

Rhea Anastas

“Language is the social dress”*

In a group of recent exhibitions and photographic series, Josephine Pryde used the body to invite visceral and cultural responses based on a physicality that exists within the photographic imagery. For works shown in “La Vie d’Artiste” (2009), the artist photographed a 24-month-old child; for “Thérapie Thank You” and “Thérapie Thank You Thank You” (both in 2010), she created figural photo-abstractions using clothing and mannequins as stand-ins; and for works shown in “Embryos and Estate Agents: L’Art de Vivre” (2011), she sourced MRI scans of a developing embryo in utero to use in a series of photomontages. In this essay I narrow in on the fact that with certain series this idea of the body, as in life’s physical part, is repeatedly conjured and carried forward to the viewer through exhibitions that extend this concern for physical presence to the staging of the works in space. Since Pryde’s art is camera-based, this presence is multiple. It attaches to corporeal objects, to the artist’s body and eye, to shooting events, and to the persons viewing. To begin with, I want to account for this basic presence of the socio-cultural body and to identify a body schema that is in large part discontinuous with the language-based models that have up to now informed the reception of Pryde’s work.

In “Thérapie Thank You” at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York, Pryde installed a group of large-scale photographs.¹ Kinetic stacks of baskets were included in the same room and swayed from ceiling hooks much like mobiles near the photographs. The photographs showcase draped Issey Miyake fabrics that Pryde has amplified through various scale shifts. Underneath these coverings are female mannequins and the view is shot close-up. We see the image from where things bend back, loosen at the edges, and lose proper form through proximity. One of the works is titled with this question or conversation fragment: *Do You Want Children?* Projections about women’s and men’s and children’s lives are stirred up like a wind. The covered mannequin we see in *Do You Want Children?* features a curve; vaguely we see it as a pregnancy, adding to the volumes already shaped by the Issey Miyake pleated and patterned textiles. Some of the photographs were shot and sequenced as diptychs, two frames mounted side-by-side and arranged as a single object. The seams are subtly visible. This is an indication of the largest size of print that the printer allowed, and yet, the seams gain by association with the fabrics and curves of the mannequin bodies.

A minor element of “Thérapie Thank You” was the press release, which contained a piece of fictional writing whose narrator is vaguely unreliable in a similar way that

* A note about the title: “Language is the social dress” comes from a 1987 book by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective (Libreria delle Donne di Milano) that reconstructs its history as a group within Italian feminism: *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (“Don’t think you have any rights”, a quotation after Simone Weil), published in English as *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis and translated by de Lauretis and Patricia Cicogna, Indiana University Press, Bloomington/Indianapolis, IN, 1990.

¹ I write about this show; however, my discussion of this body of work equally pertains to the subsequent presentation (under an extended title) at MD72, Berlin.

the mannequins of the photographs are unreliable representations of women. A female personification comes to us in a mere handful of sentences, and in an unstable position, both being apart and viewed in proximity to the work. The text suspends her in this way between the surrogate-like bodies of the mannequin photographs on view and any speculations that this character may give rise to about her role or purpose for the work or for the writer and readers of the text.

The visual juxtapositions of Pryde's photographs hang open in a dynamic space structured by socially active identifications and addresses. If models of reading Pryde's and other contemporary art as social critique have set up meaning as an uncovering of surfaces for depths within a directional pathway, a telling of the referential field, there has been an overemphasis on intellectualizing what actually rests with the viewer as disjunctive and phenomenal sequences of both cultural framings and experience.²

In 2009, for the exhibition "La Vie d'Artiste" at Richard Telles Fine Art in Los Angeles, Pryde used her own body within a live performance and for the production of a group of colour photographs and one black and white Lambda print.³ As with "Thérapie Thank You", physicality and the multiple responses to it were given primacy. The main group of photographs in the show, *I Love Music* and *Adoption (1)* through (13), exist within and gain meaning from the approximately two-year-old boy's inconsistencies and varieties of body and facial expression, rooted in his being looked at and contained (or not) and in the situation of his being with Pryde and being with the camera.

