

# CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: ED ATKINS

**Ed Atkins**

*Us Dead Talk Love*

**21 September – 11 November 2012**

*Katie Guggenheim: Ed, you have often used high definition video as the medium for your work but this is the first time you have made a two-channel video, and, used surround-sound. How did that decision come about and what does it mean for this new work?*

Ed Atkins: There's a very pragmatic answer to this, which is that these are the tools of a contemporary kind of image making. If you buy a camera or a projector or computer then you can't really *not* use these things. But, having said that, the decision comes with an understanding of what these materials are doing to image making, and – particularly for me – to representation. High definition has offered – in industrial cinema and in lots of other scenarios – the possibility for a powerful accuracy of representation that is so much more than what was possible before and it has had some strange effects. I think I'm not alone in feeling the hyperreal aspect of this. A test sequence from the new *Hobbit* film was screened recently - it is shot at 48 frames per second and in 3D high definition - and the audience complained that it was too real. You could see all the actors' make-up – you could see the prosthesis. Suddenly the way of capturing reality is too real, frightening even.

High definition reality privileges the representation of texture and surface, but at the same time the 'body' of the film or video has dropped away. Even though the image itself is more concerned with physical and tactile aspects, the source of the image, the body, is no longer there – it has become ever more immaterial. High definition films are on memory cards not DVDs and they're not recorded onto or into anything comprehensible when you shoot them; they never really resolve themselves into a body – whereas the image... there is this kind of split: extremes of representational thinking – contemporary representation, high definition on one hand – and on the other, the kind of *ur*-representation that is the dead body. The only way that one can become a representation of oneself is to die and in that moment you become a high-definition thing. The physical, tactile and corporeal come back with a vengeance in the slumped form of

a dead body, having spent so long under the duress of consciousness – but at the same time obviously there is nothing there. The thing that was there – the self – has been replaced by representation, and has gone forever.

Film critic and theorist André Bazin commented about cinema being a warning that the material will always return – that it's not just illusion, it's not just air; that there's something there. Obviously his point was more explicit in the sense that there was film and chemical and things like that, but today, in spite of the continued dissimulation of the material of moving image, we must still look for it, and one of the places that one might try to find this material aspect of the digital would be inside the viewer, where it would reterritorialise and become manifest. This is something I've explored quite explicitly – tumerously – in previous work. *A Tumour (in English)* (2011) promised to conjure a tumour in the viewer.

Of the technologies that are making this embodiment possible – assaulting the audience in such a sensational way – surround-sound would be another particularly prevalent example. It has this immersive aspect, it encloses the body, but it also affords the possibility of penetrating the body sonically. The sub-bass could overawe a body; the space conjured by surround sound could transport a body. It all sounds quite violent, and perhaps it necessarily is. This technology is consumer or more specifically prosumer – these two areas having become very important for me because they describe and afford being intimate with making the work. Being able to make work intimately, being able to use all this kit and using this newly, partially democratised technology allows you to make it all yourself.

*You have made the film on a laptop with headphones, which is quite different in scale to the way it is being shown.*

I rather like the violent gesture of expulsion. This movement – from me looking at a tiny window on a video editing screen and never being able see both video channels at once because, annoyingly, in the software Adobe Premiere you can't have two sequences open as separate windows together... – to those huge screens in the gallery is thrilling. If I was constantly trying to predict how the work would exist apart from me while I was making it then there would be that kind of wrenching all the time; but if I live with it very intimately and nurse this thing and then throw it out there

then I can't predict what it's going to be necessarily, but I can certainly read it again.

The screens are in an aspect ratio of 4:3, which is a defunct aspect ratio – it's like TV. The cameras you buy new now are 16:9, and all the projectors you get now – none of them are native 4:3. But 4:3 encloses more – it has less of a relationship to an expansive landscape and more to a close portrait. High definition will always be 16:9, but making the projected image 4:3 meant that there would be this overspill which would serve as a little potted history of that technological narrative, somehow, and also serve as a way of underscoring the fact that a decision has been made here. What happens with the overspill is that it exists in a strange, liminal space because it is part of the moving image but it doesn't move – it's light, but it's from the projector, and it's hitting the wall behind the place where the image is, so it's not part of that. It exists in this peculiar place where it's in the room but it's not of the diagenesis of the video. It's from the same source but it's not controlled or edited and has the effect of looking like the screens are spot-lit, which also confuses the image's location. It's also like parentheses – it isolates the screens individually but symmetrically, which I think, in terms of a relation to images – text as image – is quite important.

