

Performing The Real

**Ed Atkins: an exploration of abjection, theatricality
and grief in search for the Human**

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Unit 10: Option B

PERFORMING THE REAL

“Nothing is more real than nothing”

Samuel Beckett

Why do artists try to represent the ‘real’ when the task is so seemingly impossible? Debates around how to define and delineate between the ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ are longstanding in discussion around artistic representation, but the discussion has been revitalised within the context of contemporary developments in ‘virtual’ technology, such as the internet, Artificial Image generation, and digital avatars. Emma Shachat takes on this debate in *The Avatar and the Index* (2020), and argues that within this context, the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ may start to intertwine. Shachat establishes the historical definition of the ‘real’ as being “grounded in the physical, embodied world ... fleshy, subject to decay, prone to illness and death”. The virtual is then understood as that which is “not directly tangible, does not directly occupy a material form, is not navigated directly through our fleshy bodies.” (Shachat, 2020, p.xi). Digital media, and thus our understanding of

the real and virtual, have been rooted in language of the body and mortality: from Barthes’ “punctum”, insisting on the power of a photograph being that which “pricks us” (Benjamin, 1936) to Peirce’s definition as that which “acts upon the nerves” (Peirce, 1988, p.7 quoted in Shachat, 2020). Physical sensation has been used to mark the juncture between the digital and embodied experience. Moving into the 21st century, however, we see this juncture become decreasingly definitive, and the virtual become increasingly interwoven with our bodily experiences. For example, to ‘drag and drop’ a file onto a desktop offers a physical action, to hear the camera shutter opening and closing when taking a picture provides a grounding in sound. It goes even further: when a digital avatar is wounded in a video game, the controller vibrates; biometric feedback assisting the player to respond reflexively. Apple watches receive texts directly and buzz on your wrist, and the new Oura ring records heart rate, sleep patterns and more; all tapping directly into our biology. Here, the intermeshing of tech and the body extends beyond the artistic realm and into something with ‘real world

implications.¹ It raises existential questions around how we represent the real: in our practice, of course, but also in our social media, in our news, in our technology moving forward, and where we may find the truly human within this.

¹ In the *Guardian* article “The Rise of the End Times of Fascism” the collaboration between the Trump administration and America’s ‘tech bros’ result in what some are calling ‘technofascism’. Here, the impact of advancing digital techniques on real bodies is highlighted. For example: the White House’s dedication to releasing AI-generated propaganda: “Footage of shackled immigrants being loaded on to deportation flights, set to the sounds of clanking chains and locking cuffs, which the official White House X account labeled ASMR” (Klein and Taylor, 2025). Tech is also infiltrating the approach to

border control and mass deportation: the acting ICE Director, Todd Lyons, told the 2025 Border Security Expo that he wanted to see a more business-oriented approach to deportations, “like [Amazon] Prime, but with human beings” (MacDonald-Evoy, 2025). We also see the discourse infiltrate geopolitical and climate discussions in the vision of unregulated “freedom cities” (Klein and Taylor, 2025) where corporate loyalists and police join forces to create cities free from democratic oversight, environmental laws, and labour protections.

INTRODUCING ED ATKINS

The ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, especially within this context of developing tech, is at heart of Ed Atkins’ work. Many reviews and accounts of his work label Atkins a “digital art pioneer” (Jonze, 2025), an artist “best known” for his digital video work (Tate, 2025). However, throughout the 2025 Tate Britain retrospective of his work, the virtual is overlaid with the physical: drawings, tapestries, and conspicuous objects – all elements which introduce an analogue counterpoint and emphasise the entanglement of reality and artifice. Together, they pit a “weightless digital life against the physical world of heft, craft and touch” (Tate, 2025). Atkins speaks about this himself: “I started to conflate what I was thinking about the experiences of the digital moving image with the material and the experiences of death ... the physical situation of loss and grief and anger and love found its counterpart in digital video” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.25).

Alongside the pioneering digital art that has made his name, the Tate Britain retrospective presented a remarkable breadth of media; drawings, paintings, performance, music, embroidery and theatrical props. This study will focus mainly on this show, which I visited over

several days in August 2025, along with the *Ed Atkins Exhibition Catalogue*, (Ladd and Staple, 2025), but will also draw on his book publications and his many essays and interviews. After a brief introduction to some of the key themes, it uses two key works as case studies: *Hisser* (2015) and *Nurses Come and Go but None for Me* (2024). Nearly ten years apart, both works are predicated on loss. Both have mortality at centre (though interestingly the human corpse itself is absent or indexed) and both embrace theatricality. Despite a grounding in similar concepts, the aesthetic devices used differ. *Hisser* is computer generated, punctuated with bathos, and combines the digital and analogue with dense literature and research. *Nurses* is a film, featuring actors Toby Jones and Saskia Reeves and high production values; it is slick, clean, and sits alone in a pitch-black cinema room. Under the sign of the performance of the real, this dissertation will examine the connections and differences between these works, both aesthetic and conceptual, to argue that both at the micro-level, in the techniques used within the individual works, but also at the macro-level, in the spatial curation of the show, the work self-consciously stages questions of the real and counted to provoke a range of emotional responses. Ed Atkins

thus becomes a case study in exploring much larger questions around representation, reality, grief and the human in the digital age. Reviewers of Atkins' work frequently highlight the slickness, coldness (Kurtz, 2025) and distance – the “fastidiously sealed aesthetic” (Cumming, 2025) – that comes with the high-tech production of the show. Others again reference his intellectualism: his frequent citations of theoretical approaches and references to weighty art historical debates, described as a “voyage through the crevices and byways of a mind and a body, redolent by turns of Woolf, Beckett, Bernhard” by Josh Cohen in a review of *Flower* (2025). For Oskar Osprey, Atkins reminds him of the certain kind of “tech wiz kids whose studios were their MacBook pros” (Osprey, 2025).² Despite Atkins' reputation as a digital artist, all is not straightforward, as the title of the interview published just before the 2025 retrospective, ‘The Weight of the Unreal’ (Obrist and Atkins, 2025), suggests. Here the show is characterised as investing the artificial with the weight of the human, the unreal with the real. And indeed, reviewers have also gone out of their way to highlight the emotional affect present in the

show, the place of vulnerability, where there is “a strong sense of confusion, déjà vu and anxiety” as well as “pain” and “turmoil” (Cumming, 2025). The “harrowing” (Charlesworth, 2025) nature of the experience is felt by many: “sometimes it brought me to tears and I’m not even sure why ... I’m not sure I’ll ever recover from it” (Luke Kennard, review of *Flower*, 2025).

