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Hal Foster, "CLOSE-UP: YOUR LOSS, Hal Foster on Ed Atkins's *The Worm*, 2021," Art Forum, October 2021

CLOSE-UP: YOUR LOSS

Hal Foster on Ed Atkins's *The Worm*, 2021



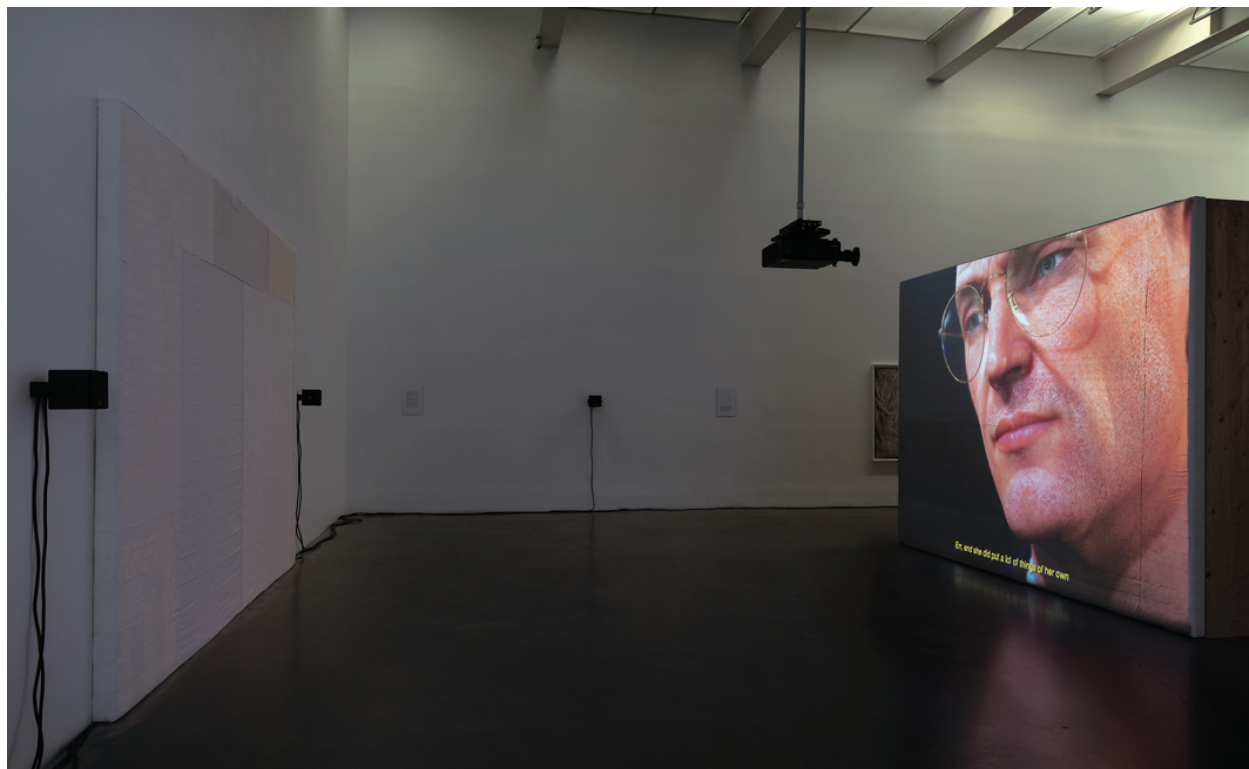
Ed Atkins, *The Worm*, 2021, digital video projection, color, sound, 12 minutes 40 seconds.