*The gallery space at Chisenhale is a classic white cube, but rather than turning it into a cinema-like black box, you've made a specific installation environment, dividing the space into two, with one half almost like a stage and the other half reserved for the audience.*

I didn't want to just make a cinema, partly because certain kinds of cinema situations offer safety and sanctuary for a body; you're not really at risk or culpable there. But I think that a gallery space, performance space or theatre introduces the reality of being near another body and feeling that body. Not that the collaged panels are alive but they relate in a way that they're not just asking you to see them as images. The way I was thinking about the space was in-between a stage and cinema – but also a TV studio and other kinds of stages and sets which are less obvious, like the academic staging of conversations and interviews or panel discussions – all the kinds of areas which co-opt bits of those larger structures of theatre and cinema but do it slightly differently or slightly awkwardly. Having the collaged boards in there means that the light has to be such just enough for you to be able to see them but they're not paintings or things to be seen – a kind of half light scenario. The acoustics are

also both a compromise and not.

Basically I'm trying to hold on to as many of these things as I can, and trying not to let it feel like one space, but instead to have a feeling of discomfort about where someone is and that hopefully this discomfort would ripple on to an interpretation of the work. The halving of the space seemed like an important thing in terms of defining and understanding an area where a certain kind of reality takes shape. The audience are with the boards, which are big, analogue, inky, painty and papery things – and on the other side with the black carpet, which destroys a certain sense of space, you have the projection screens and almost everything on the screens is made in-computer and is very close, strange and hyper-treated – again the mirroring binaries of something that privileges surface and unctuous matter, but is also totally absent. It's totally immaterial yet dealing with really base material things.

*When you were making the work you made some recordings in the gallery space. Which sounds were recorded in the gallery and why did you decide to record them here?*

I was thinking quite a lot about having a Classical chorus to lend some kind of comment to what was happening with the protagonists in the film. A lot of this has changed in the making, but it felt like a good idea to record the chorus – if they were going to be part of the audience, or acting as intermediaries between the performance and the audience – in the space as well so that the sound would be of an audience in the Chisenhale space, but obviously its totally illogical in the sense that when recording and playing it back, there is a doubling of the acoustic. Still, it was kind of a revelation with the choir. The space is apparently perfect for choral music – it's like a church in a way, I suppose. Similar harmonics, perhaps. I recorded a lot of other incidental sounds in the space, like dragging a chair around or clapping. When planning the work we talked a lot about the problematics of the space acoustically, and that so often it needs addressing with sound panels, but again being aware of not trying to push the space to be something it's not, like not to make it into a cinema, but to recognise these particular aspects of the space and one of those is definitely its very particular acoustic. All the dialogue is recorded very closely mic'd and completely flat. There's no space to it and actually a lot of the sound from the front of the room, from the screens, is completely killed – there's no reverb – and so... that was important as a delineation. The choir haven't been treated at all – they are

just as recorded. Everything else that's in the film is treated in some way to fake a space or to kill a space. The whole thing is artifice. A lot of the sounds are appropriated sounds or they're from stock CDs of sound effects or they are me coughing, shuffling, etc. – deliberately making noises for the production of moving image stuff, like all the filters used in the images.

*This approach of layering sounds from different sources and combining audio and visual effects in the film seems to extend to your treatment of the collaged panels. There are materials, textures and techniques that appear across both and I wanted to ask you about these, and the specific images in the film, such as the photographs of sculptures that look like they are taken from old art history text books – what are they?*

They're kind of citations I guess – they're kind of footnotes. They often appear in the background behind one of the heads while it's talking, masking taped to the wall. One of them is a drunk fawn or satyr, which is a Roman sculpture, probably a copy of a Greek original, and it's notably, obviously erotic – a kind of spread-legged man reclining on a boulder. He stands as a surrogate for a certain kind of eroticism – a deep sense of eroticism and also classical eroticism. Some starting points were Socrates' Phaedrus talking about Eros, madness, love, coupling. I was originally going to film some plane trees because Socrates has this conversation sat under a plane tree outside the walls of Athens, but this whole thing thankfully became much more complicated. A lot of these images are monumentally large in what their effect could be, but also at least partially vacant and able to be constantly appropriated. You can buy postcards of the drunk fawn at the Gliptothek in Munich, you can buy miniatures – his face is strikingly similar to Val Kilmer's – it's already processed and absorbed, into culture, to a certain extent. The other one is a Medusa head. I think it's from Leptis Magna or somewhere like that. Medusa again has a fierce kind of erotics at play, and this came from this recent book by Julia Kristeva about severed heads – which felt really apposite at the time – that amongst other things, talks about the hermaphroditic aspect of Medusa in terms of her gaze, her returned gaze... and obviously 'the gaze' has been one of the main discursive aspects around moving image – the male gaze in particular – and Medusa returns the male gaze with all its violence, turning its originator to stone. Also the writhing, phallic snakes and the repugnance and the attraction. You have to look at her but you can't. A lot of the themes and areas of discourse surrounding moving image are Classical.

