

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Adrian Searle, "Here comes everyone! The monster avatar taking over Manchester," *The Guardian*, July 06, 2015

## The Guardian

### Here comes everyone! The monster avatar taking over Manchester

Ever wondered what a mixture of Adam Buxton, Björk and Mr Tumble would look like? Artist Ed Atkins and a team of CGI geeks are turning all the stars of Manchester International festival into a freakish poetry-reading avatar

**Adrian Searle**

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Pliable and plastic ... Adam Buxton takes part in Performance Capture. Photograph: MIF

Ed Atkins stoops over his seated subjects like an attentive hairdresser, coaxing them through an on-screen list of commands. Smile. Sneer. Brows down, brows up. Chin raise. Jaw left, jaw right. Kiss. A camera snares them in a net of coordinates that appears on the screen. The technology can only deal with a limited range of expressions, as it scans then builds a pliable and plastic 3D moving image in virtual space.

Part exhibition, part performance, and part live recording and editing studio, Ed Atkins' Performance Capture at the 5<sup>th</sup> Manchester International Festival is a work in progress by the artist. One by one, stars, musicians, dancers, curators and directors, all of whom have some role in the current festival, will be invited on to a bare white stage in Manchester Art Gallery to be rendered. Later this week, the artist will render me too.

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On the white stage is a chair and a mark on the floor, a mike-stand, a big computer screen and an autocue. Someone sits in the chair, dressed in a zip-up CGI jacket, a wired-up hat and special gloves, and reads from the autocue.



Man of many faces ... Ed Atkins's multi-person avatar. Photograph: Production stills from Performance Capture. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned and produced by MIF and MAG, 2015

Everyone has to read a section of the script that scrolls down the autocue screen in front of them. Atkins coaches them through it. On my visit last Friday someone was reading the lines

*'I've seen  
Analgesic anticoagulant Olbas  
Shame beneath bedclothes, like  
Ortolan-Scoffing dignitaries;  
Those hooded caverns  
Of genital vapour rub and the slimed  
Walls the dreamed  
Blue dreamed meant of those maffled  
voices ...'*

The ortolan, before you ask, is a small bunting which, drowned alive in armagnac then roasted, is a French gourmand's illicit pleasure, and eaten with one's head under a napkin - either to hide the shame of it from God or because it tastes better that way. President Francois Mitterand infamously ate one (if not several) as part of his last meal, before his death in 1996.

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But I digress. Atkins's script, which is in fact a poem that goes on for pages and pages, is a maddeningly opaque soliloquy. Meaning is hard to grasp, but snatches of it are as piquant as the ortolan itself. Excerpts of this poem provide the text ranged about the walls: 'The promise of fragged meat and other mechanically retrieved misc. pie!', and 'Rendering the captured individual brutalises nuance and vitalises representation'. Rendition is the key.



Ed Atkins coaches a performer as they read his 'maddeningly opaque soliloquy' from an autocue. Photograph: Joel Chester Fildes/MIF

As well as the performance of a song, a part or a poem, rendering has grim associations: rendered meats and fats; the rendering of suspects for covert interrogation; the rendering of a human being into an avatar. Atkins takes it further, melding many avatars into a compound and homogeneous CGI being, whose utterances are as glutinous as a pre-prepared synthetic meal.

Around the big white room, big white drawings with skinny black lines also hang on the walls: dismembered fists, a condom over a gasping head, a severed hand in the place of the foot. Over and between the drawings are fragments of text cut through sheets of white Perspex. "Read more about symptoms of dementia," says one sign, hung over a vase of wilting flowers that sheds dessicated blooms on to the floor. Another text describes David Cameron as a poorly darned comedy sock-puppet, "without any arm right up it".

It all boils down to the same thing in Atkins's art, with its uncomfortable humour, with the sense that all is not right in the world, nor in art, nor in our sense of ourselves as integrated and substantial human beings. We are all post-internet now. What Atkins is getting at is a kind of texture and timbre of life today, with its constant fractures, the disjunctions between our bodily lives and our experience of ourselves and others as ghosts in a digital machine.

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What a performance. In a back room, we can look over the shoulders of keyboard-tapping geeks as they tweak the on-screen moving images. Back here are skin and pimple wonks, eye, mouth and nose specialists, people primping virtual hair and electronically implanted eyelashes. The technology looks fearsome (there's even a humming black tower of servers) though the system Atkins is using already lags behind latest CGI developments. Military, cinema and computer game technology is always rushing ahead, but still human beings continually do things the machines can't deal with and can't render down.

There's a limit to the verisimilitude, an inevitable gap between the real and the digitised, an insurmountable gulf between ourselves and what a machine can simulate. Soon, Atkins's work will look outdated, a fact that he embraces.



A compound and homogeneous CGI being ... the morphing avatar from Performance Capture. Photograph: Joel Chester Fildes/MIF

Beyond the CGI studio a screening room lets us watch the accumulating rushes. For every couple of minutes of individual participation there are hours of electronic augmentation. The final work - a visually and aurally morphing avatar that speaks Atkins's poem in multiple voices - will depict a multiple me, a cumulative, divided and riven self. The final film will be shown in a further exhibition here next February. This is the first time Atkins has used other people in his videos. Usually he does all his stuff on his own, in his bedroom, using himself as both subject and model. Acting himself, he is not himself, but a fictive, specious other. At the Serpentine Gallery last year, he became Dave, a hard-drinking, chain-smoking romantic who sang a sad and lonely lament.

Performance Capture will do more than commemorate the current Mif, its performers and participants. Rather than a spliced, celebratory group performance (like all the stars who sang Lou Reed's Perfect Day in the 1997 BBC charity single) Performance Capture is, like all Atkins's work, much darker and weirder and unsettling. He is making a monster of multiple, morphing personalities, a thing possessed.