

Ed Atkins's dildonic hand

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In Ed Atkins's gallery film, *Even Pricks* (2013), we are presented with a digitally rendered hand that mimics and modifies the thumbs-up gesture performed by one of today's most prominent screen hands – the Facebook 'like' icon. Throughout his film, Atkins manipulates the rendered hand, especially its thumb, so that the 'like' is recast by association. He draws the hand into a series of penetrative couplings with bodily orifices (eyes, ears, nose) and with materials rich in metaphorical association (water, clouds, blue paint). He rotates the rendered hand so the thumbs-up becomes a thumbs-down; inflates and deflates the thumb; and metonymically recasts the hand as various physiological and prosthetic organs, from the umbilical cord to the dildo.

I argue that, through such mirroring and recasting of the 'like', the rendered hand in *Even Pricks* presents an 'organology' of human existence in platform society in order to highlight and challenge the widescale 'ill-being' emerging in this context. Organology, or 'general organology', is a framework developed by the late French philosopher Bernard Stiegler to describe how human existence is constituted through ongoing immanent relations between bodily 'physiological organs', technical or 'artifactual organs' and 'social organizations'.¹ As Stiegler puts it,

general organology defines the rules for analysing, thinking and prescribing human facts at three parallel but indissociable levels of the psychosomatic, which is the endosomatic level, the artifactual, which is the exosomatic level, and the social, which is the organizational level.²

Stiegler provides a broad range of examples of the 'organs' comprising organology. 'Psychosomatic organs' include the 'brain, hand, eyes,

¹ Bernard Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures 2016–2019*, ed. and trans. Daniel Ross (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020), pp. 37–38. See also Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 34.

² Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, pp. 37–38.

- 3 Stiegler, *For a New Critique*, p. 34.
- 4 Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume I: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 5.
- 5 Stiegler, *For a New Critique*, p. 34.
- 6 Bernard Stiegler, 'Elements for a general organology', *Derrida Today*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2020), p. 78.
- 7 Ian James 'Technics and cerebrality', in Christina Howells and Gerald Moore (eds), *Stiegler and Technics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 70.
- 8 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, Volume I: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 113–14, 145. Ian James points out that Stiegler repeats (with important differences) the privileging of the hand above the brain in Heidegger's theory of human evolution and technology. Both authors, James notes, appeal to the hand to displace the metaphysical conception of the brain as 'command centre' of human subjectivity. See James, 'Technics and cerebrality', pp. 72, 80.
- 9 Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p. 12.
- 10 See, for example, Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society, Volume I: The Future of Work*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 7; Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), pp. 7, 18.

touch, tongue, genital organs, viscera, neuro-vegetative system', amongst others.³ 'Artifactual organs' can be 'technologies, objects, tools, instruments [and] artworks'.⁴ 'Social organizations' encompass a wide array of groupings ranging from 'families' and 'clans' to educational and political institutions, social systems, societies and international organizations.⁵ By situating the body within this broader plane of relations, organology facilitates an examination of how diegetic figures – including screen hands – express the proximate and expansive processes through which technics and psychosomatic life transform one another across time.

Stiegler did not use the phrase 'general organology' until 2003, more than ten years after the publication of his influential *Technics and Time, Volume I: The Fault of Epimetheus*.⁶ Yet, as Ian James notes, organology continues an 'interrogation of organs' found 'at the very centre of [Stiegler's] initial philosophical work'.⁷ The hand, in fact, has a foundational role in Stiegler's historical account of the organological emergence of the human in *Technics and Time, Volume I*. Stiegler argues, drawing on the anthropology of André Leroi-Gourhan, that it was the hand's involvement in the use of the first tools that led to the expansion of the human cerebral cortex and development of self-consciousness.⁸ Atkins's rendered hand situates 21st-century human existence similarly as immanently shaped by digital technologies and the social organization of platform society. The hand, an organ sometimes marshalled to set the human apart from the wider environment, instead expresses here the human's becoming with artefacts and organizations.

