OFF-DEMONSTRATION

James Richards' video and installation practice explores the instructional form as a means to negotiate public and private imagery. Here, Richards tells Isla Leaver-Yap about the overlap between his screening programmes and his video works, his ongoing collaboration with artist Steve Reinke, and experimenting with the language of digital animation.

Isla Leaver-Yap: *As a material in your work, what is it about a video or a video clip that dictates its reuse?*

James Richards: Making exhibitions and screenings presents a chance to work out my feelings about material. On a very improvised level, it might draw out different connections: there's a sense of free association. The way one might work with material on a computer allows for constant interchanges, particularly with editing software, so there isn't necessarily an "end" to the appearance of footage in my exhibitions. Some material seems to stick around for longer: it has a fascination and stays in the mind. If it seems relevant when I'm working on another piece, I try it out.

ILY: *I was wondering, then, if you made a distinction between your video works, which use found footage and short clips, and the more formal screenings you present using other artists' moving-image work.*

JR: The screenings really emerged from my use of sampling techniques and found footage. It was this initial process that drifted into developing screenings like the Serpentine Park Night event last year, or programs like *Mouth Room* that I developed for FormContent and Light Industry in 2009. One of the first things I did after leaving college was a salon-screening event at LUX, London. I wanted to show a selection of videos that I found inspiring, but also find a way of presenting them together in a way that fit the feel of the individual character of each work. One program, *Devotion* [2007], was a mix of works by Steve Reinke, George Kuchar and Anne

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Maguire videos, some material from the film *Carrie*, an excerpt from a bondage tape shot by a friend, and a poem by Mary Cigarettes that I found on Myspace. We took out all the pauses between the videos and dubbed the works together using a stop-start function on a Digibeta recorder. My process of mixing and selecting was very present but informal. In some respects, it was modelled on how you might make an audio mixtape in your bedroom. The *Active/Negative Programme* that I made for my ICA show [2008] didn't feel authoritative enough to say that I "curated" the piece. These programs are more about working things out, or thinking about ways of showing things. The word "curate" suggests something more scholarly than what was actually going on.

ILY: *When people say "curate", it often implies that the exhibition is the end point of investigation. But your description of your programs or screenings seems to be more about a trial of works, an attempt to see what the footage does to an audience or accidental community. I was thinking about your ICA show in relation to this notion of community.* Active/Negative Programme *comprises a series of video clips shown on a plasma monitor, and is positioned on a small stage with a few rows of black folding chairs. It didn't feel like the default or neutral gesture of putting a monitor in the space (where the encounter with that monitor is similar to that of a photograph or a painting in a gallery: there is a one-to-one intimacy between viewer and work. With monitors, the initial act of looking is not necessarily shared). Your staged presentation of* Active/Negative Programme *constructed the space as a communal cinema, a presentation to a specific body of people – not an individual.*

JR: Two specific things interested me about the form of a communal screening: first, the black-box format, where there's often a curtain delineating the screening space. In galleries, there's usually a tension where certain people decide to go right inside and sit down, whereas others might nervously hover by the door. so it's a self-conscious space. There's also that moment where people spend a couple of seconds checking if they actually want to commit to seeing the work or not. With the *Active/Negative Programme* installation, I wanted to reconstruct a similar scenario in a brightly lit, open gallery space, and highlight the point where one chooses to step up on the platform or not. Secondly, the "set" of the video program was raised up. I wanted it to feel like something from a trade stand or a looping demo at a careers fair. A lot of the material in *Active/Negative Programme* is demonstrative, but it's edited in such a way that the viewer never sees what is being demonstrated; the program presents a sequence of ambiguous actions. I was interested in the tension that occurs when you present something broken and distracted on such purposeful equipment.

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ILY: *You produced a very particular aesthetic in the construction of that space. It felt theatrical, macho, and utilitarian, with the plasma screen on the Unicol stand facing the ranked chairs. Artists like Hilary Lloyd use that aesthetic to very different ends. But with your installation there was an underscoring of commitment, where an individual's non-participation was just as visible as someone who chooses to step up to view. In* Active/Negative Programme *you also used some of clips from previous works.*

JR: Yes. It features the *Practice Theory* video clip I started using in 2006. But it was also the first time I used footage taken from a demonstration video showing photographic uses of studio lighting umbrellas. The demonstration depicts the movement of these props and their effect upon the visual mood or tone of an image, using male subjects who stare straight at the camera. Clips from that footage were inserted into *Active/Negative* as nervous intervals between other material, but that footage also made its way into my larger installation *Call and Bluff* [2009].

