

Terry Atkinson: A portrait of myself not made by myself

Four years ago, in 2021, Josey organised Terry Atkinson's first solo exhibition in the UK since 2004. Installed across two sites in the English regional city of Norwich, it featured war drawings – the complete series of 'Berlin, East Prussia and the Desert' (2014–17) and a selection from the ongoing 'American Civil War' (2018–) series – alongside wall-mounted 'Grease Works' constructed from Atkinson's designs of the early nineties, *Slat-Greaser 4* (1990/2021) and *Slat Greaser Trough 5* (1991/2021).¹ In 2021, the 'Grease Works' were not Atkinson's priority: the weird communing of Goya's monsters, ET the extra-terrestrial and the Bolsheviks, or the fraught intimacies of the Proud Boys, Rosa Parks and Colin Kaepernick had more purchase in the wake of the January 6 Capitol riots.

Many more 'Grease Works' exist as unrealised plan drawings than have been constructed. Retrieved from storage, those shown at Josey were repaired – screwed together and repainted using DIY-store materials – before being reinvested with generic petroleum grease. Wooden structures reminiscent of Kenneth Noland's trapezoid canvas supports are offset by horizontal bands of trough-like frames filled with grease. Volatile, daubed like wet paint into fixed compositional elements, grease would continue to run during the exhibition: a soft/hard material dyad was, for Atkinson, reflecting on the works in 1988, analogous to the software/hardware distinction in computer science.² Over the ensuing decades, many meanings – rooted in arguments with modernist art and artistic subjectivity – would stick to the 'Grease Works'. Josey was fascinated by the greased mod-formalism of postwar abstract expressionism, dating to 20 years earlier, in proximity to the phantasmic socialist realist drawings. How does a practice hold such things together?

Earlier this year *Slat-Greaser Trough 3* (1990/2024), constructed from a drawing by Josey, featured in the epochal group exhibition 'Fake Barn Country' at Raven Row gallery, London. Many of the works in the exhibition – an exhibition of an expanded network of artists drawing on local, international and intergenerational references – the artist-organisers propose:

operate in relation to a kind of realism – with things shown as they are, or how they appear to be. There are found, reconstituted and reiterated forms and images – familiar materials, rudimentary devices, household stuff – while the ways and means of making are often economical, and include low-tech reproduction, layering and repetition, shopping, borrowing and covert recording.³

Among the likes of, for example, Kitty Kraus' spiralling Lidl trolley handle (*Untitled*, 2009) or Stuart McKenzie's crisp, stitched receipts (*Welt 3*, 2025), the 'Grease Works' resonate with the straitened, precarious aesthetics of post-austerity practice while evoking an earlier threshold moment of our burgeoning techno-feudal era. Tracking with twentieth-century postwar history, the searching critical integrity of Atkinson's 70-year practice, first as part of the collectives Fine/Artz and Art & Language, then as an individual, issues from a restless inquiry into the conditions of artistic subjectivity and production. New meanings stick to grease; his work continues to find new audiences.

Josey was first made aware of Atkinson in the *Dispatch* publication produced to accompany his 1996 retrospective organised by curator Lynda Morris at the Norwich Gallery titled 'Terry Atkinson: Histories, Biographies, Collaborations, 1958–1996'.⁴ Morris, Atkinson recalls, had first approached him with the framework for the exhibition at a 1994 conference he spoke at with one-time collaborator Joseph Kosuth⁵; in the previous decade, what Atkinson referred to as "the refurbishment of conceptualism" had seen it "pulled back into a certain historical focus" by art historians as well as a number of blockbuster exhibitions, among them 'L'Art Conceptuel, Une Perspective' (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989) and '1965–1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art,' (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1995–96).⁶

In such exhibitions the history was, he said, "brutally and literally sorted out": the intimate underbelly of conceptualism is overridden "perhaps in the interest of hype and historical vanity and maybe rhetorical grandeur".⁷ "They certainly don't pick up a lot of the detail that the practice of conceptualism at that time had," Atkinson conjectured. For Atkinson, Morris' framework for the exhibition enacted "an ethics of historical transmission": the small, intimate scale of the exhibition at Norwich Gallery better reflected the politics that he experienced as the drive of conceptualism. The fact of separating out histories, biographies and collaborations, Atkinson said, "is an interesting way to unravel the lies of one's own life, so to speak, as well as the truths". How can these truths and lies be disentangled from social, economic and political relations?