In keeping with Stiegler's broader pharmacological approach to conceptualizing technology, organology can have poisonous or curative effects. Stiegler writes that 'it is always possible for the arrangements between [...] psychosomatic and artifactual organs to become toxic and destructive for the organic organs, and hence also for the body within which they dwell'.⁹ He cautions that digital organology tends towards toxicity in its present configuration for a number of reasons: it is characterized by the privileging of algorithmic calculation above other forms of 'decision-making'; it has a harmful impact on noetic (intellectual and spiritual) life and subjective singularity; and it exerts a 'disintegrating' effect on the social, including via the transformation of 'sharing' from an action that binds social groups together into a mechanism for capitalistic exploitation.¹⁰

Even Pricks presents a comparable outlook in marshalling the rendered hand to point to, and sometimes contest, different forms of toxic 'ill-being' animating platform society. I use 'ill-being' as an umbrella term to encompass widescale experiences of exploitation, conditioning, misery and exhaustion that have a damaging impact on sensory and reflective life. Specifically, I discuss how the rendered hand's penetrative couplings evoke the sensorial intrusion and emotional

- 11 This essay relates to a book I am currently completing, *Rendered Bodies: Film Art and Expanded Organology*, which examines the different meanings tied to the digitally animated figures of contemporary artists' film. These figures have been given different names by different artists. My choice of 'rendered body', and 'rendered hand' is influenced by Ed Atkins's *Safe Conduct* (2016), which presents the digitally animated figure through an expansive etymology of 'rendering'.
- 12 José Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 49.
- 13 Ibid. Shoshana Zuboff describes the 'like' button similarly as a 'powerful supply mechanism' through which user behaviour is 'continuously captured and transmitted', furnishing predictive computing. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2018), p. 159.
- 14 Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, p. 41; Stiegler, *Automatic Society*, p. 22.
- 15 As Annie Ring argues, the 'cloud' is problematic because it gives the impression of weightlessness and so distracts from the 'material impact' of data storage. On this point, and on other problematic metaphors of the digital, see Annie Ring, 'The material impact of "the digital"' in counter-archival video works by Hito Steyerl and Brenda Lien', in Annie Ring and Lucy Bollington (eds), *Citational Media: Counter-Archives and Technology in Contemporary Visual Culture* (Oxford: Legenda, forthcoming 2024), p. 133.
- 16 On water's metaphorical relationship to capitalism and the digital, see Cadence Kinsey, 'Fluid dynamics: on the representation of water and discourses of the digital', *Art History*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2020), pp. 501–37.

manipulation unfolding through the 'like'; how the thumb's deflations and downward turns symptomatize the rising depression and libidinal exhaustion occurring with neoliberal, computer-based labour; and how Atkins's transformation of the rendered hand into a conceptual 'dildo' parodies and decentres the androcentric dynamics of platform culture. I conclude by arguing that in connecting Facebook's 'like' with these different layers of ill-being, *Even Pricks'* organology has both diagnostic *and curative* potential. For in opening onto these associative meanings, the rendered hand transforms the 'like' from an exploitative organ of the data economy into an expansive conceptual site through which reflections on contemporary existence unfold.¹¹ Through this transformation, Atkins invites spectators to relate in new sensorial and reflective ways to an otherwise pernicious screen hand, one with which they most likely have extensive encounters.

The 'like' icon was first introduced by Facebook in 2009, and was quickly adopted across digital platforms in the following months. Its key significance rests in its relation to data capture; it is an indicator of the human user's immersion in vast networks of data collection and redeployment. For José Van Dijck, the 'massive adoption' of Facebook's 'like' across websites 'epitomizes [a] profound modification of a social norm', because this button 'turned personal data sharing by third parties into an accepted practice'.¹² All data collected through the internet's various 'likes' are funnelled back to Facebook, regardless of whether or not users have Facebook accounts.¹³ The 'like' is thus also symbolic of what Stiegler refers to as the algorithmic 'reduc[ti]on' of the social and of subjective singularity 'to the calculable'.¹⁴

Even Pricks' rendered hand establishes this data economy through the thumb's couplings with materials metaphorically representing the digital. The thumb rotates in clouds – 'the cloud' being a persistent and much criticized metaphor for data storage.¹⁵ Atkins also dips the rendered thumb in water, a frequently used metaphor for both digital *and* capital 'flows', so acting out the dynamics underpinning what Shoshana Zuboff calls 'surveillance capitalism' – a profit model functioning through the collection and re-use of user data at scale.¹⁶ *Even Pricks* highlights the ill-being animating this computational economy by having the rendered hand perform intrusive couplings with bodily orifices.

