Books in the artist's collection, New York, 2010

Frog Prince: The Gallic Charms of an American Original

Bob Rubin

This exhibition, and accompanying book, organized around the artist Richard Prince's collection of twentieth-century first editions, manuscripts, and related objects and ephemera, is about books and art. How books influence art. How books—from pulp paperbacks to artist's books—are art objects as well as texts. How you can actually make art out of books, or parts of books. It is also a typology of American subcultures and their denizens: cowboys, space cowboys, bikers, beatniks, hippies, and punks, in science fiction, fantasy, pulp, porn, comics, and rock and roll. Additionally, it is a bibliographic exhibition of one of the finest collections of modern Americana in private hands.

We are not peddling a revisionist interpretation of Richard Prince's art. Our subject is Richard as he is defined and inspired by his books, their authors, and related ephemera. Stuff you, or at least he, can touch, look at, leaf through, arrange and rearrange, even wear. The artworks by Prince that are on display in the exhibition, and within the pages of this book, are about the influence of books on his artistic process. Richard Prince the artist and Richard Prince the book collector are one and the same.

I will explain the connection between this most American of collections—amassed by the artist who has given us entertainers, cowboys, nurses, partying Hells Angels and their bare-breasted girlfriends, and Borscht Belt one-liners—and the hallowed turf of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, library of kings, repository of how French, and therefore, until recently, world, culture was made, stomping ground of Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, and other titans of Eurocentric critical theory.

Frog Prince

The linchpins of Prince's book collection, of which he has multiple permutations and association copies (copies whose inscriptions indicate a provenance of some significance), were first published by Maurice "Gid" Girodias, founder of the Olympia Press, Parisian purveyor of porn to traveling salesmen. Girodias published works by J. P. Donleavy, Samuel Beckett, and Henry Miller, French authors Raymond Queneau, Jean Genet, and Jean Cocteau, and, in four short years, Vladimir Nabokov's

Lolita (1955), Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg's *Candy* (1958), and William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), all while running what Southern called his "house o' porn operation *extraordinaire*."

In addition, four of the authors that Richard collects in depth owe much of their stature to the French, who appreciated them long before Americans did. Richard Brautigan, a quintessentially American writer in the vein of Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, was somewhere between forgotten and reviled in his native land by the time he committed suicide in 1984. Three years earlier, the first serious critical work on Brautigan had appeared in print—in France. Pulp crime fiction writer Jim Thompson has never been out of print there, as he was in America for a decade following his death. Philip K. Dick, always in a struggle to break out of the sci-fi ghetto, wrote of experiencing the novel, but agreeable, sensation of being famous for the first time after he went to Paris in 1979. Chester Himes wrote in English but was first successful in France. Jean Cocteau hailed *La reine des pommes*, Himes's first novel for Gallimard, a masterpiece. It won the French equivalent of the Edgar.

Bonne Continuation

The methods of Richard's art making and his book collecting are similar: repetition and variation, accumulation and continuation. In fact, much of Richard's art from the past decade has been a continuation of his collecting.

Richard often asks himself what he can *add* to images or genres already out there. The *Nurse* paintings descend from nurse paperbacks. Similarly, the *de Kooning* paintings began with Richard taking a book about de Kooning and adding paint and collage to its reproductions. Continuation differs from appropriation, where the artist *takes* from what is already out there. "Appropriation" is usually the first word that pops into Anglo-Saxon critics' minds when they hear "Richard Prince." Sometimes it's the only word. For those critics who think appropriation is theft, continuation would be vandalism.

The French understand this difference. The very word "continuation" is at the core of their culture. After removing a plate and replacing it with the next course, waiters will say, "*Bonne continuation*." So you could say that Richard's art is the next course at the Art Banquet. Not a whole new meal—just a different part of the animal.

Unpacking the Library

Richard's library primarily covers the years 1949 to 1984. He decided to start with the year he was born, 1949. George Orwell's *1984*, the first rare book he ever bought at auction, was also published that year. In this exhibition, only James Joyce's *Ulysses* sneaks past the 1949–84 boundary Richard has established.

When handed the keys to Richard's library to work on this show, I did what Richard would do: I made some lists. What I ended up with was a Top 40 of seminal texts. These works are reference points for the chapters of this book. When you connect the dots of these key works, they paint a picture of Richard. With a nod to Walter Benjamin, I have "unpacked" Richard's library.