HOW MANY OF US, when we speak with our parents, feel like stock characters, as though we were simulations of ourselves? In *The Worm*, 2021, the centerpiece of "Get Life/Love's Work," his recent show at the New Museum in New York, the English artist Ed Atkins presents a telephone call with his mother in this very manner. In the roughly thirteen-minute animation, his mum is heard but not seen, while Atkins is rendered, by way of performance-capture technology, as a digital avatar who listens attentively, mumbling in agreement, sympathy, or surprise, asking a question only when her narrative falters. Aurally close, the mother is spatially distant (*The Worm* was made during lockdown), while the son is almost too present on the large screen—there are extreme closeups, odd angles, abrupt cuts, awkward gestures, and unconscious tics—even though we know it is not truly Atkins that we see. His double, a three-dimensional model purchased online, is no double at all: The usually scruffy artist appears as a natty television host in a dark windowpane suit with wire-rim glasses who diverges from the often-bject characters featured in his previous videos. And the setup, with its soundstage, blue light, stylish chair, small table, glass of whiskey, Silk Cut cigarettes, and ashtray, is indeed that of a studio interview, a dated genre that conflates reality and artifice in its own way. One inspiration for *The Worm* was

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the final TV appearance of the English writer Dennis Potter, who, on the brink of death from cancer in 1994, talks, bluntly yet poignantly, about the immediacy of sensuous experience (a plum flower outside his window strikes him as the “blossomest blossom”), his commitment to writing to the end, his faith in community over “the rumor” that is God, and the corruption of journalism and politics by Rupert Murdoch (already then!).²

The mum talks about her family—some about her insensitive father, more about her depressive mother—and how she took on the worries of the latter, especially about “lovability,” to little avail, mostly because such cares could not be expressed openly (depression was euphemized as “weekend letdown”). The theme of her reminiscences is emotional inheritance, in particular that of unhappiness, and we watch the avatar struggle to metabolize this misery even though (or precisely because) he is not altogether human. “The way she talks of her mother, Nanny Bea, is how I could talk about my mother,” Atkins writes. “Thwarted artists, manic-depressives, chronic dysmorphics through and through. All of which is contagious, hereditary poison.” This “empathy-mirroring” was arduous for both parties, a self-conscious performance, but it was “also love,” Atkins insists. “Love! Tenderness!”



View of “Ed Atkins: Get Life/Love’s Work,” 2021, New Museum, New York. Left: *Untitled Sampler*, 2021. Right: *The Worm*, 2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

This point brings into focus the import of his titles. “Get life” is an ethical imperative: here, to address the repressions in a family and to resist the predations of media technologies. Yet it is also a prison sentence, for both struggles are likely to go on forever. “The worm” is multivalent,

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too. A worm is base, like the spider that represents the formless for Bataille, lowly like a daughter burdened with the pain of her mother, squirmy like a son who cannot settle the debts of the past. “The worm of time” comes to mind as well, the turns of fortune through the generations, as does *The Sick Rose*, the Blake “song of experience” in which a worm threads together eros and disease: “O Rose thou art sick. / The invisible worm, / That flies in the night / In the howling storm: / Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy: / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy.” This allusion calls up another source cited by Atkins, *Love’s Work*, the 1995 memoir of the English philosopher Gillian Rose, who, like Potter, was brought to her “reckoning with life” (the subtitle of her book) by a death sentence of cancer. This “sick rose,” who writes magnificently about eros and disease, argues that the near-oxymoronic work of love is to convert melancholy into mourning—a Freudian labor also important to Atkins—and then, somehow, into delight: “I want to sob and sob and sob,” Rose tells us, “until the prolonged shrieking becomes a shout of joy.”³ Atkins desires this transformation, too. Even as *The Worm* foregrounds the difficulties of his mother, the death of his father, also from cancer, looms in the background, as it does in other of his videos (Atkins calls his characters “dead men, surrogates, auto cadavers”).⁴



Ed Atkins, *The Worm*, 2021, digital video projection, color, sound, 12 minutes 40 seconds.