Metaphors of user data being intrusively surveilled are evident when the hand in *Even Pricks* acts as an extension of the user's body and couples with eyes and ears, orifices functioning as anthropomorphized organs of the platform's electronic 'body'. In one instance, a large rendered head looms, godlike, above the smaller upturned thumb, which prods its eye. Conversely, if one reads the thumb in this example as an electronic organ of the platform, and the orifices as representing the user's physiological organs (Atkins's hand invites these multiple identifications), this coupling evokes informational onslaught upon the

17 On sensory information and the body image, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), especially pp. 35–36, 74–75.

18 Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*, p. 4.

Fig. 1. Still from Ed Atkins, *Even Pricks* (2013). 7 min, 32 sec. © Ed Atkins. Courtesy of the artist, dépendance, Brussels, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet, London, and Gladstone Gallery.

user's sensory pathways. Given our embodied knowledge of the sensitivity of the eyes when poked and prodded, this coupling registers as injurious, while also perhaps suggesting the user's desire to 'poke their eyes out' at sensory overload.

Another example of sensory intrusion occurs with the coupling of thumb and nostril at the film's start, a coupling that even produces a nosebleed. Red blood, however, is here replaced by Facebook's blue hue, suggesting an electronic body that 'bleeds' data when prodded, or a hand stained with information following its encounter with the platform. The soundscape accompanying such couplings adds to the prevailing discomfort. Staccato clapping and snapping, performed by Atkins's off-screen hands, and audio close-ups of the sound of the tongue smacking against the roof of the mouth, are relentlessly jarring. As piercing sonic equivalents of the penetrating 'like', these sounds resonate with the 'prick' of the film's title in their intrusive prodding of spectators' eardrums.

The rendered hand's couplings present an organology of human existence in platform society. Biologically speaking, the sense organs collect 'information' from inside and outside our bodies, registering this sensory data in our brains to produce our psychic conception (morphology) of our bodies.¹⁷ The thumb's couplings with sensory orifices in *Even Pricks* therefore bridge two types of 'information', biological and digital, while suggesting a reshaping of the former by the latter that has profound implications for one's experience of embodiment. This resonates with Steigler's organological claim that the sense organs are not 'static', as is often believed, but rather 'subjected to a never-ending process of defunctionalization and refunctionalization which is tied precisely to the evolution of artefacts'.¹⁸

In *Even Pricks*, such co-evolution is evoked by the natal associations created by the rendered thumb's insertion into a belly button (figure 1). Here, physiological and technical organs converge in the social



Fig. 2. Still from Ed Atkins, *Even Pricks* (2013). 7 min, 32 sec. © Ed Atkins. Courtesy of the artist, dépendance, Brussels, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet, London, and Gladstone Gallery.



organization of the platform to ‘birth’ a body immanently shaped by networked distributions of agency and affect. The metonymic slippage of thumb into umbilical cord suggests a parental information route connecting platform to user in which connotations of nourishment conceal extractivist data routes. This coupling creates the defunctionalizing and refunctionalizing feedback loops of dopamine reward systems. Ill-being is found in the implication that the organology being evolved is one in which the constant connectivity promoted by the social organization of the platform facilitates widescale exploitation.

Emotional manipulation is another layer of ill-being animating platform society. In 2012, Facebook implemented a study of ‘emotional contagion’ without its users’ awareness or consent.¹⁹ The study examined whether subliminal exposure to positive posts would mean users exhibited ‘positive’ posting, and vice versa with negative posts. The results confirmed Facebook’s theory about emotional contagion, for the mood that users exhibited in their posts mirrored the mood displayed on their newsfeeds.²⁰ This study is redolent of Stiegler’s claim that ‘sharing’ is today transformed from something that unifies social groups into a vehicle of digital manipulation – into a harming ‘*of those who share by means of what they share*’.²¹ Emotional conditioning is implied when the wrist of *Even Pricks*’ rendered hand is repeatedly twisted so it takes the shape of a strung-out, elongated corkscrew (figure 2). Assuming a plasticine-like texture, the twisted wrist recalls the ‘moulding’ of analogue material in order to convey emotional conditioning online. It also prompts the hand to spin repeatedly, so the thumbs-up recurrently becomes a thumbs-down, symptomatizing a frequent rotation of mood propelled by an actant (the algorithmic conditioning) not otherwise visible on screen.²² Emotional experience becomes disoriented – ‘twisted’, as it were – in the toxic organology of platform society.