My portrait of Richard in these pages is a collage of existing texts and images. I have pillaged countless memoirs and *belles lettres* by the likes of Robert Stone, Ed Sanders, Larry McMurtry, Terry Southern, and Nick Tosches, magazines like *Holiday*, the *New Yorker*, and *Swank*, as well as so-called Little Magazines like *Jack*, *City Lights Journal*, and *Big Table*. I've also included a few excerpts from the great works of BeatHippiePunk—Prince's shorthand for his book collection. Nothing original here, except perhaps my particular cut-and-paste job.

A number of themes emerge from the paste fumes. First, to quote the Chief in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, "It's all true even if it never happened." Critic William Crawford Woods put it this way: "history becomes fiction in the … act of being written down." It is what Richard calls nonfiction fiction, or wild history, which John McWhinnie explains in his essay.

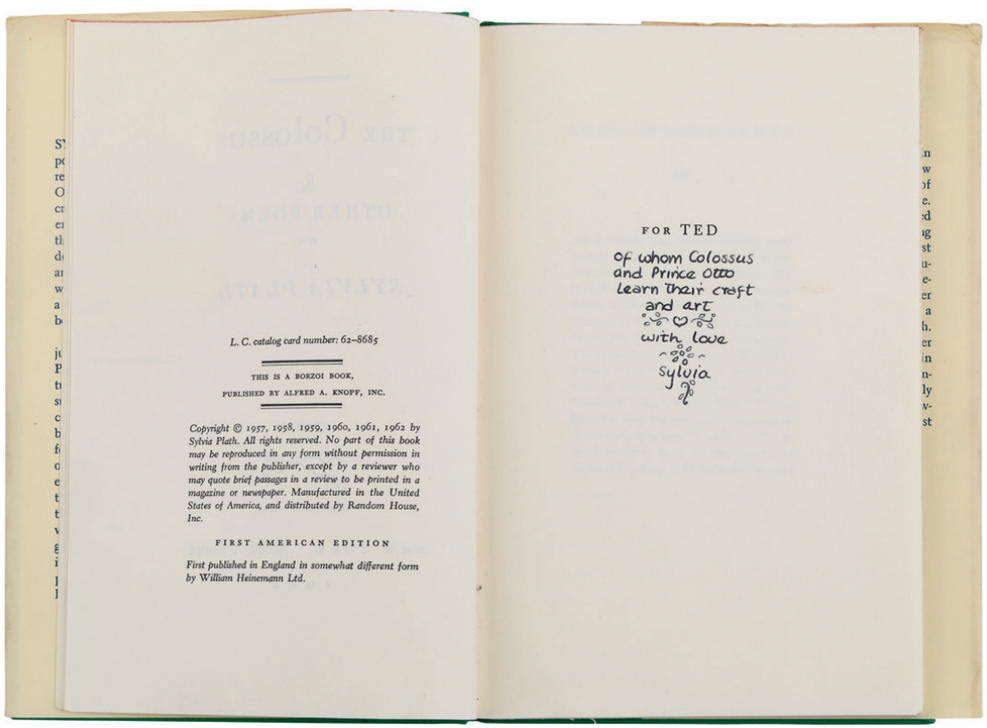
Second, culture is war. Art is ordinance. Museums, bookstores, and nightclubs are battlegrounds. Just pull the rap sheets on Lenny Bruce or Hunter S. Thompson. Indeed, as I was working on this project, *Spiritual America*—Prince's 1983 rephotograph of an image of a nude, prepubescent Brooke Shields—was removed from the Tate at the behest of the British authorities due to obscenity concerns.

And finally, porn is not necessarily smut. It is the fruit of a certain kind of imagination—one that, according to J. G. Ballard, fuels the global economy and advances civilization. All these themes inform Richard's work, much of which plays with notions of desire and censorship.

Triages

To shoehorn Richard's extensive holdings into a normal-size exhibition, and to keep this catalogue shorter than the Warren Report, I had to jettison some great stuff: a complete run of *Black Mask* magazine, the only known copy with dust jacket of Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key*, a great first edition of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* …

The key works—those that serve as reference points—had to be something Richard has collected in depth: he has twenty-two first editions of *Lolita*, including one in Arabic, six permutations of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, including the original typed manuscript, four of the one hundred true first editions of *Ulysses*, every edition of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* …



Sylvia Plath, *The Colossus*, 1962 edition, inscribed to the author's husband, Ted Hughes. Collection of the artist

When I collected baseball cards as a kid, we used to flip through each other's decks during school recess. As the cards fell, you said either "got it" or "need it" and traded accordingly. Since meeting Richard, I realize that "got it" and "need it" aren't mutually exclusive.