Works can of course be multilayered, but these reviews feel like they are pulling in different directions. Here, however, I will argue that it is not just the distance noticed by critics, nor the affect noticed by others, nor even the ‘tension’ mentioned in passing by Charlesworth that is at stake. But, to point forward for a moment, rather, I will argue that it is the deliberate oscillation between these irreconcilable opposites that creates the characteristic dynamic at the heart of Atkins' work. The more one experiences of the Tate Britain show, the more it becomes clear that the digital works do not stand alone. In this retrospective, Atkins takes care to provide the digital with physical counterparts, always rooted in our spatial and physical experience, and there is a constant movement: between presence

² This quotation reminds me of the ‘tech-bro’ aesthetic of Musk, Zuckerberg, etc. It could be this image of the ‘tech-bro’ and its implication of technofacism that makes Osprey, and

some other reviewers, so uncomfortable with Atkins and the way he explores masculinity in his use of the digital.

and absence, the distant and the personal, the timeless and finite, and between high-tech media and aesthetic impoverishment. All of these elements come together within the works under the umbrella of the real and unreal, but this conceptual oscillation is also enacted physically as we move through the space, and the work becomes inexorably linked with our own bodies, our own spatial experience.

A key concern for Atkins' is the body, the work constantly striving for a "certain corporeal visibility" (Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.13). In fact, we are frequently presented with the abject body – with Atkins referencing Kristeva often in his interviews (Hoare, 2020). Kristeva's theories of abjection describe the porousness of the human body and are grounded in feminist theory, giving a framework to the western, patriarchal abjection of the female body, where processes of menstruation and childbirth are seen as impure, unclean, and "monstrous" (Creed, 1993). Atkins, however, strays from this traditional representation, and shows us both in his aesthetics and writing, the abject male body – often a body that mirrors or is a direct

representation of himself. In his 2016 book *A Primer for Cadavers*, he imagines "a razor blade gliding along the central seam of my scrotum" (2016, p.16). Bruce Hainley delights in how in this text, Atkins is doing "Masculinity in different voices" (Review of *A Primer for Cadavers*, 2016).³ This has provoked some extreme reactions among reviewers (I shall return to the issue of 'doing', or performing, gender later). Hoare describes walking "away from [Atkins'] installation feeling provoked" at the "vision of a white male subjectivity". Herman calls Atkins' digital figures "generic-looking avatars of white men" (2016) and Fox recognises the satirical implications of this choice of avatar: "men or boys that can only walk or talk stiffly, (A joke about all men is begging to be made there.)" Or again, a body that "was once useful, desired, but now past it. Their faces are videogame bland." (Fox, 2025). While some critics imply a moral objection to Atkins' use of abjection as a man, others recognise that theories like this exist to be used by all – with Atkins having every right to offer his own criticism or experience of patriarchal abjection. The gender of the bodies, for me, did not

³ There is an interesting dynamic around gender in all of Atkins work, made more complex by the final rooms of the Tate Britain retrospective, which introduce the only female bodies in the Tate show, his daughter, and Saskia Reeves.

prevent me relating to the work; in fact, there was something refreshing about seeing the male body pushed into abject states. Atkins explains that he is “often destroyed by an image of himself” (Atkins, 2025b), and as his avatars are pulled apart, pushed down endless holes, turned into guts and gloop, the privilege afforded to him by his body (white, male and heterosexual) is disrupted.

The most extreme manifestation of such abjection is in the form of mortality, for example in the video work *Death mask 2*, (2010), or the publication *A Primer for Cadavers* (Atkins, 2016). Death, or more accurately, the absence of life, is everywhere in the exhibition. Atkins takes an original body, sometimes himself, and generates a digital representation.⁴ This turns the digital avatar into a kind of cadaver or vessel, a “surrogate”, he calls it, on which to project experience (Atkins, in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.12). He occupies the “avatar’s digital flesh” like an “emotional crash test dummy” (Atkins, 2025b). In this sense, the CG avatar is an imprint of Atkins’ own, real body, of

his corporeal having been there. However, the imprint left behind, is not completely shed. “I am in there too, performing, wearing the figure like a mask or a skin” (Atkins, 2025b). Through introducing the body, the surrogate, and through the play on words with ‘corpsing’ (when an actor breaks character on stage), we are led into the realm of theatricality and performance.⁵ Theatre is a further key motif for Atkins, with many works focussing on performance: for example, *The Worm* (2021) where Atkins poses as a chat show host as he calls his mother on the phone, or in *PianoWork 2* (2023) where he labours over performing a piece of piano music, and finally in *Refuse.exe* (2019) which begins with digitally rendered, thick, red, velvet theatre curtains opening on scenes of destruction.

Death is generally a singular, personal, and human moment; but by foregrounding the simultaneous meanings of the word ‘corpse’ Atkins also suggests performance, repetition and humour, combined to tip into absurdity. Several works, for example, explore death as a mass phenomenon (for example in *up/down, in/out*, 2017, which

⁴ In *Hisser*, the computer-generated character is a standard 3D stock figure with Atkins’ facial movements and speech mapped on. In *PianoWork 2*, he creates a “digital double”, based on scans of his head and hands (Tate, 2025).

⁵ Searle, in his 2025 review, quotes Atkins saying “I want to make everything corpse” before going on to ask “Where is the real Ed Atkins? Where is the real anybody? We’re all corpsing all the time, for all the time we have” (Searle, 2025).

shows hundreds of anonymous CG avatars run towards huge sinkholes, their bodies piling up on top of each other when they fall and reach the bottom). Other works loop repeated deaths: stretching the individual moment into an infinite and absurd (even slightly comical) repetition. The concept of performance is central here, especially when considered alongside Atkins' use of repetition. Both ultimately reference time.

