

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ben Lerner, "The Pain Artist," *The New York Review*, February 8, 2024

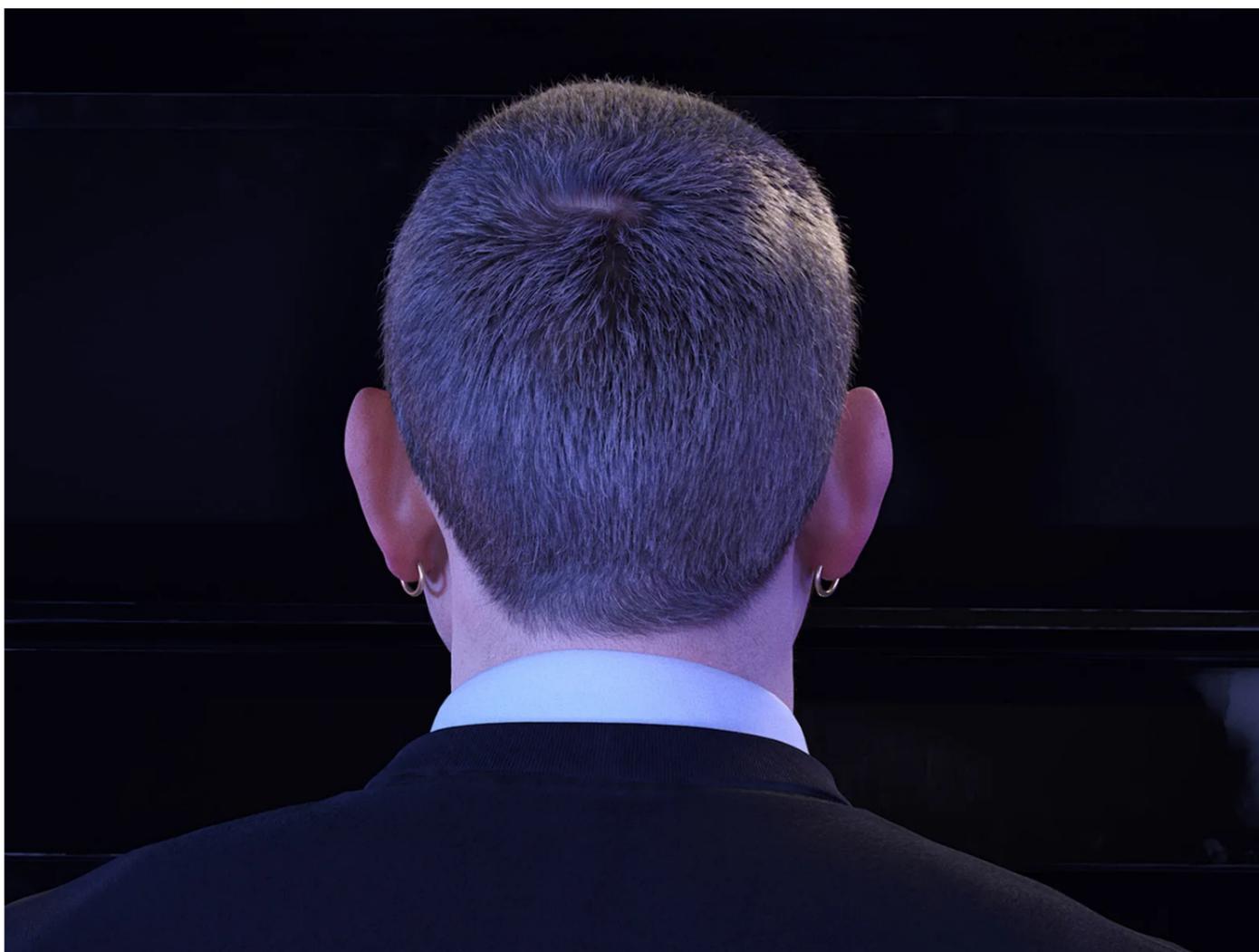
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The Pain Artist

Ben Lerner

The artist Ed Atkins's video *Pianowork 2* poses questions about the representation of reality.