Gilt by Association

Another hallmark of Richard's library is its trove of association copies. The gesture of inscribing a book or making it one's own, or uniquely another's, through annotation is itself an act of montage. There are in Richard's collection, associations by blood (Heller's dedication of *Catch-22* to his daughter), by sweat (one writer to another: Richard Brautigan to Henry Miller, Jim Morrison to Norman Mailer), and by tears (Sylvia Plath to Ted Hughes). Some are highly conceptual artworks in themselves. Who had the vision to ask Jim Morrison to autograph a copy of *The Doors of Perception*? Some are just plain out there: a copy of *Roots* dedicated by Alex Haley to Buckminster Fuller, or Jack Kerouac's annotations in Robert Bloch's *Psycho*.

Association copies have a particular appeal for Richard. They render the multiple unique through an imagined momentary encounter. They are open-ended tickets into famous people's lives; a movie you can write the script for yourself.

Good Life: A User's Manual

After I had triaged the material to a manageable bulk, the next question was how to organize it all. Chronologically? Yawn. Alphabetically? Too anal. Beat, Hippie, and Punk? These categories are too porous: Is Neal Cassady a Beat or a Hippie? He is Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*, but he is also the driver of Ken Kesey's bus. Brautigan is both an indigent San Franciscan wannabe Beat and a Hippie poster child. Bob Dylan is all of the above. So the armature of thematic sections on which I have hung the material is based on two things: Paris and Prince. The chapters are as follows.

"Lolita and Lollipop": The shabby Parisian offices of the Olympia Press, which published *Lolita* and *Lollipop* (the original title of Southern and Hoffenberg's *Candy*) are Ground Zero of BeatHippiePunk.

"Beat Hotel": If this Parisian bohemian crash pad had never existed, it would have been necessary to invent it for this exhibition.

"Bomb Dreams" and "I Am (Not) Spock" are a pure Princean cocktail of nuclear anxiety, psychoanalysis, science fiction, standup comedy, and conspiracy theory.

"Criminals and Celebrities" is the name of a 1986 work by Prince in his *Gang* series. It sums up the overlap of fame and notoriety, literary and otherwise.

"Brothers from Another Planet": The title is taken from a John Sayles movie in which an alien who superficially resembles an African American man falls to earth—the quintessential expatriate.

Richard Prince, personal check, 2005

Truman Capote ephemera. Collection of the artist

The rest—"On the Road," "On the Bus," "On the Coast," "Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll," "Cowboys," "1984(–1949)"—should all be pretty obvious by now.

When I was done, I felt like the kid who finishes some complicated jigsaw puzzle only to find one essential piece still in his hand. In my case, it was *Ulysses*. It is nowhere near making the 1949 cut, but leaving it out would be like leaving Christ out of a history of Christianity. So in the finest Hollywood hack tradition, I made a prequel: "Paris," where, not coincidentally, *Ulysses* was first published.

As for the epilogue, "Corralling the Pornographic Imagination": Nearly every artist or author of the key works has been arrested for obscenity, has been sued, or has had his or her work banned or removed from the mail, school libraries, galleries, museums, and/or other public places. Offending works include *Naked Lunch*, *Lolita*, *Howl*, *Candy*, Wallace Berman's show at the Ferus Gallery in 1957, Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, and Lenny Bruce's nightclub act (in multiple venues across state lines). Just recently a graphic-novel version of *Ulysses* was removed from the iPhone app store for nudity, only to be reinstated after public outcry.

A few final notes on my methods:

I have not taken any liberties with the texts apart from condensing them. I was careful not to change basic meanings or to take ideas out of context. One exception: Mark Spitzer, perhaps the most extreme contrarian in my stable of authors, dislikes Bob Dylan's music as much as he admires his prose. This is so jarring to yours truly that I elided Spitzer's musical comments and just left his literary exegesis of *Tarantula*.

There is no biographical index. In the age of Google and Wikipedia, it seemed a waste of good paper. You don't have to know anything about Harold Norse to appreciate his eulogy for the Beat Hotel. But if the reader is interested in Norse, there is plenty about him on the Internet. Much of the Web's information on Norse is fairly accurate, but in the case of other minor figures whose lives and legacies are not so historically contested as to warrant editorial surveillance, one is likely to find interesting encomia and jeremiads masquerading as encyclopedia entries. It's wild history.

If it were up to me, there would be no source citations, but the printed word is not yet there. I do tip my hat, though, to David Shields, who, in his preface to *Reality Hunger*, urges the reader to rip out and throw away the endnotes his publisher forced him to include, so as to better understand his polemic on literary appropriation and attribution.

As Jonathan Lethem explains in "The Ecstasy of Influence," the use of others' intellectual property should not be considered theft, but rather the beauty of second use. And, in the words of Roberto Bolaño, it's better to rob a book than a safe because at least you can carefully examine its contents before perpetrating the crime.