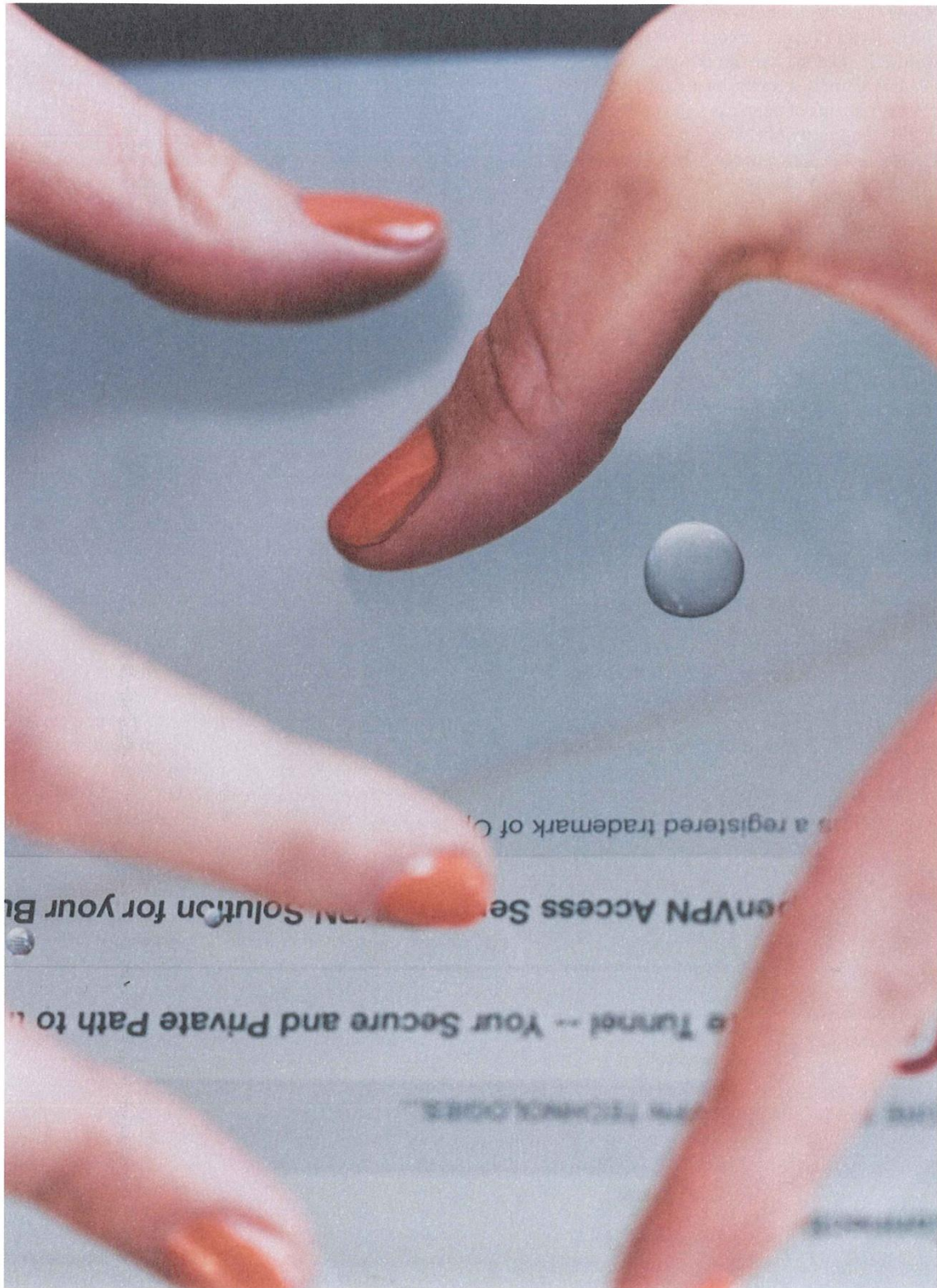


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Beheaded by iOS:  
filter bubbles and  
the feminine touch  
in the photography of  
Josephine Pryde. By  
Lili Owen Rowlands



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"Only that which can be switched can be," said the German theorist Friedrich Kittler. In other words, if you don't have an iPhone, you're not just living under a rock; you are not even living. "What remains of people is what media can store and communicate," he wrote in his 1986 work *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*: "Media determine our situation." It is impossible to understand digital media because digital technologies structure our very understanding. The internet encloses us in its ontology – we are locked inside the echo chamber of the operating system.

