

## Not Blacking Out, Just Turning The Lights Off.

*Text by Ed Atkins, Commissioned for the Publication '=='*

There is a sequence in James Richards' video, 'Not Blacking Out, Just Turning The Lights Off', of a cigarette butt dropping into shot and hitting a patch of leaf-strewn ground with a sharp bit of foley, bouncing once, perhaps (a couple of sparks from the burning tip) before coming to rest beside another butt – a butt whose tip is also still glowing and was, one might assume, only tossed moments before the other. Everything suffused with the deep indigo of a Technicolor movie nighttime – an indigo to coolly isolate the two smouldering orange nibs of the discarded butts. This all accompanied by a soundtrack of cicadas and, perhaps, the off-screen sputter of a campfire. This all suspended within the particular grain and vignette of some particular cine-moment between the mid-seventies and the late-eighties.

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The shot lasts about two or three seconds but, in James' video, loops maybe ten, twenty, thirty times – each time the visibly dropped butt impossibly returned to an unseen hand, only to be dropped again beside the always-already present first butt, accompanied by the same swell of forest foley.

The effect of this repetition is, firstly, rhythmic: the brittle hit of the butt on the forest floor, the crescendo of the cicada chorus – repeated as if in musical bars – some obscure time signature revealed; the satisfaction of recapitulation, of re-emphasis, return, familiarity. There is a desire for this to continue indefinitely.

This reiteration also serves to unravel the short sequence, divulging and individuating some of its more esoteric, fleeting aspects: the odd scattering sound heard after the butt hits the ground; the ever-so-slight twitch in the dry leaves; the almost imperceptible distance the first butt rolls over the course of the sequence, belying the fade of its prior, dropped or flicked momentum; the unbranded, period-looking simplicity of both butts; the blooming, saturated quality of the shot, like certain lichen; the angle of the butt's decent, suggesting the height, the stance of the smoker – their posture in relation to the other, immobile smoker – the place that they will move to after finishing their cigarettes – the mute conversation. – At the same time, the sequence in repeat seems to converge on itself, to close ranks and to become whole, complete in its cloistering. In this apprehended isolation the sequence seems to become an object whose beginning and end are as apparent as that of a glass, say, or a glove; and its faceted totality makes it somewhere near as exquisite as a sapphire. To arrest a sequence like this is to hold it, to gently trace its shape and its effect as indivisible.

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The discretion that James engenders of a sequence – revealed through a tenderness towards a scene, a moment, the tiniest inflected rhythm, etc. – is something that, for me, is both exemplary of James's work pragmatically – as a process of selection – and demonstrative of a particular affect his work has; namely, that of a deep and loving intimacy.

This, I think, can be considered in a number of ways. The making-discrete of a sequence means that, to a

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certain extent, it can gain a kind of autonomy: one feels, as described above, that it's possible to comprehend each sequence within one of James' videos as complete, as opposed to as a fragment or a component – both of which being more common kinds of apprehension of work that is predominantly appropriative. In this regard, each sequence collapses its unique subject into a kind of formal, almost figurative object – something that is never usurped or subsumed by any overarching diegetic body, but is instead held by the soft scaffold of the encompassing exhibition, delicately and intimately positioned in close proximity to both the other sequences, the physical space of display, and also to the viewer.

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Each exquisite discretion remains proximate, never merging, only touching – despite how it might appear; a certain parallelism to montage, though it feels instead that we should venture into a meditation concerning intimacies between bodies – of corporeal heft, of skin, and of a deferral of penetration and consummation through a tenderness and a graciousness. The intimacy offered here requires your reciprocity. This invokes a complicity in the viewer that seems particularly rare: a requital of careful affection rather than something punitive – which, again, is an affect that seems more familiar in the context of artist moving image, particularly as understood as a structural trope. The figurative (romantic) model for James's work, then, being a collection of individuals, moving synchronously together in space predominantly, rather than time; a closeness not just performed for the audience, but offered to them.

Ed Atkins, 2011

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