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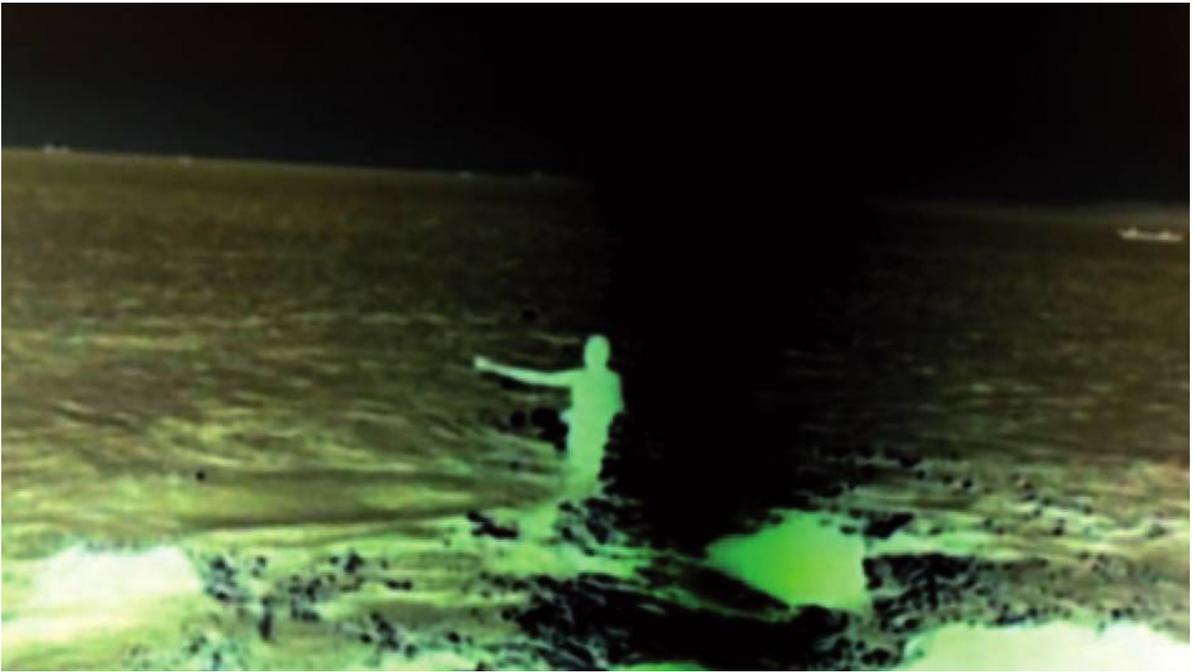


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James Richards,
Not Blacking Out,
Just Turning the
Lights Off, 2011,
two-channel video
installation, colour,
sound, 16min 16sec,
stills. Commissioned
by Chisenhale
Gallery, London

Previous spread:
James Richards,
Not Blacking Out,
Just Turning the
Lights Off, 2011.
Installation view,
Chisenhale Gallery.
Photograph: Andy
Keate. All images
courtesy the artist;
Cabinet, London;
and Rodeo, London
and Istanbul

Will You Be My Version?: James Richards

– Ed Halter

A man sits in a comfortable-looking chair, his eyes closed, his shaved head tilted back. He's youngish, and white, and wears a black T-shirt emblazoned with a sporty red logo. From off-screen, an older male voice instructs him to 'now focus on three sounds', telling him to imagine each one by 'not really describing it, but just knowing what it is'. The unseen speaker leads the young man through a guided meditation, and perhaps into a hypnotic trance, judging from his voice's firm but soothing tone; we may assume that the lad will soon be drifting off. But before we can see this happen, a synthesised hum begins to drone in the background, continuing after a cut to a new image: a colour negative of handheld video shot at a lake or river, with some men playing in the water, and the sounds of waves licking against the shore.

