

## Fellow Traveler

by Matt Keegan

When I wake up in the morning and go to the bathroom, my cat, Earl, arrives toilet-side to solicit head pets. My proximity to the ground comforts him. My normal verticality and busy human behavior fall away, and he sees me as a fellow animal shitting in proximity to his litter box. Recently, I have been making drawings of the plumbing in my bathroom, thinking in part about cleanliness due to augmented Covid hygiene but also about the plumbing's complex infrastructure linking my body and the privacy of my apartment to the elaborate sewage system that runs throughout my neighborhood and wider city. The construction of New York City's sewers and waste removal started in 1849, in response to a major cholera outbreak, and by 1902 most of the city had a functioning sewer. Two years later, NYC's first underground subway began operating, visually overlaying the intestinal structure of plumbing onto the network of trains.

In James Richards's video commission, *Living in the Radiant Cold*, for the Fondazione In Between Art Film, we continuously encounter solid and liquid waste and the various systems that circulate them. We see feces and wastewater being sucked from a large rectangular sewage hole and multiple sequences of cameras snaking through pipes to find blockage, a visceral transposition of the now routine endoscopy. We see an array of unlikely objects floating in water, repeated washing, sinks, a red-seat toilet that shifts from containing bloodied water to resembling an open wound. In Jim's broader practice, he often utilizes an associative logic in the assembly of archival material alongside his own footage to tell us stories rooted in and about the body. *Radio at Night* (2015), a commission for the Walker Art Center, comes to mind for its affinities with this new work. Reflecting on this earlier video, the writer and curator Mason Leaver-Yap writes, "*Radio at Night* is a work suffused with openings, holes and voids: eyes, mouths, viewfinders, geysers (as well as violent openings: surgical incisions and bullet holes). Whether literal or metaphorical, bodily apertures are both the subject of the work and the tools for its reception."<sup>1</sup> These are not instructional works; instead logic and meaning emerge only within and from the intuitive and nonlinear order of their sequencing.

When Jim asked me to write about his new work, I thought about the fact that our relationship mainly takes place over the phone and on WhatsApp, from our homes in Berlin and New York. I decided to write this essay between the locations of home and work, during my twice weekly train commute to teach art students. I take the subway to Grand Central, a commuter train hub that brings passengers to the northern parts of NYC and into Connecticut, where I teach. The Metro-North New Haven Line brings me to my eventual destination; the line was absorbed into New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority in 1983, the year Jim was born. Greenwich, Stamford, Stratford, and Milford are stops I pass on my way to New Haven, and all these towns have corresponding locations in the UK. I google the train travel time between Cardiff, where Jim grew up, and London, where he went to college, and am surprised to read that it is nearly identical to my journey from Grand Central to New Haven. These spatial and temporal parallels affirm my mobile writing structure. The trains that move me from home to work and back again provide focused space for me to think about Jim's previous videos and current research in relation to his developing commission.

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<sup>1</sup> Mason Leaver-Yap quote: <https://walkerart.org/magazine/flow-james-richards-radio-at-night>

I met Jim in the spring of 2009 at the opening of the New Museum's first triennial exhibition, unfortunately titled "Younger than Jesus," where our work was featured. Jim presented a single-channel video, *Active Negative Programme* (2008), which played on a monitor flanked by two speakers and faced by two rows of black institutional chairs, all on a raised platform. The speakers were nearly as large as the monitor, establishing the centrality of audio within Jim's work. *Active Negative Programme* foregrounds the process of looking and listening and begins with found footage of a teacher instructing a viewer how to draw eyes. Over a twenty-five-minute run time, it focuses on the visual and aural processing of information presented in formats that profess to teach, such as lighting tutorials and voice training. It centers on a simple psychophysiological process of eye and ear: the transmission of visual and aural information to the brain via the optic and auditory nerves. It is a basic process that ultimately undergirds the synaptic logic of Jim's assembly of found material alongside his own footage for optimum sensorial effect.

The work I included for the triennial grew out of an artist's book I made in 2008 called *AMERICAMERICA*, looking back at the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency just as George W. Bush's tenure was ending. Through archival material, interviews, and commissioned writing, the book maps how the AIDS crisis came into public view in 1986 in tandem with a burgeoning social conservatism activated by Reagan. After I shared this book with Jim, he recommended that I read Samuel Delany's *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). In his preface, Delany establishes that the book's two essays "look at aspects of New York City affected by the Times Square Development Project. . . . The city has instituted not only violent reconfiguration of its own landscape but also a legal and moral revamping of its own discursive structures, changing laws about sex, health, and zoning."<sup>2</sup> Through personal reflection ("Blue") and critical analysis ("Red") spanning the 1960s-90s, Delany creates a deeply felt and articulated book; he foregrounds the need for "interclass contact and communication"<sup>3</sup> that amongst other reasons is often tethered to sex.

