

September 2 2020, Copenhagen

Andy —

Hope you're okay? Apologies, etc. Those fibreglass mobility scooter chassis look properly teratomatic, appalling. The thought of clambering into one and processing round your tomb is perfect. The Venn of provincial museum / dark ride / Sisyphean skit / candied Jung / Morlock am-dram, feels irresistible. I do so hope you manage the It's A Small World dirge in limbo. Was it meant to be with a libretto lifted from Robert Burton?

I've been struggling with this thing, as you know. It's been extraordinarily difficult for me to write about your work. Really hard. I thought I'd start with the title. Find something concise but, you know, portentous. And catalytic, importantly. I've done that with artworks before: fashioned some peg to start draping reflexive slop over. Until just now this piece was called Dank Memes: Of the progress of the soul: Fan Fic (with apologies to Kierkegaard), with each of those chunks once discrete – and that last parenthetical bit from just now, just before I hit send. Each chunk is pretty good, I reckon. Particularly the first two. Dank Memes seemed like it nicely straddled sepulchred gothic, and, you know, memes and bitmoji'd self – and was nicely deniable, inasmuch as it already exists as a term. Of the progress of the soul is, I think, the title from a slice of Donne's Metempsychosis. The bit with the worms devouring the dead flesh; the "deathless soul"; the sod. I'm certain Donne's come up in conversation, and I felt he might hold some signal position between metaphysical poetics / conceptions of death, and your Wordsworth use, Romanticism – your Worsdworthian, wandering, infographic, animatic surrogate, on some Grand Tour of the Hanna-Barbera circle of hell. (Another persistent analogue: Bruno Ganz's angel in Wings of Desire as a beleaguered pedagogue on late-night BBC 2 OU.) Needless to say, the titles contained more than whatever meagre shite I mustered beneath them. I was going to write under my persistent pseudonym, too. Again, for catalytic purposes. They have published plenty at this point, and they've often felt the domino to break the tedium of my encrusted self, dispelling timidity, stylistic tics, etc. But it didn't really work. Perhaps because I wanted to address you, as me. I mean, I think I wanted to write you in order to move you as a friend might. I wanted this thing to be from me in a manner inimical to our ongoing conversations, and I thought that perhaps this would surely mean more – or more importantly *feel* more – than some quasi-critical piece *about* the work, the show. I mean, I guess the reason you asked me is because you really didn't want something like that? That you wanted something born of friendship. It took a while to realise that. I've just scrapped everything and started again in that spirit.

I thought I sent you that little mood-appraising SMS about irony the other day as a sort of joke, but it turns out it foreshadows what I want to write you now. The following is turmoil. From me to you alone. And maybe it's the start of an epitaph.

– Is *The Structure of Feeling* a tomb? It seems existentially Christian, irregardless whatever pagan referent, right? Any resemblance to a pharaoh's tomb serves to recall your theft and your, um, penitent hadj to restore a speck of Khufu's pyramid at the start of your career; your avatar's role as tutelary spirit in bereft cartoon aspects abjects some angelic sanctimoniousness with, like, a survivor's guilt? rendering the technical *clunk* of the animatic an exaggerated mope, manifest melancholy; more guilt... The loop of the show – from ghost train to mp4 to maybe synched lighting – inscribes a purgatorial loop, with your Sisyphean task surrogated by the artwork. It's a cult image, art; an apophatic theology devoid of the tacit but intransigent absolute of God. God stops irony's potentially infinite trope. I think you're maybe a type of Kierkegaardian Christian. Really.

Is your work attempting expiation for subbing art for Jesus? Ha. That is to say, irony is your fundamental artistic grift, right? But the type of irony employed is, I'd contest, itself ironised, perhaps unconsciously, suspending even the ambiguity irony enacts – the suspension of truth and falsity – as both theistic and nihilistic; God and/or eternal nothing. What if you were to force the resolution of your irony – to grasp irony's ouroboric movement – by way of some previously buried Christian faith? The work's/your melancholy, your equivocation, and your individualism form an image of ironic expiation that symptomatically confesses guilt at the denial of Jesus, which, as with Peter, corroborates your faith and Jesus' necessity.

To skew some things we've discussed before, there are basically two kinds of irony – neither of which the vernacular sense synonymic with sarcasm. Irony's a trope: the deliberate (or misinterpreted in reception) irresolution of opposing conclusions; a suspension of meaning or sentiment or feeling as a way to affirm or emphasise the agency of the ironist. This is the freedom it might bestow. Irony defers the last word, for as long as it (irony) exists. Irony's dissipation is at the moment of its resolution, be that the conclusion of whatever the equivocation is, or in its confession: divulging irony as such is to banish it by the same conclusive impulse. The two types of irony I'm presuming here are delineated theologically, Andy. Surmising that irony requires fuel for its troping, the ironist stokes it negatively, by the deferring of an answer to the implicit question of its existence. In order to do this, the ironist must offer up everything, at least speculatively; irony multiplies and whittles its surroundings. Everything is ironised, including the ironist themselves. This result's either that Schlegel-via-Kierkegaard “self-annihilating nothing” – as irony ironises irony, etc. – or with God, as defined apophatically: the Divine defined negatively, by everything He is not. Irony is defined by one's incapacity to define it. Irony is divine, but only inasmuch as one submits to God as the absolute to underwrite it. God is the inexhaustible fuel by which irony might be kept spinning, with God offering sustenance and a surrogate – in the form of Jesus – to maintain irony in the ironist's stead, affording the ironist an everlasting version of the

freedom the gesture confers, dependent on the ironist's accepting of Jesus. This is part of Jesus' sacrifice. His is the divine capacity to be infinitely undone, superimposed paradoxically (ironically??) with the human foible of finitude, mortality. I mean, your irony is, partly, that shared by much contemporary art practice wherein meaning – or the pursuance of meaningfulness – is teased and maybe even portended, even as the artwork's precondition is interpretative equivocation. Romantic irony is the model for my nihilistic irony... But where much contemporary art might in general be ironic in its equivocal kind of stasis, ironising, at root, a definition of art as art – your artworks ironise you, Andy Holden (or 'Andy Holden' or something like that), drawing your self into the vortex of interpretation, categorical muss, and, unpropitiously, derision, incredulity, dismissal from those shitty corners of encounter. This is not to say that most autobiographical or auto-fictional work does this. Oftentimes it feels like recourse to the self is a way to found empirical truth, and construct didacticism on top like cake. Your self is more often somewhat masochistically offered up as unknowable, deferred – ironised indefinitely. Jesus both resolves and instigates irony's liberating possibility in the practice of apophatic faith.

Just a start.

Thinks: Melancholy loss of Jesus? As in, Jesus as lost object, manifesting melancholy. Apophatic faith as irony? A MATRYOSKA of SIN. Is your work paradoxical like Jesus was? All exhibitions are purgatory: yours is literally. Or better, Bardo? Digital reliquary? Cartoons as sacrilege? Your cartoon laws are heretical, right? In Zoroastrianism the wicked get purified in molten metal. Here, you're first rendered cartoon neotenous then CNC milled. A tomb is a place of infinite rest: Andy, you more than anyone I know, need some rest. I thought about Holbein's The Body of the Dead Christ in The Tomb; I thought about the gun in Roger Rabbit. I wrote plenty of this in the Royal Danish Library on Kierkegaard's Plads.

More soon.

With love,

Ed x

Ed Atkins is a British contemporary artist best known for his video art and poetry.