This sequence transpires near the beginning of James Richards's two-channel video *Not Blacking Out, Just Turning the Lights Off* (2011). What happens in the remainder of the quarter-hour-long piece could be interpreted as the young man's

Out is certainly possible, it wouldn't fully account for the experience of the work. Here, as in Richards's other videos, the images don't simply cohere into a story or argument, but rather drift against and into one another, like flotsam on the sea's surface, convening to form some fleeting yet potent design. This figure of a sleepy young man invites the viewer, too, to enter into the dreamlike state typical of the artist's work, thick with nameless emotions, suffused with a muted eroticism. *Not really describing it, but just knowing what it is.*

An oneiric sensibility has been a constant feature of Richards's work, from his earliest assemblages of archival images, to his curatorial programmes of other artists' films and videos, to his most recent titles, which have increasingly included footage shot by Richards himself. The liminal zone between sleep and waking is old territory for cinema; Richards continues a tradition that contains the nightmares of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, the trance journeys of Jean Cocteau and Maya Deren, the closed-eye vision of Stan Brakhage, the transportive boredom of Andy Warhol. Yet, in continuing this line of exploration into the twenty-first century, Richards now reckons with an era marked by the ubiquity of screens and feeds, one in which the artificial hallucinations of audiovisual media rarely cease to surround us. Richards has said that some of his first tapes, like *Untitled (Cinema Programme)* (2006), strive for the effect of 'late-night drifting through the internet'.¹ This is a pointed example of sleep being stolen from the body, then replaced with a cybernetic simulacrum of dreaming — the kind from which we never completely awaken.

Though from his earliest college efforts to today Richards has always included original footage that he has shot,

Ed Halter considers James Richards's responses to the present media landscape and to the histories that inform it.

dream, if one wished to find a narrative rationale in the stream of images and sounds that subsequently flow by, which include night-vision shots of reindeer, blobs of viscous liquid altered through chromakey effects, a chest X-ray dotted by a laser pointer, a woman's voice reading poetry, a cigarette butt falling to the ground and part of the Incredible String Band's electro-folky 'A Very Cellular Song' (1968) slowed down to a sonorous moan. While such a reading of *Not Blacking*

1 James Richards in conversation with Chris McCormack at 'An Evening with James Richards', Museum of Modern Art, New York, 6 October 2014.



his work is best known for using images taken from pre-existing sources. His first tapes employed material from YouTube and other online aggregators, as well as old VHS cassettes purchased in charity shops; around 2009, after acquiring an analogue-to-digital converter, Richards dramatically increased this inventory of footage from VHS, creating an image stockpile from which he continues to draw. He also rips material from DVDs — the basis, for example, of much of *Not Blacking Out*. The internet still provides new elements for Richards's use, but more recently he has begun creating animations using After Effects, which for him tend towards stock visual tricks like lens flares, digital splats and liquid textures. Since 2013, he has been ripping Blu-rays to obtain high-definition transfers of films from the 1960s, 70s and 80s. His practice may have evolved over time, but new sources haven't displaced older ones; rather, his total personal archive has grown. 'There is always so much overlap,' he wrote in response to a recent email. 'During editing and finishing something ... [I] dip back into older folders and bring

past things or older unused experiments out and into the mix.'²

The vocabulary we have inherited to describe the practice of reusing images created by others seems insufficient in light of Richards's output. 'Appropriation' and 'détournement' now strike us as violent, evoking acts of seizure and hijacking that would seem unnecessary in the age of digital abundance. In addition to its obsolete reference to the measurements of motion-picture film, 'found footage' implies levels of rarity that are likewise unthinkable today, when the unpredictable operations of the second-hand store have been rapidly superseded by the algorithmic efficiency of search engines. Moreover, even in the short time that Richards has been at work, networked access has increased to the point that the time-consuming labour necessary, for instance, to find and convert an old VHS tape has become irrelevant to our contemporary experience of those resulting images, which now appear to us as essentially indistinguishable from something discovered in a split second with the click of a hashtag. The public

2 Email from the artist, 10 November 2014.



Above and left:
James Richards,
*Untitled (Cinema
Programme)*, 2006,
digital video, colour,
sound, 17 min 43 sec,
stills

image bank has become so massive that we are today surprised when something *isn't* available; seemingly all electronic media have thus been levelled by the internet, regardless of historical provenance.

