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Cover image: James Richards, *on the side of the disease and not the cure*, 2019.
Digital image courtesy of James Richards.

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Contents

on the side of the disease and not the cure, James Richards and Sarah Perks



on the side of the disease and not the cure

James Richards and Sarah Perks

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Introduction

This Cover Collaboration displays new work by James Richards, and a short essay by curator Sarah Perks, commissioned by *British Art Studies* to coincide with the release of the landmark publication *Artists' Moving Image in Britain Since 1989* (edited by Erika Balsom, Lucy Reynolds, and Sarah Perks), and the exhibition *Migrating Worlds: The Art of the Moving Image in Britain* at the Yale Center for British Art (October–December 2019). The book, which was published by the Paul Mellon Centre, includes an artist's statement by James Richards, edited by Sarah Perks.

on the side of the disease and not the cure

The title is a description of the film *Safe* (1995) from an interview with the director Todd Haynes. In this new commission for the cover of *British Art Studies*, James Richards starts with scans of medical equipment available to purchase online for self-diagnosis. The equipment offers a bypass for professional analysis of sickness that willingly creates a confusion between symptom, cause, and cure. They are also an opportunity to disregard the societal and structural factors that might cause ill health in the first place, by forcing the solution to be procured or bought by the individual alone.

This piece continues the artist's investigation into the body and technology, found in his earlier works such as *Rushes Minotaur* (2016) and *Uncontrollable Universe* (2019), that dislocate found objects and images to create new meanings. Richards' describes his process: "It's through the enabler of digital technology that you can work with sound and the moving image at a really high level and with the same level of intimacy as the directness of painting and collage."¹ Here he uses the popular GIF format—a low-res animated file designed for the Internet—to take over the screen creating a vertical series of moving images.

Cheap medical equipment is joined by other paraphernalia (cotton buds, lube, selfies, keys); the clinical merges with the casual, the mundane and the memories collide randomly as they might in a bedside drawer. Together, they create a part-abstract, part-classical composition distanced completely from online sales techniques and the business of self-diagnosis. Via a flatbed scanner, they return a full circle to their Internet origin as a disorientated yet powerful digital artwork that explores the private desire to heal.

The dreamy GIF format of this work allows the objects to move, yet they feel also trapped, embodying a description of Internet space Richards' has called: "...like a pond—a flat surface when seen from above, but once you get close and jump inside you can swim up, down, and sideways."² The micro-choreography, looping, and an absence of sound within the GIFs, and their

scrolling structure when presented together, are like a mesmerising metaphor for our own state of online sickness. The Internet as a perpetual, endless, and irresistible oasis of self-help and self-diagnosis.

In the film *Safe*, the main character Carol battles an unnamed and undiagnosable illness, it is never clear how much is physical or psychological (“Now nobody out there made you sick, you know that, the only person who could make you get sick is you, right?”). Set in 1987, Carol sends herself into an institutional self-help, self-love, self-diagnosis retreat. The Wrenwood Centre in the film is like the Internet, by offering only what one can buy (or buy into) as the solution to sickness, it reveals itself as a place for the business of disease, not the cure.

Footnotes

- ¹ “James Richards”, in Erika Balsom, Lucy Reynolds, Sarah Perks (eds.), *Artists' Moving Image in Britain Since 1989* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2019), 436.
- ² “Questionnaire: James Richards”, in Omar Kholeif (ed.), *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* (Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications and Space, 2014), 231.

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