Replacement Character
by Luke Shannon

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Introduction

Luke Shannon's *Replacement Character* examines surveillance and selfhood through an interactive, kinetic photographic apparatus: the *plotter-scanner*. This custom machine, designed and built by the artist, combines a standard document scanner and a 4'×6' plotter to create a life-sized scanner bed that offers new perspectives on documenting, digitizing, and reflecting the self.

The *plotter-scanner* is a tool of simultaneous surveillance and witness. While the scanner suggests a clinical and impersonal perspective, the act of making images with the *plotter-scanner* requires total closeness. The resulting prints are both precise and intimate, holding the body at scale, yet fractured at the seams. Shannon likens this to being online: an expansive presence stretched across windows and gridded feeds, pieced together from fragmentary, constantly updating views. Shannon's engagement with the machine becomes a new form of self-portraiture: durational, ephemeral, and mirroring the artist's own presence.

The exhibition's title refers to the "" symbol—a placeholder used when a computer fails to recognize or render a character. Shannon explores the idea of a swappable, seemingly replaceable self in the digital age, where physical presence becomes data—hyper-accurate, yet charged with evocations of human experience. *Replacement Character* thus examines the porous boundaries between us and the devices that mediate our reality. This work prompts viewers to reflect on what it means to be seen—not only by other people, but by our environments, technologies, and the ubiquitous systems we increasingly engage and inhabit. In doing so, it raises critical questions about how intelligent machines might "read" or interpret us through images.

Replacement Character was presented at Heft Gallery from October 8, 2025–November 8, 2025 and at Paris Photo 2025, through 40 unique life-size prints, 10 video works, and a limited number of commissions with the artist. For this essay collection, five writers were approached to contribute essays of their own original work. Importantly, these essays serve not as documentation of *Replacement Character*, but as new production and distribution. The following pages present these essays by designer David Reinfurt, writer Rex Shannon, artist Maya Man, curator Sofia Garcia, media theorist Ruby Justice Thelot, and closing with a transcript of the *performance-lecture* by Shannon held in the gallery. Each offers deeper insight into the project's themes of image, identity, and the permeable boundaries between the virtual and the physical; together, they too provide an expansive (and fragmented) view of the work.

TurboScan

by David Reinfurt

June 5, 2015, on Barry's News: Linux, technology & personal interests blog, BarryK writes:

> I own an actual scanner, a Hewlett Packard ScanJet 4200C. I was reading recently about scanner apps for phones, so thought that I would give it a go.

BarryK "tried a few, with mixed results" and "found it difficult to obtain a sharp image." He "wasn't really enamored by any of them and was about to give up, then I discovered TurboScan."

TurboScan was created by Piksoft and released in 2014. It was quickly my favorite app when a former student turned me on to it. TurboScan employs document recognition and perspective correction to produce flat scans using the phone's camera. Point your phone toward a document in a 3-dimensional setting and the app auto-recognizes the source and produces a clean, legible image in under 3 seconds. Pretty remarkable (at least in 2015). It was also remarkable that all this automation was enabled by machine vision. BarryK agreed, concluding his TurboScan mini review,

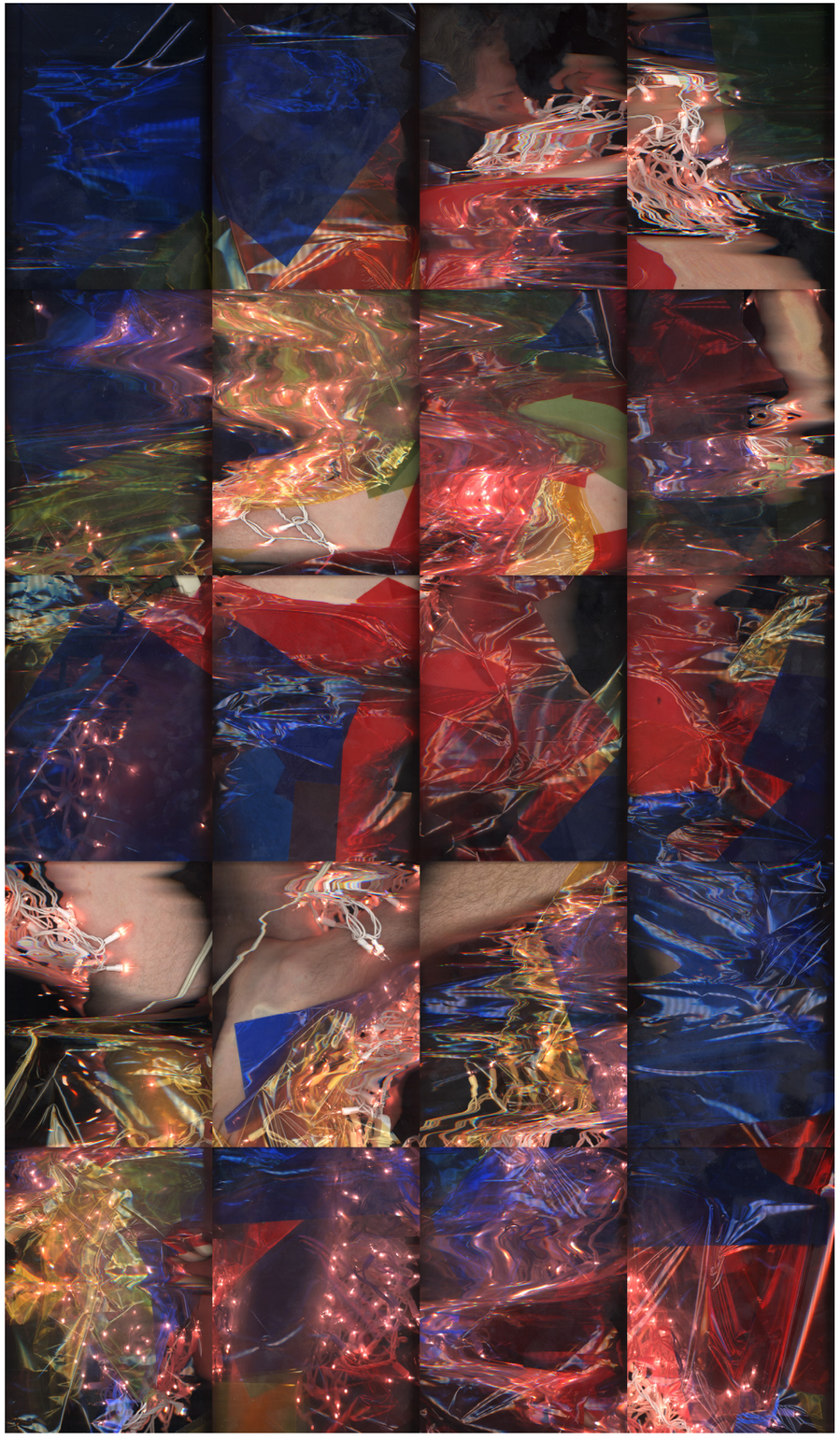
> That $3 was well-spent.

TurboScan relies on multiple image processing techniques including thresholding to distinguish the scanned content from the background, segmentation to partition the digital image into meaningful chunks, blob detection for inspecting and filtering the image, edge detection to identify the bounding rectangle of the source document, and perspectival post-processing to produce a 2-dimensional result. These all conspire in how TurboScan effortlessly scans a document.

Fifty years before TurboScan, Italian artist and designer Bruno Munari was experimenting with another (at the time) novel image scanning technology. Introduced in 1959, the Rank Xerox photocopier was large (about the size of a washing machine), heavy (more than 1/4 ton), and had a tendency to overheat (so much so that Xerox shipped the machine with its own fire extinguisher), Still, it was a commercial success and a revolutionary reproduction technology.

Photocopying is a dry process which uses powdered toner and static electricity to produce perfect copies of existing documents on plain paper. The source document is placed on a transparent scanning bed where a light passes across the surface exposing the image. As the image is exposed, the light is photo-projected onto an electrostatically charged selenium cylinder. The projected light, or white in the image, neutralizes the electrostatic charge in these areas, while the black parts of the image remain charged. The selenium drum then carries the image as pure static electricity. Powdered black toner is applied to the drum, sticking only to the areas with an electrical charge. A sheet of ordinary paper is placed on the drum and an opposite electrostatic charge is applied which attracts the toner and transfers the image. Heat is used to fuse the dry toner to the paper and print the resulting image, which exits the machine as a perfect copy. Munari was excited by the immediacy of the new technology, and recognized its capacity to produce (rather than reproduce) images. He began to experiment with the Xerox intensively.

By 1970, his investigations formed the basis of his participation for the 1970 *Venice Biennale.* Titled *Proposal for an Experimental Exhibition,* the large collective art show looked to challenge existing forms and engage the public more directly, even interactively. Munari staged a Rank Xerox 720 photocopier in the central pavilion for open use during the run of the exhibition. Artists, attendants, visitors, and the general public were encouraged to make use of the tool. Together with Rank Xerox, Munari also published **Xerografia, Documentazione sull'uso creative di macchine Rank Xerox** (*Xerography, Documentation of the creative use of the Rank Xerox machine*). It was a perfect-bound, A4-format book, printed black and white with subtle reproductions, which catalogs his experiments starting in 1964.



Munari was trying to learn how the photocopier sees images and how that's different than other graphic reproduction tools. He was particularly curious to understand how the machine reacted to materials and forms it was not meant to reproduce.

