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Richard Whitby, "Richard Whitby in conversation with Ed Atkins," *Map Magazine*, July 10, 2011

MAP

Ed Atkins

Q&A by Richard Whitby

Richard Whitby: Can we talk about what it means to be 'emotive'? Your films don't have characters or narrative in the conventional sense, but the process of making the work is always evident within the drama. A striking moment in your recent film 'Death Mask III', 2011, is when you use the lens cap to occlude the lens. It's a deathly moment: the image is hooded, killed.

Ed Atkins: You're right—the experience of making is heavily inscribed within my work. The scene you describe is also the most significantly noise-based part of the film. At that moment, sound is reduced to a very bassy death growl. I want people to feel certain things, but I also want to create an awkward understanding of those feelings.

Whitby: You use the camera or the lens as a protagonist, an embodied character who is subjected to events within the realm of the image.

Atkins: To a certain extent, this is to counteract the 'incorporeal' digital. The physicality of the camera and the nature of me fucking around with it—these are bodily things.

Whitby: The video images or footage produced for your films are similar to those featured in instructional videos, like the stock footage that plays in a shop window, for instance. In that context, there is a highly generic quality to the subjects photographed, a lack of specific narrative content, which foregrounds the technology you use. Your films also pivot around a gap or absence; when you shoot the back of someone's head, you're only getting the edge of something.

Atkins: In the fumbling intimacies between you and someone else, there's a collapse of power. There's a risk involved that allows you to be nervous, but also project yourself into the scenario. So the back of a head, for example, is somehow easier to be 'close'. There's something incredibly othering about recognising someone; there is a huge schism between you and another

GLADSTONE GALLERY

person. I'm interested in deferring that recognition—I might insert the sound of breathing or a snippet of recorded conversation in the sound-track on top of the image. Also, I think HD can approach banality because it seems too real. I've been trying to marry up HD with corpses. Being with a corpse produces a hypersensual scenario. It's loaded to the point of excess: every physical aspect becomes more heavy, more present. And subjects shot in HD often appear too real; it collapses diegesis.

Whitby: Your writing and films possess a seductive completeness to them—a strong diegesis. Structures are apparent in unusual ways: the film script might be made into a written work rather than a precursor to a film, for instance, or there is the manipulation of subtitle bars that become strips of colour rather than areas of translation. Yet, like a genre film, one accepts these unlikely structures very quickly.

Atkins: I don't want it to be difficult, though. I want legibility, fluency. I suppose that's part of having a 'rule' base. For example, when I edit the image I always include an accompanying sound. Fluency is a better place to start than resistance or revolt; otherwise there's nowhere to go. Rupture only seems possible, noticeable, within something apparently legible.

Whitby: There's certainly nothing 'punk' about what you do. Is there another category or affiliation that is instructive here?

Atkins: Well, maybe Romanticism has a place in my work. I am not necessarily melancholic, but the work I like is both incredibly arch and desperately sad—like Godard. I find the exposure of structure moving. There's a weird balance between honesty and archness.

Whitby: The feeling is represented. It's spoken about, not induced. You are not being duped.

Atkins: The work I like is also absolutely in love with the history and possibilities of a medium. I admire the risk of emoting but at the same time desperately apologising for it. There is a fakery so conspicuous that it's obvious there is something behind it; a timid, worried thing carried underneath it.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Whitby: Bodily traces are infused in your films. The little salival mouth-noises you record and add to the films seem to cling to the equipment of filmmaking, like grime on a keyboard. This is incongruous with the cleanness and sharpness associated with the HD medium and the bucolic footage you often use.

Atkins: Do you know Spike Jones, the American radio guy from the 1940s? His style was to use constant, violent interjection. He performed everything with his mouth ... 'Gup, geernow!' Whistling. He sounds so present, not as a being but as an instrument—a load of muscles and saliva.

Whitby: Is there a cumulative, perhaps even diaristic element to the films?

Atkins: There's a lot of accrual in my process. I pretty much make my films from beginning to end. That's what is needed to get close to the audience: to be able to watch it while I'm making it, to be surprised by it, but also to make it *other*—an autonomous thing.

Whitby: Do you think the films could be like automata? The film or camera could be said to have senses, but not as a Being. An automaton can be considered as having life without death and, conversely, as possessing death without life.