19 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, p. 301.

20 As Zuboff summarizes, ‘whether or not users felt happier or sadder, the tone of their expression changed to reflect their newsfeed’. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, p. 301.

21 Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, p. 18 (emphasis in original).

22 Reasons for ‘liking’ are, of course, manifold, and the complexity of human emotion cannot be captured in an emoji; this ‘measurement’ assumption is an operating error of affective computing. Yet, in the contemporary British cultural context in which Atkins works, the thumbs-up largely denotes ‘positive’ affects and the thumbs-down ‘negative’ affects. Atkins relies on these expressive associations to remap the ‘like’ as a destabilized emotional Ferris Wheel, repeatedly turned by revolving affects.

- 23 Steve Sullivan, *Encyclopaedia of Great Popular Song Recordings, Volume 1* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2013), pp. 135–37.
- 24 Trebor Scholz (ed.), *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.
- 25 Wendy Brown situates the 'like' similarly as forming part of a common capitalistic logic uniting leisure and labour, when writing that 'whether through social media "followers", "likes", and "retweets", through rankings and ratings for every activity and domain, or through more directly monetized practices, the pursuit of education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption, and more are increasingly configured as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self's future value'. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 34.
- 26 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2009), pp. 76, 89.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 29 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

Even Pricks also has the rendered hand express forms of ill-being associated with computer-based neoliberal labour: namely a rise in depression and exhaustion and a decline in desire. Atkins's screen text and background settings invoke the waning borders between work and leisure. The film repeats the textual slogan 'just arrived home from work', yet spectators see only a series of standardized hotel rooms and advertisements for generic 'pre-furnished' one-bedroom apartments. These are connected through the soundtrack to The Eagles' 1977 rock song 'Hotel California', which expresses themes of 'burnout', 'claustrophobia', 'decadence' and the descent of dream into nightmare in an earlier (post-1969) US context.²³ Atkins recasts 'Hotel California' so that it designates the wide reach of Silicon Valley technology companies and computational capitalism. The implication of Atkins's liminal hotel imagery is that in today's epoch of techno-capitalism, one never really arrives 'home' from work. Portable technologies and amplified connectivity mean labour is not limited to a specified place or time. The monetization of user data also means that digital leisure activities effectively become forms of work, creating a situation described by Trebor Scholz as 'playbour'.²⁴ It is worth mentioning too that today the 'like' icon itself symptomatizes such a decline in the differences between leisure and labour, appearing as it does across social media and digital work platforms alike, measuring 'achievement' in terms of popularity and/or productivity.²⁵

Atkins highlights Franco Berardi's *The Soul at Work* as influential on *Even Pricks*. Berardi's book discusses the organization of computer-based 'immaterial' labour and its physiological and technical characteristics. It advances, in other words, an *organology* of computer-based work. Berardi observes that while, ergonomically speaking, much computer-based immaterial labour entails comparable desk-based typing, such work is ever more specialized, leading to social isolation, heightened investments of individual creative energy in work and the neoliberal tendency to perceive others as competitors.²⁶ Neoliberal computer-based work thus produces 'a loss of eros in everyday life' in the diminishment of pleasurable exchanges with others.²⁷ Declining eros, Berardi suggests, is also a product of the standardization of expression under computation.²⁸ In its original platformed context, the 'like' emblemizes such communicative contraction, reducing responsive complexity to a quick, standardized expression – a click. Berardi additionally highlights rising depression as a critical consequence of the neoliberal organization of computer-based labour.

The forms of ill-being Berardi discusses recur in contemporary philosophical engagements with the techno-capitalistic present. Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* suggests neoliberalism has ushered in an 'achievement society' animated by perpetual self-exploitation and positivity, all to the detriment of our relationship with others.²⁹ Depression and burnout, Han argues, are the exhausted consequence of the ceaseless exploitation of the productive, achieving

30 Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

31 Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*.