He tested the limits of the machine methodically and incrementally. For example, he photocopied a set of parallel lines of increasing thickness to understand at what point the copier no longer capture a solid black (his answer, 3 mm). He proceeded by scanning and printing textures (dense line patterns, stippled dots, spray paint, tracing paper, halftone screens); manipulating materials (crumpled halftone screens, wrinkled tracing paper); combining images by superimposition (overprinting on a previous copy by feeding it back through the machine); moving the source image (in all directions, speeds, rotations); recursive scaling (shrinking or expanding an original, and repeating that process on its copy and so on); using transparent source materials (usually more than one); manipulating figurative images to amplify their meanings (such as the motorcycle rider stretched horizontally to amplify the feeling of speed); repeated copying (copying the copy repeatedly until the image disintegrates); and combinations of all of the above. He kept notes on what he found in collages on cardboard that record an inventory of effects — how various signs and textures are seen, understood, and reproduced by the machine.

This is a question that Luke Shannon's *plotter-scanner*, Munari's Rank Xerox photocopier, and Pixsoft's TurboScan share: How do our machines *read* images? Like the *plotter-scanner's* ability to "fix this moment in a scan-line exposure," Munari's Xerox also reads an image line-by-line over time. The *plotter-scanner's* products are named with a time and date (**Tuesday, April 15, 2024 at 2:02 PM**), similar to how TurboScan automatically marks the scanned image with a time and date indicating the moment the exposure was created and the file was written.

TurboScan, however, works differently than either the Xerox or *plotter-scanner*. In addition to the laundry list of machine vision software techniques previously described, TurboScan uses neural network machine

learning (or in today's language, simply "AI") to perform image classification. In machine learning, a computer model is trained on image source data to enable weighted and self-training multi-variable decision making. This allows the model to understand not only the pixel values in the image, but the semantic contents of the image, or what it is that is being seen. This is more like how a human sees than previously possible.

The *plotter-scanner* is not nearly so smart. Like any flatbed scanner in the face of more advanced scanning apps like TurboScan, it's already an anachronism. Still, something in the theatricalization of the *plotter-scanner* (its enlargement of the scanning bed to human scale, the extended duration of the scan, and the necessary performance that produces an image) suggests it's worth thinking more precisely about what's happening anytime an image is captured, now.

When our machines *read* images, what exactly are they reading? Every time you point your phone camera at a subject, it reads, yes, the light and dark values of what it sees, but it also captures *when* the image was made (using the internal clock), *where* the image was made (via GPS), *who* made the image (whose account the phone is logged into), *how* the image was made (which app), and (using AI vision classification models) even *what* is in the image. That is a whole lot of valuable metadata stored in the file in addition to the more fundamental grid of RGB pixel values.

In a comment appended to the TurboScan mini review blog post on an unspecified date, BarryK glumly concedes:

> I can no longer recommend TurboScan.

David Reinfurt

on Friday
September 19, 2025
at 1:29 PM

Lucky Luke

by Maya Man

Luke likes looking. But Luke doesn't like to be looked at. Curious then, that he chose to construct a machine that looks at him quite closely. Closer than a person ever could, capturing him with machine vision, head-to-toe entirely.

Experiencing the *plotter-scanner* is intimate. Its elevator eyes look you up and down as you're splayed out, horizontal on the glass for a lengthy five minutes. It's uncomfortable, like having a conversation with someone who doesn't know the socially appropriate time to break eye contact. It forces you into that squirming mental state, when the staring has gone on for far too long.

Fixating on the feeling of being looked at is undeniably a symptom of the "contemporary condition." Increasingly, the duty of the artist is to watch themselves from every possible angle. It is important to exercise discipline over how we appear through our work, conversations, and of course, social media. Maybe X or TikTok, but most likely Instagram.

@_lukeshannon currently features zero posts on his Instagram profile. His page reads like a series of "" symbols, forcing visitors to use their imagination in lieu of a curated grid of images. "No posts yet" announces the text over the blank, white, lower half of his account page. Nothing under his tagged posts either, by the way. His most notable hint toward a more specific character concept is his profile picture. The small circular photo reveals Luke gazing down at the T-shirt he's wearing. He holds out the bottom part of the fabric so the text on it is visible for the photographer. "I'm real," it reads, in default sans-serif font. With his head tilted down, away from the camera, you can barely catch the contours of his face.

I gave him this T-shirt for his birthday last year. I had it custom printed at the Uniqlo on Broadway in SoHo. "I'm real," I typed into the iPad at the UTme! T-shirt printing counter. I wanted to make something, as advertised, "one-

of-a-kind" that I could "take home straight away." I took that photo of him, wearing it for the first time, in my apartment on October 17. He wore it out the door that night when we went to see Bladee live on his *COLD VISIONS* tour at the Brooklyn Mirage.

COLD VISIONS is one of Luke's less loved Bladee albums, but inevitably his favorite song on it is "Lucky Luke." It's more meditative and less rage-driven than the rest of the record. In the last line of the song, Bladee declares, "I'll draw faster than my shadow." This is a reference to the Western cartoon series Lucky Luke, whose eponymous protagonist "shoots faster than his own shadow." In a clip I found on YouTube, Lucky Luke draws his gun, spins around, and fires a shot at his shadow behind him. His shadow then peels off the wall and promptly disappears in defeat.

In Jungian psychology, the "shadow" refers to the hidden, repressed parts of oneself. If the shadow lives below, posts on a platform like Instagram live at the tip of the self-iceberg. Imagine each one scraped off the surface of one's self-performance. Posts are the pieces of a person that rise to the top—moments and markers worthy of being plucked from the material experience of living and rendered into pixels pushed onto others' feeds.

Look at me! a post screams. Then I do, casting my eyes downward, peering into the phone-shaped portal in my hand. It's pictures, pictures, pictures, forever in the bright LED light. I hide from my shadow by looking at my screen.

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag proclaims that act of taking a photo violent:

> "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves ... Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time."

Does this make a selfie a form of self-destruction? I know firsthand how masochistic it feels to not only take an image of yourself, but then voluntarily spawn instances of it online for others to surveil.

If that's true: a "self-portrait scan" is Lucky Luke, spinning 180 and shooting his shadow with a ghost gun he printed himself.

BANG!

Luke peels himself off of the half-inch-thick glass.

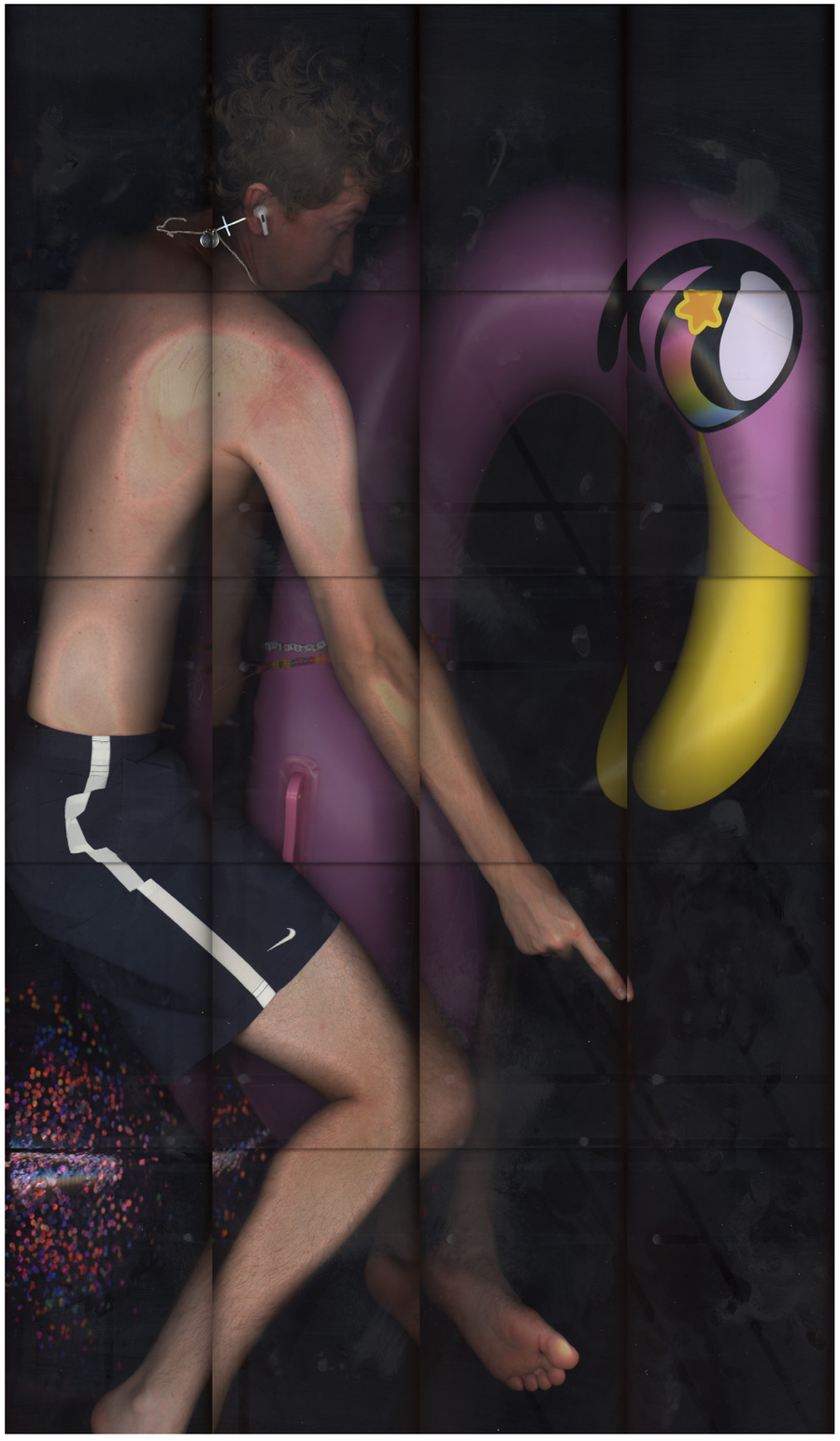
Luke doesn't like being looked at. But I love looking at Luke. Like a scanner pressed against the glass, I try to see him. Lucky me.