TATE BRITAIN RETROSPECTIVE – ROOM TWO FLOOR PLAN

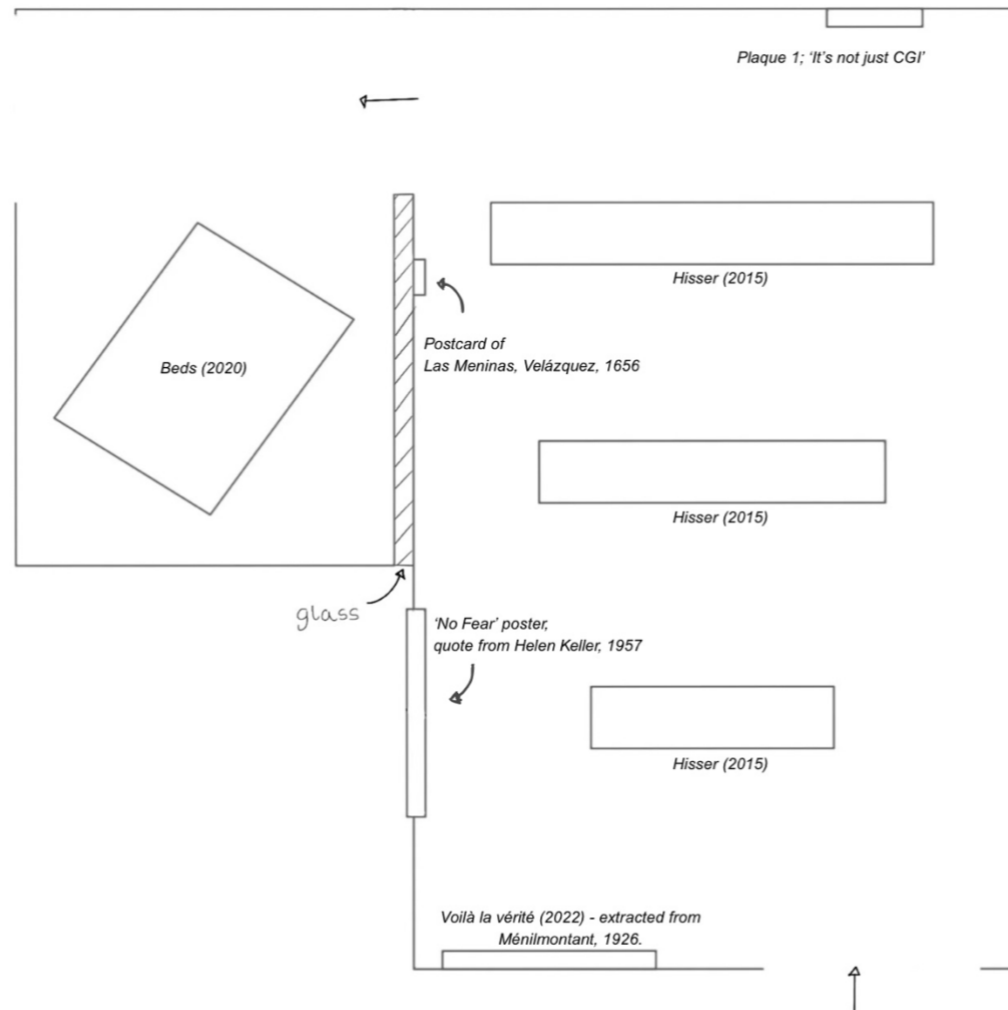


Figure 1: Rosa Leeder, *Tate Britain Retrospective, Room Two Floor Plan*, 2025 [digital drawing].

HISSE

The second room of the Tate Britain retrospective is dedicated to *Hisser* (2015), a computer-generated video, featuring a singular male figure alone in his bedroom. While the work is much discussed as a digital piece, approaching it in the Tate Retrospective demonstrated the work's dependency on the much larger installation it forms a part of, one that twists and turns and encourages different directions of flow. The sheer amount in the room was striking, and while initially I encounter the work through a critical and objective eye, as I move between spaces and pieces, personal interpretations and connections seem to ambush me in an unexpected way. I see first a large, bright white wall onto which the *Hisser* video is projected, it reads as a space set up for some kind of film screening. This reading shifts, however, as I approach to see that the set-up is repeated and scaled up; there are 3 large white walls, each as solid as stone and thick, permanent. They increase in size and sit parallel to each other, each with a projection of the same film, in sync down to the millisecond.



Figure 2: Ed Atkins, *Hisser*, 2015 [three-channel video and sound, 21min 51sec], (installation view), Kunsthhaus Bregenz, 2019

The space created between each wall forms a kind of room of its own, creating defined spaces that serve as a prompt for the emotional experience of the viewer – something that Atkins himself comments on: “The work can express things that are otherwise walled off” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.22). This is certainly what happened for me. The repetition of the video offers a selection of viewing spaces to choose from; I opt to crouch with my back against the second wall and watch the video projected in front of me on the third, moving into a place that is intimate, personal and internal. As the structure of the room prompts the audience to flow through each individual space, however, it feels as though my slice of privacy is interrupted, as if my mum has poked her head round my bedroom door when I’m absorbed in some (private) activity. I’m pushed back to a distant place, one of observer, doomscroller.

The video shows a bedroom occupied by a figure who, as explained to us by an introductory text in the gallery, once was real. Named Jeffrey Bush and from Florida, he was made famous when a sinkhole opened underneath his bed and he was swallowed by the earth, his corpse never recovered. There is something powerful here about the absent corpse: if the original body is now lost, then its CG

representation, Atkins' own “surrogate on which to project experience” (Atkins, 2025b) is simply an index of the life that once was. The index is equated to “trustworthiness, stability and physical proximity” (Shachat, 2020, p.xv) but Atkins provides us no such comfort or stability; as the CG body here and elsewhere suffers a variety of abject fates, the index becomes something disconcerting: “The index is worse than the thing in itself, isn’t it? I mean, like a blood stain, like your own shit on your finger...” (Atkins, 2019, cited in Shachat, 2025, p.19). We see this ghostly implication recur throughout the show: in paintings of beds where “absent bodies are indexed through the indentations on the mattress.”(Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 39), or in *Beds* (2025), where white duvets rise and fall autonomously, as though encasing a breathing body.



Figure 3: Ed Atkins, *Beds*, 2020 (installation view) Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2023-2024.

Figure 4: Ed Atkins, *Hisser* 2015 [three-channel video and sound, 21min, 51sec] Tate. Purchased 2016.



By creating the CG index of the original body, and rendering him back in his bedroom, it is as if his corpse has been re-animated, struck by lightning and in some Frankensteinian way, suspended not in life or in death, but in a sort of purgatory; the video is endless, looping, timeless.⁶ At some point during the video, the screen ‘scrolls’ vertically, revealing a series of identical bedrooms which looks like frames in a film reel, as if the whole film is glitching. Then the video continues: a sequence which is repeated over and over again in a seemingly infinite loop. Lining his bedroom are three posters, each featuring an animal (one with a wolf, two with kittens) and each emblazoned with generic messages: “Hang in there!” “Believe!” “No Fear”! Like the posters, the bedroom is generic: an infinitely reproducible Ikea bedroom, intended to resist translations across culture, across the change in style that comes with time. It is neutral and flat-pack-able without any indication of personal identity or history, underlining the sterile and enduring nature of the purgatory *Hisser* finds itself in.

