

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jeff Nagy, "Ed Atkins, Serpentine Sackler Gallery," *Artforum*, October 09, 2014

## ARTFORUM

LONDON

### Ed Atkins

SERPENTINE SACKLER GALLERY

The end of a night like any other, facedown on the bar with a cigarette turning to ash between two fingers, singing a perfectly acceptable rendition of the aria "Erbarme dich" from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* before your head deflates and everything goes dark. We've all been there, right?

This blackout into canonical bathos is the repeated fate of the computer-animated protagonist of Ed Atkins's video work *Ribbons*, 2014, the centerpiece of his recent solo exhibition, a triptych of simultaneously projected roughly thirteen-minute-long video works. These



Ed Atkins, *Ribbons*, 2014, three-channel HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes 19 seconds.

played on a synced loop along the back wall and in the crypt-like vaults of the darkened arsenal, with a short intro sequence and concluding blue screen accompanied by synthy reference music giving you time to move between them, as if binge-streaming some particularly dark Netflix sitcom. At the Sackler, they were flanked by two parergal flat screens on either side of the gallery entrance that showed loops of lopped-off heads with anatomically accurate neck cross sections bouncing down endless flights of stairs, and supersize placards covered in marked-up text related to *Ribbons*' dialogues. Atkins's avatar, as in his previous *Warm, Warm, Warm, Spring Mouths*, 2013, is "Dave," who can be had by anyone for \$399 on Turbosquid, a website selling 3-D models to "creative professionals around the world." Atkins and his collaborator Adam Sinclair scuff up the perpetually nude Dave with aftermarket tattoos and suture Atkins's voice to the slightly awkward motions of his mouth. Using an off-the-shelf avatar as the conduit for one's own voice speaks to a sense of alienation from new means of production—as the avatar in the earlier piece says, "What I wanted to say is that none of us could make a fucking computer"—and to doubts as to what room there might be for genuine thought or affect in the prêt-à-porter toxic straitjacket of pop materials. One begins to think of the prefab mouthpiece as all-over visual karaoke, and to wonder what that karaoke becomes when the music cuts out, leaving Atkins's voice as naked as Dave's body.

*Ribbons* is in part a comment—empathic and scathing—on UK drinking culture, on its misogyny and aggressive self-pity ("Help me communicate outside of peremptory assault, my love"). Tumblers are filled with whiskey, wine, green ichor, blood, and urine, while snatches of odd songs, by composers from Henry Purcell to Randy Newman, are sung. Inquisitive genitals, fingers, noses, and tongues get stuffed through glory holes and then withdrawn unanswered; Dave delivers torrential monologues from underneath a table, or tries unsuccessfully to connect with an offscreen love object, undercut by the occasional sound of a fart or push alert. In the relative silence that opens the concluding scene on each of *Ribbons*' three screens, the conversations of gallery visitors blend in with the bar chatter low on the sound track—the sound of missed connection, of loneliness in public. The three Daves sing into this social hum on all screens at once, a song to himself and to his own accompaniment: the call-and-response of a narcissistic blues.

Atkins uses Dave to ventriloquize a set of questions in contemporarily virulent forms—about how we love, hate, hurt one another or ourselves, or might; about alienation, artistic or economic or social; about "original" voices and "actual" bodies. Dave's body is for sale, and

Atkins stays anxious about its effective embodiment and capacity to solicit or provoke intersubjectivity: "I say coronary, but I have no idea whether it even has a heart. . . . And what desires power it?" This nexus—corporeality and connection, interface and desire—reappears in the glory holes everywhere throughout *Ribbons*, including an actual hole cut into one screen, scotomizing the image. Anonymizing its users, the glory hole reduces them to desires and organs to support them. It asks for our input while begging a question about the fate of the senses in a post-physical world: an ethical question complicated by the changing state of an incomprehensibly premediated environment only partially revealed to us in our various desires or distresses. What I wanted to say is that none of us could make a fucking pop song.

—Jeff Nagy