

INTERNAL LITTER: JAMES RICHARDS INTERVIEWED BY JACOB KORCZYNSKI

Exhibition-making as artist's medium and a pivot between peers and predecessors.

James Richards interviewed by Jacob Korczynski

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I was introduced to the work of James Richards just over a decade ago when I experienced *Active Negative Programme* (2008) in *Younger Than Jesus*, the first edition of the New Museum Triennial. Anchored by a video that included James's interventions alongside extant works by his artistic predecessors Paul Bush and Chris Saunders, viewers were invited to consciously put their own viewing on full display, perched upon a rostrum centered in space. After returning to Toronto, I found a link to his work much closer to home as a collaborator with Steve Reinke. This resulted in their first video, *Disambiguation* (2010), with the two artists sharing not only a vocabulary of collage but an intuitive desire around amassing and dispersing the moving image.

James's practice continues to find its manifestation through the accumulation of found images and objects that consciously reject linearity and exposition. Despite this, I chose to begin this introduction with the aforementioned timeline because of the way in which my two early encounters are echoed in his current exhibition at Haus Mödrath–Räume für Kunst. Its title, *When We Were Monsters*, is shared with his latest video collaboration with Reinke which is included in the show, and he takes the invitation to make an exhibition as an opportunity to present a range of works by other artists. Regardless of the medium he engages, James's is a perception that is piercing. Not for the view it enables onto others but for the way our gaze is refracted back upon our own bodies and their attendant longings and vulnerabilities.

Jacob Korczynski: *Your exhibition When We Were Monsters continues a dialogic approach to your practice that is present from your earliest videos and in recent years has expanded in space through exhibitions you've curated at Spike Island, Bristol (2013); Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff (2018); Cabinet, London (2018); and elsewhere. Before pushing toward the boundaries of who and what are included alongside your own work at Haus Mödrath, I wanted to circle around your most recent works found in the exhibition. Bunk Bed, Internal Litter, Tenant 2, and Untitled Radial Arm Maze 1, 2, 3 (all 2021) appear to respond to the conditions of confinement found in the simultaneously domestic and institutional site of Haus Mödrath. I wanted to ask whether these works formed at the beginning of your process as you were in dialogue with the other artists in the exhibition, arrived at the end when all of the other works had been assembled, or whether they developed as the show came together?*

James Richards: It's interesting to think about the show in this way—that it's in fact a combination of collaborative works that emerged in dialogue with other artists and projects, a kind of reaching out and connecting with artists such as AA Bronson and Steve Reinke, and then these reflections on enclosure and isolation via the sculptural works.

The show evolved out of a thinking about a number of parallel strands in my work and an interest in what it might be to bring them together for the first time. So there are the single-channel videos that I have been making since art school and am probably best known for. Then there's the ongoing work with Steve in which we exchange, re-work, and compose through sending each other material. And finally there are the works of other artists that I have shown in group shows I've curated, often working in an ongoing way with each project morphing into the next.

The theme of enclosure that's in *Bunk Bed*, *Internal Litter*, *Tenant 2*, and *Untitled Radial Arm Maze 1, 2, 3* come from the period when they were made: the autumn and winter of 2020–21 after nine months of lockdowns in Germany, *going inside*. Also when I began working on the show at Haus Mödrath, they sent a large and very luxurious doll house type of architectural model to my studio that you could open up on each floor and place things in the rooms. It stood on one table in the corner, dominating the space. It's probably the biggest show I've made or the most comprehensive in that it brings together much older work with more recent experiments. Being in lockdown in Berlin over winter working every day in the studio with this large model

of the house in the corner, I began projecting into it, imagining a really augmented sense of enclosure. Scuttling around imaginary corridors.

There was always the intention with the show to keep things feeling domestic. While it has been renovated, Haus Mödrath still has the feeling of an old house with lots of smaller-sized rooms rather than large, hall-like spaces you might get in art galleries. So some rooms might be left rather empty, and there are some direct reactions to the building. We commissioned two works by the artist Bastien Gachet that take the house as material. One repurposes an old desk found in the basement and another connected directly with the old marble pool room by kind of hacking a found hairdryer.

JK: “Kind of hacking” is a useful idea because it suggests identifying and repurposing an extant object while retaining elements of its form. I think that speaks to your methodology, whether working with images or objects. With an engagement with archives so central to your work, I was wondering how the way you invited your peers to the show at Haus Mödrath differed from how you selected the work of your predecessors?

JR: This makes me think about the difference between hacking and working with archives. I guess the archival is much more associated with the dead and the inanimate. Perhaps some parts of my practice might be described as animating the dead, while hacking suggests something more parasitic.

When Steve and I worked together for the first time in 2008–9, I came to the dialogue very much as a fan. So in a sense there was definitely trying out moves in my own editing and selecting materials that I thought he would use. It’s a perverse thing, mimicking or imagining the decisions someone would make, then sending that back to continue working. Needless to say his response wasn’t what I expected, and I think this meeting of what you project onto the other and what the other is actually thinking is at the heart of this collaborative impulse.

In terms of the work of predecessors like Albrecht Becker and Margarethe Helde, it is perhaps less dynamic in terms of a relationship; they come into the show more as material in the way that there are existing works by other artists sometimes nestled in my videos.

JK: *As someone who has followed the way you have made space for the work of other artists in your exhibitions, it is interesting to see which artists appear in some projects, disappear*

*from others, and then reappear again. One example is Adrian Hermanides who appeared in your exhibition *Alms for the Birds at Cabinet in 2014*, and then wasn't included in *Ache*, the exhibition you curated at Cabinet four years later, but whose work from 2014 appears again here at Haus Mödrath. All of the artists you share space with are clearly those you have a kinship with, and what I wanted to ask is with an artist like Hermanides where do you locate their works when they aren't on view with your own? Does the presence of some artists in these exhibitions recur intermittently because of a bond to the work that is resolved in terms of the relationship of it vis-à-vis your own or because it isn't, and you're still feeling that out at different times and in different spaces?*

JR: I think it really depends on the artist. Often they are friends, such as Adrian, so the flow is connected perhaps to things outside what's in the work on an immediate level. With Adrian I think it's quite simple, and it's good you bring up *Alms for the Birds*. That show was very important for me. I had worked since art school on video screenings that would mix moving-image works distributed by LUX with my own clips and some stray found footage elements. Experimenting with this blurred provenance approach I mentioned earlier. When the opportunity arose to work with Cabinet on curating a group show, it opened things up and became more about photography, found objects, and a certain material aura. Adrian's work was very important in this context as it was the element that tied a lot of the works together and opened up a way of working for me that then carried on in subsequent shows. So when thinking about this exhibition and what a retrospective of curatorial projects might look like, it felt important to return to this piece.

The last part of your question about resolution I need to think more about. One first thought is that, yes, I've experienced this in the past with certain video clips. They've circulated in different forms around my work—popping up in screenings, or rough drafts, or one-off event presentations before they finally settle into a finished work. Until they find a final place where they make sense within a more finished piece. Then once they are there, in a way I don't feel so compelled to touch them again. They don't feel so open any more. I definitely think that a part of what motivates my work—in both the video-making and the exhibition-making—is the desire to find out how I relate to something that fascinates me. To fit them into a personal lexicon.

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/internal-litter-james-richards-interviewed/>