

Martin Herbert, "Ed Atkins," *Artforum*, February 01, 2012

# ARTFORUM



This page and opposite page, from left: Ed Atkins, *Paris Green*, 2009, stills from a color HD video, 7 minutes 37 seconds.

OPENINGS

## Ed Atkins

MARTIN HERBERT



This page and opposite page, from left: Ed Atkins, *Death Mask II: The Scent*, 2010, stills from a color HD video, 8 minutes 19 seconds.

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ONE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING high-definition digital video is via statistics: If the pixels-per-image count is anywhere above 920,000, it's high-def. But a more nuanced characterization, and one less likely to be repurposed for advertising copy, appears in Ed Atkins's unpublished 2011 text "Some Notes on High Definition *with Apologies to M. Blanchot*." "High Definition (HD) has surpassed what we tamely imagined to be the zenith of representational affectivity within the moving image," the twenty-nine-year-old London-based artist writes, "presenting us with lucid, liquid images that are at once both preposterously life-like and utterly dead." If this sounds contradictory, it isn't. Consider, as Atkins proceeds to do, how HD vividly renders the pores, wrinkles, and blemishes of Johnny Depp's face in Michael Mann's John Dillinger biopic *Public Enemies* (2009), and you may find that the format's verisimilitude becomes more an agent of strangeness than of familiarity. The "deadness" the artist cites is a function of too *much* verisimilitude, as if we are glimpsing a diabolically perfect *trompe l'oeil* representation rather than life itself. If the uncanny valley



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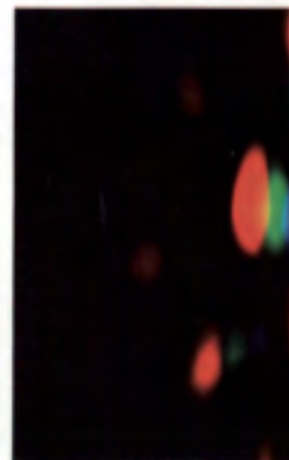
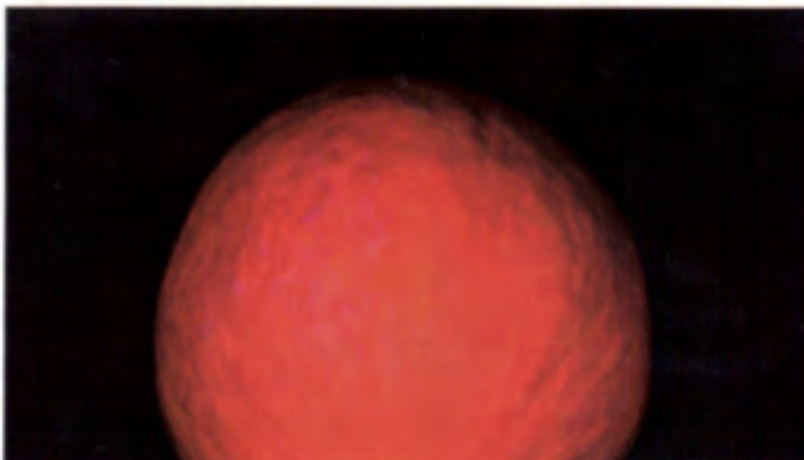


is a failure of representation (things are not quite real enough), then with HD representation seems to be triumphing—over us. One notable aspect of Atkins's succession of HD videos (which have garnered him a solo exhibition at Tate Britain, among other distinctions unusual for an artist less than three years out of school) is how subtext becomes text and format becomes content. The deathliness that results from his medium's overzealous pursuit of life rises, through a variety of strategies, to the surface.

Atkins's first foray into HD was the seven-minute *Paris Green*, 2009, made shortly after he graduated from the MA program at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. The video's extended aerial swoop over mist-laden jungle landscapes, set to Popol Vuh's sublime, mellotron-propelled sound track for Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972), is repeatedly short-circuited by jump cuts to studio lights, low-grade shots of the glowing moon, and scenes showing the acoustic guitar we hear strummed and scraped elsewhere on the audio track. Here, Atkins exposes anxieties about the impenetrable representational surface of HD, taking the rain forest as a

metaphor for the high-definition image: HD's dense hermeticism repels our efforts to immerse or "lose" ourselves just as the jungle thwarts Herzog's doomed conquistadors. In an updating of Godardian (or, really, Brechtian) disruption, meanwhile, the screen intermittently fills with a block of flat synthetic color. In the depthless digital space of HD, the titular Paris green—an inorganic, extremely toxic substance used as a pigment by the Impressionists and Sigmar Polke, among others—is made equivalent to the unyielding flora and to chroma-key green, the standard background color against which the "live" components of digitally animated video are shot.