32 Ibid.

33 Stiegler, *Automatic Society*.

self. In *The Agony of Eros*, Han points to declining eroticism as another consequence of such self-exploitative processes.³⁰ In *Symbolic Misery, Volume I*, Stiegler argues similarly that ‘ill-being’, in the form of rising misery and declining desire, is the affective consequence of the organology of ‘hyper-industrial’ society.³¹ Consumer capitalism’s ‘aesthetic conditioning’ of the senses and its related emphasis on ‘synchronization’ bring about a loss of meaningful participation in symbolic production and sensory life, creating ‘immiseration’.³² And in *Automatic Society, Volume I*, Stiegler describes a flattening out of energy and of subjective singularity under calculative computing where ‘immiseration’ becomes ‘entropy’.³³

The rendered hand of *Even Pricks* expresses comparable forms of ill-being. Declining eros and depression register when the hand metonymically resembles the (flaccid) penis or, as I argue shortly, the dildo. Images of the thumb becoming engorged or being stroked are evocative of screen-based sexuality and libidinal channelling. Yet the film’s rendered thumb also undergoes detumescence and repeated downward turns. Such images convey eventual libidinal exhaustion and the feeling of being deflated, of *being down*, following over-stressed positivity. In one example, the rendered hand assumes the position of the ‘like’ gesture but without the participation of its thumb. No longer upheld, the thumb falls downwards and resembles a punctured balloon, as if the air had been let out of neoliberal positivity and an exhausted, depressed body had been left in its wake.

Atkins therefore employs the rendered hand to evoke the misery and declining eros emerging in immanent human relationships with technology in the now undifferentiated social organizations of platformed work and leisure. Notably, he suggests in interview that such images of depression in his art often carry dissensual potential too. In the case of *Even Pricks*, this statement can be elucidated through some further context about the ‘like’. When Atkins made *Even Pricks*, no ‘dislike’ icon existed on most platforms (an exception being YouTube), meaning the most ‘convenient option’ was to click ‘like’.³⁴ Atkins argues that this sole presence of the ‘like’ is indicative of a pernicious ‘consensus economy’ grounded in the expectation of a constant positivity that effectively ‘erode[s]’ people’s ‘emotional range’.³⁵ In *Even Pricks*, Atkins critiques such behavioural consensus in sequences where the rendered human hand mirrors the hand of an anthropomorphized ape, a hand that similarly performs the thumbs-up gesture of the ‘like’. Atkins uses silhouetting to merge these human and ape hands, momentarily conflating them. Such mirroring and convergence introduce a metaphoric of copying (‘aping’) into the film’s associative poetics, an emulation that speaks to the affective and communicative synchronization or ‘consensus’ encouraged by algorithmic ‘behavioural herding’ in the social organization of the platform.³⁶

34 See ‘Ed Atkins: Interview with Anna McNay’, 1 August 2014, <<https://vimeo.com/103679862>> accessed 21 September 2024.

35 Ibid. See also Ed Atkins, ‘Under the Influence: Ed Atkins in conversation with Beatrix Ruf’, in *Ed Atkins* (Zurich: JRP|Ringer, 2014), p. 120. Atkins’s observations here resonate with Han’s contention that ‘the general consensus of the society of positivity is the “Like”’: Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 7.

36 See Atkins, ‘Under the Influence’, pp. 120–21. On behavioural herding, see Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

- 37 Atkins, 'Under the Influence', pp. 120–21.
- 38 Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 34.
- 39 See Ed Atkins and Matthew De Abaitua, 'Head space', *Frieze*, no. 165 (2014), <<https://www.frieze.com/article/head-space>> accessed 21 September 2024.
- 40 White writes, for example, 'Facebook's reference to white hands in shirt cuffs, blue borders [...] associate the site with men and masculinity and script participants as white-collar and white men'. Michele White, 'Touching feeling hands: gender, race and digital devices', *Flow Journal*, 7 December 2022, <<https://www.flowjournal.org/2022/12/touching-feeling-hands/>> accessed 21 September 2024.
- 41 Judith Butler, 'The lesbian phallus and the morphological imaginary', in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Even Pricks' deflated thumb undercuts such consensus. The rendered hand becomes what Atkins describes in an interview as 'the obverse of those kind of affirmative, determined selves that present in "productive" social media', for "to depress" and to be "depressed" disrupt the 'never-ending flat homogeneity' of neoliberal positivity.³⁷ The organology performed by the deflated thumb is therefore not only *diagnostic* in its evocation of ill-being; the hand's expression of depression and exhaustion is also dissensual in its upsetting of the consensus economy that coheres in the 'like'.