Maya Man

on Saturday
September 20, 2025
at 4:34 PM

Inspect

by Rex Shannon



If you have never been hopelessly addicted to *World of Warcraft*, I pity you. The thrill of upgrading your character's items—his helmet, neck, shoulders, cloak, chestpiece, tabard, bracers, gloves, belt, leggings, boots, rings, trinket, weapon—goes beyond the dopaminic. It's akin to finally playing a piano piece correctly when you've been learning it for weeks, or running a distance you never thought possible, or elegantly speaking a language you've been studying in the country in which it is spoken. Improving one of your Slots—going from the paltry [Leggings of the Fang] to the robust [Triprunner Dungarees] on your rogue, for instance (a +9 in the "Agility" stat, and a +2 in the "Stamina" stat)—feels as good as improving your actual life.

As a *WoW*- and *Runescape*-addled child, I imagined, when I received a new pair of shoes, that I had leveled up my real life agility (+3); when I performed well on a 7th grade algebra exam, that I had received a +1 talent point to the Mathematics skill; when nimbly navigating a conversation with a girl I liked, a tangible deepening of my Charisma specialization (+2). I was not a boy, I was a character, and, like all characters, I had ever-deepening needs: a higher level, more currency, better gear. My idols were not quarterbacks or actors or artists. They were Zezima and Reckful and Vurtne. They had what I wanted.

In my world, in the *World of Warcraft*, when I target your character with my mouse, when I right-click your character portrait, when I hit "inspect," then I can see your Slots, and then I can see what you are made of. In my world, the best characters sit theatrically <AFK> at prominent locations in popular cities simply to be inspected. They are not merely displaying their impressive Slots. They are showing each passerby their dedication, the endless hours they have sunk into the accumulation of better pixels. Their Epic mace, their [Torch of Holy Fire], is not guaranteed—it is an 8% drop from the final boss in a dungeon you need a coordinated group of 25 people to undertake. As you waddle around the city in your under-leveled, under-geared character, these

titans, toting their torches of fire, command your respect. Look at what I am made of, they say. It is impossible to look away, to refrain from inspection. You can only right-click and bow at their flickering candles, wordlessly praying to one day be accepted among their ranks, to become a member of their exclusive and holy grotto of adoration.

I did not know, as a child, that these games were weaponizing my natural, healthy desire to improve. Only a fool would do schoolwork when his character needed him. Your rogue is waiting there, lonely, desperate, while others outpace him. Those [Triprunner Dungarees] will not obtain themselves. +9 agility feels good; you can really notice +9 agility. Eviscerates and Backstabs and Sinister Strikes hurt noticeably more with +9 agility. Think of how much time you are wasting. How dare you doom your character to purgatory! You have a moral obligation to not let him die. You are his God! He needs you! And if he needs you so desperately, so utterly, it's obvious that you need him in that way, too.

What we do not see, what the internet does not allow us to see, is the character behind the character. Those gear-blessed players must give over their lives to my world, to the *World of Warcraft*. To be the best, they must relinquish their health, their social worlds, their jobs, their family. Lynxtitan played *Runescape* 17 hours a day, slept for 6, and ate only lasagna for a decade. But, fuck you, he is #1 on *Runescape's* Hiscores. Are you?

These men—it's usually men—have the ambitions of Lance Armstrong or Barry Bonds, but with a keyboard and mouse instead of a bike or bat. They want to be the best. They want their Slots to be the best. There's a common term for this: BiS. Best in Slot. "I'm full BiS," players announce in 25-man raids. They've done it. Of course they will suffer for BiS; they will destroy their lives for BiS. That's not a question. They will inject themselves in the glute, or live with their parents, or piss in a coke bottle. Wouldn't you? You, surely, have your version of a bike or bat or keyboard, your version of a quest for full BiS. A nasty problem rears its head when we are encouraged to publicize our own quests and, simultaneously, inspect the world's progress on theirs.

Social media, apart from being an easy target, is our modern-day character equipment screen. It is where we display our torches of holy fire, where we <AFK> in Orgrimmar and allow others to inspect us. Only we have replaced Triprunner Dungarees with bruschetta from a café in Siena. You had to be there, we desperately chant.

But, no, actually, that was 2013. We've evolved. We don't display our bruschetta anymore. Flagrantly toting your torch of holy fire in earnest is asinine at best, social ruin at worst. Now, you must acknowledge the stupidity of the medium and preempt it with ironic distance. "Take me back" is dead. "Italy sucked, honestly" is in.

But no. Fool! You fool! No! That was 2018. Now, you've learned, on the internet, that you can craft your torch of fire in the nexus of your mind. Now you are encouraged to design your own bruschetta. Social media used to be recording your world: you lived and posted what you lived, like a photo-journal your best friends could read. Now, social media asks not that you record but that you invent: What do you wish to display? What do you want others to see when they inspect you? How can you modify you-as-you-really-are to fit you-as-you-wish-to-be-seen?

Imagine a *World of Warcraft* where each character could invent the gear they were wearing—an unregulated marketplace of maniacal, ego-driven invention. Nothing would mean anything. Your torch of holy fire has +49 intellect? Mine has +999,999,999. Actually, I've renamed intellect. And it's not a mace. Isn't that better? No: that world, my world, would die.

It used to be thus: when I scrolled through your feed, when I inspected you, then I could see what you were made of. But now, if you decide what's being inspected, entirely, I won't see anything at all. I can look through the keyhole of your life, but you have arranged the room for me and know exactly what my eye will light upon. When you let me look through the camera, but you decide the angle, I'm not really looking through the camera at all.

And, crucially, the camera you've set up only lets me see parts of you. But we are not parts.

What makes *Skyrim* and *RuneScape* and *WoW* and *Champions: Return to Arms* and most other MMORPGs so pernicious is that they feed the illusion that we are not complete, whole people but rather a walking collection of Slots—of bracers, weapons, and trinkets; of vacations, sadnesses, and victories; of interests, hobbies, and dislikes.

This is social media's deadliest weapon, too. Her hair is so pretty. His arms are huge. Their house is gorgeous. That kitchen island is stunning. That trip looked epic. The picture behind the picture, the character behind the character, the hours spent setting up the angle: all lost. And, unlike the video games then (but increasingly like the video games now), social media tells us that if we want someone else's slot, we can simply buy it. Google's phones take out the legwork for us—simply "Circle to Search." Double-tap longingly at the slot and we will find it for you. Temu's ads suggest everything is for sale. No slot is off limits to you.

In my world, you might look at a Priest's torch of holy fire and think to yourself: I want that mace. Fine, good, but you'll have to kill Kel'Thuzad to get it. You cannot buy it. (This life-truth is why microtransactions in video games kills them: if it doesn't require time and effort, it doesn't mean shit). On the internet, you might look at a woman's page and think to yourself: I want her cheekbones. And, disastrously, those cheekbones are not locked behind Kel'Thuzad. They are locked behind cash. Well, our world says, sure. You can have them. You'll just have to buy it.

But, problem: those cheekbones don't fit your character. Your cheekbones fit your character. Isolating the slot—the "Cheekbone" slot—yes, those are great cheekbones. Legendary, even, with +3 Sexiness. But those cheekbones do not go with your other Slots. They throw the unity of your character out of wack.

Because, obviously, you are not a character composed of Slots that you can upgrade. You are a human being. There is nothing to upgrade. You should not go to the gym. You might feel healthier. But there is no "should." *World of Warcraft*, Instagram—they command you. They "should" you. Sommer Rae's bracelets should not be in your wrist slot. The only things that matter in life are not things. That kitchen island is stunning. But what about the water that surrounds it?

This is all obvious, probably, which means it bores us, which means we need artists to refreshingly re-teach us these truths, until we encounter them anew again and feel their weight. This is what Luke Shannon's *Replacement Character* does for me.

Replacement Character is the character equipment and inventory screens of all the best video games I have ever played come to life. It is an Instagram feed made manifest on a table. It is the ultimate act of inspection. It is, in real life, right-clicking on a character portrait, hitting inspect, and seeing what someone is made of.

Except there's a key difference: here, the subjects willingly and consciously reduce themselves to various Slots. They have not set the camera angle, or arranged the room before I gaze through the keyhole. The angle is always the same: a brutal vantage that requires the subject to paste themselves like a fleshy sticker upon glass. It is not a photo, but a scan, and it sees everyone the same. There is no hiding, no invention, no renaming of your torch of holy fire.