At times, the maternal monologue verges on confession or therapy, yet there is no priest here, only a son, one who, rather than talk about his mother, listens to her talk about her mother. The expected analysand becomes the unexpected analyst, and this also makes the Atkins avatar squirm. The fact that he processes private matters in a public setting (fictively in a television studio, actually in a museum gallery) makes us squirm, too, especially as we are reminded how personal exposure has become the obscene norm in media culture. Atkins adapts the Lacanian

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term *extimacy* for this everyday confusion of the intimate and the alien. “Everything’s become involuntional,” he writes in a free association typical of his hyperbolic prose. “Think family, heredity, history, antecedents. Think of history as a movement inward maybe.” Yet rather than see this involution as a limitation only, Atkins wants to run with it, to revalue it: “going inward both in memory, in body, in heredity, in technology, and, of course, in psychology. That we might pursue this psychical memory . . . bliss.”

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The sound of *The Worm* is penetrative, and the image is immersive; the avatar appears as “a country of pores, wrinkles, and, I hope, the tiny inflections and winces of a detailed, silent response.” So what kind of realism is at stake here? The video is hardly realist in the old sense of referential; its setup is entirely artificial. Yet Atkins seeks not to reiterate the technological derealization of the world so much as to resist it. His aesthetic goal is to “model those parts of life that steadfastly elude representation.” “That’s my utopianism: a faith in the eternal singularity of materiality,” which he locates above all in “the irreducibility of IRL/mortal experience.” This realism is rooted in the body and the psyche, especially in extreme states of abjection and trauma (Atkins is interested in Kristeva and Lacan as well as Bataille).⁵ It is the real as remainder, understood as that which resists the symbolic order—its task made all the more difficult given that this order is now supported by technologies of computer generation, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic scripting.⁶



Four stills from Ed Atkins’s *The Worm*, 2021, digital video projection, color, sound, 12 minutes 40 seconds.

The wager made by Atkins is that if reality can be derealized by such technologies, it might also be rediscovered there, and this might occur in a few ways. First, he believes that, once outmoded, technology passes over to the side of “base materiality”; its very clunkiness becomes a reality

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effect. Atkins adapts the term *corpsing*—the moment when an actor breaks character and so dispels the illusion of the performance—“to describe a kind of structural revelation more generally”; his examples are when a vinyl record jumps or a streaming movie buffers. To corpse a medium is to expose its materiality, even to underscore its mortality, and in this moment the real might poke through. Second, punctuated by the gestural tics of the Atkins avatar, *The Worm* is also rife with manufactured glitches—sudden blurs, flares, beeps, and crackles—and these apparent cracks in the artifice might provide another opening to the real. Although these reality effects are artificial, “they baffle the signs of reality by parodying them, engendering a new kind of realism.”⁷ Third, if the real might be felt when an illusion fails, so too might it be sensed when that illusion is “glazed with effects to italicize the artifice,” that is, when illusionism is pushed to a hyperreal point. In this register, Atkins conforms to the criterion of “fidelity” in technological reproduction, but excessively so, and in this way claims such fidelity for the side of “revelatory materialism rather than techno magic.” Fourth, Atkins exploits a central feature of high-definition video inherited from photography and film, at least when they were experienced by early viewers: The inanimate appears to be alive. This confusion is a telltale attribute of the uncanny (in his account, Freud was inspired by those avatars known as *doppelgängers*), and this uncanniness is another “mortal experience” that evokes the real.⁸ Finally, if photography and film opened up an “optical unconscious” for Benjamin, a reality not perceived by the naked eye, high-definition video expands this realm for Atkins. His surrogate dead men make visible the psychopathology of everyday technological life.

Rather than reiterate how the human is given over to technology, Atkins seeks, perhaps impossibly, to bend technology back toward the human.

