

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES RICHARDS

Jamie Stevens: Could you tell me about the title of the work?

James Richards: The title is 'Not Blacking Out, Just Turning the Lights Off'. I had been thinking about the gallery space and what it means to project moving image in a black room, which is something I really didn't want to do. The title also references a certain feeling you get when cropping images before really knowing quite what they do or what they are. A feeling of coming into passages of material slightly too late for the action, or the action itself being blocked away from you within the material. That's where the title came from – revealing or not revealing. 'Blacking Out' refers to the hypnosis scene in the video but also the camera actions that feature throughout the work, whereby the lens gets so close to a surface that the image distorts into black or burns into white.

The title immediately relates the work to its display setting, to the history of how moving image work has been presented in galleries.

There is something quite theatrical about the exhibition space at Chisenhale. As you enter the room it immediately feels like a theatrical platform and I wanted to work with that feeling, not to undo that sensation of entering the space. Making the video material itself can be a very insular studio-based process but then there is a second stage of the work that takes place in the making of the installation. In the gallery space you become aware that there is an extra layer of montage in the setting. The seating, wall, floor coverings and the lighting, for example, are all chosen for particular effect. These elements are part of the collage of the whole work, setting up a space in which there is an immersion of both the images and the audience.

To pick up on that idea of immersion, it's interesting to come back to the decisions you made for the space because the default immersive environment for moving image is that of cinema, of the black box and projected image. So is it a different type of immersion that you are talking about here?

If you think about the light bulb that features in the video, it's a gif file, not a cinematic image and it sits there next to you, occupying space in the way that advertising aims to. I like the light bulb because it's lost and feels dumb or goofy. It takes on a poignancy for me when it's sitting there and the joke that it's able to light but it's not screwed in becomes bleaker over time. Rather than becoming a window into somewhere else, it's coexisting with the other component parts of the exhibition and also the bodies watching the video, which is something that I'm drawn to in the way I show work. Your body is still there and you're still aware of sitting in a room next to someone else. The work isn't cold and silent; there are journeys within the passages of material. I remember going to artists' film and video screenings and being very aware of sitting in rooms with people in complete silence, which you never get as a teenager when watching films at the cinema. Those feelings you get with people when watching silent images are very particular.

The light bulb rocking back and forth feels disturbing because the passage is completely silent, whereas digital animations almost demand sound in order to render them physical. The light bulb then immediately cuts to a harsh static sonic frequency which points the images in a completely different direction. The act of listening seems to be central to this work and I know sound plays an important role in leading your editing process.

Yes, definitely. The passage with the reindeer, for instance, came about when I was listening to an improvised music album by Sankt Gerold whilst playing with a camcorder in my flat. I thought I would capture the audio by filming the speaker cone but I began to play with the shutter on the camera and got into playing in time with the music. When I watched it back on the computer I could see the speaker cone, then there was a moment of black and then it re-opened to overexposure. This wasn't particularly stimulating to watch. I thought about editing another image into the sequence and so I chose the deer footage, which is from the BBC programme 'Tribe'. In the end, the original cone footage dropped out entirely. That more-or-less describes the long way around that the work takes to be made. It's like Chinese whispers of associations where elements are added and dropped away simultaneously, which perhaps is a musical method.

What is your starting point for making a video? I know you have a stable of footage that you work from but maybe you could elaborate on how you begin the process of making a new piece of work.

I go through periods of image collecting, going to charity shops and buying different types of videos online. DVDs pile up and I have sessions where I'm very openly pulling out passages that catch my eye. Those passages may not end up anywhere or they may become central. I also listen to a lot of music and spend time with a record player and a sampler listening through things. It's then a slow process of making connections between images and sounds.

How much of the footage in this film did you shoot yourself?

More in this work than in anything else I've made. A lot of my own footage was post-produced into other images. A lot of the surface textures I shot myself and I found them to have quite a satisfying type of distortion. The landscape footage shown in negative is me and a friend in the sea and was shot in the negative effect option on the camera, which looked pleasing when the sun hit the camera. The found footage and the material I've shot all ends up together. My own material is treated as casually as any of the found videos. The intention often comes so much later than the moment I first encounter or shoot the material. The reindeer passage, for instance, I recorded years ago. In a way everything gets levelled and it becomes a kind of matter.

Do you have a clear idea or understanding of how the material will transform as you make the work?