Jim and I grew up in the wake of the early years of the AIDS crisis and the gentrification that followed in London and New York City, where we both lived during and after art school. AIDS completely rewired our understanding of our own bodies as permeable to a disease that could kill us through casual sex. Like in most queer relationships, talk of sex permeates our friendship as we WhatsApp about our crushes, love affairs, and the well-endowed men that enliven our pandemic days and nights. The imprint of AIDS can also be found throughout Jim's work, including *Living in the Radiant Cold*. We see blue PrEP pills, empty pill casings, syringes, home testing equipment, and alcohol swabs all floating in water. The cameras that move through throat- and anus-like plumbing canals underscore the body's vulnerability. The initial minute of *When We Were Monsters*, Jim's 2020 video collaboration with his long-term collaborator Steve Reinke, alarmingly addresses this vulnerability: a gruesome strobing montage of bodies, inside and out, visually marked with a wide variety of physical afflictions, dramatically accentuating the body's ability to become infected and its need for constant care.

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<sup>2</sup>, <sup>3</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, New York University Press, 1999.

As Jim's work began to develop, he shared with me a cache of research, including images made by Horst Ademeit, a German artist born in 1937 who created an elaborate system of photography and notation to document his daily life. Ademeit died in 2010, just months after the inaugural US presentation of his work at White Columns, where I first encountered his confounding Polaroids; the images were adorned with meticulous writing akin to the writer Robert Walser's microscripts, filling out the white frames. The work presented was part of a vast archive of thousands of photographs and notes that began in the 1980s and continued to nearly the end of the artist's life.

The photos and elaborate system of note-taking documented what Ademeit categorized as "cold rays": environmental phenomena that had a direct impact on his day-to-day life. The documentation spanned from the chronicling of his body to the cataloging of his apartment, his broader neighborhood, and daily newspapers. The exhibition press release states that Ademeit's system of notation was "typically augmented with gauges, thermometers, compasses, clocks, and other measuring devices. In tandem he made notes that recorded distances and other quotidian phenomena, as well as recording things beyond visual perception: smells, sounds, atmospheres, moods, etc."<sup>4</sup> Such recording of things beyond visual perception for esoteric and even neurotic ends is translated into the insistent nature of Jim's own methodology, specifically how his photographs and stills generate their own parallel architecture. In postproduction, these initially static images get distorted, expanded, and repeated to complicate what they originally documented, transforming them into imaginative and often hallucinogenic spaces.

Having recently read about Ademeit's work and the daily mapping of his life over decades, I am struck by encountering Ralphie on the subway to Grand Central. He is someone who has marked my twenty-three years in New York, as I have ridden the L train with him since the summer of 1998. I have mainly lived in Brooklyn during this time and witnessed a wide variety of people on the subway who are performing, selling or giving away food, seeking work, or usually just in need of money. There are people that I have encountered with more frequency, but Ralphie is the only person that I have seen regularly for over two decades. He used to introduce himself by saying: "My name's Rafael but my friends call me Ralphie." He had a tick that has faded: in between talking, he would make a sort of *tsst tsst* sound. He now introduces himself only as Ralphie. He was selling books and I could not make out their titles. He used to sell a newspaper called *Good News* that sounded Christian, so I avoided it. Ralphie emphasized that he is not feeling so good and mentioned that he was in the Navy when he was younger. A detail I did not recall from before. Ralphie did not look good. Skinny. Torn clothes. I had not seen him in a while and used to see him nearly every week. I remember he would refer to people who did not give him money or buy his papers as PCPs and always wondered what this abbreviation stood for. After this past year of Covid precautions, the public space of the subway, in which people live in front of one another with unusual physical proximity, is brought into further focus by Ralphie, fragile and aged over an incalculable number of subway rides.

My Metro-North train commute from Grand Central to New Haven is two hours. Feature film length. Most people prefer to ride the train facing the direction traveled. I prefer the

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<sup>4</sup> Press release for Horst Ademeit: <https://whitecolumns.org/exhibitions/horst-ademeit/>

backward re-view, reflecting on what has passed. I am reflected in the large glass window that frames my view, more visible in low light, wearing glasses and a disposable medical mask. I also see the person sitting across from me. Lots of men heading to finance jobs in Greenwich and Stamford, either wearing athleisure or button-downs and pants with sneakers. Autumn's arriving so sweaters and zip-up fleeces are prevalent. Ads inside the train promote the benefits of Norwegian Wool. The pace of the train allows me to ascertain class structures of passed-by neighborhoods. Bigger backyards, a dog hotel and spa, covered boats, car dealerships, multifamily homes on top of one another, generic apartment buildings, offices, various businesses (Wayne's Auto Body), mini-malls, graffiti, a Fuck Biden flag, shuttered factories, so many cars and trucks. People in their cars. Adjacent roads, highways, and street signs. Very few pedestrians. A dad pushing a stroller. Kids playing basketball. Parking lots with graphic grids. Train stations. Water. The stutter of trees. Neighborhoods that I will never experience and their residents whom I will never meet.