In the summer of '66 Atkinson quit Fine/Artz after a light and image show titled *Miss Misty and the Tri-Cool Data* projected in the Great Hall in Aston University in Birmingham: he'd realised its glaring proximity to the advertising world of commodified entertainment.⁸ In 1973, Atkinson's exit from the conceptual art collective Art & Language was due, in part, to the way it had been hitched to the "speedwagon" of avant-gardism by a professional museum establishment, for who the unspoken assumption was that to be avant garde was to be progressive. Later, by the mid-1980s, Atkinson began to recognise the extreme self-assured projection of the artistic subject as a "self-confirming centre of truth", which, by the early 2000s, he referred to in shorthand as the "AGMOAS": the avant-garde model of the artistic subject.

Looking back, the AGMOAS, we might say, refurbished a view of Atkinson's own formation, beginning with "attempting to become an artist" at Barnsley Art School from 1958–60, which included imbibing the notion of the AGMOAS, even if he had no notion it was occurring, and the Slade School in 1960, where he fully absorbed the ideology. Later, the volte-face that his socialist realist drawings represented in the wake of Art & Language "offered, at a minimum, a promise of some kind of cognitive reward, some kind of skewered art practice side-step out of the AGMOAS":

The formation of the avant-garde model of the artistic subject (AGMOAS) was by the eighties, after a more than eighty years transition, clearly formed into a neoliberal commodity where career, true to the conversion of practices into brands, was belauded over practice.⁹

Dating from this time, the 'Grease Works' were an attempt to make works that modelled the artistic subject as a critique of the AGMOAS. Building on the hardware/software analogy, Atkinson reasoned that the artistic subject is a kind of learned software programme that runs (is implemented) in the biologically inherited hardware of the artist's body – the receptacle for the concept of the artistic subject. Art pedagogy is a primary programme.

Grease offered a ludic poetic valence as evidenced in his sentences and paragraphs of 1988, *GREASING, USING GREASE, PARAGRAPHS ON GREASE* and *USES FOR GREASE*:

- 2) Grease is the perfect material for contemporary art practice. And how is this, we ask ourselves? Because grease is a perfect resume of the shift towards consumption as its own justification! Really!
- 3) Grease is the perfect material of socialist realism. Because of its working class associations. The local car mechanic. (but how about Formula 1, Silverstone, etc.? Within the next decade we will see the Leningrad Glasnost Grand Prix!) Please don't try to be ironic, rather try and make a noble stereotype out of the material of the car mechanic.
- 4) The attack on complacent dichotomies is complacent. Fake the attack! Grease it! Then make a double-fake! A double-fake! What's a double-fake?¹⁰

Grease gave a way to think through the perpetuation and dissolution of boundaries. Like a permanently wet paint, yet with plastic sculptural qualities, it dissolved boundaries between traditional artistic media.¹¹ In the earlier unconstrained 'Grease Works', such as *Warhol Chair* (1986), grease applied to the picture plane leached into the surface; stubborn blooms interrupt the image, breaking down the relationship between the figurative and non-figurative. This propensity to dissolve borders took on a new geopolitical meaning when Atkinson filled floor-based wooden troughs in the form of a Union Jack (*Grease Flag*, 1991).

Writing in 2019, Atkinson recognised in fact that grease functioned for him as a kind of automata: a self-operating machine carrying out a procedure within human-designated conditions (it is only a short line between automata and Artificial Intelligence). In the early 1990s, the 'Grease Works' appeared in installations with slide projectors that were conceived of as "performing" and "behaving" as works in lieu of the artist's body. Likewise, Atkinson's use of a range of pseudonyms in paintings and drawings – "Terry Dog", "R.Tist", "Terryact" – functioned to displace the signature as an index of value pegged to the bodily guarantor of agential subjectivity.¹²

Atkinson's 'Grease Works' belong to a period of full-throttle nihilistic displacement of self, "a throwing away of responsibility", whereas the later works, particularly the drawings, articulate his own biographical formation and position within the AGMOAS. In the proxy cultural war of abstract expressionism and socialist realism, after conceptualism, Atkinson plumped for the latter. The 'American Civil War' drawings were made, Atkinson has written, from a

desire to report the fact that the experiences of his generation were overseen by a form of political rivalry, the events of which are still omnipresent – the Cold War. It was two colossal civil wars, the American Civil War (1861–65) and the Russian Civil War (1918–21), which led to the superpowers that incubated, conducted and maintained the Cold War. “This conflict,” Atkinson writes, “permeated every aspect of the lives of my generation, not least the art world in which my own art practice was imbedded from 1958 onwards. The Cold War was fought and marshalled through many proxies and conveyed into every cultural aspect of the so-called West and East.”

