data. The tools and processing programmes have become easier to use as they enter a consumer market eager to print out copies of unborn babies, miniature friends or family in plastic, metal or chocolate. By visualising the self-administration that computers and our working lives demand, I wish to recapture a creative and playful sense from a screen space which is often, for me, administrative and stressful in the unending demands it puts on a human body.

What does it mean to process a self for storage and manipulation, to feel what it is to be captured, *thinged* and *glitched*? The aim is not to print objects but to see the schema of the screen and learn the language that shapes the process of trapping and building. As with many practices, this activity requires collaboration and assistance, which will be partially erased in the final images and is often unacknowledged. For my experiments, I am totally reliant on the skills and

experience of Hannah Benini of Rapidform RCA, both to acquire the data and then to access it and reframe it. We begin with a *Zscanner*, a laser scanner that, for best results, requires its subject to be sprayed with chalk or covered with small self-adhesive dots which are white and shiny. Covering my hand and forearm with luminescent sticky dots I feel as if I am applying a new form of body decoration, a cyborg style. When I leave them on and later travel on the bus, a young man asks me where he could get some and says they look great. The dots create anchor points alongside the grid against which I must rest my arm; together they provide patterns, which the laser can use as co-ordinates as it maps my hand.

The sampled hand that emerges in an odd thing. Purple and partial, it dips into a grey illusion of cubed voxel space and appears to be disintegrating or coalescing, it is full of holes and particles appear to be flaking off. I think of Fedorov, hovering up his ancestors.³⁰ A sad amputated thing, the hand has a kind of passivity which anything trying to stay as still as possible has.³¹ This is a world away from the speed and resolution of image capture which we have become accustomed to with digital photography.