Seeing the subjects' *Replacement Character* readouts is like accessing intimate full body TSA scans: should we be seeing what we're seeing? There is no way out: no duck face, no contour, no .5x zoom. There is no favorable distortion, only bodies on glass being scanned. I imagine this is how a lepidopterist feels studying the splayed scans of her species collection. I see you, I recognize you, and there is no hiding.

Replacement Character removes social from social media. It's pure media: your body how your bed sees it. There is no posing or modifying or squirming away. It's like an Instagram where the only acceptable posts are x-rays and MRI scans. Finally we can all really see what you are made of.

Imagine a *World of Warcraft* where, suddenly, people didn't pilot characters, but photo-realistic versions of themselves. In a flash, everyone at the Orgrimmar bank has become who they really are, the character behind the character. You, with your headphones, at your computer. You know what would happen.

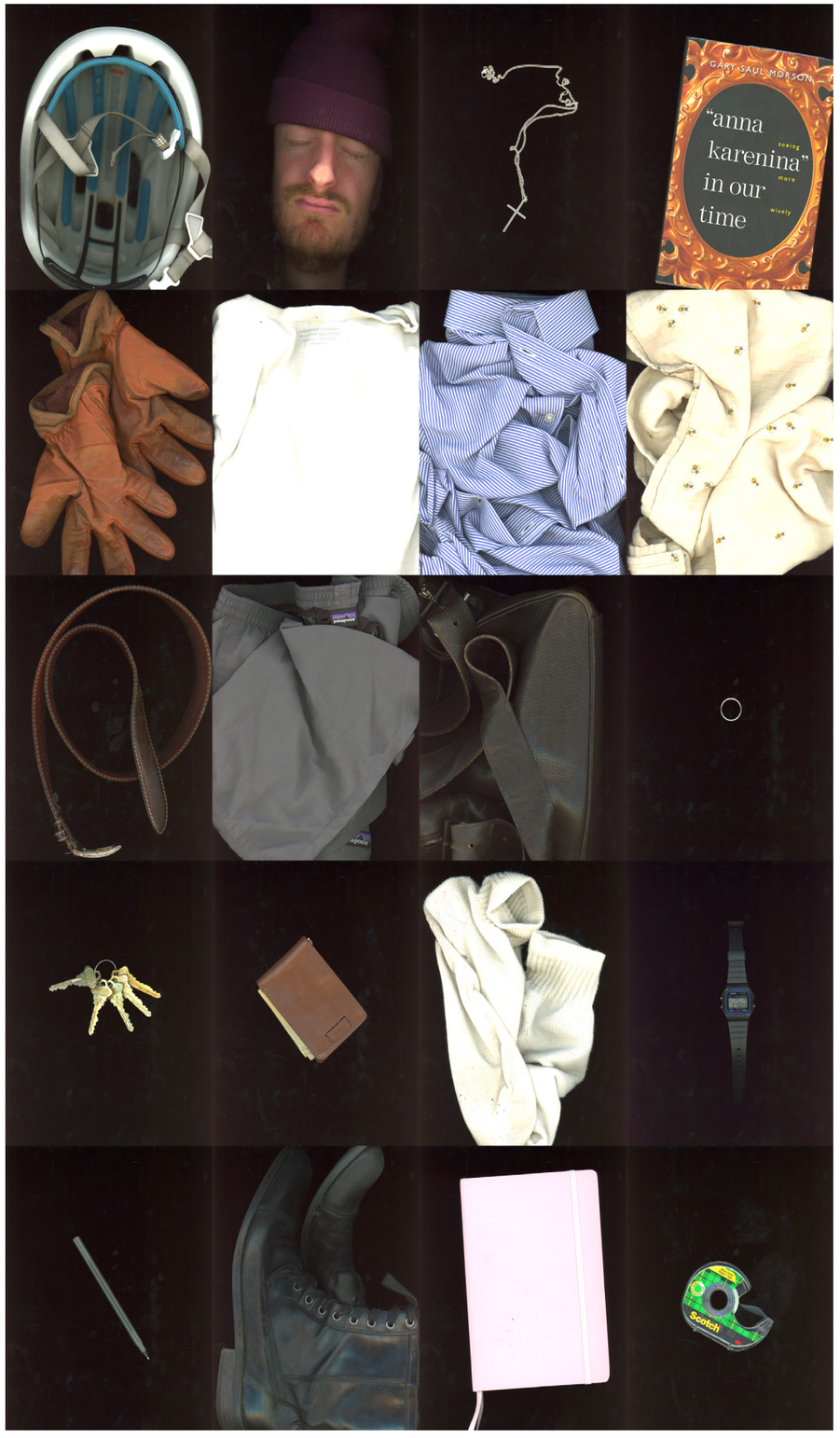
Confusion, for a second. Brief horror and panic, maybe. Then, for maybe a minute or two, people would inspect each other's character, and they would see a version of Luke's *Replacement Character*. Real shoulders, real leggings, real hands. Trinkets: wallets, keys, rings. Belts, underwear, socks. They would inspect themselves. Is this really what I'm made of?

And then, in a flash, every single person would logout, never to return to the world in which they had to be who they really were. It's too much work to be totally yourself twice over, in both your world and my world.

There would be a mass exodus, a character-death event, until my world, the *World of Warcraft*, would cease to exist. At least not as I ever knew it. The only remaining characters would be utterly replaceable, the bots and NPCs, the animated code-people aimlessly patrolling the pixelated halls that would one day be their tomb.

Rex Shannon

On Saturday,
September 20, 2025
at 12:10 PM



Hearth

by Ruby Justice Thelot

I am looking, I am looking, I am looking, from over your shoulder, from across the room, through an oblique vantage point, I am looking at your phone screen, I am looking as you scroll through Instagram reels, I am looking as you text a person I can only imagine is your mother, I am looking as you laugh-react in your roommate-groupchat, I am looking because we share the screen.

The screen is, and always will be, a zone of intimacy. The phone holds secrets revealed through the ordered illumination of pixels and the confused illumination of desire. The desire emerges as we press ourselves against the screen, leaning in toward our handheld devices. As film theorist Laura Mulvey argues in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), we, as viewers, are encouraged to identify with the person depicted on the screen. A Lacanian mirror dance is at play when we are entranced by the screen: for some instants, it is us that we see in the protagonist, we become the hero, the cowboy, the knight—the gaze becomes projection.

The person on the screen represents a Gestalt: a self coherent, a crystalized unity which we aspire to through the slow act of increased proximity. This, alas, is a méconnaissance or misrecognition, as French philosopher Jacques Lacan puts it; the screen lies, as much as it is a zone of intimacy, it is also a zone of fiction, an area of illusion. Like the infant before the mirror, the viewer sees “themselves” stabilized and magnified in the hero. As French film theorist Christian Metz details in his book *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), the spectator undergoes a process of identification with the characters. The screen is an apparatus projecting an ideal ego, an illusion of wholeness. The viewer is Benjamin Franklin “Hawkeye” Pierce, the viewer is Anakin Skywalker, the viewer is Don Draper.

The nature of the screen changes the nature of the identification.

There was only one television and one computer in the home before the turn of the millennium, in part because of the adoption curve and in part because of the cost of the devices. This meant that the screen was, in the average American household of four, an object to be shared. Families watched television together, on the couch, in the living room, in the constant compromise of the communal decision of how to spend primetime, family members who lost the argument spent commercial breaks switching back to the show they really wanted to watch or relied on weekend re-runs. We shared the screen. The screen was a place of congregation, a site for community, the hearth of the modern American family.

Similarly, the computer screen was also meant as a site of gathering. On weekend nights, when we slept over at each other's houses, my cousins and I would take turns playing on the computer. *Maple Story*, *World of Warcraft*, *Trickster Online*. There was only one mouse, and we shared a screen as one person held the pointer. The family computer allowed for three to four young boys to be hunched over, jabbering, screaming, reveling as the other fought an evil Egyptian god in a dark dungeon. It allowed for the shared experience of the new music video on YouTube. We were all watching the screen together.

That was before screens got small and portable, before the screen became a private space.

Neuroscientists have attempted to quantify this through MRIs and other means. In a 2021 study, researchers at the University of Maryland, College Park studied the effects of social viewing on neural activation. The findings suggested that positive neural stimuli were more salient when a video was experienced together. The study found that the medial prefrontal cortex, one of the regions of the brain involved with social cognition, was more active when participants believed they were watching a video with another person. A 2019 study by researchers at Duke University and the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology found similar effects in great apes: "visually attending to a video together" facilitated social closeness. They sought to prove that this human phenomenon had deep evolutionary roots, and this study suggests that may be the case.