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A still from Ed Atkins's *Pianowork 2*, 2023

Reviewed:

Ed Atkins with Steven Zultanski

an exhibition at the Gladstone Gallery, New York City, November 17, 2023–January 6, 2024

Ed Atkins's *Pianowork 2* is a sixteen-minute computer animation that involves an uncannily realistic digital avatar of Atkins playing Jürg Frey's minimalist piano composition "Klavierstück 2." (I saw *Pianowork 2* at the Gladstone Gallery late last year, and it will presumably be included in the Atkins exhibition that the Tate Britain is planning for 2025.) The real Atkins's piano performance was translated via a motion-capture process into what the gallery materials describe as his "digital model." "Ed wore a lycra X-Sens motion-capture suit and gloves," reads a pamphlet that accompanied the show, "and a rig to brace an iPhone to his head—the TrueDepth camera of which was used to record Ed's face.... Ed's head and hands were scanned for fidelity."

The artifice of the disconcertingly detailed digital model is in part re-vealed through the flawless rendering of bodily flaws—razor bumps, patches of red skin, etc. The imperfections are too perfect; the primary “tell” of the artificial is now a surplus of reality. (That said, there were many moments in the video when I don’t think I could distinguish the actual Atkins from his digital double.) Perhaps its most obviously unreal element is the space around Atkins’s model and the piano; it’s a gray noplacé, somewhere between a soundstage and the surround of Manet’s *Dead Toreador*.

As Atkins’s avatar plays Frey’s pains-takingly slow “Klavierstück 2”—a piece of music so minimal that I wasn’t initially sure it was a composition; Atkins might not have been following a score but improvising melancholically, distractedly, repeating himself, stopping and starting at random—digital tears well in his eyes, he grimaces, his hands shake. He exhibits, in other words, a wide range of sorrowful expressions and what philosophers call “pain behaviors.” (Expressions of suffering, though, can sometimes be hard to sort from expressions of concentration, trying to get the music right; the rests between notes are long, and Atkins is presumably counting.) The camera—but of course there is no actual camera inside the digital space; these are just camera effects—moves around, maybe at random, maybe following some rule I can’t discern. This rhymed, in my initial viewing, with the uncertainty about whether a composition was being performed or whether the depressed avatar was just depressing keys.

Here we see from ground level a leather shoe stepping on a sustaining or damping pedal, here we see the back of Atkins’s close-cropped head, each individual hair somehow too discernible, here is a shot of the hands—see the hairs on the knuckles—from the perspective of the player, here is the pianist in profile, a frontal closeup right into his eyes, now from several virtual feet away. I had the sense that the simulated shifts in perspective were asking us to identify, to locate, where the pain resides:

The fingers? The hunched shoulders? The eyes? (Perhaps the least realistic element of the avatar—is that deliberate or are eyes harder to translate?) At one point the noncamera zooms into the avatar’s slightly open mouth, as if to force the question of interiority, as if trying to get to the source of the sorrow.

Music isn’t the only melancholy sound in *Pianowork 2*, there are mic effects of an ASMR sort—close breathing, sighing, the breath catching (our breath glitches from emotion), mouth popping and smacking sounds, fabric moving. There is also birdsong—presumably but not certainly real—in the distance for part of the video, and voices from a nearby room or of people passing on the street. “The sound of Ed’s performance was recorded by Magnus Kaslov very deliberately,” says the pamphlet, “using various microphones, including ribbon mics, contact mics, and accelerometers,” whatever those are. Or—given that Frey sometimes uses humming in his compositions—are some of these sounds not spontaneous but rather dictated by the score? Regardless, the bodily sounds are intensely intimate, both physically and emotionally, and intensely mediated; they are not sounds we hear in unmiked daily life except maybe when we’re making out with someone or attending unusually closely to our own physiological noise. In that sense they too constitute a kind of hyperreality.