Within the research file shared by Jim, I read "Box" and "Phrasing" written by Rae Armantrout, an American poet associated with the language poets, who emerged in the 1970s. I was not aware of Armantrout nor her affiliated group with its deadpan name. I learn that their name comes from the magazine  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ . My friend Shiv Kotecha, a writer and poetry teacher, coincidentally wrote his undergrad thesis on "lang po" and texts me that these poets are the first-generation readers of then-recent English translations of continental philosophy and are heavily influenced by semiotics and poststructuralism. Jim adds that Armantrout's poetry engages more with traditional lyricism and tends to be more personal than analytical. Shiv further notes that language poets think of the reader as co-creator, a position echoed by Jim in his work. When I watch Jim's videos, I am acutely aware of his prioritization of the viewer and the generosity of his work: he requires the audience to fill in the gaps. In a recent lecture, Jim spoke about how, in his videos, we often enter a scene just before or right after the action, forcing a viewer to parse out what may be happening. A definitive reading that the full audience can agree upon is not the goal.

Armantrout's "Phrasing" closes with this text:

I'm in between  
two states  
and can't be interrupted,  
between two points  
and can't be found,  
waylaid

Included within Jim's shared drive were his tracking shot experiments with Tolia Astakhishvili that confuse and conflate an industrial location with interspersed two-dimensional planes. The camera steadily scans from a fixed central point of rotation: industrial space butts up against collaged walls that hold reproductions of drawings and photos. Overlaid music sounds as if someone is strumming the interior mechanisms of a piano, becoming more emphatic, like the escalating score in a thriller when the villain's approaching. A female vocalist singing octaves briefly disrupts the crescendo and we encounter Jim as a still image, looking down at the camera with an intense unblinking stare. Although the eyes and ears are parallel receptors, they are often separately catered

to in Jim's work, with scores that are developed in tandem with the visual elements but not beholden to them. The images often bend and morph in response to the audio track as if having an emotional or psychological response to its sound.

Jim's videos have mapped the technologies of his lifetime, from the appropriated VHS footage in *Active Negative Programme* to cutting-edge cameras, scanners, and imaging software in his ongoing collaboration with Leslie Thornton. But even as he incorporates new technologies, the old remains equally weighted; everything is up for grabs in terms of assembly. This nonhierarchical organizing principle is woven into Jim's broader archival instinct to voraciously collect found footage and audio and store this material alongside what he shoots in his day-to-day life. This way of working is linked to Jim's time at a London-based film-and-video archive and distributor, LUX, where he was employed during college. This experience certainly influenced the way Jim works and introduced him to many artists and filmmakers, including Steve Reinke. Walking through the archive, a young and keen Jim came to see the expanse of material as not simply a preservation of the past but as rich material for a moving-image artist. This eventually led to the construction of his own archive of hundreds of hours of footage, all reconfigurable in endless subsequent edits. In a recent essay on Jim's work, the art historian Joseph Henry writes, "Instead of mastering the image, controlling its semantic meaning, exposing its ideological constructs, or even emptying its affective determinacy, Richards submits to its potential, in turn generating new 'coalitions,' as it were between subject and image and image and image. Richards's is in this sense a queer montage, expanding its modernist dialectics beyond a dichotomy into a less geometric, more pulsating field."<sup>5</sup>

To begin making this present work, Jim delved into his reserve of preexisting footage. This process of remaking is a constant within his practice and underscores the way his work generates a reflexive archive; he builds a vocabulary in which meaning changes based on how clips are paired together as well as via the adverb-like impact of an audio track or a visually augmenting postproduction overlay. This iterative way of working is akin to the physical process of mastication in preparation for digestion. Mastication, or chewing, is an automatic process that, like breathing, has a pace that can be sped up, slowed down, or stopped. This process resembles the embodied editing and pacing of Jim's recycled material. He chews his material as if saying a word over and over and over again until it becomes emptied out, dislodged from meaning and new with possibility. This metabolic reprocessing and redigesting is not a minimalist exercise of distillation. Instead it yields a baroque visual and aural amalgam revealing how the body sees and hears, learns, changes, feels, and fails.

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<sup>5</sup> Henry, Joseph. "The Camera Feeds." *When We Were Monsters*, edited by James Richards and Johanna Markert, Dortmund, Verlag Kettler, 2022, pp. 181–91. Published on the occasion of the exhibition *When We Were Monsters* at Haus Mödrath – Räume für Kunst, Kerpen.