ILY: *That demonstration clip you used for interludes or punctuation in* Active/Negative Programme *has a changed emphasis in its reconfiguration in* Call and Bluff. *Presenting the latter in the immersive environment in Tramway, Glasgow [2009] or the installation on monitors that you used in Tate Britain [2010], the looped clip seems to address something very different: the use and appropriateness of silence. Because of your elongation of an already highly contrived moment (like the part where the man poses with a guitar), it appears increasingly inappropriate. It's more uncomfortable the longer the moment extends, comically so.* Call and Bluff *seems to ask what is or is not acceptable about an image and its duration. Thinking about that work, I've been keen to ask you about your new looped video work* Pirate *[2011].*

JR: *Pirate* is two plasma screens, with a poster I made in 2006 positioned next to them. The video on the screens is a looped fragment of an advert, shot through the window of a television shop at the top of Tottenham Court Road in London. It's footage of one of those high-definition loops that are put on new televisions to demonstrate the effect and feel of the screens. The screens sit there hypnotically looping away. I see it working more as a lightbox, except the image constantly fades out; it's the end of something, on repeat. The poster next to it works as an aside. It's a first attempt, albeit on a small scale, to combine still imagery with moving images. The image is really glossy and the screen is very bright. The whole thing feels like a demonstration, or perhaps just slightly "off" demonstration.

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ILY: *I think I've seen that poster on the wall of Matt Keegan's studio, is that right?*

JR: Yes. I sent it to him – I think he's working with it as part of a collage. The text on the poster is a Josef Albers quotation from his book *Poems and Drawings*. To me, it seemed like the perfect quote for urban anxiety, particularly in relation to the idea of a window display. It seemed pertinent.

ILY: *A lot of your work is inscribed with bodily gestures, whether it's stepping up onto a platform to view, or screening works like those at the Serpentine (your inclusion of Charlemagne Palestine's experiments with the effect of sound in relation to the body come to mind). There is always a body in the work. Your stacked books piece [*Untitled (The Mirror Within)*, 2011] also has an implication of a human scale in terms of the towering height of the paperbacks, which seems just over life-size. But you recently mentioned a growing interest with "flatness" in your newer work. I was intrigued as to what you meant by that. Do you mean digital flatness, the disembodied image?*

JR: I've been looking at and thinking about flatness in terms of flash animation and the advertising you see on the escalators of the London Underground, where on-screen images appear to move differently from those you see on monitors. The images don't really emerge from the screen; they seem to pass across it. I'm beginning to experiment with this as a new language. These animations don't appear to cut or transition between images; it's more animated than edited.

ILY: *A lot of these animations seem strange in that they have no root in any sense of physical reality. They are never fixed to anything; they exist on virtual memory. It's interesting to consider what that does to our perception.*

JR: Yes. They're weightless. They're not sourced from anything; there's no filming. It's animation composed of other animations.

ILY: *Are you interested in working with this sort of imagery as a piece of found footage, or attempting to generate similar imagery?*

JR: Both. I've been experimenting with software and ways of composing these things. I've also

been filming more of them, which is really how *Pirate* came about.

ILY: *You're doing a residency at the Experimental Television Center in Upstate New York this summer with Steve Reinke. Is this new animation material part of the work you want to examine in the sphere of your ongoing collaboration with him?*

JR: I think the Experimental Television Center might be the sort of space that usually produces the opposite of that form of imaging, where analogue has a warmth or depth. But my visit might present a meeting between that analogue processing and digital working.

ILY: *We talked about your collaboration with Steve when it was just beginning to form in 2009, which resulted in* Disambiguation *[2009]. You mentioned the distance involved (with your base in London, Steve's in Chicago). You would mail each other material in the post. Perhaps because of that distance, the initial collaboration seemed more like a sequence of events with mutual points of exchange. This seems significantly different when you're actually sharing the same space together.*

JR: *Disambiguation* was an emptying-out of footage, using material that hadn't yet found a way of integrating into things that I was working on. The collaboration discussed very little, but it was like having another, silent... I don't want to say "another self " because his decisions were so different to the ones I'd make. I'd send some material off, and it would come back changed or new. The process was unspoken. Clips would appear with no explanation or reason; they would simply be processed or vanish completely. It was a strange, anonymous intuition. Now looking back on *Disambiguation*, it feels like a coherent work, something shared between us. When we collaborate again at the Experimental TV Center this summer we'll be taking material, footage and images with us, and spend a week processing these things. It's the starting point for a new composition.

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