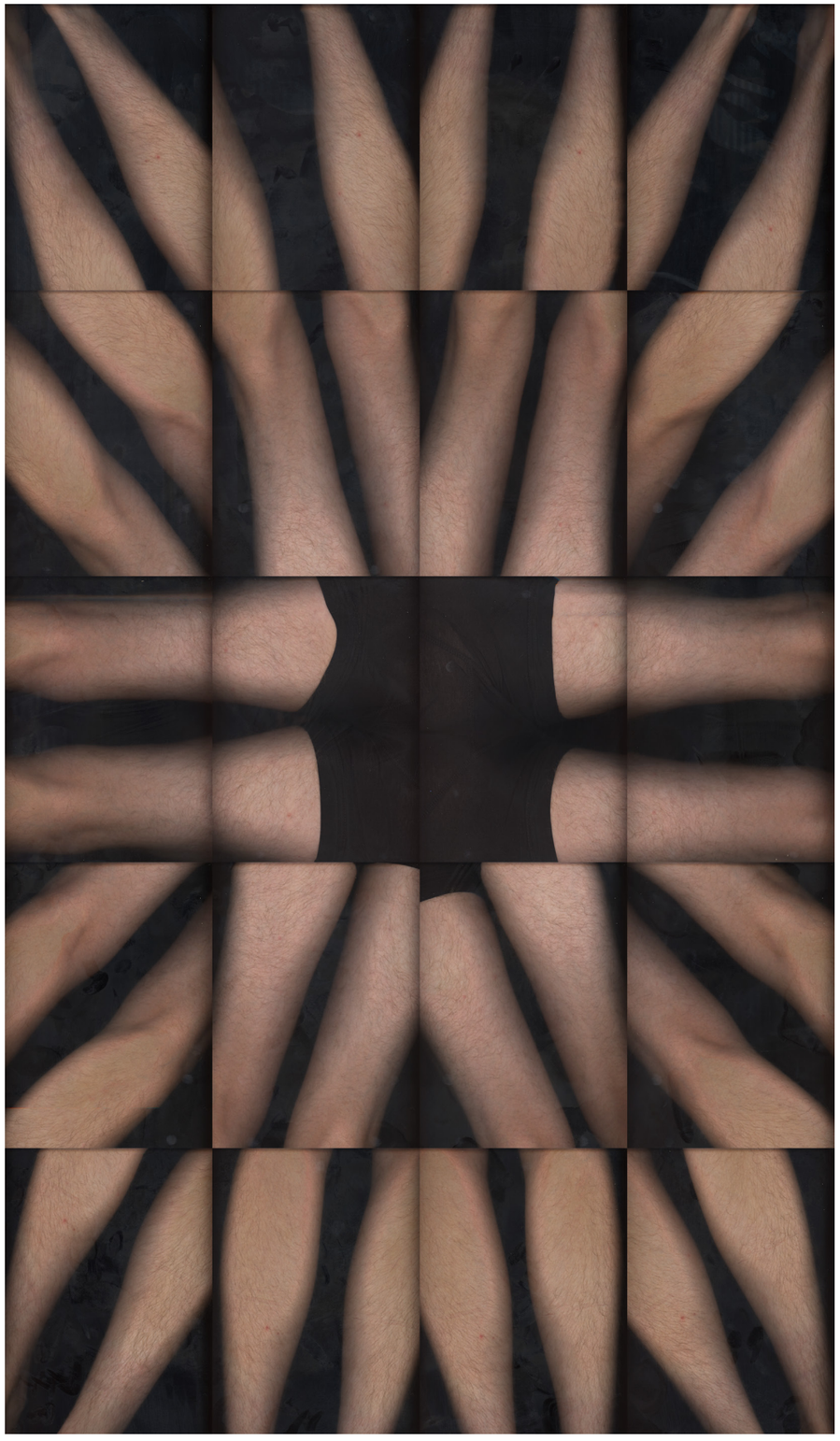
Moreover, the experience of identification seems to be amplified by the act of sharing the screen. Erica Boothby, a lead researcher at Yale University, studied the effects of shared attention on reception of the experience and found that "people who share experiences with another person rate those experiences as more pleasant or unpleasant than those who undergo the experience on their own." This suggests, in our context, that sharing the screen amplifies the process of identification, and, conversely, to do it alone creates a more fickle, more temporary misrecognition. To watch alone is to be a poor hero, to watch together is to be a great one.

Because the screen has been privatized, so has the process of primary identification. The beauty of the big screen, TV or theater, is the shared experience of misrecognition. When we share the screen, we share the signifier, and we are all engaged in the rapprochement with a common whole ego. This experience breeds closeness and community.

In the cinema, the collective misrecognition produces both a fantasy of wholeness for the individual and a fantasy of wholeness for the group. The audience breathes together, laughs together, and gasps together, all participating in the same hallucinatory projection of an ideal ego. The illusion of coherence is doubled: the protagonist on screen seems unified, and the crowd in the blackened theater momentarily feels unified as well. The shared screen transforms the Lacanian mirror from a solitary encounter into a social rite, where strangers are bound by the simultaneity of their identification.

This communal structure gives the screen the quality of a hearth as a place of ritual gathering. To share the screen is to share the misrecognition that sustains culture, to agree to suspend disbelief together, to momentarily dissolve into the same dream. It is not just that we see ourselves in the hero; it is that we see ourselves together in the hero, each spectator recognizing the same illusion and in so doing recognizing one another.

In *Replacement Character*, Luke Shannon's new show at Heft Gallery, Shannon places deftly a large screen in the middle of room; the human-sized pane reveals its insides, a roving-scanner that takes man-sized pictures on the subjects upon it. Mixing images created with the apparatus and performance, Shannon reinvigorates the need for size in screens, understanding that even



in the gallery space, a large screen can be a place of congregation, especially when its function is expanded from watching-tool to image-making-tool.

In our current world of small screens, we choose our own singular heroes, our own singular egos to identify with, atomized and lonely. In a way, this is a tragedy, because the communal experience of identification was a culture-building ritual. We now have a thousand heroes with a thousand different faces.

The small screen is bad enough, but a new wall has been erected, furthering the atomization and privatization of the screen. These days, when I encounter a screen on the subway, sometimes it is covered with a privacy screen protector. A privacy screen protector is an appendage to a device meant to impede on the ability of others to look at the screen. It works by embedding a thin film of microscopic louvers—like invisible blinds—over the glass. These louvers narrow the screen's viewing angle so that light passes clearly only when seen straight on, but turns dark or black when observed from the side. Where a bare screen radiates outward to anyone nearby, a screen with a privacy filter enforces directionality: visibility for the holder, opacity for the others.

The images created by Shannon's *plotter-scanner* verge on the intimate, flipping the screen's radical penchant for isolation into subversive vulnerability. In bed, open, almost nude, the subjects are beautifully eviscerated by the scanner's flattening lens, revealing the soft innards through careful compositions. They expose what screens can be and, when returning back to our own pockets, what they are not.

Privacy protectors are the logical extension of this privatization. Where once the screen was designed for maximum visibility, a beacon calling the family to gather in the living room, today the screen is engineered for opacity, for secrecy. A dimmed brightness, a darkened cone of vision, a technological barrier against the communal gaze: this is how the contemporary screen insists on being personal.

I need screens to be big, huge, so we can watch them together. I need screens to be huge so we can rekindle the hearth's fire and snuggle together, warmed by the bright glow of the liquid crystal display. No more impediments to screen-sharing. Remove your privacy screen, I'm looking. I'm looking because I want to be close to you, I am looking because I love you.

Ruby Justice Thelot

on Monday,
September 8, 2025
at 8:31 PM

This Has Touched

by Sofia Garcia

The first time I stood before Luke Shannon's *plotter-scanner*, I laughed out of sheer giddiness. A scanner, one of the dullest tools of the office, had been inflated to monumental scale. Standing at nearly four by six feet, the sight was absurd but also magnetic, yet what struck me most was how it didn't ask for admiration from afar. Instead it pulled me closer, as if the only way to understand it was to press myself against its surface.

That demand for intimacy is the scanner's defining difference from the camera. A camera flatters. It gives you an array of choices: an angle, a pose, the distance that allows you to shape how you appear. The scanner allows none of that. Your nose flattens, fabric wrinkles, skin creases against the glass, and everything is recorded without reprieve. Roland Barthes wrote that the photograph testifies to the "that-has-been." The scan insists on something even less forgiving: this-has-touched.

And then there is the button. The simple push that transforms an impression into a file, instantly light enough to circulate anywhere. Shannon has said the button itself, not the scanner, is the true invention of our time. He's right. Distribution is the real power here. The button is casual, even thoughtless, but once pressed it cannot be undone. What was once private is already public, already sliding into contexts beyond your control. I know the feeling: the late-night impulse to share something small or sincere, only to watch it reframed by others. What at once felt personal becomes communal, or worse, distorted. The button makes us complicit in our own circulation.

Shannon built his scanner from scratch. It advances beneath its subject line by line, the beam crawling slowly to assemble an image over several minutes. The process feels neutral, but it is deeply generative. Each scan follows the same rules, yet no two outcomes are the same. Accident, movement, hesitation, each shifts the result in ways the system cannot anticipate. It is the paradox of generative art in physical form: rule and variation, determinism and surprise.

The first version I encountered stood upright, scanning in a grid. I treated it like a photo booth: a hand pressed in one square, a grin in another. The stitched result was cartoonish, a collage of mismatched parts. At first I laughed, but the laughter carried a sting. The image revealed something I had not expected, that when gestures are pulled apart and magnified, they slide into theater. A simple set of instructions, stand here, hold this, press against the glass, yielded an image that felt performative. This is the generative condition—even when we follow the system, the output exceeds our intention. Guy Debord's line in The Society of the Spectacle echoes here: in a culture saturated with images, the ordinary cannot help but become theater.

Months later, when I visited again, the scanner had evolved into its final form. It now lay flat on the floor, more like a platform than a mirror. Climbing onto it was unnerving. I remember my palms sweating, wondering whether the glass would hold me. Once down, there was no retreat. The machine moved slowly beneath me, demanding stillness. My shirt had ridden up, exposing skin I had not meant to show, a trace of armpit hair I had not even thought about that morning. Vulnerability arrived uninvited, recorded with the same fidelity as everything else.