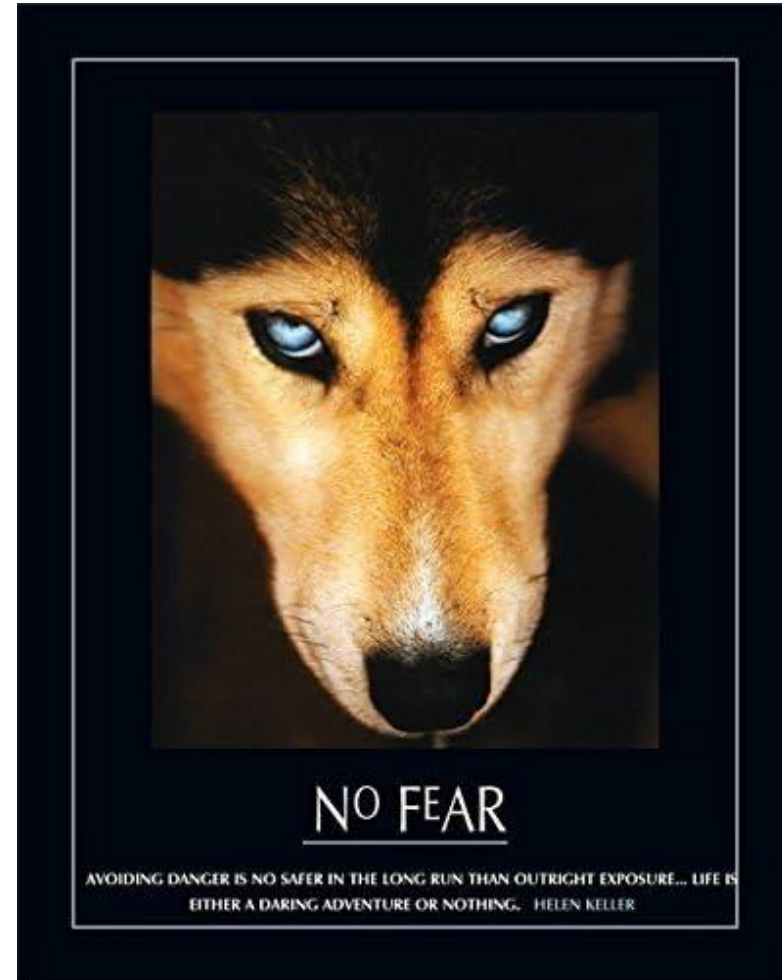


Figure 5:
No Fear
2017-2025
[inkjet print
on paper]

⁶ “I saw the pale student of the unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion” (Shelley, 1818, p. 9). This line from the original *Frankenstein* seems apt to describe Atkins’

avatar. The figure seems to wander, glitch, never reach full potential of movement – and he absolutely runs off of some ‘powerful engine’; in fact, ‘Unreal Engine’ is the name of the platform used to generate Atkins’ avatars. Their website cites the engine as “The most powerful real-time 3D creation tool” (Epic Games, 2025).

It seems he really is hanging in there as he cries, hums, sings, coughs, and floats through the room in some type of deranged solipsism. He repeats the muttered phrase “I’m sorry” and “I didn’t know life was so sad”, before standing in the corner and masturbating to blank Rorschach cards, (ironic as these are about revealing one’s hidden personality), all to the backing of Elton John and Kiki Dee’s 1976 hit, *Don’t go breaking my heart*. There is humour here too; the digital avatar is desperately alone, the door locked shut, and he doesn’t have a heart to break. Finally, he falls through the sinkhole and the video repeats again, endless living, sinking, living, sinking. Is he scared of the sinkhole that is to come? Does he believe he may escape his fate, this time? In taking a step back from the screen, I notice that the same posters featured in the video also line the walls of the gallery, only larger, and more imposing (the wolf face saying “No Fear” seems to loom over the whole room).⁷



Above: Figure 6: Ed Atkins, *Hisser* 2015 [three-channel video and sound, 21min, 51sec] Tate. Purchased 2016.

Below: Figure 7: @missuswormy and @donkeybrainsPhD (2024) Ifunny.co.

how the poster “serendipitously resonated with the cities atmosphere”. (Herman, 2016). This is another example of my own experience, where the work seems to project out into the world, or beckon and invite personal interpretation inside, to play with the work.

⁷ That same poster is captioned 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.” (Keller, 1957). Laura Herman visited the show in 2015, following a terrorist attack in Paris and a few hours before Belgian authorities closed the city centre. She reads the quotation, and notes

I move over from the poster and the first *Hisser* screen and am met with *Voilà la Vérité* (2022) – a short video that reworks a single sequence from the 1926 silent film *Ménilmontant*, directed by Dimitri Kirsanoff. At first, it seems impossible to square how the film relates to the rest of the room. *Hisser* is a CG video accompanied by sound that echoes through the gallery, *Voilà la Vérité* is eerily silent in comparison. The title is the only text in the film: a fragment of a headline on the newspaper. The rest of the film has no other subtitles or text, and thus relies entirely on image, editing and movement between scenes to convey narrative, mirroring Atkins' own interest in the breakdown of the relationship between image and language. I did not know the original film, and when seeing it for the first time, sitting beside *Hisser*, I could not understand why it was present. In the short time I spent with the work, however, I felt instinctually that there was more to know. The following detail came from research done after the show, and through this it became clear that *Voilà la Vérité* acts as yet another reflection in the room of mirrors that is *Hisser*. The original film presents a fatalistic view of life, beginning and ending with a brutal, unexplained axe murder (a gory murder seems very Atkins), suggesting that life in the slums is a repetitive, inescapable cycle of

violence and sorrow, or some kind of purgatory. Atkins digitises prints of the film, adding colour and new voices for the two featured characters, who do not speak but do sob, sigh, and eat, adding a strange sense of bathos. By never straying from the film's original images or sequence, Atkins is left with "the perfect combination of acting and the impossibly real"; "I feel like the resulting video is haunted", (Atkins, 2025b). The same could be said about poor Jeffrey Bush and his untimely demise in *Hisser*. The scene of his death has been manipulated, accompanied by Atkins own choice of colour, sound and imagery, yet his story is not lost. In this way, both the remake of *Ménilmontant* and *Hisser* have earned their titles; this *is* the truth, a paradoxically human truth, at its very heart. "What a tender, almost real moment this is. For all its artifice, it is like touching a wound." (Searle, 2025).



Figure 8: Ed Atkins, *Voilà la Vérité*, 2022. [video and sound, 3min, 50sec]

Atkins talks about his desire to create “Diegetic everything – as in, everything being from and of the world presented in the videos.” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 29). We see this desire manifest aesthetically in; the bedroom’s interior being repeated in the gallery, and conceptually in the inclusion of works like *Voilà La Vérité*. Indeed, this diegetic everything is noted by one critic as a “breakdown of any relation between self and other” (Denman, 2025). While I am able to relate to the figure in *Hisser*, the more I observe, the more I feels as though I am being pulled into its fictional world. Even when I attempt to escape, to watch *Voilà la Vérité*, or sneak a glance at the exhibition’s next room, it is to no avail; as *Beds* (2025) writhe and squirm in my peripheral vision, separated only by a glass panel which seems to duplicate *Hisser*’s screens.

The construction of an internal and external world, and the confusion between them, connects with Atkins’ interest in Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit’s *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (1993). His interest in Beckett is pointed to in several reviews and interviews, but also in the inclusion of *Arts of Impoverishment* in the make-shift library of references which follows the exhibition. Here

the aesthetic of ‘failure’ refers to a breakdown in representation which prevents the work of art from relating to the outside world. This is underlined and commented upon in the *Hisser* room by the inclusion of a postcard of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), pressed against the glass screen opening on *Beds*. The painting raises questions about reality and illusion, famously placing the viewer within the scene, and leaving no vantage point from which to take stock, or unpick the image. Its inclusion here places me in a similar position with regard to the installation. The fact it is displayed simply as a postcard one may pick up at the last minute from a gallery shop, with scrawled writing on the back and the blue tack used to stick it to the wall visible is disconcerting (and humorous). The gesture takes a moment of intellectual reflection and puts in back in the world of *Hisser*’s wanky-bathos; it feels like an Easter egg that only the keenest-eyed viewer may notice. But it does not feel as if it is put there to aid any reading of *Hisser*; in fact, it serves to complicate it further, intensifying the sense of confusion and distance.