It is all the more remarkable, then, that we can find such sense of wonder and emotional depth in Richards's work, when images as such have become cheap and weightless. Richards rescues video from demystification, and he achieves this by focusing not merely on the content of media, but rather its contemporary effects on the viewer, as well as the relationships that images can develop towards one another. By meditating on otherwise ephemeral images, he susses out the strange attractions between them, using these lines of force to chart new and unusual pathways we might follow.

This notion of the moving-image artist little resembles the macho myths of heroic *poïesis* nor those of struggles against budgets and industry standards that we imagine drove an Orson Welles or a Jean-Luc Godard, much less a Kenneth Anger or a George Kuchar. Instead,

in Richards we see that images are not products of creation, but rather constitute part of a total media environment in which we are suspended. As the hypnotic subject of *Not Blacking Out* succumbs to the words around him, we too must submit to the flow of images in order to navigate the currents. Richards's work is not so much a commentary on this electronic over-saturation as an attempt to express what it feels like to live within it — to communicate through media, to learn through media, to imagine through media. To propose links between these images is a means of looking anew at what we are always experiencing. The drifting, wandering quality of his video work in this way mirrors our contemporary situation, as each of us floats, alone but connected, upon a vast informatic ocean.³

Another set of moments. A high-school girl begins to fall asleep in the back of a classroom, her head resting on her hand, her eyelids drooping. A hand draws a face. A zoom through deep space, through the starry clouds of distant galaxies. The sequence loops, at first without sound;

³ This use of an extended nautical metaphor has perhaps been influenced by Richards's *Raking Light* (2014), which includes recurring images of flowing water, rushing waterfalls and raincoat-clad boaters.



James Richards,
The Misty Suite,
2009, digital video,
colour, sound,
6min 48sec, still

then cut to the beat of a repeating phrase spoken flatly by a female voice: 'Bear down. Bear down. Breathe.' Once again, Richards pairs a young person on the edge of consciousness and an older figure's words of therapeutic control, of mind over body.

This sequence has drifted around Richards's body of work over the years. On its own, it exists as the minute-and-a-half-long video *Misty Boundaries Has Left the Room* (2009), first released as part of the LUX Associate Artists Programme's online project 'The Politics in the Room' (2009), paired with another short work, *Misty Boundaries Fades and Dissolves* (2009). These two pieces, in turn, were combined into *The Misty Suite* (2009), which Richards screens as a single video. Another early video, *Practice Theory* (2006), has bounced around his filmography in a similar manner. Richards includes it, in toto, within the longer *Voice Hits and Near Misses* (2007). But for the compilations *Devotion* (2007) and *Active Negative Programme* (2008), Richards incorporates *Practice Theory* in re-edited chunks. When working with celluloid, the process of editing each film comes to a definitive end, by necessity, with the striking of a release print. Today, as Richards's work shows, the moment of so-called 'post-production' can be extended infinitely, and an artist's play with his or her materials need never come