These things lend themselves, through mirrors, allegory, sexuality and hubris – to contemporary technology and its users.

A lot of the background textures and images in the film are stock footage. Like the drop in a pool – that's one of those famous stock images; or the fabric, which is a transition that comes free with the software Final Cut – I think it's for DVD menus mainly – but it comes alpha channel keyed so you can use it for anything, and I've coloured it and blurred it and pushed through any number of filters and effects. Blur is one of the filters I've used an awful lot – pulling between very tight depths of field, so things will fall out or in to focus but they'll be quite close to one another. There's this sense of a particular depth pretty much throughout – a very particular sense of depth... like the depth of a cupboard or the depth under a duvet rather than proper depth or a theatrical depth. And it's all faked, obviously. Anything that's relatively real I shot in front of a green screen and then you can build that up as a layer and you can isolate bits and take stuff out. All of this invites collage really, and a lot of this is playing to what the technology desires and what the medium wants. The stock stuff is very vacant; it's emptied-out stuff that doesn't mean anything in itself, which makes the editing and the decisions involved in the processing and postproduction more conspicuous. A really successful stock image is successful because it can be used in so many different contexts. You can put someone's company name underneath and it would make sense or you could put a caption or you could inject it into something. It has the ability to be hyper specific when used in a context but also completely ambivalent to its own place in the world.

*How do you see the analogue collages on the boards in relation to the collaging of digital effects?*

The stuff on the boards is pretty much of the same stock – sometimes literally – but filtered in another way, through my labour to become real again. Like the hairs, which are a randomly generated thing. It's a filter for making digital footage look analogue and you can change the parameters according to whatever use. So hair trapped in the gate or dust particles or flicker – all the things that would signify it being old and made of film – but by pushing the hair filter to a ridiculous level which undermines its possibility to be invisible, you get this flickering field of black lines, hairs. I guess a lot of these filters are meant not to be seen – so corrupting it by drawing attention to it and

making it hairy... no one would have that much hair accumulated on their film and it doesn't look right. Projecting stills of that and copying them onto the boards in ink was a way of drawing attention to that lineage – the perversity of that movement from the artifice of faking something analogue all the way to me painstakingly inking them onto the boards.

The size and shape of the boards, 8' x 4', is a pragmatic avoidance of making a decision – but the size also has a relationship to the body in a way that the video can never do in terms of scale and presence. Having them leaning has a gravitational aspect and returns weight to the world. They are of a bodily scale. Somewhere in them is a bed, and somewhere in them is a storyboard. The masking tape has a provisional aspect but also an understanding that there's a stock of stuff that's being used. Most of them comprise of the same elements – a nod towards something like an infinite number of permutations of these kinds of elements – the faith that if you were to get everything right something would happen. Something extraordinary. All this stuff is at the service of underscoring a process of editing rather than genesis of image making or creativity. Again it's all kind of appropriated – but the panels, particularly, are empty entirely. There's no one in the bed, there's no head on the pillow, and with the hair, there's no image that it's trying to make look analogue.

Points of origin unravel in different directions but end up making the same gestures, but one towards matter, becoming matter, and one towards ether, or non-matter. Both of them still maintain a relationship to both, and not just through conspicuous absence. You can separate the two but there's a kind of melancholy. A subject of the work here is the impossibility of proper intimacy, between two people, particularly, but also between anything and anything else. Intimacy itself describes being as close as possible but not being the same – the desire to be as close as possible to someone else, which is always stopped by skin, but also by identity and also the sheer unintelligibility of another person. Someone else is always going to be incoherent to you and understanding another person as incoherent is ethical – it's a 'good' thing to do but it's also very sad to admit – to not try and cohere someone and categorise them but to appreciate their incoherence – it's a very melancholy thing. There is a kind of classical tragedy to this. The tragedy being the failure of people to be able to be enough in love and be close enough to each other, and that's also part of a larger narrative of war and families and drama of all kinds, but ultimately it belies the fact that two people can never be the same

### *How did the title come about?*

It was a process of being quite deliberately dumb about understanding the work on fundamental levels – what are the root things that are in the work. A lot of it came from very particular readings of things and the desire to talk about representation and death, as I seemingly always do – an idea of representation as being violent and murderous in its base desires and trying to counter that to a certain extent, through abstraction and a certain denying of the possibility of representation – talking about things that are unrepresentable, but then trying to represent them, in the knowledge that it won't work but trying to get very close to that membrane. Maurice Blanchot's idea that one can only become a representation of oneself in death is a terrible thing to understand because most of us are, in one way or another, trying to represent ourselves – that totality, however, is always withheld. That that full transition into representation is impossible in life. I've been reading Catherine Malabou's writing recently about destructive plasticity and the possibility of metamorphosing into another completely. Another pretty Classical trope is of metamorphosis, which is always of appearance but never of being. Whoever turns into a swan, or a thing, is left with their abject original being inside, because if they became a swan entire – in terms of a swan's being or whatever – there would be no point, no narrative, no humanity left. Actually certain lesions of the brain, or Alzheimer's, or similar, change being irrevocably – a person becomes something else completely. They might look the same, superficially, but their being is absolutely, totally other, which is just as frightening as dying, if not more so.