“Unlike with movies, my CG stuff is deliberately janky,” Atkins states. “Enough to underscore it, draw attention to it. Which is a perversion of its aim to disappear.” This is a contemporary version of the modernist call to reveal the medium, “to bare the device” (as the Russian formalists put it), but Atkins goes further: His formalism is dedicated to realism, one of “bleak histrionics” that he calls “Bruegelian.” “[I] want to realign the tech in the service of life’s *beggared*—‘love’s work’—rather than as a tool of captivity.” For Atkins, then, to bare the device is also to “impoverish” the medium and thus to point to other impoverishments—in his life, in his family, in society at large. At the extreme, the bared device stands in for “bare life,” or life defined by Agamben as utterly subject to power, life that is indeed *beggared*.⁹ Here Atkins proceeds by way of analogies: “Analog error feels as if it is to the reality of a CG image what impoverishment is to representation at large—what tragedy is to depictions of life; what misery is to experience.” He knows that this string of “allegories” is a stretch, but he is not afraid of bathos, which he sees as the other side of pathos. Atkins risks these states because he sees affect as an essential dimension of life that must be both wrested from media technologies and rediscovered there. This is why he aims to find an “emo, cybernetic surrogacy” in computer-generated avatars and to graft his “sentimental self to the tech, rather than the other way around.”¹⁰ This is not to deny that life is steeped in loss but, on the contrary, to acknowledge that reality, and to produce work that addresses it, that assists in “affective recognition.” It is to contribute to “love’s work.”

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Ed Atkins, *The Worm*, 2021, digital video projection, color, sound, 12 minutes 40 seconds.

Here his notion of art confronts his theory of media, which Atkins sketched in a 2018 lecture titled “Losslessness.” “Losslessness,” he tells us, “refers to a category of data compression algorithm that allows original data to be perfectly reproduced.” To achieve this fidelity, digital media, even more than analog media, aim to disappear; “technology constantly seeks to be lost.” The magic of technology wants not simply to cover up our existential lack—this is what makes it the ultimate fetish—but to distract us from its inevitable failure. Its myth of losslessness serves “ideological ends,” among them our fantasies of “coherency,” “holism,” even “immortality.” However, it never quite succeeds: Loss is felt nonetheless, and because this loss cannot be acknowledged, our relationship to technology is rendered “neurotic,” marked by “aimless melancholy or shame.” In response, Atkins argues, “the artist must first set out to *find* the technology,” and the initial step is to make the technology “corporeal, analog, mortal.” This “movement toward the literal” is not simply “a rebuttal of the desires of the tech”; it also points to the “uncovering of other realities,” which in turn promotes the “freedom of the subject.”¹¹ Here we are back on the familiar ground of modernist defamiliarization, a project that is now vastly complicated given that the human seems almost fused with the technological and the world often appears to be media all the way down. Moreover, for Atkins, it is not enough to defetishize technology, to demystify its magic. For his work to be effective, illusion must be allowed “sufficient function” not only “to sustain critique” but also to promote affective recognition—to express loss, to “set in motion a shift from melancholy to purposive mourning,” to find in media technology an interpersonal connection that it always promises but rarely delivers.

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Ed Atkins, *The Worm*, 2021, digital video projection, color, sound, 12 minutes 40 seconds.

Atkins signals a shift among artists steeped in new media. Just as the Pictures artists once assumed the society of the spectacle so that they could engage its image repertoire, so Atkins takes computer-generated technology as a given but attempts to “misuse” it critically. Here he differs from the practice of immediate predecessors such as Harun Farocki, Trevor Paglen, and Hito Steyerl, for, rather than reiterate how the human is given over to technology, he seeks, perhaps impossibly, to bend technology back toward the human. His true utopianism is that he believes technology might aid the human to become human again—to become emotive and empathic on our own terms. His art is not a lament for humanism or a celebration of posthumanism but a snatching of a neohuman from the belly of the beast.¹³

Again, Atkins subscribes to a philosophy of the remainder—of the recalcitrant detail, the personal *punctum*, the traumatic real—but, as with Barthes on photography, this fascination can lead to an occlusion of another reality, social reality, Bruegelian (or Brechtian) concerns with the beggared notwithstanding.¹³ His interest in the “arts of impoverishment” (a title taken from Leo Bersani, who features Beckett, another Atkins favorite, in his account) is in tension with his commitment to an aesthetic of reparation (Bersani is critical of any “culture of redemption” that frames experience as always already damaged).¹⁴ Finally, can media technologies truly be turned so as to enrich our affective lives rather than strip them like so many assets? Alongside the old ideological state apparatuses such as the church and the military, there have arisen a whole slew of social media leviathans that produce, circulate, and monetize all kinds of intense affects in ways that disorient us politically as well as psychologically. But then, when it comes to art, no one should complain about contradictions. For Atkins, they are what drive his practice; they may also be, in part, what keep us human.