Interspersed with ‘Time Travellers’ such as Goya’s monsters, ET the extra-terrestrial, Picasso’s bulls, and Bart Simpson – figures of non-linear history interrupted – these works stand as an historical reportage and re-examination of major events that formed the Western world. In the ‘American Civil War’ works Atkinson draws white supremacists into proximity with counter protestors, including heroes of Black Lives Matter, the Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and sixties, post-war African-American popular culture, and the black and white soldiers who fought and died in the American Civil Wars. Seventeenth-century English suprematism, aligned with the holy values of rationalism, industry and liberty, as well as moral justifications for slavery, created the battlegrounds of this ‘New World’.^{13 14}

Here, in Cologne, in an intimate setting, Josey is showing a selection of the ‘American Civil War’ series addended with ‘Curtis LeMay’ (2022–24) drawings alongside two recently-fabricated ‘Grease Works’, *Wing-Greaser 1* (1990/2025) and *Slat-Greaser Trough 3* (1990/2024), as well as a selection from his most recent ongoing series, ‘Frontispiece’ (2025–). In ‘Frontispiece’ earlier works rear-up from Atkinson’s archive, like the intrusions of art historical monsters in ‘American Civil War’, ornamented by detail drawings of motifs from abstract expressionist paintings. Stencilled statements on Art & Language conceptualism are accompanied by a rollcall of assumed pseudonyms – crucially, factured artfully as drawings, not signatures. There are other tone words, “PORTAL” and “THRESHOLD”, that imply time-space slippage and those which imply a more ungenerous psychologism: “NARCISSISM”, “SELF-ABSORPTION”, “CONCEIT”. The frontispiece of the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ book *Leviathan* (1651), a book that has sustained Atkinson for many years, is a figure of some significance for the artist:

I’ve lived my reading of it as demonstrating Hobbes grasping to an image of himself, on the one hand, as a biblical epic champion of authoritarian governance and the significance of sovereignty of one-person rule and, at first inquiry, and, on the other hand, and in the final analysis, issuing a seemingly contradictory warning against the gathering of an excess of power in one person’s hands. This Hobbesian contradictory sustenance is embedded I think in the foreground of my practice.¹⁵

At the centre of the work *Portal 1*, surrounded by the emblems of “NARCIS-SISM”, “SELF-ABSORPTION”, “CONCEIT”, is a drawing of a photographic portrait of 24-year-old Atkinson taken while installing as part of Fine/Artz in the showcase of recent British art school graduate work, Young Contemporaries. The portrait was taken by someone else, yet Atkinson claims it as a self-portrait: “a portrait of myself,” as he puts it, “not made by myself.” Atkinson takes us back to the beginning to retrospectively “make some sense of my practice being ensnared (inevitably it seems noting the date) in modernism”. Yet, Atkinson has also spoken of a desire for another kind of beginning, “somewhere to start again”:

The worry is not only that I am locked into the transition of having become a trivial miscreant, the worry is that not just the career is now the *Spectacle*, that was always the case, many artists embraced it (Duchamp, Warhol et al.), but the entire practice is transfixed into its glistening surface, which is the *Spectacle*. At this point, let’s dispense with the notion that there is a kernel. Somewhere to start again? Marx maybe? A chink at best, but maybe somewhere (‘somewhere’) to try and not go quietly into the night of the continuous recreation of the entertainment terminus.¹⁶

What we have the privilege of encountering in the ‘Frontispiece’ works is the compression of a 70-year practice into a series of tableaux keyed in, at the centre, to a parallax view of the artist-subject: one constantly searching for a position outside of himself, one who will not go quietly into the night.