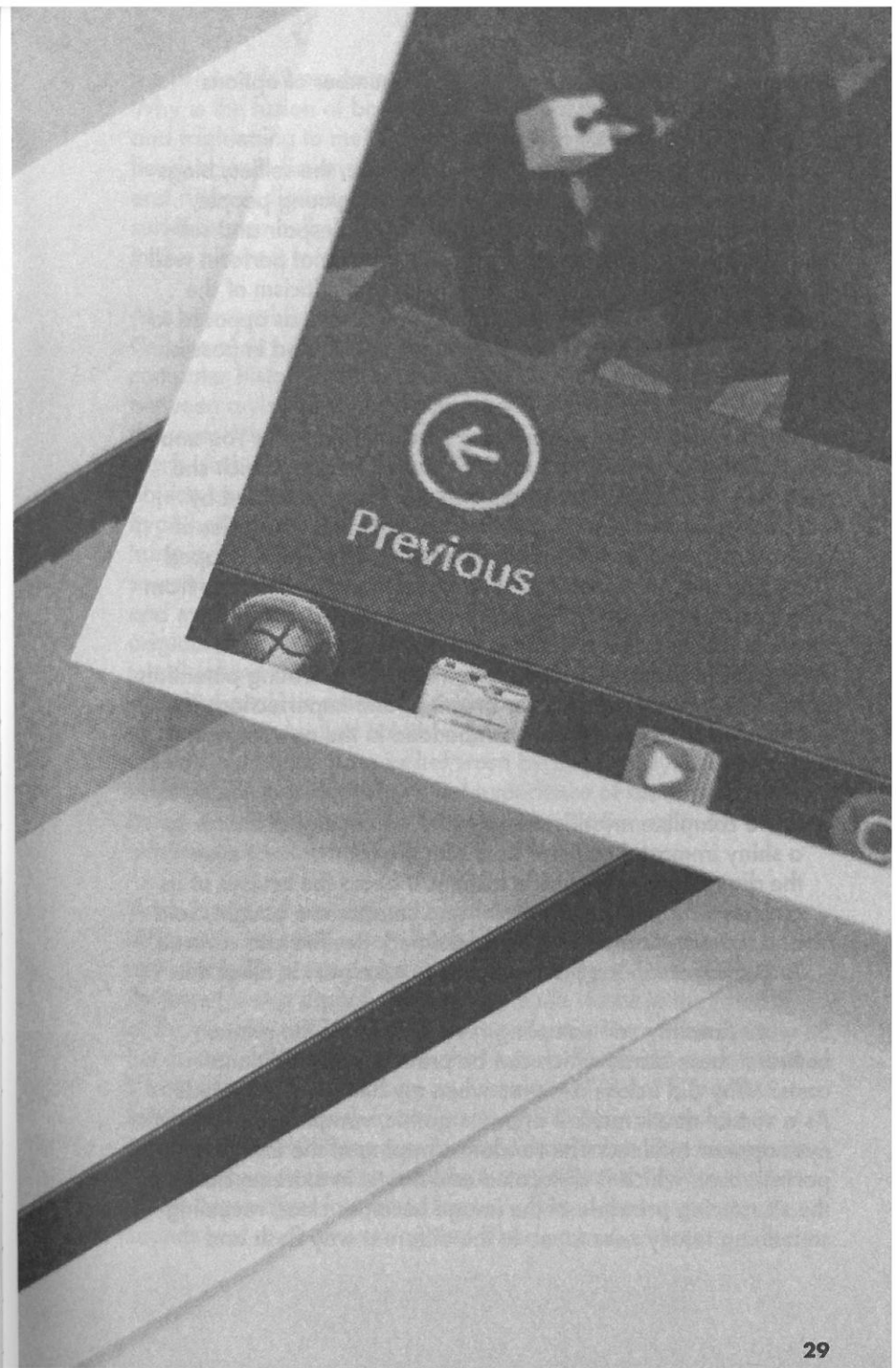
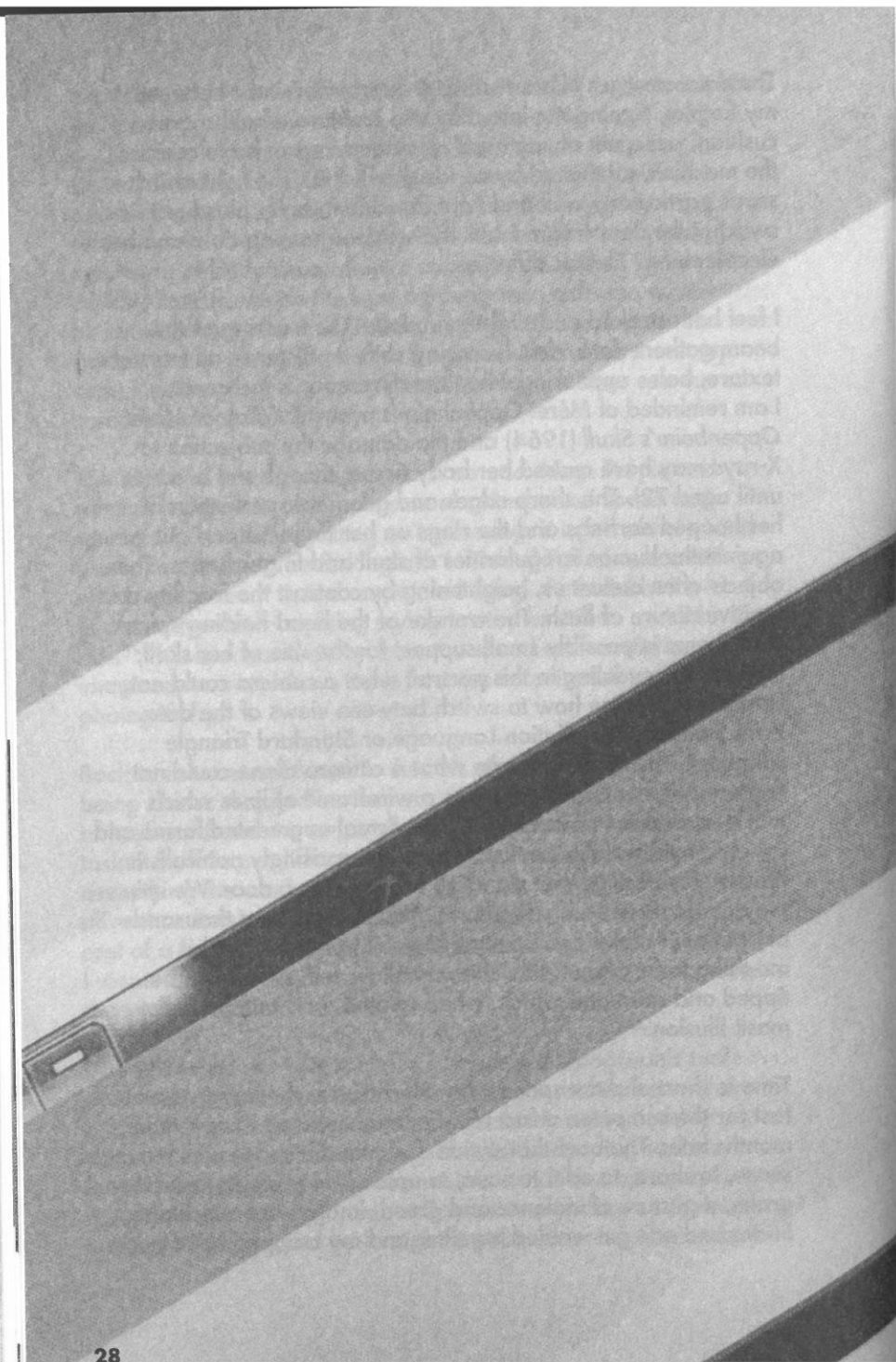
Back to the severed hand. Is the role of the hand in making being lost or simply diverted, our digits digitized so that the tap of keyboard and the swipe of touchpad or screen performs all tasks? Stuff scans differently, but on the whole the render gives everything the same quality, the XYZ axis appear to be more alive than the simulated skin. What relationship is there to a cast of a hand? This is not what I was chasing, what I thought I wanted, so we begin another session, with another tool, some days later.

