

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Laura Herman, "Ed Atkins," *Frieze*, January 04, 2016

Frieze

Ed Atkins

DÉPENDANCE, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM



Ed Atkins, *Hisser*, 2014, installation view, dépendance, Brussels, 2015; photographs Sven Laurent

When I visited dépendance's show of Ed Atkins's CGI-animated film *Hisser* (2015), it was just following the terrorist attacks in Paris, and a few hours before Belgian authorities intended to close the city centre. Coincidentally, the first work visible upon walking into the gallery was a poster of a wolf, which bore a caption by the blind and deaf American writer Helen Keller, alerting us in bold capitals: 'No Fear. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure... Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.' While the poster serendipitously resonated with the city's current atmosphere, Atkins's high-definition video work primarily concerns itself with endemic anxieties of the digital age, focusing on how technology produces and controls physical bodies. Combining sophisticated software with poetic and literary tropes, Atkins creates nightmarish virtual environments populated by avatars of white men plagued by sorrow and desire.

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Ed Atkins, *Hisser*, 2014, installation view, *dépendance*, Brussels, 2015

The focal point of the exhibition is *Hisser*, a dual-channel video projection accompanied by a powerful soundtrack. On screen, slow tracking shots navigate through a digitally rendered bedroom of a single, middle-aged man, scanning the books on the shelves and revealing the room's cramped, generic setup. It's nighttime; the window is open; curtains blow in the breeze. A full moon sends a silver ray of light across the room. *Hisser* immerses us in Atkins's unsettling reconstruction of the final 30 minutes of the life of Jeffrey Bush, a Florida man whose bedroom was suddenly swallowed by an enormous sinkhole. The wolf poster reappears above the protagonist's bed, prompting a sort of *déjà-vu*, and reflecting on the contingencies of real-life embodiment and digital corporeality.

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Ed Atkins, *Hisser*, 2014, installation view, dépendance, Brussels, 2015

Hisser straddles hyper-realistic representation and complete disorientation. Zooming in on a flickering HD-screen on the floor of the bedroom, we see a flattened space with no edges or contours to guide us. That void represents the empty inside of the screen, where everything but the hyper-real avatar is effaced. Naked and solitary, the virtual character wanders aimlessly across it, repeatedly whispering: 'I'm sorry, I didn't know.' The scene suggests that while virtual life promises liberation from material constraints, it leaves us alienated from corporeal affects, substances, bodies and sex. Technology is always pushing to be construed as magic, right?' Atkins asked rhetorically in a piece in *Artforum* discussing his earlier work *Ribbons* (2014). The question reverberates throughout *Hisser*, reminding us how technology – just like a sinkhole – is constituted by material preconditions.

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Ed Atkins, *Hisser*, 2014, HD video still

The film returns at intervals to the bed: sometimes empty, sometimes occupied by the avatar humming songs, calming his insomniac, perturbed digital self. Later, the figure turns his back to the viewer, flipping through cards imprinted with Rorschach inkblots, speculating on his emotional functioning before jerking off in a corner of his room. The scene becomes even bleaker, with interjecting musical excerpts taken from Elton John and Kiki Dee's 1976 hit *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*. Consumed by doubt, fear and loneliness, the figure whispers, sighs and mutters, building to a crescendo of desperation. Sounds interrupt erratically; images change focus. A strange sense of a make-believe reality creeps under the viewer's skin as the slick digital images and sounds increasingly jar and break down, complicating our perception of time and space.

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Despite its apparent inertness, the empty room emanates a charged, foreboding atmosphere. The vertical hold on the screen begins to move upward; the frames accelerate into a vertiginous loop, before steadily slowing down again. From then on, all solid ground disappears; the room starts to shake and finally collapses, engulfing its occupant. The disappearance of the avatar in the sinkhole is Atkins's visceral allegory of the paradox of the HD image: however sharp, lucid and convincing the image appears, it has no material basis; it can be quickly wiped out without a trace. So what is it we empathize with when the image starts to rupture, and the avatar forever vanishes into nothingness? Is it only when digital technology breaks down or disappears that its apparatus becomes visible – that we become aware of its failings, and its artifice? Interested in what technology is not or cannot do, Atkins's work urges us to consider the deceptive nature of the virtual in favour of real-life investigations into our own embodied emotional depth.

Laura Herman