**INCREDULITY
AND THE DIGIT:
NOTES ON
HOW TO POKE
JESUS, DEATH,
FAKES AND THE
DIGITAL**

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Caravaggio's "The Incredulity of Saint Thomas" is composed around disbelief. In this painting the essence of disbelief is captured by the gesture of the poke. Saint Thomas pokes Christ, incredulous about his resurrection. For Saint Thomas—a doubting Thomas—the poke does away with the illusion of Christ, the mere possibility of Christ replaced by the direct and personal sensory experience of touch. This digit—that poke—supports him as a real presence. The physical interaction affirms the material presence of life in what would otherwise be assumed dead or fake.

Many people are likely familiar with the motif of poking the dead, usually with a stick. Unfortunate YouTube videos abound to confirm the universality of this gesture today. Saint Thomas followed this same common logic: if you poke it and it reacts it is alive, it is real. If you poke it and you meet no resistance, no reaction, no response: it is dead and/or fake.

The Dead

What is dead simply won't respond. Though, it will fall over. Falling over is not evidence of life, but a parasitic 'piggy-backing' on the bit of life expelled by a poke or similar point of contact. What is dead receives a poke with the feeling of being uncomfortably stiff or strangely forgiving (squishy) to the touch—as decomposition does. The exception to this is dead technology.

Dead technology may be as hard as ever because its software is not exposed. Digital technology is frequently assumed to be 'digital' because of the Boolean algebra, colloquially known as binary code, which constitutes its software. Digital technology is also 'digital' because we interface with it through the digit or finger. It no longer works primarily by grasping and physically working elements, as in analog technology, instead operating through the poking of buttons. This causes a cascade of computation within digital software, not unlike the original reason for naming the finger 'digit.' During the medieval period, Oxford Dictionaries tells us, the finger gained the name of 'digit' because of "the practice of counting on the fingers." This highlights a long-standing cyclical relationship between calculation and the body specifically revolving around the finger. In this way, the finger is a significant gateway for the embodiment of knowledge through a process of touching, pushing and poking thinking into computational action. Dead technology is frustrating because it stops this computational before it even starts. A phone with a dead battery will not light up. It will not acknowledge your need for attention. It does not care; it is dead. The dead will not invite you to poke them. This was Saint Thomas' first clue that Jesus had been resurrected; he was invited to poke. It is you, Saint Thomas and digital technology users alike, who feel drawn to what is potentially dead and its rejection of you, demanding that you poke it to reap its attention in order to fill your emptiness. Everyone wants to be more important than death.

The Fake

It can be said that what is dead and what is fake are two separate things, but it is precisely this concern of what is alive, what has life, that the concept of fakery engages with. To the Western mind, what is fake is merely a duplicate or a lie. It is one step backward from not existing at all as the fake is always subordinate to the original. Cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han has noted in *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* (2017) that the copy in Western art is often viewed simply as fake and less worthy than the original. This "inexhaustible source of knowledge for Old Masters such as Raphael, Dürer, or Rubens" has been degraded by what Han calls the "cult of originality." The copy, "which is essential to the creative process," then finds itself in the background rather than as an integral part of thinking through material. 'Thinking through material' can also simply be called 'making.' To the cult of originality, the copy or fake is without the spirit of what is true and the aura of what is hand-made. Focusing on the original thus "spirits away what has been," Han says, which makes it appear as though what is original, new, and in a way alive, spontaneously appears out of nothing.

In this way, what is fake or a copy must be poked. We must nudge the suspicious into action, for if it

does not respond it has no life of its own and feeds off the life of another or it had no life to begin with. This is known as a reproduction. We re-produce the same product with cold, mechanized (anti)touch processes which produce cookie-cutter replicas on a factory line. However, this is also how babies are made. And they appear to have life...

If what is presumed to be fake or a copy does respond it can be judged on its actions and reactions. This is known as resistance. The resistance produced by a poked thing keeps it from falling over like a dummy. This suggests a kind of authenticity in which the thing that was poked because it was thought to be fake turns out to have agency of its own. The reactions of a thing being poked are telling of its authenticity. If it is authentic and genuine it will follow a logic that is appropriate to its kind: a yelp of pain, surprise, or discomfort—or maybe the sensation of weight and mass will be communicated to the one who pokes. What is poked will respond if it is authentic and alive. It will move or acknowledge you in other ways, unless it is a sibling, spouse, parent or cat.

What is fake can be poked with a finger, a stick (like the dead) or with knowledge. Knowledge prods the fake with an understanding of history, consequence and common sense. The fake may invite you to poke them but will hope you won't. If you call their bluff, this may incite a disproportionate sense of indignation. As we can see from the calm expression of Christ, he is not fake to Saint Thomas. There is no indignation in response to his poking. Christ invited the poke. But, the expression on both their faces leaves it unclear on whether a knowledge of each other ever truly penetrated.