That moment clarified what separates Shannon's scanner from conventional photography. A camera offers control: angles, edits, the ability to shape the narrative. The scanner erases those options. It does not capture how the body looks. It captures how the body presses. Even accidents become evidence. What feels mechanical turns theatrical.

This is where Shannon's work begins to brush against surveillance. Michel Foucault's panopticon comes to mind in the sense that one is always visible, and that visibility shapes behavior. In Shannon's scans, every detail, whether intended or not, is captured with equal authority. Yet to call this only surveillance feels incomplete. Shannon himself describes the machine as both "watcher" and "witness." The distinction matters. Surveillance captures in order to control. Witnessing records in order to affirm. *Replacement Character* sits between these poles, holding preservation and exposure together at once.

That double bind extends to the archive. Once scanning is complete, what was living becomes reproducible, portable data already severed from its moment. Jacques Derrida called this "archive fever," the paradox that to preserve is also to excise, to detach. Shannon makes this explicit by scanning his own notebooks and sketches, collapsing biography into artifact and practice into record. But clarity is not the same as legibility. The title *Replacement Character* points to the small glyph that appears when data cannot be read. Even in their precision, the scans admit failure. Seams remain visible, fragments stitched imperfectly, meaning never entirely secure.

Time itself fractures in the process. Each image takes minutes to compile, thousands of instants stacked into a single surface. What looks immediate is anything but. Henri Bergson's distinction between clock time and lived time plays out here. The machine produces one kind of time: divisible, mechanical. The subject experiences another: the long hum of the scanner, the uncertainty of whether to shift or hold. For me, those minutes stretched into something meditative, though tinged with anxiety. Every hesitation felt etched into the record. It was impossible not to think about how similar this is to life online, where the present is captured and circulated before it is even lived.

Comparing the prototype to the final version made the stakes clearer. The grid of fragments had felt playful because I believed I was directing it. The flatbed demanded surrender. The scanner made plain a shift I recognize in digital life more broadly: what once felt like casual self-expression has hardened into inescapable exhibition.

This, I think, is where Shannon's work is most compelling. What matters is how directly the scanner stages our cultural condition. A banal office tool becomes an engine of intimacy. Its neutrality produces vulnerability. Its distortions remind us that wholeness is always a construction. And in the process, it claims its place within generative art. The scanner is both code and machine, producing infinite variations out of a fixed set of rules. It is not simply documenting the world but generating new images from it, revealing how systems shape and distort what passes through them.

Replacement Character reframes portraiture for a networked age. These are not likenesses in any traditional sense. Nor are they performances we can fully control. They are propositions: that presence is always provisional, and that every act of being seen is also, inevitably, an act of being misread.

Sofia Garcia

on Monday,
August 18, 2025
at 3:20 PM

performance-lecture
(transcript)

by Luke Shannon

Hi everyone. Welcome. Thank you for coming. I'm going to speak for about twenty minutes. Let's start with the elephant in the room, and its rather clumsy name: the *plotter-scanner*.

That's all lowercase, one word, hyphenated. It is two objects, rather different from each other, joined gracelessly at the hip with that hyphen. They both end in "-er," which is kind of nice. They both end in "-er" because they are both active actors. The plotter plots, and the scanner scans. The plotter was one of the first ways to output documents from a computer. In 1946 Electronics Associates, Inc. began developing the first point-plotters, the predecessor to the pen plotter. Before there were printers, these machines, on a mostly smaller scale, would hold a pen and, mimicking a body, draw on paper the output from the computer. Also in 1946, Xerox agreed to develop the first commercial dry copier, the Xerox Model D, the predecessor to the scanner. The scanner was one of the first ways to input documents to the computer. Before there were scanning apps, these machines, on a mostly smaller scale, would receive a document, and, mimicking an eye, read the paper as input to the computer.

As that framing may make clear, I think of these in some ways as the same, and in some ways as opposites. It's a method of movement, and a method of watching, and neither of those things is done at the same time.

The *plotter-scanner* takes about five minutes to complete a scan grid. When you look at a scan, you are seeing 5 minutes, all at once. It's different from a video or a stack of photographs that you can flip through quickly. It's different even from a long exposure photograph, which overlaps and compresses those five minutes into a single image. A photograph captures a perspective image, an xy-plane, frozen at a single time t. The scanner captures only a line, an x, and moves diagonally through *y* and time. There is no motion blur on a scanner, only time compression. Each pixel on the image is an index to a specific time, person, pressure, and movement on the *plotter-scanner*.

In her 1979 essay "Grids," Rosalind Krauss distinguishes between two paradoxically opposite effects of the grid. The first, "centripetal" grid, respects the edge of the canvas and deals materially with its subject. The second, "centrifugal" grid, leaves the canvas and extends to paper over the world. The plotter is the centripetal grid, it creates its own world within its xy-bounds. The scanner is the centrifugal grid, it excises a section of the world on glass and claims it. The hyphen is their rope, for handfasting and for tug-of-war. The *plotter-scanner* could also be called the *hand-eye*.

This is Bruno Munari, an Italian artist and designer, and one of his works, "Seeking Comfort in an Uncomfortable Chair." This work and many others of his were an inspiration for my 2023 show *Seating Arrangements*. They were an inspiration for many reasons, reasons beyond their possibly comparable comfort. Here is another one of his chair-related works, "A Chair for Short Visits." I like these naming contradictions. Bruno Munari's other works include "Useless Machines," "Illegible Books," and a 1970 show at the Venice Biennale, built around the Rank Xerox 720.

At the Biennale, Munari placed a Rank Xerox 720 copier in the central pavilion and invited anyone—artists, attendants, visitors—to use it freely. He was curious about how the machine actually saw and how its vision differed from other reproduction tools. He wanted to know what happened when you fed it materials and forms it wasn't designed for, and to watch how it reacted when pushed beyond its limits. He also published a book collecting the results of these these experiments.

Huh, a book—that's a good idea. Hm.

Let's hold that thought and look elsewhere at another artist working with copiers in 1970. Sonia Sheridan during her artist residency at 3M, worked with their new "Color-in-Color" thermal process color photocopier. She used this table-like machine to create piecemeal collages of the human body, producing works like "Man-Scan" (that's "Man-hyphen-Scan") in 1974, and even some self-portraits. That looks like a pretty laborious process to produce. She said in an interview, "Any artist in his right mind who thinks that the route we should go is only towards simpler and simpler pushing-a-button systems is in my opinion simply missing the boat."

> **Luke pushes the button of the* plotter-scanner *and stands on top of it. The* plotter-scanner *will run continuously from now on.**

You are walking alone in a dark forest at night, and you see something ahead, in the dark, that looks like it just maybe could be a person. You approach it cautiously, you peer worriedly, you inch forward towards it and then, all of a sudden, you realize that it is actually just a tree. Phew.

Or you walk into an empty room, no big deal, when suddenly a person in what you thought was just a pile of clothes jumps up and starts talking to you.

These two moments illustrate the very different ways our minds deal with things that are alive and things that are not. When I realize that the shape in the dark is not a person or animal or anything, it moves immediately from one zone of my perception, the zone concerned with self, to an entirely different area concerned with objects. When the pile of clothes starts talking, I go from being the "me" I am alone to being the "me" I am with that person in the pile.

What interests me is that threshold, right between ordered motion and unpredictable motion—between rules and randomness. If something moves with too much randomness, like a plastic bag blown arbitrarily by the wind, then it is an object because it does not act in the world, it is only affected by it. If something moves with too much regularity, then it is a machine, doing the exact same action totally predictably. In between these two extremes, an object

with an apparent aim but an unpredictable path is where I think we begin to identify objects with selfhood. This is where I want the *plotter-scanner* to sit: in between actor and audience.

Here is a work produced by the *plotter-scanner*. This is me, lying on top of this glass, as it scans continuously overnight. As you can see, I am tossing and turning. This is not a good night's sleep. It's on cold glass, with a loud machine, extremely bright intermittent light, and I'm in a strange room. This is me, "Seeking Comfort in an Uncomfortable Bed." This is how my mattress sees me every night. This is what it looks like when it watches me. In one sense, I find this awful, scary, surveillant, and of course uncomfortable. The word "scan" is a frightening word. It's medical, military, and impersonal. It reminds me that I'm being watched by everything.

On the other hand, to me this image is tender. It's certainly intimate. It requires total proximity; even in a room full of light the scanner removes its subject to this dark background. In another sense, I find the idea of my mattress watching me to be comforting. I am being witnessed by everything, and watched by the world. I want to be witnessed. I want to be seen by the things around me, as I see them. In ChatGPT's useful summary, "The Lacanian gaze isn't the act of looking. It's the unsettling moment when you realize you're already being looked at by the world, and that this external point of view shapes, fractures, your sense of who you are."

So, what is the boundary between me and the world?
Am I alone in my bed?