We can see a child's body in the *Adoption* series, whereas in "Thérapie Thank You", bodies are suggested by mannequins and by the narrative fragment of the press release. This difference counts for a lot, and I will use it to problematize the universal look and stable viewing position that descriptions of subjects or compositions in artworks often assume. The *Adoption* series may have been made with some degree of interest in breaching a sense of decorum in contemporary art – that is, to put an unlikely set of images whose symbolism or sentiment would seem to embody or exceed the very contained if not prohibited expressive side of things.⁴ Within *Adoption (1)* and *Adoption (10)*, a very shallow depth of field predominates. Pryde used her medium-format camera seemingly at its focal limit.⁵ As a result, the area where the image ought to be sharp is narrow. The images of the toddler become complex and hard to render or delineate as the child's presence comes to us in contrasts of light and dark, in webs of photographed hair and skin texture, and as segments of space that Pryde has arrayed between herself and the child, captured in the geometries and spatializations of the focal length of the camera.

The toddler images of "La Vie d'Artiste" were the product of a physically demanding studio session. Pryde's body would have had to move with the child to bring shape and order to her choices about the photographs. This is unlike shooting from a fixed position or tripod. There is an active interrelation that Pryde used to generate these images, an engagement with pivoting space that mirrors the child's own sense of his body, reach, and visual field. The photographing happened over two days, seemingly long periods of time for a toddler to spend in a specialized studio for photography.⁶ What could the child really know about relating to Pryde with the camera in front of her face? The camera was there as an interceding object, a focal point of attention, and a constant presence amidst the atmosphere of play, talk, and pleasure that Pryde would have had to create to make the two

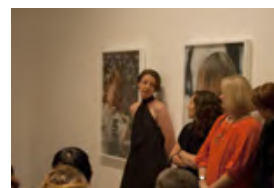
2 This type of interpretation that emphasizes social critique can be found in Isabelle Graw's review of "Hollow Inside" at Galerie Neu Berlin. 'Josephine Pryde, Galerie Neu, Berlin', *Artforum*, Vol. XLVI, No. 2 (October 2007), pp. 384–385.

3 Pryde's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, "La Vie d'Artiste", was held at Richard Telles Fine Art from October 31–December 19, 2009. See Rhea Anastas, 'Material Holes. On Josephine Pryde at Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles', *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 77 (March 2010), pp. 163–166.

4 In this idea I echo artist and theorist Tom Holert who writes about Pryde as having acted to "counteract purported sobriety" (p. 169) of minimal art with these kinds of breaches, what he refers to as ambushing the viewer (p. 167). See Tom Holert, 'Test Subjects: The Art of Josephine Pryde', *Artforum*, Vol. 50, No. 8 (April 2012), pp. 166–175.

5 Pryde used a 120 mm macro lens, a lens type chosen for close focusing and therefore the depth of field is shallower than a regular lens (email to the author, September 11, 2014).

6 Pryde furnished this fact of the duration of the photo studio shoot in comments she made on an earlier version of this essay (email to the author, September 11, 2014).



La Vie d'Artiste
Photo: Heather Rasmussen

7 Stabilizing the place of the song event within the show, elevating it to a performance or artwork status, Pryde includes two stills of the vocal performance within the installation views of the exhibition. A card printed in color was also produced for the show featuring a reproduced typed and marked-up copy of the song lyrics in French on one side and an English translation of the lyrics on the other side.

8 These were Rendition #1 through #3, alternating between the song's original French and English languages. (John Kelsey and Pryde had translated the lyrics into English.)

9 There are a few instances of performance in Pryde's work, such as *The Bear, the Duck & the Oyster* (1999), a piece that Pryde wrote, casting others to perform. A performance still can be found in *Josephine Pryde, Sere-na*, exh. cat. Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, 2001, p. 48.

10 Holert related "the precarious economy of bohemia" (p. 172) depicted in the Ferré song to Pryde's regular explorations of artistic identity in her work, in his words, "This performing of the artist and of the psychic and economic dimensions of artistry". Holert, 'Test Subjects: The Art of Josephine Pryde', p. 173.

stretches of photographing possible. (Any toys or objects that may have been there in the studio to play with are only partially visible in the photographs: coloured fabrics, clothing, and other props.)

Adoption (10) is taken from below the boy's head and chin, which look upward, and centres on a proximity to the child's face. The position suggests the child is reclining. The lying-down position connotes vulnerability. The photograph captures a heavy sense of embodiment. One eye is sharpest in the picture, with the surrounding area, and some sweaty strips of hair. The whole view of the face is a collapsed volume of undulating curves. The nostril and eye appear as delicate openings. There is greenish-blue on the left, a red area in the middle, and an intense blue in the upper right. This area at the top of the photograph is lush, as is an area on the image's lower right, surrounding the child's outstretched arm.

