

CORPUS, CHORUS, CORPSE: STEVE REINKE AND JAMES RICHARDS' WHAT WEAKENS THE FLESH IS THE FLESH ITSELF

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"The body is the inscribed surface of events... and a volume in perpetual disintegration." – Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"

An off-screen figure handles glossy prints from the end of the photochemical era, moving them in front of the lens and then out of frame, with faint traces of his body and the tripod he uses occasionally visible in their reflective surfaces. These images are things: things to touch, things to hold. In one photograph, analogue materiality makes its final, futile push back against the then-impending digital age, as the image of a clunky desktop computer is invaded by an orange-white flare—but this end-of-roll inscription succeeds in cancelling only the edge of the pictorial field, leaving the rest of the quotidian scene intact and datable to the turn of the twenty-first century by the technology pictured within it. Mostly, though, these photographs are images of youth, of friends at Pride festivities in Cardiff, whether posed or candid. The off-screen figure, James Richards, is there, too; in one snap, he smiles, while in another he stares down the camera's flash in close-up against a field of black, skin blanched and mouth agape. On the soundtrack, a clock is ticking. As if in deference to this marking of time, multiple cuts carve up this flood of pastness, interrupting it with animated footage of the medieval theme of the *danse macabre* set to a mangled clip of a Carpenters song. The prancing skeletons seem so happy to have shed the soft vulnerability of the flesh, so happy to remind us of the universality and inevitability of death.

This is not the first body of photographs to appear in Steve Reinke and James Richards' *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself*. The forty-minute video opens with an eight-minute sequence of self-portraits taken

by Albrecht Becker, a production designer and photographer imprisoned by the Nazis for the crime of homosexuality before serving in the Wehrmacht on the Soviet front. These photographs, drawn from the archives of Berlin's Schwules Museum*, where they were deposited after Becker's death in 2002, show him as a middle-aged and elderly man, clothed and unclothed, his body covered by layers of tattoos and transformed by piercings and paraffin injections to his genitals. Becker insistently returns the look of the camera, at once coy and direct. Sadomasochism, self-fashioning, sexuality, oppression, resistance—indeed, all the twentieth century's energies of violence and emancipation—congeal within these extraordinary pictures. Many make use of multiple exposures and darkroom processes to multiply the figure in an uncanny twinning, while others employ collage techniques to achieve phantasmatic self-replication. Photography produces clones through which these many Beckers might live forever. If the notion of the archive is etymologically inextricable from the authority of the magistrates and, hence, from structures of domination and normativity, it is perhaps more fitting to refer to these photographs as a corpus, a word that returns one to the body rather than to the law, and which speaks to a penetrable collection of elements rather than to fixed rules of inclusion and exclusion. In this corpus, photography is at once testimony and plastic transformation; in this corpus, body and image together form surfaces of inscription that endure and register the workings of power, each linked in its own way to a reckoning with finitude.

Between these two corpora of images, between the bodies of Becker and Richards, lie two linked labours: the work of image-making and the work of queer inheritance across the life and death of generations. To speak of queer inheritance at all might seem oxymoronic; after all, as Jack Halberstam has shown, the time of inheritance is “repro-time,” the time of heteronormative reproductive futurity, a “generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next,” assuring stability. There must be another way of imagining survival and passage, beyond familial bonds, property, and propriety. Perhaps it is to be found in the promiscuity of copied and recirculated images, in meetings of bodies that penetrate, bruise, caress, leave marks.

Becker's images stand somewhat alone in *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself*, positioned as they are as an uninterrupted stream at the commencement of the piece. But all bodies are penetrable. Reinke and Richards follow their presentation of these photographs with an accumulative fantasia of sounds, images, and texts united by no single genre or origin. These materials mingle with Becker's photographs and each other, forging relationships of conflict, affinity, and mutual transformation in a kind of pot-pourri. This term first referred to a “rotten pot” of different kinds of meat cooked together; now, it designates a mixture of flower petals and spices that perfume a room. In both usages, as in Reinke and Richards' work, the whole

is more than the sum of its parts and putrescence is never far out of sight. The sensuous evocations of nausea and beauty contained within this strange double meaning course through *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself*—nowhere more evidently than in the shot that succeeds Becker’s final portrait, of a tattooed man, face out of frame, enticing a small bird to drink water from his hands, which he has positioned under the running tap of a sink. As the water level rises and the soundtrack fills with atonal strings, the panicked bird struggles to take flight; what had seemed a gentle act turns sinister. Or is the bird just flapping its wings? A tiny plastic jack-o’-lantern in the background looks on, as if to ask, trick or treat?

Does the man with the tattooed arms play a cruel trick on the bird or give it a watery treat? The answer is undecidable. As with so many images in *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself*, the assignation of a determinate meaning here remains elusive, flickering between tenderness and brutality. Instead of meaning—which, as Roland Barthes knew, was “always a blow of force”—the viewer is met with something fuzzier: a suspended uncertainty within which concepts and affects circulate restlessly. It hits in the gut. Reinke and Richards’ repurposing of collected materials positions their work firmly within the lineage of found-footage filmmaking, yet they remain at a resolute distance from the strategy of détournement, so central to that tradition, whereby the original meanings of appropriated materials are subverted through their redeployment. There, the image is treated as language. Here, sensation trumps semiotics, as the artists combine fragments in constellations that activate and amplify what is latent within them.