Unlike the piano music—which I experience as issuing from the instrument depicted in the video—I don’t always hear the bodily sounds as originating from the avatar. A few seconds after the performance concludes, for instance, there is the distinct sound of lips parting, a quick inhale, but the avatar’s mouth doesn’t move. Breath-work does not always seem synched to pianowork, to the digital model’s movements, and this quietly preserves a small distance between Atkins and his representation. “Pneuma” means both breath and soul, and the digital model doesn’t quite have one.

The near-anagrammatic relation between pain and piano hangs over the piece. And is a piano a computer of a sort, its score a software? Together they are expressive, often of pain. The almost weeping almost-Atkins playing barely music with his digital digits on a keyboard is a melancholic player piano for the age of deepening fakes. But the power of the work is that it’s both very old and very new in the concerns it activates. “Relevance,” Elisa Tamarkin reminds us in her *Apropos of Something: A History of Irrelevance and Relevance* (2022), means “to raise or to lift up again,” to make something in the past freshly present. The forty-two-year-old, Oxfordshire-born Atkins, best known for his video works, “sounds” ancient questions in new ways, including questions about the animate and inanimate, reality and simulation, the problem and privacy of other minds, how and why we are moved by representations of suffering. Needless to say, I have no answers to the questions Atkins’s art so powerfully raises, but I think it’s worth trying to specify some of the ways it lifts them up. Apropos of pain, “relevance” can also mean “to give relief.”

In the 1930’s at Cambridge Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical discussion group was so focused on questions of pain—What is the connection between an experience of pain and its outward expression? How can we verify that another is in pain?—that the group became known as the Toothache Club. “I can only believe that someone else is in pain, but I know it if I am”—thus begins the 303rd entry in his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. For many thinkers, the central philosophical problem of other minds has often turned on the question of pain. Some philosophers have tried to bypass the split of inner and outer, suggesting that the feeling and its expression are inextricable. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), “I perceive the grief or the anger of the other in his conduct, in his face or his hands, without recourse to any ‘inner’ experience of suffering or anger.” But what about when the other is a hyperrealistic 3D digital model? In *Pianowork 2*, I not only wonder if Atkins is in pain or merely performing it, I not only ponder the difference between seeing the real Atkins suffering at the piano and his representation, but I also find myself asking: Can the avatar feel pain? An absurd question, but one that grows less absurd by the hour.

Pain and its representations are always political. There is of course a vast pain literature, debates about the boundary between physical and emotional suffering (Atkins’s avatar often seems to experience both), about whose pain counts and for whom. Just think of fights regarding the capacity of a fetus to feel pain, or how questions about animal rights turn on the capacity for suffering.² The knowability or at least believability of another’s pain is inextricable from arguments about the conferring of personhood (on a fetus) or the status of “nonhuman person” (on animals).

I'm not suggesting that anybody would claim that a computer-generated Atkins is a "nonhuman per-son" in this sense, but I am tempted to say "not yet." AI might not just have the capacity to destroy us all, it might also manage to feel bad about it. To quote one recent symposium description:

As part of National Pain Week (24–30 July 2023), UQ's Professor Brian Key and Professor Deborah Brown . . . consider whether advanced AI could one day feel pain like humans, since artificial neural networks are increasingly designed to reflect human neural networks.

Debates about machine sentience are all around us, and part of what makes *Pianowork 2* fascinating to me is how I find myself reading the avatar's expressions not just as representing Atkins's pain (which I might trust or doubt) but as indicating a kind of nascent digital consciousness. Despite my best efforts, I feel that the avatar—especially when the face stretches a little awkwardly, as if testing out a first mournful look—is just starting to know and communicate suffering of its own. I do believe (but cannot know) that Atkins was in actual emotional pain at the piano, and I can't help feeling like his digital model is getting there. Again, I feel this so acutely because the animation both closes the distance between Atkins and his avatar (the digital pianist is sometimes indistinguishable from the real person) and holds it open (the breath is nonsynchronous, the space is unreal, the details are too detailed).