The conversions here—material to metaphor, substance to hue—underscore what Atkins initially found fascinating about HD, namely, its ethereal ontological status. Recorded onto memory disc, allowing limitless liquefying permutations in editing programs, watchable on tablets and smartphones, the format is, Atkins recognizes, the moving image finally unhitched from a materialist scaffold. HD also stretches, to the breaking point, those links that structural film points up between the film apparatus and the biological



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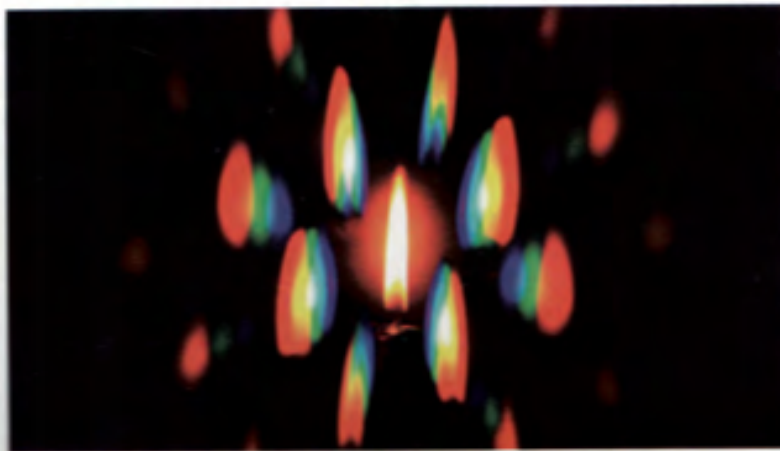


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apparatus. The deadness of HD is a complete erasure of the stroboscopic/biorhythmic pulse of the moving image—whether the flicker of film frames, the waveforms of video, or even the refresh rate of the computer monitor. Atkins exploits that quality, working at once against it and with it. (It's worth noting, in this regard, that his rapid career rise surely reflects his savvy mobilization of the most recent technology: His videos channel our near-involuntary fascination with new imaging methods *and* play slyly upon our longing for medium-specificity in a post-medium era.)

When he began exploring HD video, Atkins—as signposted by the title of his aforementioned text—was reading Maurice Blanchot, particularly the 1951 essay "Two Versions of the Imaginary." With its unnerving assertion that the human being, in the moment of death, becomes a representation of itself and that, indeed, the cadaver is the ultimate representation, Blanchot's text chimed with the lifelessness Atkins had observed in HD—the latter being representation's real zenith, at least in bluntly empirical terms. This parallel informs all of his videos, which interlace digitally fungible moving images and an





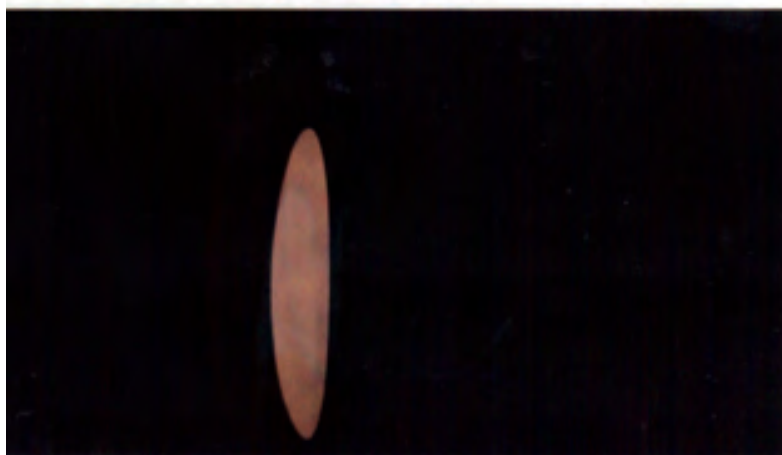
his page and opposite page, from left: Ed Atkins, *Death Mask III*, 2011, stills from a color HD video, 34 minutes 46 seconds.

**n the era of high definition, Atkins's art asks what kind of site the living (looking, thinking, feeling) body might now be.**

explicit thematics of annihilation. The key examples here would be Atkins's *Death Mask II: The Scent*, 2010, and *Death Mask III*, 2011. (The first *Death Mask*, says Atkins, exists only in the form of a screenplay for a biopic of Madame Tussaud.) The title phrase suggests a horror flick but also presumably nods to Jean-Luc Nancy's Blanchot-indebted conception of the photograph as death mask. Just as a death mask generates absence as presence, the works, in vertiginous fashion, foreground substitution and emptying out. The eight-minute *Death Mask II* begins with an image of a durian, a fruit known for its odor, which is commonly likened to

that of rotting flesh. Drastically projected onto it and refracting it over the ages, Atkins proceeds to substitute Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, for the head and for a similarly ovoiculated, and color-reversed array of fruit, being of course stock as well (mori). As with HD itself, the original or indexical point—] limitlessly modular representa-