The organology of *Even Pricks* additionally opens up questions of gendered power in platform society. As I have shown, the rendered thumb mimics the penis in shape and movement. The prominence of this genital organ in digital culture is worth noting. Chatroulette's 'penis problem' (as Hito Steyerl terms it) and the phenomenon of 'dick pics' demonstrate the recurrence of images of the penis shot in close-up that circulate through digital networks.³⁸ Moreover, the penetrative motions of *Even Pricks*' hand recall 'phallic power', an impression Atkins confirms in interview when describing the thumb as 'the brutish digit: the penetrative phallus'.³⁹ Gendered power dynamics, and the ill-being they produce, remain urgent concerns in digital studies. Such dynamics intersect with Facebook's own origin story, for the site began as a place where male college students could rate the attractiveness of their female colleagues. Michele White additionally argues that the visual design of Facebook's 'like', including the employment of a blue background and shirt cuff, codes participants as male; that this icon is marked by an implicit androcentrism.⁴⁰

However, Atkins's use of the thumb *also complicates* 'phallic power'. Rather than presenting an organology of platform society that perpetuates phallogentrism, I argue below that the rendered hand becomes *dildonic*. The hand decentres the very phallic power it sometimes recalls, while deterritorializing the penis and materializing the sexed body as plastic and organologically constituted. I advance this claim by highlighting the resonances between Atkins's rendered hand and queer and trans critiques of the psychoanalytical concept of the phallus.

Judith Butler argues in 'The lesbian phallus and the morphological imaginary' that Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan open important pathways of corporeal transferability and plasticity on the level of the body image, but ultimately shut down these pathways when establishing the phallus.⁴¹ This foreclosure is problematic, Butler writes, because it generates exclusions that limit the possibilities for the ways bodies are materialized. Butler suggests that Freud's 'On narcissism', for example, evokes a 'metonymic slide' between body parts in its mapping of 'erotogenicity', anxiety and neurosis, yet they note that Freud '[installs] the phallus [...] as an "origin" precisely to suppress the ambivalence

42 Ibid., p. 61. See also Sigmund Freud, 'On narcissism: an introduction' (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961).

43 Butler, 'The lesbian phallus and the morphological imaginary', p. 82. See also Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

44 Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 66.

45 Ibid., p. 71. According to the countersexual thesis, 'all is dildo. Even the penis', and 'all becomes orifice', for fantasies of organic 'centres' are fully undercut. Ibid., pp. 66, 71.

46 Ibid., p. 9.

produced in the course of that slide'.⁴² Butler observes a similar foreclosure in Lacan. Lacan's influential 'The mirror stage in the formulation of the "I"' connects the phallus with the transition away from the body in pieces (experienced by the infant prior to the mirror stage) and towards the fictitious sense of the 'whole body' registered in the Gestalt. Yet Butler contends that Lacan problematically assumes the phallus in advance of this transformation, that the phallus is 'already in play in the very description of the body in pieces before the mirror; as a result, the phallus governs the description of its own genesis and, accordingly, wards off a genealogy that might confer on it a derivative or projected character', while also warding off other possibilities for bodily materialization.⁴³ Against such anticipatory foreclosures, Butler avers that recuperating corporeal transferability and anatomical slippage is key to destabilizing psychoanalysis's privileging of the phallus and to forging more inclusive models for embodied existence and sexuality.

Atkins's thumb foregrounds such corporeal transferability. As discussed, the hand slides metonymically between body parts (hand, umbilical cord, genitalia) and bodies (user's body, platform's electronic body, ape's body). The film's metonymic slide even unspools beyond the body to echo in the background setting, where holes erupt suddenly as craters in beds and floors, recalling the orifices that the screen hand penetrates. The film's rendered body is also decidedly 'in pieces', the mismatched angles and sizes of the screened body parts mean that they cannot be sutured together within a corporeal whole. The phallus implied but unfastened by the upturned thumb therefore never establishes a (fictitious) reflection of a whole body; it is divested of this organizational power. The phallus's lack of governance is coded into the film's title too. For 'prick' can refer to the penis or phallus, but it also has other meanings, such as the making of a small, injurious hole. Such slippery multivalence means Atkins's titular 'prick' never fully arrests corporeal meaning, for it does not pin down the thumb's metonymic relation to the penis or phallus too tightly, leaving space for other associations and anatomical slides to come into play.

