

THE MANBOY





Elliot Dodd, interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 7 April 2017



**Paul Luckraft:** Could you outline the premise for the new film, and talk about how it follows on from other recent projects?

**Elliot Dodd:** I had a bunch of ideas in my head, and this exhibition felt like an opportunity to shove some of those together, and to see what happens when they operate in the same space. There was my weird addiction to looking at expensively produced hip hop music videos; my obsession with the Plato text *Timaeus*; and my interest in VR – I wanted to depict someone in the act of being casually absorbed in a virtual environment. The music video framework seemed to have the potential to hold all that together. I guess I am always looking for containers that can hold something and show it off.

**PL:** Are the elements that you have bolted together things you have been thinking about for a while?

**ED:** Yes, and the fundamental link between them is an almost masochistic fascination with a maleness that is confident and overbearing, and operates in an arena where it is unquestioned. It's allowed to function and to be all-encompassing. The Plato text is proposed as someone talking for hours and hours, laying everything out from solely his perspective, and being utterly confident in his freshly constructed truth. The music videos do something similar: it's a feeling of something terribly complicated made to look effortless. They use surfaces, and tools and agency that I find really attractive, and it suckers me in. They create a world that can be bought into in 4 minutes.

**PL:** You've spoken in previous interviews about all of your work being an investigation of how the fleshy human body intersects with technological machines and structures, be that in politics, economics or gender. Can you expand on that?

**ED:** There is always a reference back to the body and its fragile loopiness, as an essential zone

from which to deal with all of the actions in the world that are provocative or symbolic. Through drawing and animating this bodily container I'm trying to express the results of these real-time conditions. They produce a dynamic blob made of reformed parts. The work becomes a new set of abstracted eyes through which I can see and come to terms with things.

**PL:** The work doesn't feel like a dispassionate analysis of the world, but instead an embodied process of you discovering new psychological spaces, for yourself and the viewer. Although it may be very personal, the process of making the film involved lots of other people. How do you approach this collaboration?

**ED:** With the video work, it seems essential that it really takes on what it is pointing at. So if the task is to make something that can stand and function next to a music video it's about putting in place all the elements, and that necessitates multiple collaborations. So there is a pragmatic motivation. But I do also really enjoy that my instincts and a fast set of ideas get dropped into a mesh of interactions and decision-making, slowing the whole thing down, pulling it apart. I have a way of dealing with my own ideas which can be, in making a drawing, for example, very focused – just me and a drawing board and some pencils, really thrashing out an idea – but in making a video you have a sense that A, B, C and D are going to be interesting as a set of factors, and it's then about putting it into a blender...

**PL:** ...And you might get a delicious-tasting smoothie at the end!

**ED:** Or it might be bitter and sour, yeah. You just need a bit of confidence at the beginning that you have an interesting set of possibilities: a confidence that the ingredients are going to stand up to that thrashing around of multiple people working at different times and places.

**PL:** Do you actively think about or explore the notion of the artist as a brand? Previous installations have used non-art objects such as a BMW motorbike placed alongside your work in a display that suggests a showroom or trade fair.

**ED:** It's taking those things – products, brands, logos – and using them as another material. I feel they have a certain authority, and I grab that and put it into the mix with more conventionally artistic decision-making. This acts to make myself productively uncomfortable, bending things I am aiming towards into new shapes, twisting things beyond my control.

**PL:** One thing you do control is the animations you design and overlay onto the faces of the characters in your films. Can I ask about the intention behind adding these visual layers that feel less borrowed from other sources and closer to the imagery in your drawings?

**ED:** It initially came from seeing it being used as a technique in a documentary called *CYBERPUNK* from 1990 by Marianne Trench, which features interviews with early computer hackers. Hovering animated masks covered the identity of interviewees. It had efficiency in the way it deformed the human beings so that I couldn't decipher them. It was a really clunky technique and the animated faces were so out of sync with what was being said, like it was a person talking on top of a person talking. You could see through it and you still had a sense of the human behind, but shifted into a different entity. It was powerful and had an authority, but was also quite simplistic. It offered me a way to avoid the drama of a performance to camera. I could get humans to act in front of a camera, but I could then transform them into something else, another mode of delivery of a text via a digital cipher. Fundamentally, it allows you to film without a script.

**PL:** How much do you think the music you've worked on for this piece will shape its atmosphere?

**ED:** It will be really controlling. I wanted some bass-heavy trap hip hop, something that had a real defiance but was lumpen and slow. At the same time the snares and hi-hats are really dense and light and metallic. Texturally, it seemed like an interesting grounding and a dynamic base on which the other things could sit.

**PL:** Talking of encounters, we see someone using VR technology in your film. What is it about its uses and applications that fascinates you? And why have you opted not to use it as an actual tool for this new work?

**ED:** My interest lies more in the potential for the normalisation of VR as a physical mode of leisure or work. I'm excited about the integration of a behaviour where you are denied sight by a headset, completely removing your presence in reality. Hence the conversation in my film moves in and out of VR. As a thing for humans to be doing in their home, or at an art show, it has an absurd quality...

**PL:** Because it makes people passive objects and removes their faculties?

**ED:** Yes – well, for everyone else watching, the person using the kit is blind and deaf and flailing around. And there is something diagrammatically interesting about a cable running up your back and across your skull, plugging you in via a cord. I get really excited by the augmented, cyborg physicality, and this has been present in some of the recent drawings I've made. This sense of information being fed up a second spine and delivered into your face.

**PL:** Perhaps the VR look fulfils a sci-fi fantasy that been around for many decades?

**ED:** Absolutely. It's very *Tron*, and very silly and cartoon-like. Technological reality has caught

up with childhood fantasy. I am working on a sequence of different works that will each show a different brand of VR. In *The Manbody* I chose to use the Sony PlayStation kit because its aesthetics are particularly stylised. It's made to be looked at and to give off an aura of technology. When you use these new headsets, you can be totally convinced you're entering another reality. I wanted to film someone genuinely immersed in it. Rory, the actor, was in VR throughout the filming. He became really disorientated and confused as to where he was.

**PL:** To what extent do you think viewers of your work will get a sense of the confusion and frustration you feel in relation to masculinity, technology and consumption? Do you worry it could be too seductive and entertaining?

**ED:** The spectacle of it, the fact that it's farcical and surreal, is another set of tests for my selection of ingredients. It's a tough set of things for my viewpoints to be filtered through. I'm not interested in presenting my ideas with pinpoint clarity. I want to make it really hard for my ideas, so that they are always working. I think it's interesting if someone is just entertained by my work. The techniques and devices might win, and suck everything strange out of it. The Plato text is fascinating in part because it is so old, and has such a powerful attitude that can be conveyed through this contemporary world, in a stripped-back way, so just the absurd nuts and bolts of it are holding steady.

**PL:** A last question: where did the title *The Manbody* come from?

**ED:** It's from the revised Plato script: 'When the manbody is new it is made of fresh triangles fed on milk.' It seemed like the line that summed up everything.

#### Artist's presentation

Sunday 21 May, 3pm. Dodd devises a special event to accompany and expand his work on display.

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**Elliot Dodd** (b. 1978, Jersey, Channel Islands) lives and works in London. He studied at the Royal Academy Schools, London, from 2013–16, and completed his BA at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL London (1998–2002).

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