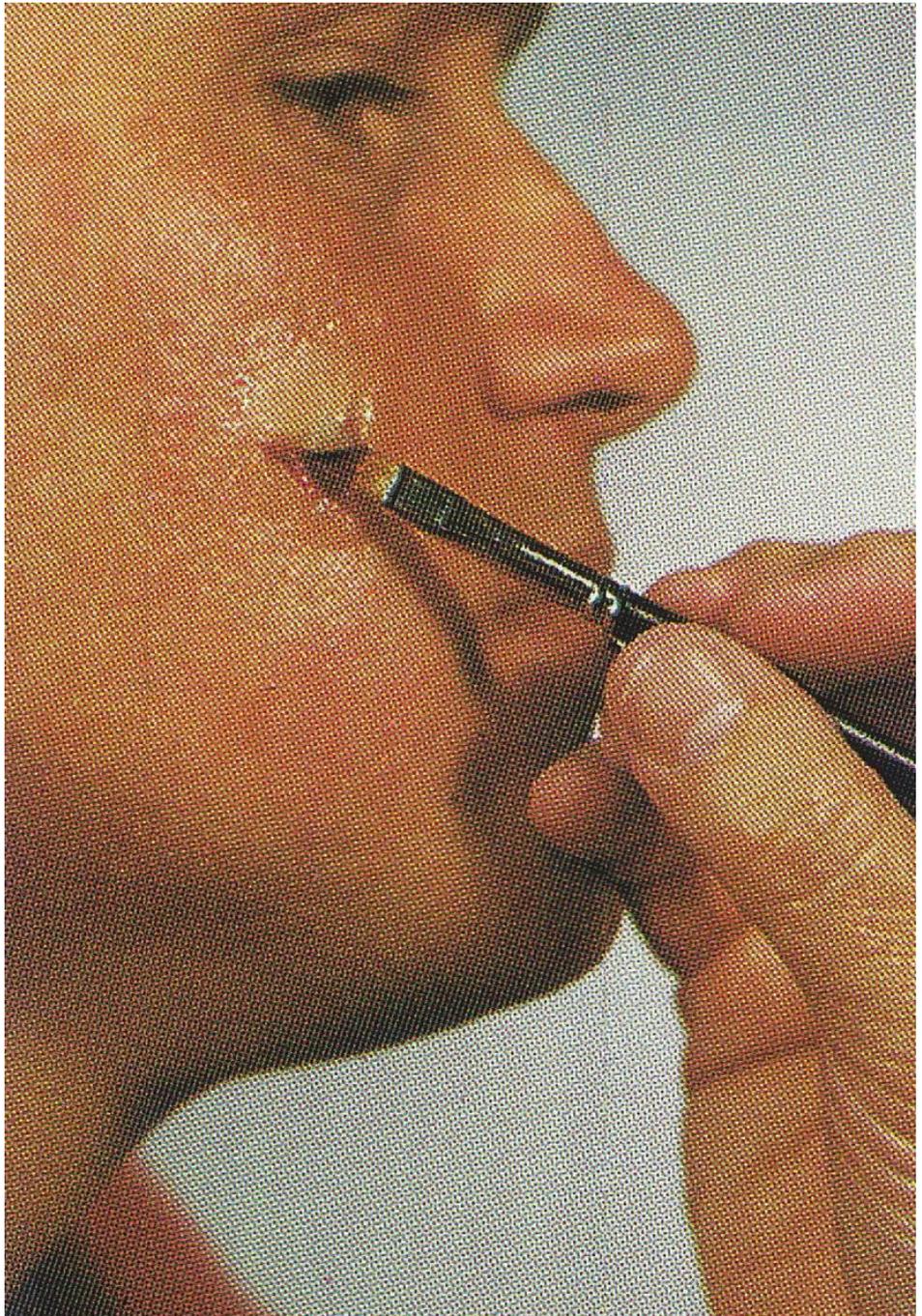
to a full stop. Elements can continue to be duplicated and reused, popping back like familiar themes and audio samples returning in a musical composition.

Recently, *The Misty Suite* reappeared in the sixty-minute programme 'An Evening with James Richards', assembled by the artist for a single theatrical screening at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, on the occasion of the group exhibition 'Cut to Swipe', which includes *Rosebud* (2013) and *Not Blacking Out* as installations.⁴ *The Misty Suite* shared time with other works by Richards, as well as pieces by artists Stuart Marshall, Stephen Sutcliffe, Chris Saunders and Paul Bush. As with his other curated programmes, Richards chose not to interpolate titles, breaks or other divisions between works, making it difficult to tell, at times, when one work ended and the next began, the line-up running like a continuous mixtape or playlist.