Hannah reads me with a *Sense* scanner, a photographic tool, part camera, part prosthetic geometer. Two metres from where I sit, she is waving the plastic beamer slowly and smoothly across the room as it apparently merges body, plug socket, fragment of chair and doorframe. We watch the data play out across a screen, jagged, unpredictable and joining up the objects indifferently, captured by its sightless sensor in unforeseen ways.

The data emerges like a rash as it improvises webs between my fingers, turning me into a hybrid creature. I hold a green cushion, put a net on my head, play and improvise to confuse the machine, motivated by curiosity, what if? The light switch scans particularly well and I am fused to it, body plus light switch, plus door fragment. Is the scanner homing onto another electric thing? Electric affinities.

I feel both stroked and slightly anxious. The tracking of the beam gathers data, closely tracing shifts in distance and surface texture, holes appearing when the difference is too great. I am reminded of Méret Oppenheim's portrait *X-Ray of Meret Oppenheim's Skull* (1964) and the damage the subjection to X-rays may have caused her body tissue (though she lived until aged 72). The sharp edges and geometric perfection of her hooped earrings and the rings on her fingers stand out against the human irregularities of skull and finger-bones. These objects often outlast us, heightening by contrast the fragility and fugitive nature of flesh. The wonder of the head-holding spinal cord seems impossibly small support for the size of her skull; technology revealing in this portrait what a camera could not. Hannah shows me how to switch between views of the data. With Standard Tessellation Language or Standard Triangle Language, the STL files create what a camera alone could not capture. We can switch between a wireframe of lines which make an architectonic model of the virtual augmented forms and the rendered surface version, where a surprisingly naturalistic render creates a puppet standing or sitting by a door. We spin the data in its virtual space and I grab images from thousands of options. A large hole in my thing-self head reveals this me-thing to be a pixel-thin skin, a hollow self, which can be tipped and spun and which, when rotated, acts out the hollow mask illusion.³²

Time is short and the speed with which I save the images is too fast for the computer, a fact I find out only when I review them months later. The bars that divide and join the images tell me to sense, to share, to edit, to save, to upload, to print. In the screen grabs, a gesture of violence and greed, images are overlapped. Share and edit get welded together and my cropped head pops



up from behind the menu bar. The sheer number of options exhausts me.

