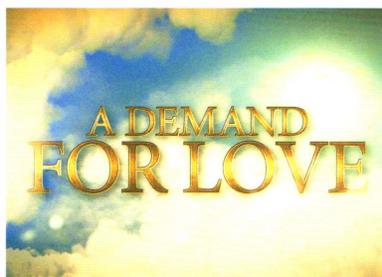


Mark Sladen, "Blank Verse," *ArtReview*, March 27, 2015

# ArtReview



Mark Sladen *Blank verse*

Ryan Trecartin and Ed Atkins are both artists who conspicuously employ the technologies and styles of the digital world in their work and who, moreover, are often thought to comment on the place of digital technology in our culture. Both artists have enjoyed significant institutional exposure in recent years, and last year both had high-profile exhibitions in London, offering an opportunity for comparison. One feature of this conjunction was the way it made apparent an aspect of Trecartin and Atkins's works that is less frequently commented upon, but which is arguably central to their depiction of the digital era: the role of language.

Trecartin showed at the Zabludowicz Collection, where he presented a reworking of *Priority Infield*, a large installation – premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2013 – in which a group of the artist's films are staged within sculptural environments made with his regular collaborator, Lizzie Fitch. At the core of the installation are videoworks featuring the same cast, sets and fictional world: a future society in which posthumans study their human ancestors through a game-slash-university, revealed in a disjointed sequence of funny and disturbing scenes. Atkins's London show, earlier in the year, took place at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery. Its central work was a set of three synchronised projections titled *Ribbons* (2014) – CGI works featuring a self-pitying digital avatar called Dave who is trapped in a cycle of drinking, singing and soliloquising.

Commentators on Trecartin's films have tended to concentrate on the club kids and other exhibitionists who populate his works, their camp performances and the Internet-era video style through which Trecartin presents them. However, what becomes more apparent when viewing the core films of *Priority Infield* is the central role played by Trecartin's script. A set of key words and phrases repeat throughout these films, including ideas of evolution and

devolution – the citizens of the future have apparently evolved into animations, just as dinosaurs apparently evolved into chickens – and a mashup of terms coming from frat culture and reality television. This vocabulary is on full display in the films' credits, which feature designations such as 'alphabetical stunt chicken items', 'basic animated concept babe' and 'basic sorority audition troll'.

In contrast, commentators on Atkins's work have tended to emphasise the hyperreal qualities of his high-res animations, and the uncanny qualities of the bodies that populate his world. But even a superficial encounter with Atkins's work at the Serpentine would have revealed the importance of language in his practice. *Ribbons* is composed of a tissue of textual fragments, including speech, song, subtitles, intertitles and a host of tattooed words that appear on Dave's forehead and naked torso ('Don't Die', 'Bankrupt'). Much of this material derives from a prior text by Atkins (released to accompany the current showing of *Ribbons* at Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie, Berlin) in the form of a prose poem addressed to a character called X, a love letter by turns affectionate, despairing and nihilistic ('So X, asleep at the wheel, windscreen tear-streaked, speeding'), and which was echoed in the London show by a set of annotated text panels that were propped up around the gallery.

The language employed by Trecartin and Atkins in their various scripts is superficially distinct, the former's highly demotic and the latter's often absurdly literary. But both use language that is characteristic of the digital age, freely blending the jargon of marketing and social media. The following is a typical exchange between a group of Trecartin's characters: "There's a rumour that there's like an antiviral on the market... And it will turn you into

Ed Atkins, *Ribbons* (detail), 2014.  
Courtesy Cabinet, London,  
and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

a consistent state of night vision... And this state of constant night vision will forever lock you into linearity... Sounds really stupid right?" There is a sense of individuals attempting – and often failing – to map themselves via corporate product, its processes of allegiance and promises of transformation.

Atkins also deploys such jargon-heavy language, as for instance in this excerpt from one of the aforementioned text panels, replete with pseudo-precise lingo that offers so much more than it delivers: 'As in: what will suffice to prevent disastrous interpretative divergence? – The judicious application of exclamation marks: a deft shuffle of enthusiastic dark-haired auditionee surrogates?' Moreover, *Ribbons* also contains an oblique but furious commentary on social media's spurious processes of affirmation and disavowal, and is sprinkled with references to trolls, haters and likes ('publicly nursed image, pruned in careful three-quarter profiles and vapid proclivities', as the Berlin text has it).

Both Trecartin and Atkins are shrewd observers of the role of language as a system through which the subject negotiates his or her place in the world. Both also have a keen understanding of the oddities and particularities of contemporary language systems, most notably those that spread their dominion over digital junkspace. Beyond this, both artists create loops of language, endlessly rehearsed and re-rehearsed, within narrative structures that resemble nothing less than nightmarish videogames offering only an illusion of advancement. The two artists may deal with very different identities in the projects analysed here – Trecartin with variously queer and female identities, and Atkins with that of a straight male melancholic – but both reveal a horrific vision of the contemporary subject's entrapment, an entrapment defined primarily through language.

This column may help prevent disastrous interpretative divergence