

PORTRAIT JAMES RICHARDS

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Spike, No. 73, pp. 76-79
Autumn 2022

In Thomas Mann's celebrated novel *Der Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain, 1924) X-rays are elevated to a literary object following the media frenzy that accompanied their discovery at the end of the previous century. Like other coeval innovations, they elicited metaphysical implications – theosophists, for example, proclaimed their divinatory potential. In Mann's *Bildungsroman*, the radiography lab is – also – a sorcerous lair where spatial-temporal boundaries established by the natural order are per- versely crossed: the mechanical gaze traverses the flesh, showing the skeletons we secretly are, and travels through time, revealing death approaching or its much-hoped deferral. Small scans of the tuber- culotics are produced in the workshop: overly inti- mate photographic miniatures, identity cards to legitimately inhabit the “kingdom of the sick,” as Susan Sontag writes. These prodigious attributions dull any initial dismay for the ghastly transparency of the protagonist, Hans Castorp, who will end up clutching the portrait of his beloved Madame Chau- chat's chest to his heart when she departs from Davos.

In an apical sequence of the Welsh artist James Richard's video *Qualities of Life: Living in the Radiant Cold* (2022) we see medical paraphernalia rising from and dispersing into a lair of darkness. Pills, sachets, tourniquets, thermometers mingle with cell phones, photos, pennies, keys, a carni- valesque mask. The work is primarily comprised of scans of instruments for checking one's own health, taken from a series of objects also physically dis- played at the gallery (*Found Objects and Self Diag- nosis Kits*, 2018–), and floating in a fictional viewing space constructed through editing and montage, suggestively aided by a musical track – a creamily disquieting soft-jazz – whose lyrics psalmody “my apocalypse.” The sequence renders the eerie flavor of trespassing the boundaries between the outside and inside of the human body – as in an X-ray session – to the more modern habit of monitoring one's own health status, a phenomenon of self- diagnosis which peaked during the early pandemic. The scene also encloses some of the artist's recur- rent themes: assemblages in a fictional, digitally con- structed space; the emergence of invisible presences (disease, in this

case); the methodical (or compulsive) drive to produce objects that are not solely or primarily aesthetic, rather, they are used as “diaries” or exploratory tools, oftentimes borrowed from other producers (pharmaceutical, in this case) whom Richards scrutinizes and with whom he opens deferred collaborations, as we shall see.

Scanning, denuding, laying bare. It has been argued by the US scholar Marshall Berman that modernity’s dialectic of “stripping away” begins with William Shakespeare – being divested of everything but one’s life, in *King Lear*, is the vehicle of epiphany, disenchantment, and action – and reaches its pinnacle in Karl Marx. With him, culture starts to be revealed not as a given, but as a manageable means for naturalizing the dynamic economic relations between individuals. History is not an ineluctable weaving – agents are constantly modifying its fibers. The act of laying bare – still according to Berman – is a nuanced, ambiguous component also found in most definitions of artistic modernism: like breaking a toy to understand its internal mechanisms, or a body traversed by X-rays, it implied a theoretical understanding of the past to advance new, future-oriented forms of cultural production, thereby promoting enlightening and elevating experiences for the spectators.