The work grows out of a process, rather than starting with a specific plan. I tend to gather material, manipulate it and then feel its effect on me. I want to try and make the material more stimulating in some way. That's why there are so many different editing devices in the composition. A certain level of confusion and disorientation can be very effective. In the end I'm trying to make work that isn't random but instead has a focus and a voice. Even though the material is so disparate there is an aesthetic or tone to the work that links it all together. That surprises me. It's what I aim to do but I only feel I've achieved that with the material in the past few weeks.

In this video, there are several spoken passages. The poem, in particular, is afforded a lot of space and the rhetorical device it uses of "Am I not..." speaks of your working method, a symbiosis of private expression and its public capture.

The poem is by Judy Grahn, it's called 'Slowly: a plainsong from an older woman to a younger woman' and I used it to balance the work against the other longer sung passage, which is taken from 'A Very Cellular Song' by The Incredible String Band. So it was initially put in for the purpose of the video's composition. There are a lot of rapid shifts and pulls so I wanted to have a couple of moments that are more sustained. The poem plays out a relationship, an intimacy between lovers of two generations and the passing on of cultural experience through romance. In the film there's a lot of skin and closeness and the poem also faces right up close to someone and asks questions. I wanted to have that in a clear, spelt out way. A lot of the shots have a juddering intimacy between the camera and the surface.

There's a great moment in the film that I assume you shot yourself, in which a camera encounters a painting in extremely close proximity. This felt like a very intimate moment in the film; an attempt to share your way of viewing or perspective but the mechanics of the camera creates an insurmountable obstruction.

The painting is from one of those gay erotic coffee table books. I used the camera to try and really get into the picture but obviously it breaks down into the printed texture and the dots. I feel like that passage is really predatory or stalker-ish, even though it's only a photo being shot.

The moment with the painting feels quite clearly authored by you so it's funny that you call it predatory. Is your interest in editing premised on a suspicion about the production of images?

I try and make images and can't. It doesn't come. I began carrying a camera more with me over the last year or so and still ended up filming magazine covers. I also spent time trying to develop a text in parallel to the work over the past year with a view to it ending up in the work and again it just became quotes from other sources.

What are the differences between the film programmes featuring other artists' works that you've put together in the past - two of which will be screened in events accompanying this exhibition - and the process of producing your videos?

I see the screenings as an extension of my working process. There's a grey area between the screenings and my own works. I have a desire to show material that is of continued fascination to me and often that might be works by other artists. I enjoy seeing what the works do to one another when they are in proximity over time both in

the making of art and screening videos. On a very private level, it's a chance to re-see the material for myself via editing the material for a public.

One of the key features of your videos and also a couple of the screenings you've organised seems to be works that feature a cyclical structure or phases of repetition. Why is repetition an important strategy for you?

In the Chisenhale work there is a sequence where a cigarette repeatedly hits the ground and very quickly all the constituent parts of the video separate out, the different layers of sound all start splitting and you begin to feel hypnotised. I find that sensation very stimulating, there's still a certain shock to repetition. We all have this stream of information that we have to edit ourselves in our everyday lives but just to isolate one element on a hunch and to think that this just might be the right image or the right moment to stick with and get into and freeze it somehow feels incredibly pleasurable or satisfying.

A lot of the footage shown in the video in this exhibition has a veneer of damage which makes it look like internet content. Some of that degradation comes from older generation video material but the immediate association and also the quantity of sources does bring in a discussion of the sheer quantity of data that the internet brings us, usually via ever more personal points of access. But then the projectors jar against that discussion, they are stable and powerful and not domestic looking at all. Could you talk about your decision to display the work on two projection screens?

The main question for me was how immersive or not immersive the exhibition should be. I made the video work with headphones and a monitor and it's a continuous challenge to replicate the intensity of that experience and allow someone else that same excitement when they first see the images. That's why I wanted the large alternating screens and powerful sound because I didn't want lots of sounds and images conflicting in the space. This work is more focussed and the two screens also felt right in how they prevent the room turning into a cinema. Having to alternate your view between two screens makes you aware of the seats and other people in the space. The room becomes a kind of sculpture and you become aware of your body in it.

You've talked about not wanting the final form of the work to seem at all random in the relationship between the many sources and I wanted to ask you about how you deal with the issue of control and authorship?

That's the problem working this way or it's what the practice is about almost. These conflicting impulses to follow the flow of the material or to completely re-compose the structure undergoes a passive accumulation. I try to forge these different elements together to maintain the excitement of my first encounter with each piece of material or edit. I'm trying to find the right level of control and togetherness but without things seeming over-crafted. In that question I hope that my voice or a sensibility might become present. That's the line of the composition.

James Richards interviewed by Jamie Stevens, Exhibitions & Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, September 2011.