In relation to the self-thinging of social media, the selfies, blogs and posts which are demanded of connected young people, there is evidence that an increasing sense of despair and self-hatred might be experienced by those who cannot perform well in this environment.³³ The online bullying and criticism of the imperfect faces and bodies that living people have as opposed to their digitised counter-creations creates anguish and impossible expectations.

In Hito Steyerl's thought-provoking essay *A Thing Like You and Me*,³⁴ she interrogates the nature of digital images, which she describes as fetishes 'of crystals and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears.' The essay exposes multiple histories of contradictory values, and binary thinking, which have shaped struggles over representation and materialism, particularly from a feminist perspective.³⁵ She proffers other ways of thinking through subject/object relations seeing the ways in which images, rips and copies can be seen to have liberating potentials in relation to their capacity for bruising, and imperfection. The parallel world of the virtual is embedded in the now. Steyerl writes:

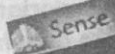
It is a complete mystification to think of the digital image as a shiny immortal clone of itself. On the contrary not even the digital image is outside history. It bears the bruises of its crashes with politics and violence... Images are bought, sold and leased. Manipulated and adulated. Reviled and revered. To participate in the image means to take part in all of this.³⁶

So what does my self-sampling reveal? What is the relation between these skins, which can be printed, and traditional casts? Why did I close my eyes when my head was scanned? As a virtual death mask it appears gothic, vampiric, lips and eyes appear to bleed. The random cropping of the tool creates a portrait bust, which is dislocated and floats. In extreme close-up the structuring principle of the image becomes clear, revealing something totally new to me in the different way flesh and

the printed flowers on my T-shirt are captured and reformed. Why is the fusion of body, wall, and light switch both thrilling and frightening to me? Ectoplasm appears to emerge from my head; science fictions multiply. I am lost, disintegrated, ragged and ripped, digitally disembowelled, a shell self-fused to other surfaces also hollow and full of holes. Touch has no meaning in this place; it is immaterial.

At a memorable but seemingly unrecorded lecture at the Royal College of Art, (somewhere between 2001 and 2008), the computer historian Doran Swade talked about the relationship between a virtual model of Babbage's difference engine, and the material thing, both giving important insights into Babbage's work. As I remember it he spoke about the potential that lies in objects as catalysts of study, by comparing three buttons from hypothetical jackets of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. One, which had hung in his cupboard unworn; another, that had been worn on several nights out; and a replica, accurate in every dimension and material and to the naked eye indistinguishable from the original (this could have included a virtual model). He went on to talk about the fact that the only one which could confirm with chemical analysis whether Conan Doyle had consumed cocaine or smoked, as he had his literary hero Sherlock Holmes do, would be a button on a jacket worn by Conan Doyle which had traces of the narcotics. The lived experience of an object alters its substance; it becomes a material clue, as Steyerl notes in relation to forensics and the fetish.³⁷

There is a dead non-weight to the techno-smoothing of difference, an administered self, pixelated into information, not informed, pressed and subject to gravity. Why does the fly-through of a digital game not take me closer to the fantasy of flying as a bird? Is it because the association with military hardware, with the overview that turns whatever is underneath it into a target, is too strong an association? What is it to be touched, to be moved, in a digital age? To stay in touch, and communicate with these prosthetics? I want to be able to animate these images, to change them in a way that technically evades me, to crash them into other frames of reference, words and sounds and undo their *thingness*. This is a task ahead.



Share

At a moment when the world is in a state of flux, it is easy to feel that the only way to survive is to retreat into our own shells. But the truth is, we are all in this together. We need each other more than ever before. We need to share our ideas, our experiences, our hopes and dreams. We need to share our love, our compassion, our kindness. We need to share our humanity. We need to share our lives. We need to share our world.