The bodiless hands with futuristic manicures holding iPhones, iPads and touch-sensitive objects in Josephine Pryde's recent photographic series gesture towards Kittler's posthumanism. The touchscreen and, ergo, the hand increasingly mediate our experience; the fingertip a goodbye kiss that passes from body to technology. Each of Pryde's images, shot in creepily high definition, behead the iPad user and make the silicon chip the subject of her "portraits", the human head replaced by the glossy screen. Pryde's photographs make real Kittler's notion that we are the subjects of gadgets, that the human is not entirely resistant to technology. The typewriter, the gramophone, the MacBook and the iPad exercise control over us: "It is we who adapt to the machine. The machine does not adapt to us."

Pryde's hands were part of two recent solo exhibitions: *These Are Just Things I Say, They Are Not My Opinions* at the Arnolfini in Bristol, and *lapses in Thinking By the person i Am* at CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco and the ICA in Philadelphia. Other works in the exhibition show hands holding gifts given to Pryde by her art dealers, hands gesturing towards the torso or the heart and a miniature train that carries visitors through the gallery. The exhibitions are a continuation of her distinctive earlier photographic work that used luminous close-ups to summon the aesthetic of advertising and stock photography.

The scale of Pryde's hands series is significant. The 32 photographs reference the ubiquity and banality of our touch-mediated interactions, which with the slightest whisper of fingerprint contact open onto endless landscapes of internet. But the specious endlessness offered up by the internet is in reality ever-enclosed. We are no longer merely the subjects of gadgets in the Kittlerian sense: we are the pawns of algorithms. Pryde's series

is certainly less pessimistic than Kittler's theories might suggest – although posthumanism and pessimism are not synonymous. The photographs of empty hands pointing towards the chest were a starting point for the series and are titled using variations on the phrase "*für mich*" (for me). Prefacing opinions with "for me" has become a symptom of our fluctuating sense of self and identity. What does the world look like when it is always structured in the first person?

Increased emphasis on the "personal" in the realm of technology entails a further closing in of our ontologies. Upworthy CEO Eli Pariser argues that algorithmic editing of our media creates a filter bubble. Tailored to who you follow and what you look at, the internet "is showing us what it thinks we want to see" as online media increasingly turn to "personalised" services. And the false consciousness these filter bubbles create has concrete epistemological consequences. To "explore" on Instagram is to bob between images taken by users with the same taste in post-internet art or Korean food. The "personal" is endlessly repeated in the filter bubble and tinged in the same Nashville, Lo-Fi and Sierra filters.

Pryde's hands have brightly coloured nails with a lacquered sheen – a glass-like surface that invites touch and invokes the materiality of screen technologies. If hands have come to represent handiwork, Pryde shows us the new "craft" and provides an ironic rebuttal to the recent nostalgia for the artisanal and the handmade. Her photographs recall the early iPhone advertisements: disembodied pink hands clutching, dabbing, swiping. These gestures seem to parody Erving Goffman's theory of the "feminine touch" in advertising, whereby women's hands merely caress the surface of objects, are passive and servile, while men's are depicted in white-knuckle grasps, holding, taking, owning.

If advertising makes us desire, Pryde asks, do you desire *this*? Do you desire the total transfer of human agency onto technology? Does the iPhone now metonymically represent the head and its opinions? She asks all this while trapped inside Kittler's paradox because nothing can be said about the media without the use of the media: "The dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and its illusions." Pryde uses the macro lens to comment on the touch screen, and I use the keyboard to comment on that in turn. \$



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