The philosophy of object-oriented ontology would say no, and yes. OOO, as it's called, is a branch of speculative realism coined in the late 1990s by Graham Harman, which treats humans and objects alike as things with equally full realities. The name is a riff on object-oriented programming, a style of structuring code around "objects" that each contain their own private state and behaviors. So more accurately, OOO would say first, no: you're not special and people aren't special objects. The objects around me have their own ontology, their own self which retreats into themselves, which I can never access. But second, yes: as an object, there are parts of me that are totally isolated, and can never be accessed. Every object, and every part of every object, has this retreat, and while there is this new distance between us, at least there's a flat hierarchy of being. That is, we can both retreat equally, and we are both equally unknowable, even to ourselves.
I feel like I always imagined this retreat as pure white, like Harry Potter's white afterlife train station. A big, bright, white void. Studio lighting. What I would imagine, as a kid, was my floating body, positioned exactly as it was if I were totally cut off from the world, starting at the skin. If I was sitting in a chair, then my knees would be bent, but the chair would be gone. If I was in a conversation, you wouldn't hear my voice—there's no air to transmit it. But my vocal cords would vibrate, just the same. And in my mind, I would watch myself from the side, and somehow I would know that my vocal cords were vibrating. I would have perfect knowledge of every atom in my body, and nothing else.

My most important question was, "Can I reconstruct the world, using my bent legs to infer that I was sitting in a chair? Using the vibrations of my vocal cords to know what I was saying, and who I was talking with? The rustle of my hair to understand the wind?" What gets through the barrier of myself? If I had perfect knowledge, just within myself, would that contain the world?

There's something in math called a Taylor series, introduced by Brook Taylor in 1715. The Taylor series for a single point in a function is when you add up all of the derivatives, the infinite number of derivatives, at that point. With enough terms, over time, the Taylor series approaches the original function. That is, if you had perfect information about just a single point in an infinite function, if you knew where that single point was—and how fast that point was changing, and how fast that change was changing, and how fast that changing change was changing, and so on forever—then you could recreate that entire function, along its entire length. Mathematically, the Taylor expansion says: yes, the whole function is contained in the single point.

Henri Bergson, a 20th-century French philosopher, said time can be described similarly, from one perspective, as discrete points, and from another, as a

continuous duration. As *temps*, scientific time, it unfolds as a series of instants—discrete points lined up one after another, measurable, divisible, inexorable. It is the scanner, marching forward with mechanical certainty, each sweep carving another point in the sequence. Yet there is also *la durée*, duration, the lived flow of time, where no instant stands apart but instead blends into a continuous breath of experience. The *plotter-scanner* is a redlight-greenlight alternation of capture and release, being on and off stage, an embodiment of what Bergson called "the mechanical encrusted upon the living."

By this he meant the comic effect of life turning rigid, of the living overlaid with mechanical repetition, stretched thin like a scan-line exposure. These images do look funny to me in that way. But that phrase means more now. It's also a description of our presence, doubled at every moment, both real and mediated—the private facing the public, the presence folding into performance, the profile picture.

To me a mystery is not a question without an answer. It's a question whose answer is unending. The mystery is the simultaneity—that the mechanical and the living, the private and the public, the instant and the duration, all insist on being true at once. It's a single answer that goes on forever. It starts at the zeroth derivative, "position," but needs the first derivative, "velocity." It needs the second derivative, "acceleration," and the third, "jerk." It needs the fourth derivative, "snap," the fifth derivative, "crackle," and the sixth derivative, "pop."

Those are their names. And I really do think names are important. Computer scientist Martin Fowler famously said, "There are only two hard problems in computer science: cache invalidation and naming things." To me, that means that there are only two hard problems: knowing when to throw away an old idea, and recognizing a new one.

Let's return to an old idea. Am I alone in bed?

Well, no, of course not. I pretty much always have my phone in bed. That's what I grew up doing. I'd like to quote from my brother Rex Shannon's essay, among the essays created for this exhibition:

> *"If you have never been hopelessly addicted to World of Warcraft, I pity you."*

I've grown up watching people online. I've grown to the size of thousands, hundreds of thousands, in Twitch chat watching streamers play video games. I've been totally and completely sucked into my phone, my computer, and my TV for almost my whole life. My whole focus, my whole being sucked down into a phone only this big, or video game crosshairs only this big.

But I don't feel only this big when I'm online. I feel large, larger than life. I feel expansive and wide-ranging.

To me, our most amazing ability as humans is tool embodiment, or extension of the body schema. It's our ability to take tools into ourselves and make them a part of us. When I'm using a pencil, it's not some separate foreign object; it's an extension of my finger. When I'm backing up in a car and there's something behind me, I feel the same tingle right here, the same as when somebody's hand is too close to the back of my head. Tools become us. We bridge our own retreat with the tool's retreat, and become a new thing for us both to retreat to. A grid is a tool. It makes things divisible, manageable. Or it can be the tool to extend them, to stretch out to infinity.

Over the last year, I've built all the furniture in my apartment, tables, beds, chairs, closet. I threw the ceramic bowls and plates that I use; I printed all the little hooks and organizers; I avoided new clothes. These objects are *centripetal* witnesses: they hold me in, indexing who I was the moment I made them, the duration I've had them. I feel better making images with lenses that I have made.

When I'm online, I feel *centrifugal*, propelled outward, as large as the internet. When I would retreat to be alone in my childhood bedroom, to go to Twitch chat and witness with thousands of other people, I would become one thing, chat.

A now-hidden post on X by user @angelsighting first proposed "chat" as a fourth-person pronoun. The first-person pronoun is I: I am watching a Twitch stream. The second-person pronoun is you: you are playing a game. The third-person pronoun is we: we are going to win. The fourth-person pronoun is Chat: Chat, is this real? Could it be true that the point of collectivity has expanded from first-person derivative to second-person derivative to third-person derivative and finally, fourth? A fourth wall, an ambiguous, half-hivemind collective addressed as one, a constant presence, an omnipresent, omniscient, and trickster fandom. Are these larger derivatives progress towards understanding the full function? This is the most telling naming collision, the best homonym to me: Twitch Chat and ChatGPT.

ChatGPT feels like a fourth-wall witness to our lives, my own omnipresent, omniscient, and trickster fandom. When I ask it a question, do I ask it a question? Or do I ask those who train it? Or do I ask us, its data? Part of me suspects my clean data—the pre-AI traces I've left online—may outlast the rest of me, and that part might go up, eventually, to a "better place."

Either way, when it answers a question, I don't really learn when I'm told the answer. I learn more by watching. I grew up as the youngest of four kids. A car seats two parents in the front, the three oldest kids in the back, and the smallest (the youngest) in the way back, lurking. It's rare to look backwards in a car, we're going forwards. To watch without being seen is, I think, a fundamental human joy. The joy of being a tall tree on the playground, seeing the world as a flat plane. But the longer I stay in the tree, as it gets darker and they start looking for me, it becomes impossible to come down; impossible to explain that I was watching them look for me, and why.

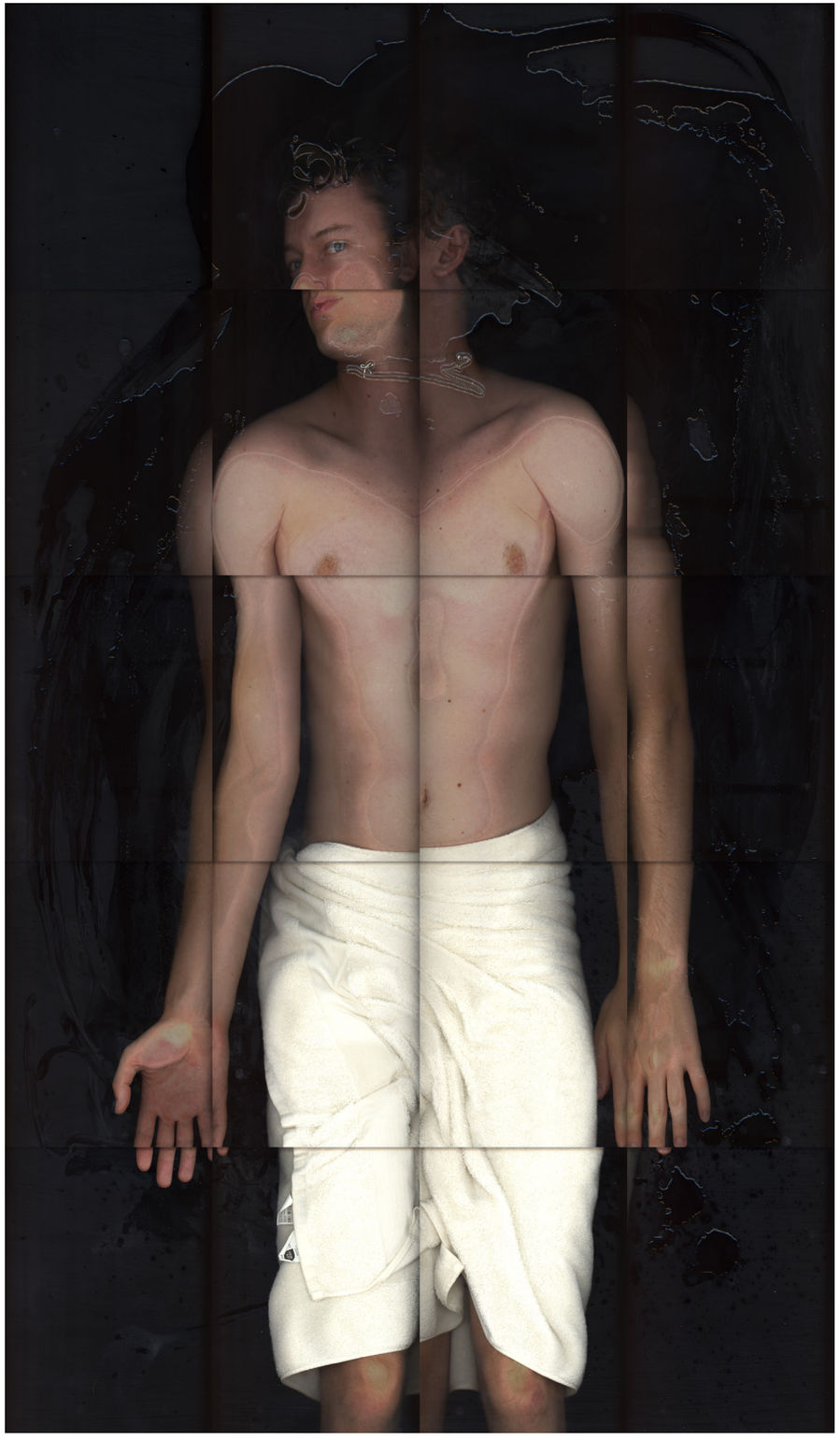
With petabytes of watching, with perfect information about the current moment, point, token: can I predict the next time-step?