Figure 8: Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* 1656 [Oil on canvas]. Museo del Prado, Madrid

Atkins talks about the “cool distance” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.14) afforded by a mechanised or digital process: “Digital representation of self means the body is, I think, transported further afield” (Hoare, 2020). If the digital creates distance, prevents us from relating, or puts us on some other plane (some out of touch, out of reach, alien realm) then Atkins brings what is out of reach crashing back down to us, through combining the digital with the physical body, and, more to the point, the abject body.

One of the most extreme examples of abjection in the show is encountered in blocks of text interspersed throughout the exhibition, printed onto pieces of scrap wood and metal found around the Tate Britain site, which operate almost as objects in themselves. The plaques, often extracts of research, take on a different language; one that feels scientific and evidential. I move to the furthest corner of the *Hisser* room to find a plaque which reads:

It's not just CGI ... Strange things can happen to a body. Your more jellylike substances are basic organic compounds and subject to all the functions of basic science. Your fat mixed with lye (usually NaOH, a common metal hydroxide, highly caustic and available) creates, famously, basic soap. The human body placed in boiling lye will be digested into a liquid of mineral oil consistency in about 5 hours. Pressurised, the time is reduced by 40%. The remaining "bone shadows" are soft, easily crushed.

The text brings me, harshly, back to reality. A reality that is difficult to confront: the reduction of the human and the body into a purely chemical formula. In fact, not even 'the' body, but 'your' body. I have been directly addressed, called out, and any sense of individuality, or sanctity of self, is bluntly dismantled. My body too, will disintegrate, could form lye, my bones could crush and decompose. The effect is paradoxical; the scientific language seems to distance me from an emotional response, but the direct address brings me closer once again. Presented on the same plaque is the story of a real diver sent to a depth of 270 meters to retrieve a corpse turned to wax, another diver who had underestimated the effect of ascension:

Ascension dramatically decreases a liquid's capacity for solubility, releasing arterial gas, bubbles, known as the bends, your veins like an opened soda can, blood effervescent, frothing from your nose, ears, eyes. Increasing gas during putrefaction causes visible bloating in corpses, raising internal pressure on the decaying structure, tensing frayed tissue, skins, and eventually erupt spewing bacterial vapor. Pressure assisted flush which aerosolizes feces in public toilets.

The language insists on abject human physicality and is nothing short of grotesque: "your veins open... frothing from your nose... bloating ... erupt, spewing, bacteria, feces." I am forced to confront the presence of the body – its gore, its liquids, its porous boundaries – in a way that cannot help but bring about a sense of fragility and disgust within my own body. As Kristeva commented: "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva, 1982, p.12). The point of *Hisser* is exactly this: the digital and scientific places me at a distance, but as Atkins' explains: "Abjection, working hard, might retrieve bodies" (Hoare, 2025). This type of abjection surely achieves this. It retrieves the distant digital body from some far away place, and brings us back into our own body, forcing a

“heightened awareness of our own inferiority within our fragile bodies” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.14), an awareness of our own death, and our own life.

NURSES COME AND GO, BUT NONE FOR ME

Hisser is a work which features loss, abjection and bodily horror, and in this way prompts us to consider mortality. It begins with a real story of death and loss (both physical and emotional) which is then abstracted, reimagined and staged in a way that builds a new, fictional world. This world is one of purgatory and suspension, constantly turning in on itself. Nearly ten years later, the film *Nurses Come and Go but None for Me* (2024) addresses the same concepts of loss, abjection and mortality, as Atkins' father's diary, written during his stay in hospital with a terminal illness, is read aloud. Instead of ending the film with his death, the last twenty minutes transition into a performance of the 'Ambulance Game' invented by Atkins' daughter. The introduction of this playful, fictional world shifts the tone of the film from something bleakly sad, to something that looks outwards and operates on the flip-side of death and grief. Instead, in *Nurses* (the penultimate work in the exhibition), we are given a chance for recovery and the potential of hope.

Nurses begins by (literally) enacting *Sick Notes*, the diary Phillip Atkins kept during the six months between his diagnosis with kidney cancer and his death in 2009. Over nearly two hours, the diary is sombrely read aloud by actor Toby Jones to a group of young adults, as actor Saskia Reeves sits in the corner at the back of the room, seemingly removed from the diary enactment. In the same way that in *Hisser*, a central figure is suspended in a timeless loop of death and life, a kind of purgatory, *Sick Notes* documents a similar limbo. "It's an account ... of illness ... of the personal and public contexts that shape a body's decline ... longing and self-pity, the loss of independence, the social life of the hospital, the bureaucracy and administration of terminal illness." (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.22). It's incredibly affecting. As I sit in the pitch-black cinema room, nestled into a back corner and shrouded in darkness, I am afforded anonymity, and in this the conditions are set for me to drift between the film and my own personal reflections.



Figure 9: Ed Atkins and Stephen Zultanski, *Nurses Come and Go, But None for Me* 2024 [video and sound] (Installation view) Tate Britain. Commissioned and produced by Hartwig Art Foundation.

I think of what it is to wither away, day after day, as illness takes over. Lying in a hospital bed, I am no longer in control of my own body, it's merely a vessel for sickness to inhabit, slowly taken over by some malignant force. I think of how it feels to be left on an NHS trolley in some corridor for hours on end, as nurses who don't care rush by. They (painfully) take vials of my blood to test, sometimes it feels that there can surely be none left to take, then they lose them. I see machines hiss in and out, they breathe for me. I feel the snaking tube that goes up my nose, scratches cold and plastic down my throat, all the way to my stomach – it swallows for me. Anyone who can relate to these experiences can relate to the artificial world inside the hospital, its removal from reality, the way it revolves around waiting; for a doctor, for a test result, for an answer. In this waiting, time seems to collapse or disappear, and days merge into each other. Atkins describes the experience of the central figure lost in this all-enclosing limbo: "In the diary, there's someone struggling to believe that this is happening to him. Right up until days before the diary ends, he's still asking, 'When does one begin to think about dying?'"

⁸ I cannot help but feel the figure in *Hisser* was asking the same thing.

(Cochrane, 2025).⁸ It doesn't feel real. The all-consuming and timeless quality of this limbo is both personal and existential. It reminds me of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; an absurd, timeless space, a constant waiting for a resolution – whether that resolution is salvation, or perhaps death – it never arrives.

With Beckett in mind, one of the most important differences between *Hisser* and *Nurses* comes into focus: on the one hand, the sleek aesthetic of *Nurses*, which portrays intense pathos in its heartbreaking account of death and illness; on the other, the aesthetic of impoverishment and failure of *Hisser*, full of bathos and a digital form which flaunts its own artificiality. Attempting to render this matter in digital media is an impossible task. This leaves a sense of retroactively authored failure in the digital work, "since seeing the tech at all is a de facto failure for the technology." (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 33). The avatar breaks down, exposing the unease of watching digital renderings attempt, but inevitably fail, to capture the true reality of human experience in subtly satirical ways.⁹ In

⁹ Beckett speaks of failure as intrinsic to the very mode of artistic production. For him, to fail did not mean to successfully represent failure, but to fail to represent (Bersani and Dutoit, 1993).

intentionally failing to convince us of its veracity, the work mocks itself. “It’s a grotesque parody, an insult.” (Atkins, quoted in Hoare, 2025).

