

James Richards

Ed Atkins



James Richards
Not Blacking Out, Just Turning The lights Off, 2011
Commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery, London

James Richards's solo show at London's Chisenhale Gallery, *Not Blacking Out, Just Turning the Lights Off*, comprised a two-channel video projected onto two large, hanging screens facing one another, each flanked by a pair of white PA speakers on white tripods. Between the screens sat a rank of infant-size, steel-and-plastic school benches. The entire floor is covered by shallow-pile carpet in surgical-scrub green. Two pools of cool-white, low-wattage light illuminate conspicuously vacant areas. A series of eight-by-four-foot black soundproofing panels hung at regular intervals on the walls. Something like a clinical cinema, a hospice-cum-youth club, or a nursing home, with its blatant concealment of a bodily index amid the calming pastels and beneath the scent of bleach. A medicated experience.

In the video there is a sequence in which a cigarette butt drops into view, landing with exaggerated foley on a patch of leaf-strewn ground, bouncing once (a few sparks flying from the burning tip) before coming to rest beside another butt, whose tip is also glowing, most likely tossed only moments before the other. The scene is suffused with the deep indigo of a Technicolor movie's night scene. Coolly the indigo envelops and isolates the two smoldering, orange nibs of the discarded butts. Accompanied by a sound track of cicadas and the sputter of an off-screen campfire, this vignette is a suspended cine-moment particular to the mid-70s and late 80s.

The raw shot lasts about two or three seconds, but in Richards's video the scene loops perhaps twenty or thirty times. With each recurrence, the dropped butt impossibly returns to an unseen hand, only to be dropped again beside the always-present first butt, accompanied by the same swell of forest environment foley.

The first effect of this repetition is rhythmic: the brittle hit of the butt on the forest floor, the crescendo of the cicada chorus—the sound track as a musical score, its repetition revealing some obscure time signature. The satisfaction of recapitulation, of re-emphasis, return, familiarity. There is a desire for this to continue indefinitely.

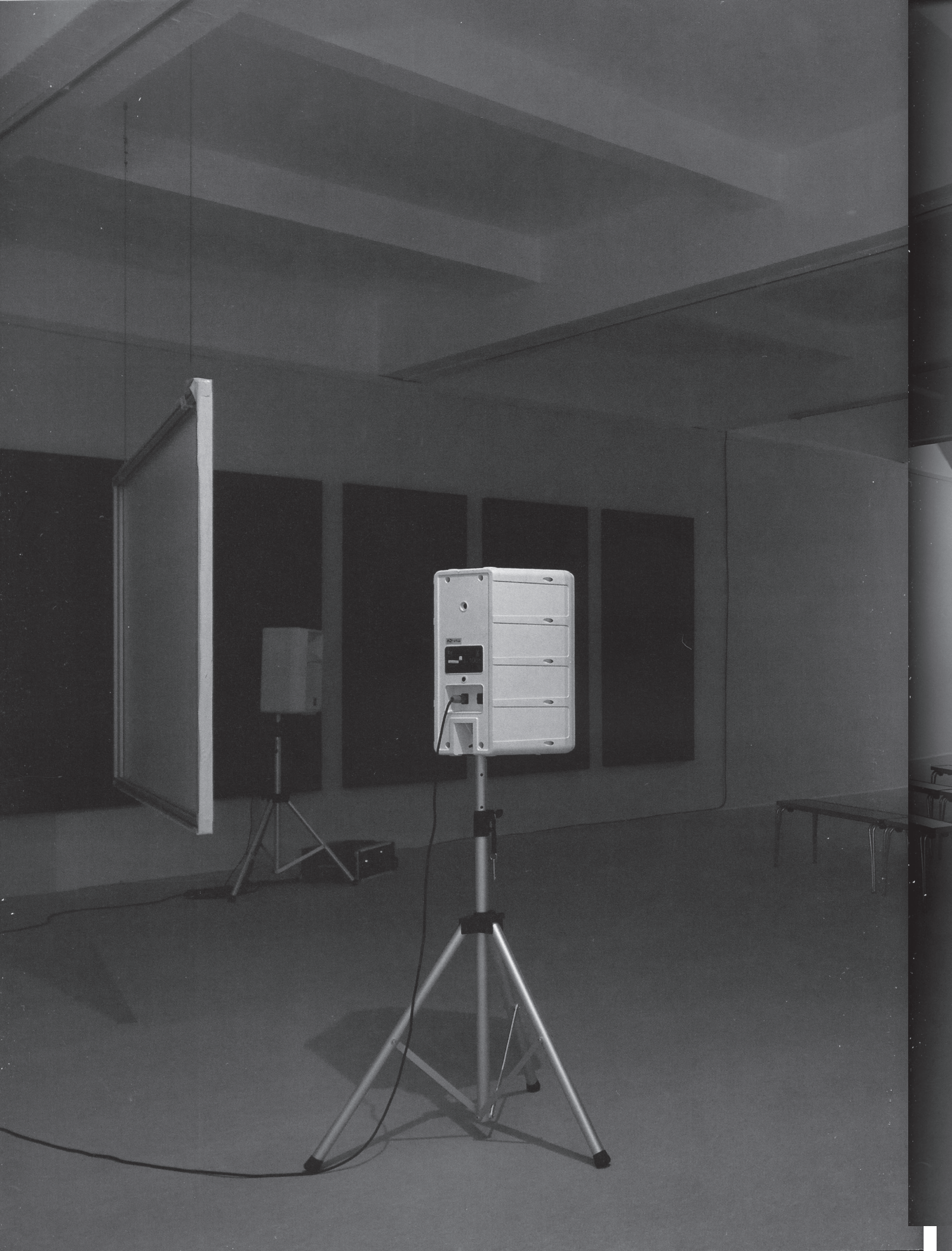
This reiteration also serves to unravel the short sequence, divulging and individuating some of its more esoteric, fleeting aspects: the odd scattering sound heard after the butt hits the ground; the ever-so-slight twitch of the dry leaves; the almost imperceptible distance one butt rolls over the course of the sequence, belying the fade of its previously dropped or flicked momentum; the unbranded, period-looking simplicity of both cigarettes; the blooming, saturated quality of the shot, like a landscape of lichen; the angle of the cigarette's decent, suggesting the height and stance of the smoker—as well as that of the other, immobile smoker—and the direction they will move after finishing their cigarettes; and 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; its faceted totality makes it nearly as exquisite as a sapphire. To arrest a sequence like this is to hold it, to gently trace its shape—and its effect—as an indivisible entity.



The discretion that Richards engenders in a sequence, revealed through a tenderness and subtlety toward a scene—the tiniest inflection of rhythm, etc.—is something that for me is both exemplary of his work pragmatically, as a process of selection, and demonstrative of a particular effect his work has, namely, that of a deep and loving intimacy. This may be considered in a number of ways. The discrete-making of a sequence means that to a 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 Richards's videos as complete as opposed to just a fragment or a component. Both options are common kinds of apprehension for 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 the other sequences, the physical space of the display and the viewer.

Each exquisite discretion remains proximate—never merging, only touching, despite how it might appear. There is 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, of a deferral of penetration and consummation through a tenderness and 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 an artist-made moving image, particularly one understood as a structural trope. The figurative (romantic) model for Richards's work, then, is predominantly a collection of individuals moving synchronously together in space rather than time; a closeness not just performed for the audience but offered to them.





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Photo: Andy Keate

