

# Revealing the Gaps of Reality: An Interview with Sophie Kahn



*Figure 1: 'Bust of a Woman with Head Thrown Back', detail, Sophie Kahn, 3D print from 3D laser scan, life-size, © Sophie Kahn, 2013.*

*First and foremost, what comes to mind when you think about Romanticism? Do you define this through art history, certain artists, your own personal understanding?*

I seek to mine the art-historical echoes Romantic and otherwise — generated by new imaging technologies. When I first saw a 3D scan of my face on-screen, the still, white form resembled nothing more than a death mask. Ever since that moment I have tried to draw out the erotics of death in the still (technological) image.

Romantic art plays out in my work via a process of transmission and re-enactment: while scanning myself, I perform a bodily grammar gleaned from painting and sculpture. The pose is re-enacted, recorded, remixed, transmitted, and then printed or otherwise materialized.

*One primary tenet within romanticism that we find important within contemporary digital culture*

*is the ways in which poetic irony is used in order to make radical statements about the status quo. Do you find that your work follows in this tradition or employs irony for a similar purpose?*

If irony is present in my work, it plays out in a process of anticipated failure. I enact emotion verging on histrionics in the body's performances for the scanner, knowing full well that the recording device may fail to capture it wholly. Somewhere down the long chain of digital translation, the emotional impetus is lost; the still, icy object is light years from the moving human body with which it originated. This is not a critique specific to my technology, however, or a lament to lost authenticity; the same fatal flaw exists in photography. We seek to capture life, but what we receive is an image, which is something else entirely. As new forms of technology

approach verisimilitude, they only become more haunting, and haunted witness the 'uncanny valley' of 3D animation.

*Would you consider your work to be exploring the ways in which simulation has changed the way we present personality or identity? If so, how do you think simulation both computational and otherwise — influences that presentation?*

In my work, identity is elided by technological duplication. The body fragments, and markers of identity (skin tone, hair, clothing) are lost. Sometimes the figures are so fragmented that the viewer cannot tell whether they are male or female. My scanner does not pierce the body, as an MRI or CT scan does; it registers only skin, generating a loose collection of overlapping, hollow shells. All that remains is a field of floating scraps, and it falls to the viewer to piece them together.

*Do you see some overlap between virtual simulation and physical fabrication within your work? How does the virtual/digital influence the physical output of your practice? Do you find that the digital/physical dichotomy to be outdated?*

My work begins with malleable digital input (3D laser scan data) and ends with fixed, analogue output (bronze, clay, plastic). In certain pieces, I have sought to set up a tension between the fleeting nature of the digital glitch and the permanent qualities of the material - a polygon can be edited any number of times, but once printed and cast in bronze it will outlive us all by thousands of years. Sometimes, the process of translation is slow and circuitous. I might 3D print a form, cast it using a silicone mold, press clay into the mold, glaze and fire the clay using a digital decal, then photograph the result. It isn't always a straight line from analog to digital or vice versa - each is folded into the other, sometimes repeatedly.

At times I do choose to exhibit prints and sculpture made from the same data. I don't do this to equivocate, but to complicate the relationship between rendering and object. At a distance, a black and white render of a 3D printed sculpture might resemble a sculptor's preparatory sketch. When viewed up close, however, the smoothness of the digital print overturned that assumption.

I am also interested in simulation via materiality. My previous body of work, *Artifact*, mimicked classical sculpture. From a distance, the slightly translucent 3D printed nylon material I used resembled white marble. It was only on close inspection that it revealed itself as plastic. The classical references of the objects (the default white printer material, the limbless, damaged bodies) were inescapable, and so in assembling the final sculptural output generated by my process, I played an archaeologist's role: I restored, I pieced together, I constructed displays which framed negative space in order to highlight absence.

Some of my pieces are cast by hand in bronze or clay, reassuringly marked with the artist's hand. Others are made without physical contact, while others, as yet unrealized, exist entirely on a hard drive.

*Do you find that the use of digital technology within your work acts as a way of expressing something subversive or political? Does this subversion manifest as an anti-corporate statement?*

The subversive element of my work is both subtle and poetic, but it is present. My most explicitly critical series was a series of landscapes rendered from LIDAR scans - using a tool more commonly used in military surveillance or forensics, I made a series of images of forests in Upstate New York. The scans were made on a beautiful spring day, but the final images were denuded of colour and motion, and they looked like the surface of the moon. At home and abroad, we have been sold wars on the basis of intelligence from new -imaging technologies. Every day, more claims are made for technology's omniscience and omnividence. Just as photographers have sought to unseat photography's claims to truth in representation, I aim to destabilize the claims made for post-photographic vision, and my particular tool is poetics.

## **CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Sophie Kahn earned a B.A. (Hons) in Fine Art/History of Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and an M.F.A. in Art and Technology Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

She has exhibited her artwork in New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Sydney, Tokyo, Osaka and Seoul. Her video work has been screened in festivals including Transmediale, Zero1 San Jose Biennial, Dance Camera West and the Japan Media Arts Festival. She has taught in the Department of Digital Arts at Pratt Institute as a Visiting Associate Professor, and has been an artist in residence at the Experimental Media. and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic (EMPAC) the Museum of Arts and Design and the NARS Foundation. Sophie is a 2011 New York Foundation for the Arts Digital and Electronic Arts Fellow.

Sophie Kahn has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

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