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“*Ed Atkins: Get Life/Love’s Work*” is on view at the New Museum, New York, through October 3.

[Hal Foster](#)’s *Brutal Aesthetics: Dubuffet, Bataille, Jorn, Paolozzi, Oldenburg* was published in 2020.

NOTES

1. The initial concept was to interview people in isolation—jailed, disabled, poor, old—but the pandemic made that scheme redundant. Still, *The Worm* is all about the desire—and the difficulty—of connection. For the conversation, Atkins set up in a hotel room in Berlin while his mother remained in England. The data captured during the conversation was used to animate the avatar, though “it’s my face that palpably lurks beneath the CG wireframe and JPEG skin.” In an excellent essay in the catalogue, *Ed Atkins: Get Life/Love’s Work*, edited by Massimiliano Gioni, Erika Balsom provides an overview of relevant works by Atkins. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this catalogue, which includes two essays by Atkins, a conversation with Gioni, and a note by Mark Leckey.
2. The interview is the basis of several Atkins videos. “For such a long time, I made these works alone, at a computer, interrogating myself with technologies that surveilled my every grimace. For me, it was a pitched self-surveillance that ended up melodramatizing me to myself.” Imagine the Warhol Screen Tests updated technologically, self-inflicted, and not at all silent.
3. Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work: A Reckoning with Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 74. For Rose, “love’s work” is a reckoning with risk and loss. “Philosophy, ancient and modern, is born out of this condition of sadness” (124). This is also true of art for Atkins.
4. These surrogates “descended, psychically, from that literal dead man who began this whole sorry mess for me. Making videos became about reparative mourning.”
5. See my “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October* 78 (Autumn 1996).
6. “The presumption of the project, from the beginning, was the accentuation of those aspects of life that elude technological remediation, recoupment, representation, rendering, capture. The work would try to rehearse freedoms by their omission from the remit of what’s reproducible. In this, at least structurally, it would recapitulate the core thesis of my work.”
7. “Analog flaws [are] re-created digitally in order to militate against the sterile horror of computer-generated nothings.” In the film *Anomalisa* (2015), Charlie Kaufman also uses glitches in the animation—cracks in the avatar—to evoke the real. See Zadie Smith, “Windows on the Will,” *New York Review of Books*, March 10, 2016.
8. For Atkins “the celluloidal story” has “the uncanny at its heart,” and the digital image is even more “spectral”: Its “persistent aping of analog reality means that the animation, the life, is doubly lost, doubly dead.” In some ways, Atkins continues, by digital means, the old cinematic fascination with ghosts, robots, and doubles of all sorts.
9. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
10. Atkins delves into “travesty” and “caricature” in his writing, too: “Typically for me, the prose is purple, bathetic; mortifying, in retrospect.” See Mike Spelinger, “Close Without Saving,” in Ed Atkins, *Seer Reader* (London: Koenig Books, 2015).
11. “I do think all this structural reflexivity I apparently demand of the medium is maybe a manifestation of the kinds of structural reflexivity that I try to undertake in my personal life.”
12. In his latest novel, *Klara and the Sun*, published this year, Kazuo Ishiguro presents an AI avatar who develops an emotional maturity that the nominal humans around her either lack or have lost.
13. Another sign of an inability to think the social is the recent turn to autofiction; like much art, much literature has narrowed its scope to the personal.
14. See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Atkins might reply that there is no contradiction here: Love’s work follows on loss. But might he primordialize and hypostatize loss? “Love is our exemplar,” and he aims to render it “sublime.”