Love also presented something of an impossible scenario for representation. There's a book by Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips called *Intimacies* and one of its projects is reassessing and maybe even reinvigorating ideas of love in a post-psychoanalytic, Post-Lacanian, post evolutionistic, Darwinist scenario – that love is a necessity that's been conjured – an artifice – in order to procreate, or that it's always already going to be a narcissistic deferral – that you can't genuinely share desire. Bersani and Phillips' book presents divergent ways around this. Also Alain Badiou's recent writing about love and the scene of the two, and 'twoness' – these dualities that again relate back to Blanchot's two versions of the imaginary: one being that the cadaver, the human dead body, which operates in both spiritual and immaterial ways – in remembering and emotional affect – but, at the same time, is the most physically present thing you can imagine: a slumped pile of flesh. The cadaver

again, offers an impossible situation, of the impossibility of two people being close and being together, genuinely, rather than just serving their own narcissistic desires. These things, to me, invite an attempt to represent them through language or through image making. They will always resist it, but that resistance presents the most exciting terrain for representation – because of that difficulty, I suppose.

*You've made a version of the written script for the film available for visitors to read.*

Yes but it's a lot longer. It's interesting to discern what should be in the film, what should be script, and what should just happen in the head. It was clear that certain things I couldn't perform out loud – they couldn't exist in a voice, or at least not in my voice. I think the script kind of complicates the whole thing. Within the film it's very clear it's being read: like, in the foreground, when the heads are facing out, there is a white block with a drop shadow as if cast from a piece of paper, and the eyes of the protagonists are kind of darting towards it as if they're reading. It's like a read-through, then, which hopefully lends it a kind of complication, in terms of what the source is and if the person saying the thing really means it – so it's an actor, then, and not a document of a real thing. I suppose it adds another layer of artifice, but there are points where it breaks down. At the very end of the video there's the awkward meter of this bad couplet, which is 'Come to bed and fucking die; add light to some small pink star'. It's too many syllables to be a couplet and the protagonist tries it in various different ways – which was genuine: as in, it's just me attempting a delivery of it in different ways. There's repeated motifs like asking if someone could 'just fix them a fucking drink' that again break out of the script – maybe the actor is making demands or the protagonist is real, actually, and needs a fucking drink.

*In terms of the process of making the work, did you start by writing, or with the visual material?*

Really it starts with reading: looking at images and accumulating a resource of citations, and then writing, but writing with the idea that this would, partially, be a script. Writing is the *thing* really – I think in text rather than in images, I suppose – text can operate in representational ways that images

can't. Metaphors can be dense, or almost completely wrong, like almost not a metaphor at all, with no analogous bearing, but still the taste, the sense of a metaphor – and more: the right metaphor. The best metaphors are the ones that don't seem to make any sense – that are truly poetic in the sense that they resist simply describing something or having something. I originally wanted to write this text in a form of English called E-Prime, which has no use of the verb to be, which is a kind of ethical gesture, again. Rather than saying that something *is* something, you would have to say 'I understand this thing like this' or 'it looks like this' – really isolating an experience of something and not be assertive, apparently objective about it. But I realised I'm not that nice a writer. I really appreciate the second person thing of addressing a *you* and demanding that if the audience understand themselves as that 'you', then taking responsibility for being the person, which could even be disabusing the person that's asking them something like, 'why couldn't you pass me a drink?' – 'Because I'm an audience member and you're not real!' would be an appropriate response. That would be one answer, but it would also be a route to a mode of address and the violence of a mode of address that's complicated again by there being two. Maybe the person is just referring to the other head, but then again, isn't that the same head? – And its sort of a monologue, but it's split. I hope that at the root of a lot of this there is an ethical position about representation and about the violence of representation. Also against coherence and a determining of things, people. Against determinism through abstraction – but an abstraction that commits a violence on representation – an eye for an eye kind of thing, even if the eye is simply the image of an eye filmed with a macro lens and wearing a chroma-key green contact lens. If representation is going to desire the death of its subject – which I believe it dreams about – the way to combat that is to be equally violent, but to images and not to what representation might ultimately commit, which is towards real bodies and real people and real lives. This work is an attack on images rather than real people, I suppose.

Ed Atkins interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events  
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