

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sophie Risner, "Sophie Risner in conversation with Ed Atkins," *This is Tomorrow*, October 14, 2012

this is tomorrow
Contemporary Art Magazine

Ed Atkins



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Sophie Risner / Ed Atkins Interview

Sophie Risner: I found out recently that you were the current Whitechapel Writer in Residence (Sept 2012 - 2013), something that automatically made so much sense to my understanding of your work especially within the context of your show *Us Dead Talk Love at*

the Chisenhale. I don't want to overly complicate the conversation too much from the get-go, but as this is to be a be-headed email exchange, posited in an art magazine surrounded by art criticism I thought the first place I'd go to was to ask you how important text is to your practice?

Ed Atkins: Text is crucial to my practice. Is my practice, really. Both reading and writing, often simultaneously, and many of the structures and techniques in the videos are transpositions of those that, for me originate in literature. It's also a way to reset, technologically as well as imaginatively. Fluency of both – as ways of thinking and improvising – being paramount, really. A diminishing of the gap between an idea and it being documented, becoming manifest. Or perhaps the gap between thinking of something and being able to read it; that seems more interesting. Approaching a scenario where the two might be almost completely simultaneous. The same with the constructing of the video. Perhaps the primary difference, for me, is that writing text affords a way around certain representational impasses that video cannot – partly because of its mode of address approaching intravenous, telepathic – and partly because of the intimacy offered as an experience. An experience of both writer and reader.

SR: How did this tale of the eyelash first come to you?

EA: I wanted to find an image to ground some of my thoughts around vast, lumbering themes: death, sex, representation. Narcissism. A man finding an eyelash beneath their foreskin presented itself as a possible locus for a great swathe of exploratory metaphor and thought. The symbolism seemed strikingly potent but pretty ambiguous, certainly ambivalent, and at the same time short-circuited a certain metaphoric tenor; that it was both blunt in its banal sincerity – but riddled with possibilities for surrogacy: of eyelash for line, incision, death, the other, sex, glamour, etc. – and in such close proximity to the body, almost subsumed, shared.

SR: There seems to be such a rich montage of references within your work, I was especially drawn to the ideologies regarding 'the eye' and obviously 'the eyelash'. Was there any direct reference to possibly the work of George Bataille?

EA: No – nothing direct. Though I can't discount any humble similarity of content. I'm a fan, of course.

SR: I was wondering as a retrospective slur, if it was then possible to name some of your literary influences for this investigation?

EA: Well, I keep going back to some of the early postmodern American writers: Bartheleme, Sorrentino, Barth. And their precursors in France, of course, whose precursors in turn might be Bataille and also Apollinaire and Roussel – all very different, put part of a lineage one could dismissively lump as 'experimental', but more specifically structural, ironic in a true sense. The Comte de Lautreamont, certainly. Guyotat, definitely. Recently, Roberto Bolaño has been important to me. Also certain end-points of poetry, like Jeremy Prynne.

SR: Can you possibly give us a bit more background as to the choice of the be-headed narrators, which are used across two screens.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

EA: The 3D models are motion captured using a bit of beta-stage software that utilises the Microsoft Kinect – a games controller that uses the body as a controller. Interestingly, Microsoft released the code for the Kinect pretty much immediately, knowing that a programming community would find various and amazing uses for it. This is a programme – faceshift – that augments the controller to recognise the face. And it's not incredibly accurate, but it's pretty uncanny nonetheless and pretty amazing. The model and the skin are defaults – bundled models that are then mapped to trace the movements of my face. Which means generating a series of blend-shapes that correspond to my facial expressions. Finally, it tracks my face in real time. Immediately, it meant that – finally – I could have a face in my video. Previously, I've been reluctant to feature a face. Not for want of trying, but it always seemed that the introduction of a face – particularly a speaking face, a protagonist, meant a collapse of several of the more discursive areas I wanted to maintain. In this scenario, however, it seemed to extend those possibilities – maintaining a reflexivity towards the image and its generation – while also allowing in a character. Albeit a character who is a model, demonstrably empty. It also allowed access to some of the more Classical aspects I wanted to have around sculpture and the severed head, via in particular Kristeva's recent book on representations of the decapitated head.

SR: There's something incredibly visceral about the work; hair, blood, death, fucking – can I gauge more of insight as to your use of such visceral reflection within your text and subsequent work.

EA: As a counter to the passivity that we're all fluent in. And also as a way to talk about those more material – visceral – aspects of the embodied subject. Viscerality being both something that the technology seemingly desires – in a banal, cheapened somewhat, representational fashion – and the reality of a thrumming, warm-blooded mortal body. Our viewing, listening, experiencing bodies offering a home for the otherwise disembodied, digital form.

SR: If visceral reflection is something you're intentionally harvesting, then do you think that our narrator within the work is in some way attacking the viewer, 'Come to bed and fucking die'?

EA: No. No attack intended. It's a necessary violence, as I see it – but towards the image, the representation rather than any reality lurking in front of the screen, in the dark. 'Come to bed and fucking die' is written, and attempted to deliver, after a kind of unspoken, spoken way – the way you might speak to a lover during sex; the way in which a rupture is created between the kind of repressed address of public life, and the approaching-unrepressed desire of physical, sexual or terminal address. Death's corollary being sexual; sex's rejoinder being deathly. The violence is, to me, what's needed to shrug off the representational aspect – the violence a counter to the murderous violence that representation might desire in attempting to describe, represent, a relation – represent an other.

SR: Similarly to your works *Death Mask 1 and 2* which were shown at Cabinet, I feel that this show also has an interest in the connection between the human interpretation or practice of death, lust, sex and raw emotion and a more primordial experience or understanding, the latter something intrinsic not just human-beings, but to the very act of living, be it plant, animal or human. I was wondering if this was something you could expand upon. Could it be possible that the human question is often fraught with the complexion of

GLADSTONE GALLERY

representation, that through the very act of being human we are incapable of deriding representation?

EA: I'm not sure I completely understand the question, but insofar as humans are the only beings capable of representation, it's certainly an anthropocentric interest. And yes, I certainly think, that representation is not something that it's possible to elude or live without – but it is something to be manipulated, thought about and considered. Resisted, in spite of the impossibility of doing so completely. So that in attempting to represent those things that are very difficult to represent, there is a necessary critique of representation there. I would say that I am against representation – or rather, against its desires... When you say a more primordial experience, I'm assuming you mean something that escapes a kind of enlightened rationale? Or perhaps something that is not exclusive to humanity? I don't think this is possible, really, but I would certainly think about an experience of being alongside those primordial, insentient or uncaring, inhuman things. Nature – as describing the non-manmade but appreciable to man (forests, sea, land pre-scape) – does not care – is a-caring; is impossibly open.

This is something I can't help but yank back to me – though with reticence about this gesture resembling Romanticism – as a way in which I might desire to be: open, gracious, passive (-aggressive), abusive and caring with impunity – but always with a thought of receiving, too – of being accepting of every oncoming incoherence.