

ED ATKINS

A Catch Upon the Mirror

If insanity is repeating the same action over and over again and expecting a different result, then spectators of British artist Ed Atkins's performance *A Catch Upon the Mirror* were most certainly pushed to the brink of it. As viewers were comfortably installed in their seats, they watched a lone figure spotlit on the proscenium playhouse stage. It was the artist, reciting "The Morning Roundup" (1971), a short poem by New York writer Gilbert Sorrentino (1929–2006),¹ over and over again:

*I don't want to hear any news on the radio
about the weather on the weekend. Talk about that.*

*Once upon a time
a couple of people were alive
who were friends of mine.*

*The weathers, the weathers they lived in!
Christ, the sun on those Saturdays.*

Wearing a calf-length black pleated skirt, a baggy black knitted sweater, and a white shirt buttoned up to the collar, he recited each line in numerous ways, toying with pace, rhythm, tone, intonation, pronunciation, and volume, reverberating in a standing microphone, commanding the space with his relentless yet rhythmic speech.

The crowd sat in low light. Atkins paused each time he reached the last phrase, which built up a strange energy across the room: Each fleeting silence created a sense of dread mixed with anticipation and expectation. Bewildered looks were exchanged between spectators, as if to ask: When would this performance of repetition end? Had it even started? What's the catch? And just as this feeling became palpable, the artist began again.

Occasionally, the artist would punctuate the rounds of repetitious recitations with a brief musical interlude. He sang Old English nursery rhyme-like tunes, a cappella and in full histrionics, before he returned to Sorrentino's words. The text morphed into a mantra, one akin to "Oh this is a happy day" in Irish playwright Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days* (1961), in which the expression is repeated ad nauseam by the main character, Winnie, as a failed self-fulfilling prophecy. Buried to her waist and next to her taciturn husband, she uses her daily mundane routine

Curated by
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Abrons Arts Center

November 8–9, 2019

¹
Gilbert Sorrentino, "The Morning Roundup," *Corrosive Sublimate* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971).

²
Stanley E. Gontarski, *Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study* (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Libraries, 1977)

to distract herself from existential doubt. "Language generally in Beckett's world is not a means of conveying meaning, but a balm for the sores of existence," writes scholar Stanley E. Gontarski.² Likewise, in Atkins's performance, language creates the illusion of a narrative built around prosaic references to the news on the radio and conversations about the weather, but the artist exhausts the words to a point of incomprehension and befuddlement until the metaphysical cycle of life and death emerges from it.

This terse poem has accompanied him for nearly a decade, first appearing in the artist's video *Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths* (2013)—an unidentified male avatar's soliloquy, part of a series of uncanny works using advanced technology software and digital alter egos who perform existential crises and loneliness. In his live rendering here, the artist embodied the type of melancholy he typically bestows on his CGI protagonists.

The final twist came from the audience, when members of a choir, who had been covertly seated among the spectators, began to sing rounds of English composer Henry Purcell's tavern song "Under this Stone Lies Gabriel John" (1686). Like Sorrentino's composition, Purcell's tune is three melodic stanzas long. Again, even though the lyrics were repeated, it was difficult to grasp the message behind the words that washed over you. In retrospect, the title of the final song calls to mind the idiom "no stone left unturned." After a thorough search for a different result to the same formula, there was finally a release—a generous reprieve from the obstinate exercise in catharsis that we had been subjected to. What is insanity, anyway? BRITTANY RICHMOND