Following Beckett, when Atkins talks about the deliberate “impoverishment” of his work, he means the “stripping back superfluous effects” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 29) so that what ever remains of the real, is much more singular. Through this process, the work moves over to a place of “incoherence, or maybe speechlessness.”¹⁰ (Atkins, 2025b) This is also echoed in *Nurses*; as Toby Jones comes to the end of his reading his sentences start to break up into expletives, nonsensical noises, broken words and grunts. “It is as if we have come to the limit of language” (Searle, 2025) harking back to *Hisser*’s same departure from coherence.

Hisser uses CGI in a way which makes it appear high-tech, yet its themes are low brow; it glitches and stumbles, is full of bathos and silliness, and in this way, it reveals itself as artificial, and takes on the aesthetic of impoverishment. *Nurses*, however, reveals its staging in

a different way. It is a high-budget film, with high production values and recognisable actors. It is slick, clean and glossy, and is housed inside a pitch-black cinema style room that feels plush and expensive. In *Sick Notes*, we learn that actors Toby Jones and Saskia Reeves play a couple, Peter and Claire, whom we gather to be surrogates of Atkins’ parents, Phillip and Rosemary. It seems then, *Nurses* is a play within a play, followed by children’s play. We also learn that the film was written in collaboration with Steven Zultanski, whom Atkins worked with to write his play *Sorcerer* in 2023.

While watching the film I felt myself notice these details, and through tears, start to question the authenticity of the characters presented. The camera switches from Toby Jones, to close-up shots of the audience, who are named “an invited audience of young people” (Atkins, 2025b). They seem just as engaged as I am, one person even breaks down in tears during the reading, but could they be actors themselves? Could their seemingly sincere reactions be scripted? One review of *Nurses* cynically says the audience look “like RADA

¹⁰ Atkins explains that to emphasise this aesthetic of impoverishment, he uses and then manipulates media that is familiar; media “at a point of ubiquity where ubiquity drives a kind of bored presumption. Perhaps, some form just before its planned obsolescence.”

(Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.26). In Act II of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the following exchange takes place: VLADIMIR: This is becoming really insignificant. ESTRAGON: Not Enough. (Beckett, p.104).

graduates” (Osprey, 2025).¹¹ The same review even compares the aesthetic of *Nurses* to a Cadbury Dairy Milk “Generosity Campaign”



Figure 10: Ed Atkins and Stephen Zultanski, *Nurses Come and Go, But None for Me* 2024 [video and sound] Commissioned and produced by Hartwig Art Foundation.

¹¹ Upon further research, I discover that the audience featured *are* in fact RADA graduates, but Osprey at the point of writing the review, did not seem to know this. One review points out the confusion that comes from this well; “if I’m understanding correctly, there are students at RADA, but they’re not playing characters – this is a real cast? Although ... they are from RADA. Maybe I’ve been duped? Maybe they’re just that good? Fuck, wait...”^f

or a “Film4 production” – observing that video art “(especially when it has a decent budget) ... can often come across like content produced by a creative advertising agency.” (Osprey, 2025).

The layered staging and the use of a medium “at a point of ubiquity” (see note 10) in *Nurses*, for Osprey, turned the film into something empty, hollow and artificial. But for others (including myself) it was here, when the fun and games, gore and frills of absurdity fell away, that whatever sense of the real was left, felt more intense than ever. By “stripping back superfluous effects” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 29) what remains becomes essentialised. The essentialism of language was an important characteristic of Beckett’s writing, and one which Atkins takes inspiration from. Deprived of narrative sequences, words and images sound only in and for themselves and there is a contagious destruction of explicit relations. While impoverishment (in *Hisser*) may conjure a sense of something poor, lacking or vacant, the more I look, the more I can see what is

(Merchant, 2025). It is difficult to unpick how Osprey guessed this about the audience – is this simply to do with the knowledge of the film’s manipulation, or is it about with the audience’s faces, their expressions, their bodies. This is after all, the first and only work in the show to feature bodies that aren’t what Herman calls “generic looking white men” (Herman, 2016).

contained within a single gesture, whole worlds housed in individual words. What can appear impoverished, may, from another angle, be condensed rich, full, heavy. Something like a vacuum-packed duvet, which once punctured, suddenly expands to fill the space in an uncontrollable manner. This is how it felt to watch *Nurses* for the first time. Just “unspeakable, unseeable overwhelm.” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p.31).

Here we return to the importance of oscillation. Osprey, thrust into a place of cynicism and distance, “only lasted 15 minutes viewing *Nurses* before walking out” (Osprey, 2025). For others, the emotional intensity of the film was overwhelming. Herman notes “complete disorientation” on leaving the show (2016), and Searle gave an account of being at the show for “hours and hours” (Searle, 2025). The constant oscillation – between media both digital and analogue, between distance, alienation and overwhelm, all operate to return the viewer to a place of humanity; either through turning to run from the work, or through being absorbed into it. It is in the moments where we oscillate between reactions, and through the movement of doing so, where we feel emotion most intensely, where the truly human seems to ambush us. One review of *Nurses* demonstrates

this perfectly: “Hearing words of how the nurses didn't care for Philip properly ...similar to [my grandmother's] experience ... I broke down, silently, in the back of the small theatre. And then, suddenly at once, I understood the meaning of the exhibition. Grief is something that doesn't feel tangible at first. It can be felt in abstract ways, but being able to attack the emotion head on takes time” (Merchant, 2025). Atkins says in *A Primer for Cadavers* (2016), and then again in reference to *Sick Notes*, “this will conjure a tumour up inside you”. As I sit in the viewing room of *Nurses* with a thick lump in my throat and tears in my eyes, it seems he is right.

Over the time taken to experience the show in its entirety, an emotional journey has occurred for both the viewer and Atkins himself. In *Hisser* Atkins' CG videos and accompanying installations can barely contain themselves, and the only explicit mentions of death exist in stories of others, told with excessive gore and abject detail. It gives an image of the artist consumed by himself, his trauma, the incongruence he feels within his own body and gender, how impossible it seems for him to put grief into words. By the time I arrive at *Nurses*, made a decade later and the penultimate work in the show, I get a sense (or at least I hope) that this marks Atkins'

escape from incoherence. The work has moved into something almost confessional; a two-hour feature film where he allows me to swallow every word of the trauma and grief that has shaped his life. He is more open, he provides us more bodies to consider, he allows us an insight into his reality. This journey is made explicit in the last twenty minutes of the film as *Sick Notes* transitions into the ‘Ambulance Game’.



Figure 11: Ed Atkins and Stephen Zultanski, *Nurses Come and Go, But None for Me* 2024 [video and sound] Commissioned and produced by Hartwig Art Foundation.