The Real

The real is what is alive. Although what is dead is not alive it can be really dead. What makes the dead real is the dead are alive as material. They respond to the laws of physics, which are alive in the world. Physics animates the dead as much as dirt and stone. Throwing a dead phone has the same effects as throwing a live one. Saint Thomas supposedly finds Christ to be real both as material and essence. Saint Thomas also found Christ's wound to be real. His finger is really in there. Christ does not seem to mind (again, note the lack of indignation), which may mean pain is not real—but, one cannot poke pain to test its validity.

The Digital

The necessity of the poke can be found in Saint Thomas' desire to poke. It can also be found in his eyes. Saint Thomas stares blankly past the wound as well as Christ into the space beyond. This brings to mind the glazed look of the undead; Saint Thomas looks more like a zombie than the resurrected Christ. The same facial expression can be found on those emerging from the cinema, offices and basements with screens and on anyone with a smartphone. The combined expression of the face and the finger of Saint Thomas can be found consistently on digital technology users. They use their digits to poke the interfaces of digital technologies, staring past the surface to the virtual space beyond. Often this space is immersive and sometimes overwhelming due to disbelief in the face of mass information that exists beyond human comprehension. In the way of digits and dogma, this Christ is digital. He may also be technology in its Greek sense of 'art' or 'craft,' which has now been divorced from such fields by science, but the intricacies of technics is outside our purview here.

To return to the importance of the poke, it can be directly seen in the evolution of digital technology leading to the touchscreen. We now need to touch the screen in order to know what is real and alive. This is clearly something Caravaggio knew in 1601, but the rest of the Western humanities forgot after Hegel and the museum. Hegel's invention of history and its subsequent containment of culture behind glass refuses the poke. Notably, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* is displayed without glass at Sanssouci Palace—more specifically in the Sanssouci Picture Gallery but 'palace' sounds fancier. Luckily science

remembered and invented the telegraph within a decade of Hegel's death, a technology devoted to the poke. It taps out a message that lets us know it is alive, similar to On Kawara's letters.

In more recent technologies, the production of virtual reality is reminiscent of Caravaggio's 400-year-old understanding of the digit. Is it real? You must poke to find out. To be clear, though, the virtual is not real. It has the virtue of being real because it carries the force or essence of reality, but it cannot be poked. By attempting to poke the virtual we affirm the boundary of the real, both in psychological terms of our perceived reality and material terms in relation to what has been poked (if such things can be separated). Today, this boundary is usually expressed in glass, both as screens and in museums. The unnaturally smooth surface of glass ironically informs the poker of the real quality of the object. The smoothness persists beyond the death of batteries affirming the realness of the screen and differentiating it from the virtual existence of what the screen depicts. In Saint Thomas' case, he meets no glass: the smooth quality of the edge of illusion.

This should be obvious, though; a glass Christ is absurdly fragile. He wouldn't have the opportunity to turn the other cheek. If Christ had been a hologram Saint Thomas would not have met glass either, but the smooth experience of stroking air or the soft continuum of water or other materials a hologram can be projected onto (we won't even begin to get into the projection of our fantasies onto digital materials). The soft, consistent quality of such a material (or lack thereof) maintains the smooth experience of unreality and is inconsistent with the real qualities of Christ's body. The action of poking a Hologram Christ would result in no difference to the hologram. Thus, Hologram Christ cannot be dead because he does not have the quality of the real: resistance. So, he must be fake.

The lack of the real means Christ as a hologram is neither analog, which can be grasped, nor digital, which is poked. If Christ were an android, he would have a real, poke-able presence. The poking would not confirm him as a digital or virtual presence, but a real presence that is virtually Christ—but, not exactly.

The poking of Christ affirms his realness for Saint Thomas, I think. Their ambiguous expressions and religion's relationship with myth make it fairly unclear to draw an absolute reading of the state of their subjective realities. Though, it seems safe to say that Caravaggio, in his religiosity and Baroque time period, felt the poke proved something for doubting Thomas. It banishes his disbelief outside the realm of the real. To continue to doubt a poked Christ's presence would be to live in illusion. Because Saint Thomas presumably wishes to live in the real, which is why he doubts, is also precisely why he pokes: to be sure of his reality. The poke constitutes both of their realities simultaneously. "Two realities, one poke", you might say. For myself and for all of you, to affirm the reality of "The Incredulity of Saint Thomas" we must poke the painting, but, since I at least am not in Sanssouci Palace, all I touch is glass.