All this feels shockingly new, all this feels very old. As I pondered the avatar's pain behavior, I thought of the way so many of my first and formative experiences of looking at art involved depictions of pain. How often have I stood before a *pietà* or deposition and felt moved (or not) based on whether I found the expressions of sorrow believable? And as I scanned the digital Atkins for signs of artificiality, I also felt the video had activated deep questions in the tradition of Western portraiture. Historians of European art talk about a move from typicality (generic and conventional faces) to individuality (faces drawn from historical persons) as a significant feature of the early Renaissance.³ Atkins's *Pianowork 2* is the first video of his I've seen in which the avatar so clearly resembles him; the also excellent *Worm*, for example, features a more generic digital figure, or at least a figure in which the abstractness of the avatar is felt as a live issue.⁴ Atkins's experiments with specificity and generality in his digital models—especially of facial features—strike me as a way of recasting the tension between typicality and likeness for a digital present in which we can reconstruct the face of "a mature Neanderthal gentleman" or Dante or generate plausible synthetic faces with a click. "Choose age, head pose, skin tone, emotion, sex and generate a baby or adult face online," says <https://generated.photos>.

Even my intuition that the avatar, the artwork, might be developing something like a soul (or sentience) is new-old. Hans Belting famously argued in *Likeness and Presence* (1990) that before the Renaissance holy images were not treated as "art" in the modern sense but as objects in which the sacred actually dwelled. My suspicion that the avatar might not merely be a surrogate for Atkins's feelings but might be expressing its own emergent interiority, and that this might create complicated obligations on my part toward the avatar/artwork, is not entirely unlike the notion that spirit resides in an icon that must itself be venerated.

In Atkins's work I encounter the promise or threat of likeness becoming presence, a creepy kind of reenchant-ment. Pianowork 2 feels both like a glimpse of the AI future and a relic.

A relic of the future: I wish Atkins a long and healthy life, but it is difficult not to imagine Pianowork 2 surviving him, since another antecedent here (as with all sculptural and painterly portraiture) is funerary art and the death mask. Perhaps that is what the 3D model's suffering concerns: Perhaps the model is mourning its maker? "Some people are using artificial intelligence chatbots to create avatars of departed loved ones," says a recent article in *The New York Times*. "It's a source of comfort for some, but it makes others a little squeamish."

In *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) Nigel Tufnel sits at the piano and plays a little for Marty DiBergi:

MARTY: It's pretty.

NIGEL: Yeah, I like it, just been fooling about with it for a few months now, very delicate...

MARTY: It's a, it's a bit of a departure from the kind of thing you normally play.

NIGEL: Yeah, it's part of a trilogy really, a musical trilogy I'm doing... in... D minor, which I always find is really the saddest of all keys really. I don't know why, but it makes people weep instantly.

If people reliably weep when you play "the saddest of all keys," then D minor can be used as a kind of CAPTCHA test: if you don't weep, you might not be a person. Instead of, as in *Blade Runner*, giving the Voight-Kampff test to sort replicants from humans, you could just have Nigel play a little and track the response. (No, that wouldn't work—replicants can cry; also, for my part, I cry at the replicant Roy Batty's "tears in rain" speech at the end of the movie more reliably than listening to music in D minor, though it's hard to tell if Batty himself is crying since it's rain-ing and he's bleeding from his eyes.)

I've always thought of artworks as a kind of CAPTCHA test I might not pass. Am I feeling the right things at the right pitch of intensity? What if I'm discovered to be lacking in some fundamental capacity—what if I'm the avatar or replicant? When I watch *Pianowork 2* I'm not only moved and discomfited by my sense that Atkins's digital model might be developing a capacity for pain, but I'm also made to reflect on the rightness or specificity of my own responses. Does and should my reaction depend on my sense of the authenticity of Atkins's or his avatar's emotional state? And is the latter a mirror of the former or something autonomous? (And is my empathy—if that's what it is—for Atkins or his avatar also just a kind of neuronal mirroring? Am I the automaton?)

