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Skye Sherwin, "Q&A Ed Atkins," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2015



Q&A: Ed Atkins

His CGI creations have made Atkins a video art star, but his project for this year's Manchester international festival sees his ambitions stretching even further

The Guardian is the festival's media partner

Interview by Skye Sherwin

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With Performance Capture, you're creating a live production studio where you'll be directing 120 people from the festival, from stars to gallery attendants, animating them before our eyes and pouring them all into a single avatar. How does that compare to your usual working method, where you've been your own model, designing behind a computer?

I'm not on my own! I'm collaborating with a team of highly trained technicians and we're using on-the-cusp, experimental motion-capture kit. It's also the first time I'll be capturing other people. I've always felt I should be my own guinea pig. It's quite a violent thing, having a chorus of people occupy one figure. It has a frightening, homogenising element.

The avatar will incorporate men and women of all ages and racial backgrounds. What will it look like?

It will be a white man - a deliberate step in so far as that's the protagonist of empowered, homogenised cultural normalcy. He changes throughout, due to his CG-ness, as will his costume and the world that he stalks and pontificates from.

Will the avatar retain the performers' stage personas?

Totally. It's such accurate software now, particularly the face. There are the tiniest inflections that you can't point out until they are rendered on a foreign body, a strange skin. Also, the voices of every performer will remain the same. If you're looking for it, you'll certainly be able to say that the artists are in there.

You're writing the script at the moment. What's the story?

The motion-capture costume looks like heavy, rigid, body armour and I'm talking about bodies being policed. It's also about paranoia and self-policing. The final stage in the process of state administration is when we observe and police ourselves. It's also a kind of epic poem: a monologue for 120 people.

The virtual world is never a happy place in your work - are you anti-technology?

It's not technology itself, but how it's used. When we hold an iPhone, it's designed to be beautiful, but also like a mystical black mirror that does a shitload of things and never speaks to the bodies in sweatshops and mines. For me, it's more about trying to retrieve the bodies that disappear with the corporate digital sleight of hand.

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How will Performance Capture address that?

It partly stems from those DVD bonus things you get: behind the scenes, with green screens and people wearing dots all over their faces. You're supposed to learn more, but actually the process is mystifying. I want people to see what happens when a body goes through that mediation, when they're "captured", as it were, and an identity is changed.



Ed Atkind, *Ribbons*, 2014

FKA twigs is also making live digital films for the festival. Will your works cross over?
Perhaps. The work she's done before is rife with contemporary life and identity that is mediated and changed. I've always thought she was creating a powerful and uncanny figure to stand behind and present to the world.

You've previously featured faces crumpling and hair with a life of its own in your films. Will there be similar high jinks?

It's a bit more brutally real, actually. We're working on how to get him wet, blow in the wind, how to have snow fall: physical limits that can be reset. It's an image that is desperately trying to be real and yet capable of the deeply abstract and strange moves a computer affords.

Performance Capture is at Manchester Art Gallery, 4-19 July. Box office: 0844 871 7654