While both *Sick Notes* and *Hisser* play with a sense of staging, of abstracting something that was once real and manipulating it into a world of make-believe, the fictional world of *Nurses* is made explicit when translated into the ‘Ambulance Game’. In the game, Atkins’ daughter “gets to pretend to be dramatically sick and receives a cavalcade of fictional treatments, brushing up against illness and mortality. Then the game ends, and everyone is okay. I mean no one dies in a children’s game” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 23). Atkins has taken the experiences of illness, a loss of bodily control and autonomy, the bureaucracy of treatment, the risk of death, and translated them into something more playful. The treatments featured in the film are whimsical and joyful performances; Phillip is given the alias of “Princess Fairy Stardust” and Claire administers pantomimed cures such as a “poultice of giant snot mixed with scrapings of wild Bullfrog and ice turnip” (Atkins and Zultanski, quoted by Scanlan, 2025, p. 120). Atkins says that “The diary was a way to turn grappling with death into pleasure ... the performance of the diary is an invitation to the audience to share in that pleasure. Similarly, the Ambulance Game is a child’s way of play-acting control of the world through illness and enjoying that control.”

(Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 23). This sense of enjoyment, love and care, is pointed to physically here, as one of the fictional treatments sees Claire casts a series of “spells” (Atkins and Zultanski, quoted by Scanlan, 2025, p. 120) where she draws a symbol on seven post-it-notes and sticks them all over Peter’s body. Here the viewer is prompted to consider the world outside the film, extending outwards to the previous gallery room filled with post-it-notes. Started during Covid, Atkins has decorated each with a personal doodle and slipped them into his daughter’s packed lunch every day since 2020. In the gallery, 700 of these post-it-notes are delicately stuck in place by adhesive strips and arranged and framed in grids. They are intimate sketches, done in coloured biro, graphite and pen, and range from messages of affection (‘I love you x’) to banal images (a piece of toast, a pear, an ear) to ominous ones (a screaming mouth, or an eyeball stretched open) (Atkins, 2021).

Atkins explains that he kept the drawings – “sometimes blotched and warped by a satsuma or softened by proximity to a banana” (Atkins quoted in Fox, 2025). His drawing ability is impoverished by the humble material of the post-it-note; it is small, throw away, ubiquitous, and associated with busy-ness. They are thus deeply



Figure 12: Ed Atkins, *Children* 2020 – ongoing [crayon, pencil and ink on paper. Dimensions variable].

connected to the contingency of the human and real, but they also offer an alternative both to the rich aesthetic experience of the film and to its timeless melancholy. “The drawings are key in acting as ballast ... they provide a joyful bumper to the generational trauma depicted in other works, a soothing palliative perhaps to depression and melancholy.” (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 40). It is the only work in the show that is still ongoing (the gallery label reading *Children*, 2020-), marked by time, and demonstrating through time Atkins’ open-ended quest to turn generational trauma into a more hopeful inheritance.

Hisser is bleak, and desperately sad. The figure’s purgatory never ends, and everything around it seems to collapse in on itself, taking the viewer in with it. The figure is incoherent, his emotions unspoken; in some masculine way they are repressed or hidden, turned into nonsense.¹² *Nurses* begins by replicating the intense sadness of a body in limbo, and echoes the collapse into incoherence, but instead of concluding with this, it opens out, onto a vista of life, of hope. It

physically leads out into the room of analogue post-it notes, and those post-it-notes are the opposite of digital, masculine incoherence. In an interview, Atkins talks of his “ambivalence” at “all the structures to do with being a man ... as a father, I’m trying very hard not to be a man because I don’t want to just reinforce or reiterate anything.” (Atkins in Cochrane, 2025). If *Hisser* represses, collapses, or avoids, then *Nurses* and its post-it-notes open and rebuild. Perhaps, they even offer “redemption” (Kurtz, 2025), this redemption coming in the form of the female and non-abject. Saskia Reeves nurses Toby Jones back to health, in what Kathryn Scanlan calls an “act of familial mourning via performance” (Scanlan, 2025, p. 121) and thus attempts to resolve, rectify or ‘re-perform’ the past, providing Peter the care of a nurse that he was deprived of during his stay in hospital. While Atkins may seem unhappy or hesitant around the rest of the work shown, he is entirely sure of the post-it-notes. They are “a great joy in my life, my real life as I currently live it. The

¹² The very title *Hisser*, in fact, points to this collapse into incoherence; referring to a hiss in both a bodily sense (flatulence, or the sound of a corpse releasing air for the last time) but also more broadly, to the sound of something collapsing, leaking, decompressing – the

‘hissing’ void. The violent, sudden end of a weightless life, a balloon that makes one last frantic dash across a room as its releasing air propels it onwards until, inevitably, it becomes empty and flat.

excuse for their production is unquestionable,” he continues, “founded as it is in love.” (Kurtz, 2025).

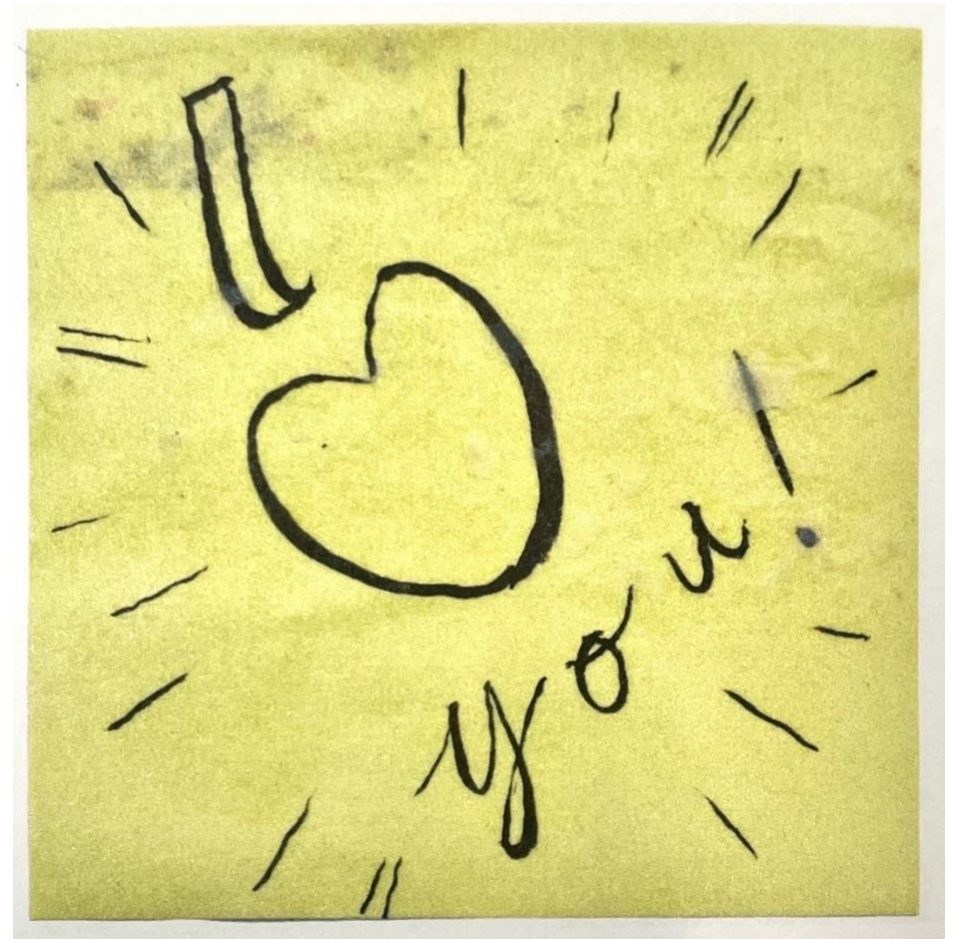


Figure 13: Ed Atkins, *Children* 2020 – ongoing [crayon, pencil and ink on paper. Dimensions variable].