Intuition and intimate attention seem to guide the artists’ selections, whether it concerns the graceful images of underwater wrestlers, computer-generated simulations of crash-test dummies, or ants spraying fluid in what might appear to be an ejaculatory orgy, but which is in fact a performance conducted in self-defence. Heterogeneous textures collide: high and low definition, analogue and digital, filters and effects, animation and live-action, the slow rock of Rheostatics and soul of Dinah Washington. What remains consistent throughout is an insistence on valuing the plastic qualities of these images and sounds. They are material things, not transparent windows to content. Reinke and Richards take no interest in being masters of signs, demystifiers who lift the veils of mass culture’s manipulations; they are figures altogether more humble, more vulnerable, for whom desire and fascination take precedence.

In composing *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself* from largely existing materials—including images the artists had themselves used already in existing works, such as their 2009 collaboration *Disambiguation*—Reinke and Richards bypass the possible arrogance of ex nihilo creation to instead cede ground to the other, to multiple others, whose voices and visions resonate as part of a chorus the artists guide. There is little regard for the questions of authority and provenance that are so central to the laws of the archive, nor for the values of ownership, hygiene, and respectability embedded in the notion of property. The work

enacts a space of indiscriminate contact, recurrence, and interdependence. This transgression of conventionally prescribed boundaries is indeed already at play in the very fact of Reinke and Richards' collaboration, which rejects the fetish of singular authorship.

Separated in age by twenty years, in their symbiosis Reinke and Richards also break with the common model of generational conflict, understood as an Oedipal anxiety of influence. Yet if the collaborative authorship of *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself* suggests the existence of mutually enriching intergenerational bonds, within the work, the deeply cathected ties between younger and older men find decidedly more ambivalent articulation. Reinke and Richards repeatedly invoke this theme, but do so predominantly within scenes of domination in which an ideal of masculine potency is at stake. Cruelty and care are indiscernibly entangled. An army commander sees his cadet collapse with exhaustion, addressing him as "son," while on the soundtrack the artist Dani Leventhal Restack recounts a story drawn from Guy Hocquenghem's *The Screwball Asses*, of an ogre who has constructed an Sadeian orgy machine. He captures a band of brothers, only to die, leaving them "slaves to a corpse." This is followed by footage shot by Kim Fielding, a Cardiff-based artist who died in 2014, whom Richards credits as an important influence on his artistic development. From behind the camera, Fielding instructs two shirtless young men to aggressively grind their closely-shorn heads together against the backdrop of a naked brick wall as they pant and groan. Then, in black and white, a forlorn young boy stares in a mirror to the manipulated sounds of Neil Young's coming-of-age ballad *Sugar Mountain*, the acoustic candour of the 1979 song at times stuttering in reverse playback. All are scenes of pleasure and pain. Nostalgia and indebtedness may lurk within this assemblage, but this queer inheritance is no simple utopia of belonging. Traumas and antagonisms, too, are passed down. How do boys become men? By which rites, what love, what force?

The title of *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself* recalls the famous line from the Gospel of Matthew, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Rather than replay this poisonous dichotomy, Reinke and Richards banish the transcendence of the spirit to sink into the immanence of the flesh—its baseness and, of course, its evanescence. A male voice-over offers another fable, this one adapted from *The Cancerous Image*, by Hervé Guibert, the French writer who died of AIDS-related complications in 1991. Over luminous close-ups of an epidermal surface, the narrator recounts stealing a photograph of an anonymous boy and coming to feel that image and model are one. Is it so far-fetched? We all think ourselves to be moderns who no longer believe in sympathetic magic, but if forced to scratch out the eyes of a photograph of a loved one or a drawing of the same, it is sure which option most would choose. In Guibert's story, when glue causes the photograph to decay, the result is described as a disease inflicted on the face of

the boy, rather than as material damage on photographic paper. He “looked syphilitic,” “his mouth twisted and shrunk, attacked by sores and pustules.” The boy will decay but not die, the narrator relates, since he will remain forever young in the disintegrating photograph. The narrator bandages the image against his skin, wearing it for weeks, only to find that eventually the boy has stuck to him, leaving the paper behind. We make images our own, incorporating them into our psychic lives or, as Reinke and Richards do, into artworks—which might amount to the same thing. The episode Guibert recounts has a peculiar impact on the fortunes of the boy destined not to die: “The transfer had saved him from his illness; he was now available to death.” From body to image and back again.

Like Guibert’s fable, *What Weakens the Flesh is the Flesh Itself* moves between bodies of images and images of bodies, finding in this chiasmus a means of feeling out how generations of men shape each other—in care and cruelty, pain and pleasure—as they live and die. For Guibert, the image is inscribed like a tattoo on the body of he who loves it, and will now bear witness to that body’s end. A photograph may remind of death, but only because it denies finitude as no body can. Perhaps this is how the inheritance one gleans from images differs from the inheritance of the family, the father: not death, but the uncanny vitality of viral replication and recirculation is its precondition. There is only a letter’s difference between corpus and corpse — how close, how far.