~ Jonathan P. Watts, Norwich, 2025

- 1 See Peter Suchin’s review in *Art Monthly*, 453, Feb 2022: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/d626bf7e8d75b7356f3eef329068f30b/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=106011>
- 2 See Terry Atkinson, ‘[BASED ON 1988 NOTES]’, *GREASE AND ITS COHORTS*, Josey publication, 2025.
- 3 ‘Fake Barn Country’ curated by Lawrence Leaman, Ruth Angel Edwards and Oliver Roger Williams, Raven Row, London, 8 May – 6 July 2025: <https://ravenrow.org/exhibitions/fake-barn-country>.
- 4 Morris was curator of the Norwich Gallery from 1981 until its closure in 2007. Taught by Atkinson in 1967 while a student of Fine Art at Canterbury College of Art, Kent, Morris wrote her 1973 thesis on radical art education at the Royal College of Art, London, using Art & Language’s Theory Course at Lanchester Polytechnic as a case study. Later, as an exhibition organiser at the Midland Group Gallery, Nottingham, Morris co-produced (with Robert Self Gallery) an exhibition of Atkinson’s drawings of World War One (30 November 1977 – 21 January 1976).
- 5 Atkinson contributed to a panel discussion as part of the exhibition ‘Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility: Ad Reinhardt, Joseph Kosuth, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ (co-curated by Jenni Lomax and Maureen Paley) at Camden Arts Centre, London, 7 January – 6 March 1994.
- 6 Terry Atkinson, ‘Politics and Conceptualism: The Refurbishment of Conceptualism’, a conference with Lynda Morris, Peter Townsend and Seth Siegelau, Norwich Gallery, 20 March 1996, on the occasion of Terry Atkinson’s exhibition ‘Terry Atkinson: Histories, Biographies, Collaborations, 1958–1996’. Audio cassette tape recording held in the collection of Norwich University of the Arts, Norwich, UK.
- 7 Terry Atkinson, ‘Politics and Conceptualism: The Refurbishment of Conceptualism’, a conference with Lynda Morris, Peter Townsend and Seth Siegelau, Norwich Gallery, 20 March 1996, on the occasion of Terry Atkinson’s exhibition ‘Terry Atkinson: Histories, Biographies, Collaborations, 1958–1996’. Audio cassette tape recording held in the collection of Norwich University of the Arts, Norwich, UK.
- 8 Terry Atkinson, ‘Notes for Sam Lewitt’, unpublished personal correspondence, 2025.
- 9 Terry Atkinson, ‘Notes for Sam Lewitt’, unpublished personal correspondence, 2025.
- 10 See Terry Atkinson, ‘[BASED ON 1988 NOTES]’, *GREASE AND ITS COHORTS*, Josey publication, 2025.
- 11 The reference to medium-specificity recalls the modernist critic Clement Greenberg’s argument for the way “advanced” art articulates the specific qualities of its medium. Visually, Atkinson’s grease recalls Joseph Beuys’ fat which, combined with felt, was applied to environments and the artist’s body to demarcate boundaries. For Atkinson, Beuys embodies the AGMOAS, something he has written on in, for example, John Roberts, *Art Has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, Verso, 1994. Atkinson’s sumptuously heaped grease also recalls Frank Auerbach’s painterly application. Auerbach taught at the Slade while Atkinson was a student: “To watch the procession of the painters coming out of Frank Auerbach’s class, including Auerbach himself and Dennis Creffield, during my time at the Slade in the early sixties, made the South Yorkshire miners departing a shift, who by that time had had pithead baths installed for a decade or more, look relatively scrubbed up. The art school sentimental mix of imagined worker lookalike and vestal bohemianism I thought was a bizarre mix.” Cited in Terry Atkinson, ‘Notes for Sam Lewitt’, unpublished personal correspondence, 2025.
- 12 Recently, writing in 2025, Atkinson has linked the displacement of subjectivity to detritus, connecting the ‘Grease Works’ with his Styrofoam ‘Signature Works’ of 1992. Here, a pseudonym signed in metal paint cuts into the frail Styrofoam support. Styrofoam, what Atkinson provocatively calls an “anti-career material”, is unstable. An unstable commodity is a poor investment. In the ‘Grease Works’ Atkinson, as he puts it “deploys an accident”. Grease in the ‘Grease Works’ resist closure yet Atkinson also sees these works as an attempt to willingly throw away artistic responsibility. Today, Atkinson connects the “accident” with the “accident” of Spectacular capitalism: boundless, limitless, the Spectacle cannot be controlled.
- 13 See Terry Atkinson, *So To Write*, Josey publication, 2021.
- 14 No.88 in the ‘American Civil War’ series was completed as Atkinson watched the mob storm the Capitol on live television. Atkinson began ‘American Civil War’ convinced that an actual second American Civil War would occur imminently. Since 2014, Atkinson has been closely following the emergence of the American Right, not least the likes of the Proud Boys.
- 15 Terry Atkinson, text to accompany Exhibition at Galleria Six, Milano, IT, April 2025.
- 16 Terry Atkinson, text to accompany Exhibition at Galleria Six, Milano, IT, April 2025.