Prediction is capture, and we are coordinating it. The three mechanisms of power: surveillance, normalization, examination. Surveillance is obvious. Normalization is enforcing the norm, seeking sameness. Examination is when you confer with an authority and conform to its suggestion. Chat folds all three into one single presence. Here's an email to my boss: Does it make sense? Make it friendly but professional.

Chat is a fourth category. Chat is a singular friend that won't judge you, that you can speak directly to. Chat is a chorus of thousands, speaking directly back. It's polite to be predictable, but we don't have to be nice to Chat. We can boss it around, make demands of it. Chat, anyone who posts that link is getting banned. Chat, make this more concise, use larger words. Draft a performance-lecture. Don't use any em dashes.

Luke Shannon

on Monday,
April 1, 2024
at 6:49 PM

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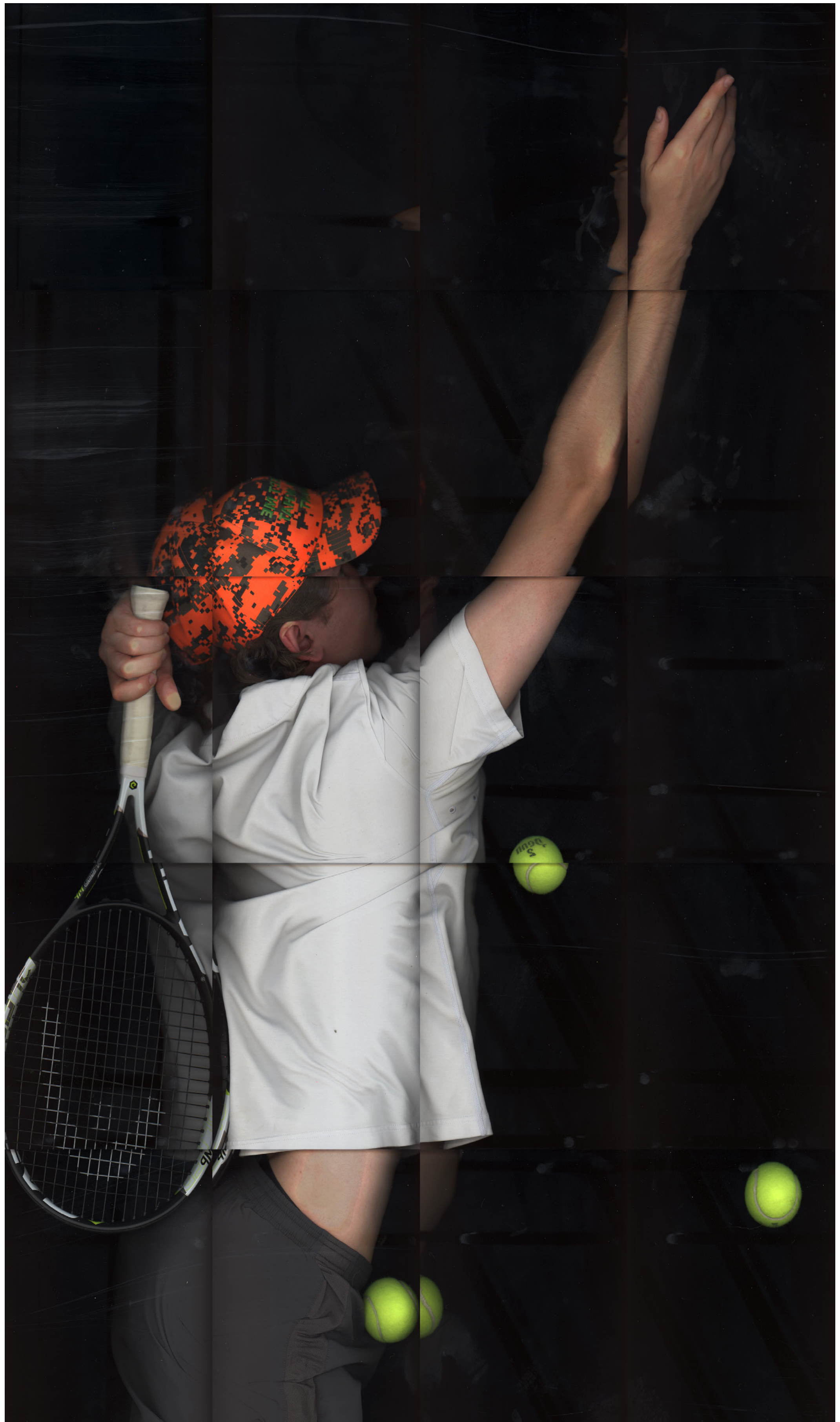

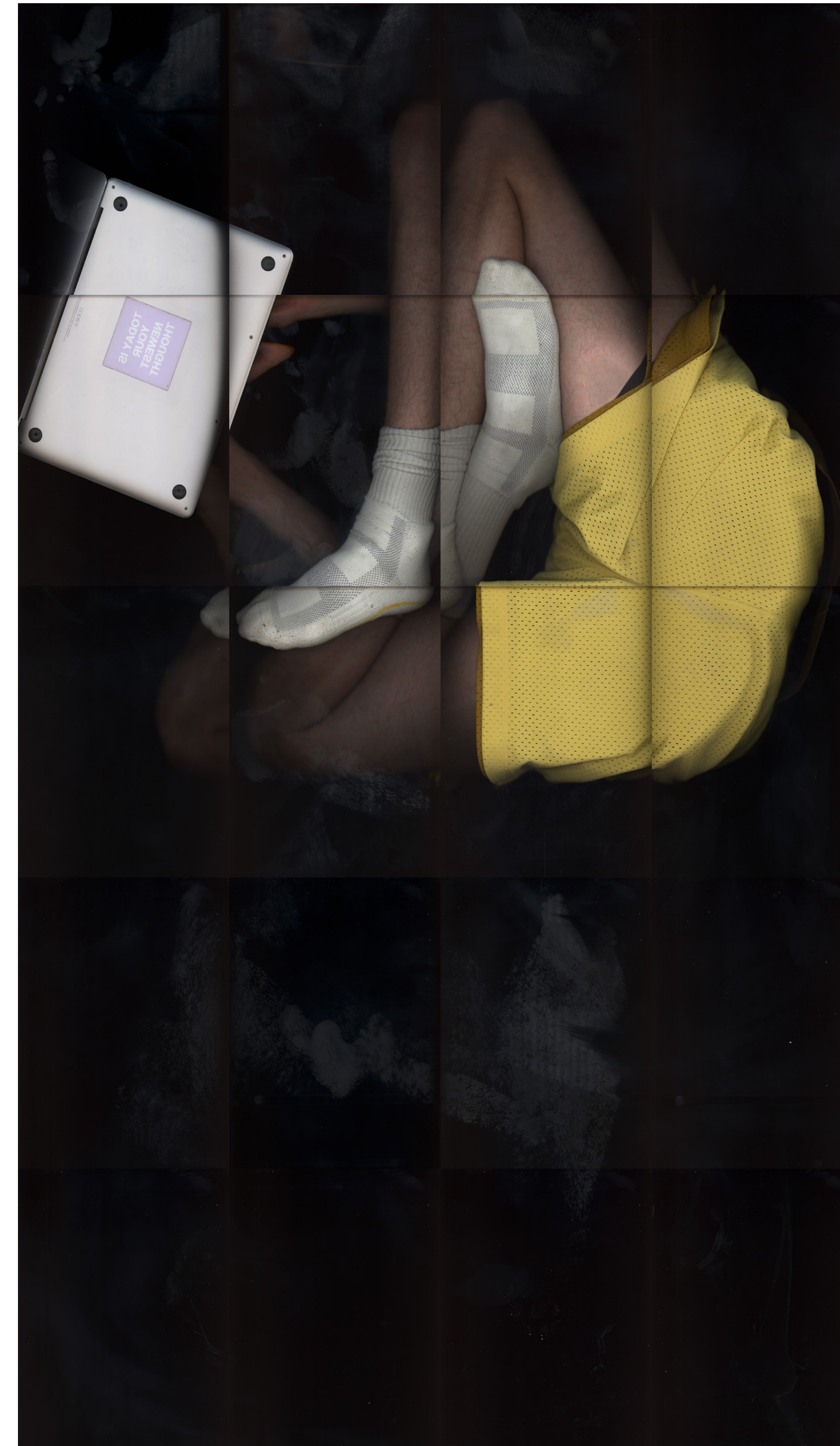

Colophon

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