For the viewer, the indeterminacy of demarcation between works in Richards's compilations prompts a bit of anxiety, even if a printed list of titles with attributions has been made available, as is often the case; at the recent MoMA screening, a shuffling of papers under mobile-phone lights occurred throughout the show as viewers attempted to ascertain what they were watching, and whether it was old or new, made by Richards or someone

4 'Cut to Swipe', curated by Stuart Comer, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 11 October 2014—22 March 2015.

James Richards,
The Screens, 2013,
four-slide-projector
installation
featuring 320 images
appropriated from
a theatre make-up
book, detail



else. Speaking after that event, Richards remarked that his desire to include pieces by Marshall, Sutcliffe and others sprang from a sort of ‘admiration from afar’ of ‘something you’re not capable of’. This distance Richards cites is not only one of space but also of time: a longing across history that grants an electric charge to this grouping of works by different men, packed closely beside one another into a single event, commingling while retaining their individual autonomy.

Richards explores the delicacy of boundaries in other ways in his most recent work. In the video *Rosebud* (2013), he engages with ‘trembling surfaces’⁵ – a flower teasing a man’s naked, hairy skin; a camera breaking through the water’s surface; violent abrasions on photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and others in a Japanese library, marking spots where censors removed images of genitalia. The corporeal strangeness of these last examples is echoed in *The Screens* (2013),

5 Richards uses this phrase to describe *Rosebud* in a video interview for *frieze* on the occasion of its inclusion in the 55th Venice Biennale, 2013, available at <https://vimeo.com/73609591> (last accessed on 3 November 2014).





James Richards,
Rosebud, 2013,
digital video, black
and white, sound,
13min, still



a slide installation of photographs appropriated from a theatre make-up book that simulate skin pinched, cut, punctured and scraped. The equation of skin and screen in the title of this piece underscores the way in which Richards's past videos play with the visual textures of electronic media, including moments of tape hiss, fuzzy static and lo-res pixilation. Such moments — less visible in their own time, perhaps, but made richly so in a higher definition age — speak of the history of these images, how they have travelled through multiple acts of transference to arrive in the present.

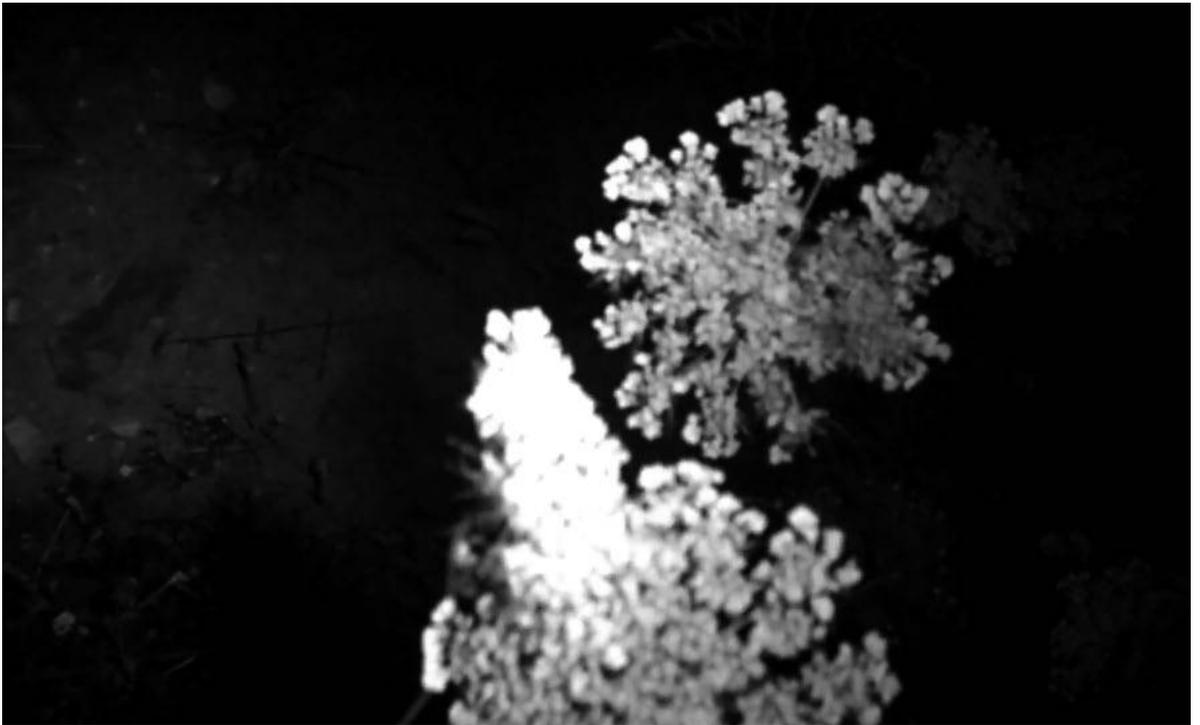
The queer valences of *Rosebud*'s imagery brings to mind similar instances peppered throughout Richards's works, both overt and coded. In *Practice Theory*, we see the cover of a gay porn DVD; in *Not Blacking Out*, the camera casually pans across a vial of poppers, a pump-dispenser of lube and a crinkly gold wrapper that once contained a condom. Elsewhere in Richards's work, internet-sourced footage of male-bonding activities, such as a frat-house hazing ritual or an impromptu roadside dubstep dance party, take on homoerotic overtones in their new contexts.