Yet while organic substance is this dizzying flux, it is insisted upon in *Death Mask III* exemplifying the jangling *physicality* that runs through. The video alternates aggressive nature's grandeur (a rolling oceanic cinematic tropes drawn from the genres (a figure being pursued drive), and the ovoid imagery of heads). Near the beginning it puts an ominous contextualization near-abstract whole. (Atkins start, though in earlier works th-



his page and opposite page, from left: Ed Atkins, *A Tamer (In English)*, 2011, stills from a color HD video, 12 minutes 30 s

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kins used these from the  
cs they were actually blank

placeholders, asking to be filled.) The artist sketches  
out some kind of ritualized scenario in which he's  
given "a very large slow release morphine tablet."  
Everything that follows, from footage of a giant vol-  
canic plug (manipulated in so many different ways  
that one is reminded of Cézanne's febrile attentions  
to Mont Sainte-Victoire) to shots of sandy, slightly  
bloodied feet, is colored by foreboding. Whatever is  
on-screen, whether an ocean or a sneaker-shod foot, is  
boundlessly unstable—filtered through color washes,  
cubistically assayed from different angles in short  
succession, vignettted, multiplied, and, above all,  
undercut by the virtuoso sound track. We may be  
viewing a coldly digitized roiling sea, but we're hearing  
close-miked coughing, a pipe organ in a distant room,  
bursts of static, and mouse clicks—layered sounds that  
oscillate between music and noise, diegetic and non-  
diegetic, never settling, cracking space open, pressur-  
ing the boundary between the aural and the haptic,  
and bringing discontinuous elements into proximity.

A prolific writer himself, Atkins acknowledges a  
debt to experimental fiction and seeks to do for a  
passivity of viewing what, in previous generations,



s 30 seconds.

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authors like Donald Barthelme, David Markson, and David Foster Wallace sought to do for a passivity of reading. He makes videos for a visually overeducated audience that is wholly at ease reading cues and putting image and sound together in all kinds of complex ways, and to an unprecedented degree. Yet he doesn't want viewers at ease, nor does he want them to reexperience the detachment from their bodies that HD, with its promise of "life" on-screen, seems to mirror and advertise. At the same time, however, Atkins isn't content to revisit to modernist strategies of defamiliarization that ultimately and in some sense reassuringly return viewers to an awareness of their own corporeality. The human body is by now an orphaned and ambiguous thing, sidelined, mooted, or rendered incidental—not least by the passivity of spectatorship via screens—while retaining all its morbid potential for malfunction and failure. If the trajectory of technology is one in which ever-higher definition leads to a world of increasingly zombified representation—where grids of tinier and tinier pixels diverge increasingly from our own eyes' photoreceptive structure—then Atkins's art asks

what kind of site the living (looking, thinking, feeling) body might now be.

The answer he seems to come up with is, for better or worse, a host. *A Tumor (In English)*, 2011, which when shown this past autumn in Tate Britain's Art Now space took the bipartite form of a twelve-minute video and a giveaway booklet, arguably offers the most explicit and formally expansive expression of his somber bodily fixation. In the video, alongside characteristically processed images of moving moons, candles, and bell ringers, a computer simulation of a human mouth asks, "Would you mind checking the mole on my shoulder?" Later, there's a repeated cut to a digitized but throbbing and bloody tumorlike form, and an extended monologue that describes its growth in viscerally graphic terms.

The body here is reinscribed into the digital via the gravest of physical maladies (as serious as cancer, as the saying goes), and the accompanying book makes this all the more literal. The prose—active, spacious, pointedly incomplete—works to the same ends as Atkins's disjunctive, edit-rich videos, reflexively describing how anyone who reads it will



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develop a tumor. "A microscopic kernel of tumorous tissue has already shuddered into being because you have stubbornly read this far," we're informed, a few lines into the book, in a dark (and conscious) inversion of the eponymous metaphor for a swelling, text-generated mental image in Barthelme's 1966 short story "The Balloon." Rounded gaps in the type visually reiterate this allusion. The text, which hinges on powerful and sometimes powerfully repulsive images—you are prompted to visualize all your problems as a large lump trapped in your alimentary canal and to imagine propping a tumor against a door and slicing into it—is shattered, allusive, grotesque. For Atkins this kind of writing has a cellular vivacity that HD lacks (and, indeed, cannot touch, cannot kill via representation). If the process of active reception he stages does engender a state of liveliness, then, it's a tense and equivocal one, indivisible from foreknowledge of the body's eventual shutdown. The price of wakefulness, according to Atkins, is always to feel death at one's shoulder. □

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