Corporeal transferability and plasticity are also important to Paul B. Preciado's concept of the dildo. The dildo demarcates 'a shift' away from 'sexual naturalism' and towards 'conceptual countersex': a movement from a heterocentric understanding of sexuality that attempts to pass itself off as 'natural' (but is ideological) towards an approach to sexuality emphasizing corporeal plasticity, prostheses and technicity.⁴⁴ In other words, the dildo offers an organological understanding of sexuality as constituted through the immanent relations between bodies, artefacts and social organizations. For reasons including shape, Preciado writes, the dildo can seem like 'an artificial substitute for the penis', but he asserts that it actually deconstructs the historical centrality of this organ, denying that centre by deterritorializing genitalia.⁴⁵ The dildo is the 'cyborg other' of the 'penis (phallus)'; its politics are 'postnaturalist' and post-identitarian.⁴⁶

47 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

The dildonic status of Atkins's screen hand registers, for example, when we watch the thumb being stroked. If we read this image literally, we encounter a *thumb* being masturbated (figure 3). This image is comparable with the diagram from Preciado's *Countersexual Manifesto* that presents a forearm being masturbated, an image representing a 'countersexual trans-lation (transfer, citation, bringing across) of the dildo onto a forearm', performed with the goal of 'subvert[ing] the sexual organs and their biopolitical reactions' by 'redesignat[ing] body parts and investing them with sensation (figure 4).⁴⁷ In both examples, a non-genital organ is libidinally invested; it becomes dildonic. Genitalia are accordingly decentred, dislodged from their normative position of sexual prominence.

Preciado, like Butler, argues that the phallus and penis are effectively one and the same in psychoanalytical theory, despite Lacan's insistence to the contrary. Yet because Freud and Lacan connect the phallus to a narrow and essentializing understanding of masculinity, Preciado adds that the phallus in fact only converges with certain penises: 'only the erect, ejaculating penis, as a productive and reproductive organ, can claim to be phallic', 'the (flaccid) penis is not yet masculine enough'.⁴⁸ The detumescence and downward turns of *Even Pricks*' rendered thumb therefore contribute to the screen hand's undercutting of phallic power. These deflations bring the hand closer to the dildo, given the dildo's historical associations with 'impotence, with alienation, with the absence of an erection, with loss of control'.⁴⁹ While Atkins's rendered hand recalls the persistence of online 'phallic power' through its penetrative motions, this hand therefore also *decentres* the phallus through its mutability, plasticity and deflation – through its organological slide towards the dildo.



Fig. 3. Still from Ed Atkins, *Even Pricks* (2013). 7 min, 32 sec. © Ed Atkins. Courtesy of the artist, dépendance, Brussels, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet, London, and Gladstone Gallery.



Fig. 4. Image from *Countersexual Manifesto* by Paul B. Preciado.

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Atkins's rendered hand therefore operates less as a self-contained or bounded corporeal figure, and more as a mutable figure of the expansive and co-constitutive interactions between humans, technical organs and platform society today. As such, *Even Pricks* provides a striking example of a contemporary screen hand that does not posit the human as somehow apart from the environment but rather expresses a complex understanding of the human's immanent and ongoing co-evolution with it. While presenting human existence in these organological terms, Atkins's rendered hand highlights and undercuts several layers of toxic ill-being unfolding at scale in platform society: the sensory intrusions and emotional manipulation of the data economy; depression and libidinal exhaustion in the context of computer-based labour and 'playbour'; and the persistence of 'phallic power' online. In so doing, Atkins's rendered hand pries open the 'like' to new sensorial and reflective meanings, so undercutting the affective and communicative standardization and the attempted bypassing of conscious reflection that surround the 'like' in its original platform context. The 'like' is therefore transformed from an organ of digital exploitation into what Atkins describes as a 'poetic kernel' from which 'metaphor' and metonymy extend like 'bindweed': an expanding hand-based poetics that at once

50 Atkins, 'Under the Influence',
p. 120.

expresses and counters the toxic digital organology symbolized by the 'like'.⁵⁰ The rendered hand accordingly invites spectators to relate in new contingent ways to the now destabilized 'like'; to respond to the 'like's' poison with expansive reflective and sensory practices that constitute something like cures.

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