Or maybe the problem is being moved at all. "Emotional music has become the image of the mother who says, 'Come and weep, my child,'" Theodor Adorno wrote in his essay "On Popular Music." "Klavierstück 2" is basically the opposite of the music Adorno had in mind, and I hardly endorse Adorno's wholesale denunciation of popular culture, but what if seeing the lachrymose pianist transforms Frey's minimalist composition into a work of sentimentality, of bathos? "One who weeps does not resist any more than one who

marches,” Adorno wrote. “Music that permits its listeners the confession of their unhappiness reconciles them, by means of this ‘release,’ to their social dependence.” Perhaps as I felt tears well up in my eyes watching Pianowork 2, I wasn’t passing a CAPTCHA test but failing a political one.

While I watched Atkins’s video, I re-called a sonnet (of a sort) by the poet Michael Palmer from his magnificent volume *Sun* (1988). The poem certainly evokes Adorno, who composed his own *Klavierstücke*, and it reads like a pro-found and exacting ekphrastic meditation on Pianowork 2, even though Palmer wrote it thirty- five years be-fore Atkins’s video was made (or was technologically possible):

A man undergoes pain sitting at a
piano
knowing thousands will die while
he is playing

He has two thoughts about this
If he should stop they would be
free of pain

If he could get the notes right he
would be free of pain
In the second case the first
thought would be erased

causing pain

It is this instance of playing

he would say to himself
my eyes have grown hollow like
yours

my head is enlarged
though empty of thought

Such thoughts destroy music
and this at least is good

In the credits to Pianowork 2, we read: Ed Atkins performed Jürg Frey’s 2001 composition *Klavierstück 2* on Wednesday, June 21, 2023, at Mimic Productions in Berlin. Ed finished this video on Sunday, November 12, 2023, in great sadness.

Is that “great sadness” personal, private, or is it the great sadness of, say, October 7 and its ever-worsening aftermath? (That the sadness needs to be asserted seems to anticipate that it might be doubted.) Palmer’s poem is a sonnet/sonata on the famously pessimistic questions Adorno posed about the relation of art and suffering, the barbarism of making lyric, expressive art after Auschwitz.

The one letter keeping “pain” and “piano” apart anagrammatically is the “o” of lyric apostrophe.) The “dissonant sound- and- rhythm off- rhyming of pain and playing, its strange wavering between numb recitative and charged ghost song” (as the critic Robert Kaufman put it in an excellent essay on Palmer in Cultural Critique), along with the hollowness of the player’s eyes and the way he seems reduced to a thoughtless automaton as the poem progresses, make the sonnet an eerily specific adjunct to Atkins’s video.

I’m attempting to gesture toward the series of subtle but powerful oscillations Pianowork 2 sets in motion (“oscillations” is a word Atkins often uses in his writings)—between past and future, human and avatar, CAPTCHA and Turing test, presence and likeness, the latter shading into the former as the avatar learns pain and its behaviors; an oscillation between suffering and concentration, between automaton (the player piano as an early computer) and innovation, following a program and just playing around, play-ing in or at pain, between minimalism and “emotional music,” “great sadness” and sentimentality; between a representation of a historical person and an avatar of generic personhood, between funerary sculpture and digital second lives. So much seems to depend on Atkins’s getting the notes right—see the avatar tremble with the effort—and yet nothing depends on it relative to the thousands, the many thousands, who will die as the video is on repeat at Gladstone, real humans who must appear as mere avatars to the drone operator. Better to destroy music than enjoy its false consolations?

As I sit here at my own keyboard trying to describe how Atkins’s work confuses my sense of the boundary between human and machine, how it complicates my grasp of what constitutes interiority or intention, it becomes hard to sort poetry from programming. So here is a found poem for Atkins (or his avatar), an octet no human intended (despite the way the long a’s of same and pain and sensation and shape imply intention, the sensation of that sonic sameness lending the “stanza” shape). From the index of my copy of Philosophical Investigations:

attending, attention

- to colour, 33, 275, 277
- to my own consciousness, 412
- and defining, 33- 4, 258, 268
- not always the same, 33- 4
- to pain or piano, 666- 7, 674, 678, 682
- to a sensation, 258, 268, 668 - to shape, 33