Atkins: I think the finished film is always more a corpse than a being. The corpse doesn't have being with a capital B; corpses are, by definition, bodies without being. The experience of being around a corpse is potentially similar to watching one of these films. There is something uncanny in the simulation of life.

Whitby: The depth of detail and focus possible with the HD camera you use is a big step forward from the once notorious flatness of video, but you often deny that depth by using filters and shallow focus.

Atkins: I would use the word 'surface' rather than 'flatness'. Surfaces are the sensory way in which one can identify physicality. Many scenes in 'Death Mask III' are shot through layers of glass lens filters, which obscure or 'debilitate' the image as a cataract or short-sightedness might. Debilitation of any kind—though particularly when one gets ill—is a way of re-instigating

GLADSTONE GALLERY

physicality, materiality. I think there's something about the immateriality of digital media, HD particularly. There isn't a traditional 'index'; it goes straight onto a memory card. I edit it like a memory, and then potentially stream it like that on an HD media player. At no point does it gain a body.

Whitby: Yet your drawings and scripts certainly have a physical presence in installation. These two elements of your practice have imaginative possibilities that video footage can never have.

Atkins: I agree with you on the writing, because I feel the wonder of being able to go anywhere, at any point. Whereas with drawing I find it harder to get it 'right'. Image-making is very different to shooting things, where the selection process can disappear. In drawing, you are constantly in a decision-making process. There's nothing to edit, and I find that frightening. Interfering (as a creative act) feels far more possible.

Whitby: Could you relate this idea of interfering to your thinking around dilettantism? You might approach something that is already there—you edit, or manipulate, rather than create something? You've written about the position of the 'non- specialist' being potentially radical in your essay 'The Radical Dilettante' [*Novel*, no. 2, 2010].

Atkins: Yes, it feels like there is a political or an ethical stance in that. There's something sociable, or at least complicit, about editing.

Whitby: Well, a more usual conception of editing is of making something palatable to someone else, as I will do with this conversation.

Atkins: 'Interfering' is more democratic. distance and intimacy, the deferral of authorship and the assertion of my own subjectivity—a lot of these strategies allow me to get to the point where I can begin making the work. There's a certain amount of smuggling the creative act past me. I need to kid myself into that place to be able to make anything at all.

Whitby: There's an associative game evident in your films and writing, which also seems to be a symbolic smuggling or sleight of hand, where metaphors function despite themselves.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Atkins: The things I enjoy writing are descriptions of a surface or a smell, a substance. There's a wonderful sentence in Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, which describes trucks passing along a highway as a 'series of burnt arms'. There's something extraordinarily wrong about the metaphor, which I think is also part of the challenge of writing metaphor, and attempting to find something beneath comprehension or the making of meaning. 'Death Mask III' contains a subtitle about the smell of someone's hair being like that of Cheltenham museum. The text appears over a shot of the mountain—absolute incongruity!

Whitby: Yes, and that's also the point where you feel the text was created for another purpose: it is edited into the context, rather than scripted for it. This is also apparent in your use of the film script, where the form is redirected towards other ends. The durian fruit, which appears in 'Death Mask II: The Scent', 2010, is interesting in this context. Its taste and smell of the fruit is compared to something that most people don't experience: a rotting corpse.

Atkins: The descriptions have an interesting level of substance, like surgical swabs, raw sewage with chopped liver, meaty custard. All these seemingly horrific things are just linguistic. There isn't a single durian fruit in that video, just stand-ins. I have often wanted to write something about sex in the same way, as an act that never really exists. Because of its communal nature, it's not possible to transcribe it in any other way other than itself, it just is. Maybe these acts and experiences become *petit mort*. Maybe there is something essentially deathly about them because they're incomparable. There's a vulnerability when one starts talking about these things. And hopefully that's there in the films.

Whitby: So is artistic 'creation' deathly for you, another of these indescribable instances of experience? Another perhaps tired way of thinking about how it connects artistic creativity to birth.

Atkins: Not birth, no. Like Blanchot's idea of a corpse as a representation of the living being, with sleight of hand representation replaces 'the original'. The work is a cadaver which necessitates the death of the original. It's potentially murderous.