

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Ed Atkins," *Kaleidoscope*, February 24, 2013

## KALEIDOSCOPE

ED ATKINS  
interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist



Ed Atkins, *A Primer for Cadavers*, video still, 2011  
Courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London

**HANS ULRICH OBRIST** I wanted to ask you about how it all started. How did you come to art, or did art come to you? Was it an epiphany or a gradual process?

**ED ATKINS** In retrospect, it seems a relative inevitability, in terms of having parents who were both more or less repressed but practicing artists in one way or another. One was a comprehensive school art teacher; one was a graphic designer. Both wanted to make work — and did, to a certain extent — but they were in situations where they felt they had to make a choice to have reliable incomes. Perhaps in response to this compromise, and to the presence of art in a practiced but private sense, there was a certain kind of lure of art apart from pragmatism.

In terms of my own practice, there were those initial fumbblings with drawing and painting, exploring compulsively — and then, almost completely aside from that, contemporary art and the moving image, which came through an exposure to structural film, particularly the American side of it.

**HUO** Like Stan Brakhage?

**EA** Yes, and perhaps Hollis Frampton more particularly. I suppose mainstream cinema was my first love — that and music, tempered with literature and computer games... Art was simply a place where I could bring these things together and that that was okay. At the event I organized with Sión Parkinson at the ICA over Easter weekend, "A Dying

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Artist," we showed Brakhage's autopsy film as the climax of this festival of representations of illness and death and creativity. Stan Brakhage appears almost disinterested and absolutely straightforward in his shooting of an autopsy.



Ed Atkins, *Cur*, video still, 2010  
Courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London

HUO The theme of illness and death is not new in your work.

EA Well, if I'm honest, that has come from personal experience as well as a more detached interest in the subject of materiality in the digital moving image. Everything began to circle around the cadaver. Cadavers became the best way to look at representation and, in particular, recent technologies of representation. There is the push in industrial cinema towards high definition and 3-D, and at the same time the body of cinema is falling away: there is no celluloid, no tape, no DVD. All you are left with are these reams of code, which, to a certain extent, simply haunt different media. So you have the hyper-materiality of the image itself, but in the body you have nothing — you have this apparent immaterial aspect, which to me provided an echo with the dead body, being both present and absolutely absent. Heavy, dense matter.

HUO It is almost a contradiction to make that productive.

EA For me, yes. It became an attempt to understand this apparent contradiction by making work that utilized this newly configured material-immaterial aspect within the moving image. Sound — music in particular — became a really big thing, too, as something that explicitly straddled that aspect. Those apocryphal early experiments of Throbbing Gristle, for example, that apparently tried to make people shit themselves or be sick with the use of certain frequencies and toned, trying to embody this invisible

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thing, sound, within the viewer. This is perhaps where a structural element came in as well: a heavy presence, with a reality to it, without the reliance upon, say, the presence of celluloid or a certain worrying about the projector – that, you would find matter elsewhere and it may be that the place you found it was manifest within the body of the viewer.

HUO That brings us back to illness and the recent project of manifesting a tumor, which is the production of reality.

EA Absolutely. A tumorous reality, which might be particularly interesting because it is certainly very hard to apprehend a tumor. You can't really touch it or smell it or feel it—at least not without surgery. It's this internal *thing* that you cannot apprehend sensorially; it can only be apprehended imaginatively.



Ed Atkins, *Cur*, video still, 2010  
Courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London

HUO Do you consider your work as connected to the idea of mutation?

EA Yes, I do love this idea. The book, *A Tumour (In English)*, which forms a part of the exhibition at Tate Britain, is free and there are 4,000 copies of it for visitors to take. So people will pick it up, take it home, read it, and 4,000 tumors will shudder into existence. I like the peculiar negativity of it...I want to make terrifying work. I believe that this is a powerful route toward comprehending embodiment. One spends one's life not really thinking about one's body; it's perhaps only really in the grip of illness or death that we truly apprehend our bodies. The fact is that the body, *matter*, will have its revenge.

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HUO Was painting ever relevant to you?

EA Literature is more the root, for me, in terms of creativity and illness. There is a particular canon, almost a group of people you could put together, just because they wrote differently after they had been *diagnosed*. Writers like Anthony Burgess, who when he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, produced prolifically — this incredible profusion of work, all of it urgent, produced within a newly endowed sense of nowness brought about by the apprehension of the body in decay.

HUO So you looked at writers and how they coped with terminal illness?

EA Yes, because that new negative life seems to afford a dropping of barriers, both intimately personal and creative. Because they are being handled by doctors and nurses and orderlies and really have no privacy left, perhaps they become more honest on the page.



Ed Atkins, *Death Mask III*, video stills, 2010  
Courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London

HUO Can you give more examples besides Anthony Burgess?

EA More recently, and more saliently for me, Roberto Bolaño. He struggled with illness for something like the last ten years of his life, during which time he produced five or so novels, alongside vast amounts of other prose, all of it completely committed to the idea that art and literature can genuinely affect physical reality; that they can kill or save lives. This is important in contemporary art, as people rightly wonder what kind of effect the work can have on any empirical reality. So the tumor — my contrived tumor

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— is both a kind of satire and a very real promise. This is not metaphor; reading the book will give you a tumor. It's magic. I have to believe this in order for it to be effective, both as a work and as a promise.

HUO You're talking about literature, but in your films, there is not much text. What is the role of writing, then, in your practice? Do you write a lot?

EA Yes. Most of the films begin as a more or less solid screenplay or prose piece, and then undergo a certain process of abstraction. Oftentimes, subtitles will be introduced, only to be removed later, leaving maybe just a blank bar... Writing, to me, is a precursor to this movement of immaterial to material, which I am trying to work around. It is the perfect exemplar: you carry a book, the most economical, almost immaterial communicative device. My writing is incredibly profuse; the language I use is all substance and detail; it is very gratuitous writing, in that sense, whereas the basic imagery of the films has a certain level of economy.

HUO So you write a text for each of your films?

EA Most of the time they just live with me in some way; they don't become anything. *The Death Mask* films all had scripts that then became discrete screenplays. But they are so far away from the final product of the film; they are almost unfilmable in themselves. They push towards literature again, rather than realization as a film. A single line might describe a shot lasting for six hours; it might describe impossible movements of the camera and the body of the cameraperson... Writing is the way I think; I think through writing. I don't draw to think, I do the odd drawing, but they are not to think. They are the opposite of thinking.