Adoption (1) draws the child near. It was shot while the boy's head was turned all the way to one side. His eyes look beyond where his head has taken them. Pryde seems to have photographed him from a point at which her body and the camera were extremely close to him. Most of the images in the show are scaled-up in relation to human proportions. *Adoption (1)* has a singular composition. Pryde crops one eye and freely places the boy's facial features off centre. This asymmetry suggests physical movement. The areas of real clarity of depth of field are very few within the image. At the very top of the picture is a sharpness, as the patches of hair running across the forehead are captured. A second point of focus is on one side of the boy's mouth, on the viewer's right. Within a black space where the tongue pulls away, saliva has pooled. Some detail of the very light-coloured hairs on the child's chin comes to the fore. A great deal of the rest of the image falls out of the depth of field. The colour tends toward pinks and browns, with patches of the red within the lips and background. There are expanses of the child's skin where a very transparent material effect of the emulsion and paper seemingly overtakes the exposure of the frame as an image.

On the opening night of "La Vie d'Artiste", Pryde performed before a seated audience, a shift of roles that is notable.⁷ Pryde offered vocal renditions of a 1975 song by Monaco-born singer-songwriter and anarchist Léo Ferré, *La Vie d'Artiste* (from which the exhibition gained its title).⁸ Tom Rogerson, a musician and composer with whom Pryde had arranged the song, accompanied her on a piano that had been rented and moved into the gallery for the evening.⁹ The Ferré song charts a broken love affair, making sentimental lyrical details of an artist's weak finances and the dividing up of a couple's scant possessions.¹⁰ Pryde's performance of the song addressed social frameworks of identity, and that's before any deeper reading of the Ferré material had developed.

Viewing "La Vie d'Artiste" happens in many layers. The exhibition's ideas can be held apart: fidelity and translation in renditions, theatricality and play, performing (as photographer, artist, child). A statement available in the gallery pointed to reproduction as a broad subject, but one with special import to photography and artistic practice.¹¹ Pryde's toddler images bring up questions of identity and of the individualized person or event within type or stereotype.

Tom Holert defines a "modularity" in Pryde's work, "as she delineates themes and subthemes", and his list includes the institutional meanings of art, systems of control, and biological reproduction that communicate through "dialogue with [the] museal setting."¹² Holert continues, "It is doubtful whether [Pryde's] images fully signify – can be

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, one group among Italian feminist groups that are little known in North American and Anglophone spheres, articulated a negative and radical philosophy of genealogy in their self-theory, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (1987), and in their journals and catalogues with commentary about books by women. "Instead of producing ideas through the collective modification of reality", they wrote, "people would be content to absorb an outlook on the world drawn by some feminist books. The movement would thus be reduced to a merely cultural event, and movement texts would only serve to confirm some ideas and prohibit others [...]. We do need theory, but this is to be gained by each individual woman and by all women through political practice, in which all are competent to engage and where there are no authorities and no authors."²³ In an interview Pryde memorably stated, "This word 'critical' is made to work very hard in art."²⁴ A great deal of the corporeal, sexual, and political realms rarely see description in language. The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective reflected on and articulated the frictions between moving from the symbolic to the factual or embodied layers "in flesh and blood", of representing social and political practices and of representing the relationships between women, as opposed to between women and the symbolic, in words. Pryde's is the type of practice that rigorously avoids totalizing models of argument by design, which raises questions about the discontinuity between praxis and theory - Pryde's as well as mine as the writer of this essay. Does constructing this argument about a type of non-argument practice betray the work? Can one write from inside this contradiction?

23 'Writers and Readers' by the Catalogue Editorial Collective of the Women's Bookshop, edited and introduced by Rosalind Delmar, *Red Letters*, Milan, No. 9, (n. d., circa 1978), p. 20.

24 Sabeth Buchmann and Josephine Pryde, 'The Desire to Desire: A Conversation Between Sabeth Buchmann and Josephine Pryde', in *Josephine Pryde. Valerie*, exh. cat. Secession, Vienna, 2004, p. 42.

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