Of course, *Rosebud* bears a particularly redolent title. It invokes the mysterious secret at the heart of *Citizen Kane*, and it's dirty slang for the puckered involution of the anus. But it also evokes

the communication of love through flowers. Watching *Rosebud*, I couldn't help but think of Jean Genet's only film, *Un chant d'amour* (*A Song of Love*, 1950), which shows two male prisoners speaking to one another wordlessly by swinging a garland of flowers between two adjoining windows, one hand to the other. Whether Richards's use of flowers in *Rosebud* is a true allusion to Genet's film is impossible to tell from the video alone. Yet it would not be Richards's only sly reference to gay history. *Not Blacking Out* includes the sounds of lesbian-feminist poet Judy Grahn reading her 1971 poem 'Slowly: a plainsong from an older woman to a younger woman'. As its title indicates, Grahn's poem in part concerns the passing down of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Pondering writers like Grahn and Genet reminds us that media artefacts are only metaphorically 'objects' to be collected and stored; they are fundamentally technologies of communication, transmitters of information from peer to peer or from the past to the present. This raises issues that are specific to queer identity (and, by extension, any historically repressed identity), and points towards the most political aspect of Richards's work. Until recently, queer life had its basis in a shared secrecy, which fostered a more limited circulation of phrases, gestures and fashions, based

James Richards, *The Screens*, 2013, four-slide-projector installation featuring 320 images appropriated from a theatre make-up book. Installation view, 'Speculations on Anonymous Materials', Fridericianum, Kassel, 2013–14. Photograph: Achim Hatzius



James Richards,
Rosebud, 2013,
digital video, black
and white, sound,
13min, still

upon a set of codes known only to a few. But what happens when these codes become widely available, potentially to anyone, as just another part of the horizontal sprawl of data? How does an identity emerge within this more dispersed culture, out of the artefacts left by past generations? 'It is a long story', Grahn writes, 'will you be proud to be my version?'⁶

Born in 1983, and thus coming of age in the digital era, Richards has often been situated as a 'young artist', as if his work should reveal something about a millennial sensibility. Perhaps; yet, at heart, his work seems equally concerned with the conversations that occur across time, through the legacy of media, and the questions such conversations raise. If we now live within a mediascape defined — if not overwhelmed — by images handed down to us from the past, how should we navigate them? And how can we find ways not simply to speak about these images, but with them?

6 Judy Grahn, 'Slowly: a plainsong from an older woman to a younger woman', *love belongs to those who do the feeling: New & Selected Poems (1966—2006)*, Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, 2008. Also available on the Poetry Foundation's website, at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/237426> (last accessed on 7 November 2014).