The same reviewer who could only stay for 15 mins of *Nurses*, ends his review by expressing his repulsion at the alien CG videos; “Note to curators: less tech and AI please, more family photos and thrift store junk” (Osprey, 2025). The review goes on to state however, that after the show, “as I sat eating a plate of grub at the nearby Regency Cafe, I really wished the chef had slipped an Atkins-style doodle underneath my pasty and chips.” (Osprey, 2025). The place that Osprey ends up in, what he has taken away, is a deeply human, deeply physical experience. What could say more about life than this mundane moment, eating at a local cafe, yearning for the personal. Would he have had this experience if his distaste at the tech in the show did not push him into this place of yearning? It is this that proves the intentional artificiality at the heart of the show. By forcing the viewer into this position of abjection, mockery, disgust, it forces them to consider, exactly where the real is located. While you are thinking about how fake everything feels, you are manipulated into a place of reality and humanity, without even knowing it.

In understanding the ‘real’ and unreal’ and the relationship between them – which is becoming ever-more complex and urgent – some may feel the urge to run away in fear; fear of the digital and it’s

capacity to be “murderous to the real” (Baudrillard, 1988). Overwhelm can produce confusion, exhaustion, and a retreat into belief, or a desire to cling onto that which is untouched by the digital. But it is an impossible task. Atkins does not run, nor does he place the digital on a pedestal. Instead, through utilising the digital, he exposes its artifice, failures and aesthetic contradictions. By impoverishing, making messy, glitchy, by failing, Atkins seeks not to reiterate the technological accelerationism of the world, the need to streamline or make glossy and fast, but instead seeks to highlight this process and in turn, to resist it. “The truth is, technology in and of itself is not interesting to me”, Atkins says. “I don’t think any machine, even in a million years, will be like the real thing. It will never be a person. That’s really my faith.” (Atkins quoted by Searle, 2025). This is a resistance against the supposed symbolic order of technology; of computer generation, artificial intelligence, of smooth images that deceive us into taking them as real, of the idea one day that AI will become so advanced as to become

indistinguishable from the human, or even surpass the human.¹³ In the face of a future which sees the digital become more and more integrated into all aspects of our lives, even our biologies, this resistance becomes all the more imperative. Some may say the answer is to simply revert to analogue means and methods (see Osprey's comment; "note to curators: less tech an AI please", 2025.) However, as technology grows in sophistication, to reject it may be to be left behind, to be outnumbered, overpowered. Could it be that to resist technology, one has to *use* technology?¹⁴ Ed Atkins exposes technology's failures and inconsistencies, and with the final work in the show, *Sky News* (2016), the 'real' becomes a punchline, demonstrating the crisis of uncertainty that comes when even the news cannot be trusted.¹⁵

I am living in a time where debate around the 'real' and 'unreal' has moved from some abstract conceptual discussion, to something that brings with it real existential threats; to myself, my own body¹⁶ and all of humanity. Ed Atkins' show, therefore, came at an important moment when I was considering these questions at an intellectual level and exploring them in my own practice. It also, however, came at a moment when in my own life, the experience of death and loss "suffuses everything", as Atkins describes in his own life (Atkins in Ladd and Staple, 2025, p. 18), due to the illness of a parent. My own experience of the work is a testament to its intention, to catch you off guard with intense emotion, to burrow under your skin. At the start of writing this piece, I presumed I would only to be concerned with the intellectual debate found in his work, but eventually, it has become clear that the work has chimed with something so much more

¹³ Former Google executive Eric Schmidt told the American congress that AI's planet-incinerating level of energy consumption was "necessary" to enable an intelligence "higher" than humanity. (Schmidt quoted by Klein and Taylor, 2025).

¹⁴ The use of the digital to resist is not limited to artists, however. For example, the organisation *People Over Papers* has established digital platforms which monitor the movements of ICE, informing local communities of upcoming raids. It has amassed over 13 million users since beginning in early 2025. They call this project, "digital resistance" (MS NOW, 2025).

¹⁵ In 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary announced that 'Post-truth' was its word of the year. Its usage increased 2000% between 2015 and 2016, alongside an increase in use of the term 'fake news'. (BBC, 2016). Immediately, stained orange skin and an irritatingly nasal voice come to mind. A 2021 poll conducted by Monmouth University reported that three out of four Americans believe that the media routinely report fake news, while a Gallup/Knight Foundation study found that 42% of Republicans consider any news stories that cast a political group or politician in a negative light to be fake news. (Horne, 2021).

¹⁶ Laura Bates in *The New Age of Sexism: How The AI Revolution is Reinventing Misogyny*, points out that 96% of the 'deepfakes' generated online is non-consensual pornography. At the same time, Elon Musk's 'Grok' is a free AI generation tool being used to generate images of child sexual abuse. (Vallance, 2026).

deeply within me. By exploring this thoroughly and unpicking my experience, I have understood more about the role of art in addressing the world around us, but also, I have understood more about myself, and my practice. I have seen that the experiences I live now, have been shared by others, and that grief can be known. What could be more human than that?

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Figure 3: Ed Atkins, *Beds*, 2020 [motor, battery, wooden bed frame, cotton sheets. Dimensions variable] (installation view) Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2023-2024.

Figure 4: Ed Atkins, *Hisser* 2015 [three-channel video and sound, 21min, 51sec] Tate. Purchased 2016.

Figure 5: *No Fear* 2017-2025 [inkjet print on paper]

Figure 6: Ed Atkins, *Hisser* 2015 [three-channel video and sound, 21min, 51sec] Tate. Purchased 2016.

Figure 7: @missuswormy and @donkeybrainsPhD (2024) Ifunny.co. Available at: <https://ifunny.co/picture/post-miss-worm-missuswormy-i-had-an-ex-that-if-1SKk5aBlB> (Accessed: 08 February 2026).

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Figure 12: Ed Atkins, *Children* 2020 – ongoing [crayon, pencil and ink on paper. Dimensions variable].

Figure 13: Ed Atkins, *Children* 2020 – ongoing [crayon, pencil and ink on paper. Dimensions variable].

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