

A Fulton Ryder Production

richard
prince:
cowboy

Edited
and Introduced by
Robert M. Rubin

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Richard Prince: Cowboy

way
out west

On the Frontiers
of Appropriation
with Richard Prince

Robert M. Rubin



Alfred Stieglitz
Spiritual America, 1923
 Gelatin silver print
 4 7/16 x 3 3/8 inches (11.6 x 9.2 cm)



Untitled (Cowboy), 2000
 Ektacolor photograph
 20 x 24 inches (61 x 50.8 cm)
 Edition of 2 + 2 APs



Charlie Company, 2008
 Collage, inkjet, and acrylic on canvas
 131 x 100 inches (332.7 x 254 cm)

Photoshoiplifting. Misappropriation. Hacking social media. What we talk about when we talk about Richard Prince.

In the forty years since he set aside overt markmaking on blank surfaces and started repositioning stuff already at large in the cultural superstructure, Richard Prince has consistently mined the motherlode of the American imagination: the West. This book is about him lighting out for those territories—(the) way out West. Four decades of cowboys, including Marlboro cowboys, drugstore cowboys, rodeo cowboys, urban cowboys, Hollywood cowboys, singing cowboys, lonesome cowboys.

Prince's art has always been digital *avant la lettre*. It's paleo-digital—the way Captain Beefheart's music is paleo-punk, or Henry Miller's prose paleo-Beat. Prince photoshopped with the camera itself. Called it *electronic scissors*. What Richard was doing back in the 1970s merely expressed a need that technology finally caught up with. Like William Gibson says, if you want to know what the future of tech will look like, ask an artist or a criminal.¹ It's as if social media emerged because Prince *needed* to make Instagram portraits. Prince was doing Birdtalk—*analog tweets of found textual snippets—on his art long before Twitter*. He's been a twisted Cro-Magnon John the Baptist for all things digital.

Isn't "intellectual property" one of those accidental oxymorons, like "jumbo shrimp" or "Army intelligence?" That would be the view of anyone born since the Internet.

Not that Prince is particularly tech savvy. Back in the day, he signed up for Facebook but never actually friended anyone. When you looked him up, there was his picture, but his page just said, "Richard Prince has no Friends." That was as far as he was prepared to go at the time.

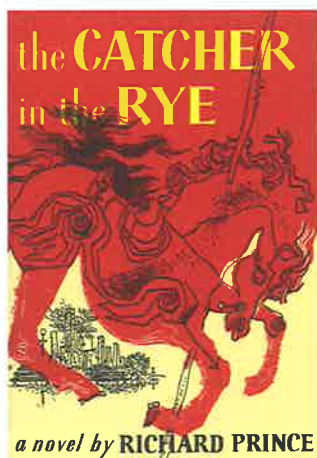
Here's the \$64,000 question: If a copy of something is itself an artwork, what does that make the original? That was a headline from *The New York Times*: "If the Copy Is an Artwork, Then What's the Original?"² The writer is channeling Jean Baudrillard, whose joint is the simulacrum—a *copy of something for which there is no longer an original*.³ Sounds like Prince to me. The real thing, only better.

But first the elephant in the room: Prince's legal hi-jinks. Litigation, the great American pastime, has made Prince the unwitting—and at times unwilling—poster child for artistic freedom and the right to appropriate and transform images in circulation, whether in magazines, books, on social media, or on the web. Now that obscenity has been litigated into irrelevance, appropriation is the new legal frontier. It's a generational thing, and the demographics are on the side of Art. But there are rear-guard actions aplenty. I note for the record that the plaintiffs lining up to get a piece of Prince are a

¹ William Gibson said, "Give me a room full of either artists or criminals talking about what they might be able to do with an emergent technology and I've got it, I've made my lunch." "William Gibson in Conversation with Ken Goldberg," JCCSF Arts & Ideas Podcasts (Jewish Community Center of San Francisco), 2012. <http://podcasts.jccsf.org/2012/09/william-gibson/>.

² Randy Kennedy, "If the Copy Is an Artwork, Then What's the Original?" *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/06/arts/06iht-o6prin.8615694.html>.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Simulacres et Simulation) (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981). First published in English by University of Michigan, 1984.



Catcher in the Rye, 2011
Artist's Book
8 x 5 inches (20.7 x 14.3 cm)
Edition of 500



Marlboro promotional merchandise,
fabric sample, n.d.

Canal Zone Richard Prince YES RASTA:

Selected Court Documents from *Cariou v. Prince et al.*, including The Videotaped Deposition of Richard Prince, The Affidavit of Richard Prince, Competing Memoranda of Law in Support of Summary Judgment, Exhibits Pertaining to Paintings and Collages of Richard Prince and The Use of Reproductions of Patrick Cariou's YES RASTA Photographs Therein, And The Summary Ass Whooping Dealt To Richard Prince By The Hon. Judge Deborah A. Batts, as compiled and revised by Greg Allen for greg.org in April 2011

Depositions are the new art form:
Canal Zone Richard Prince YES RASTA: Selected Court Documents from Cariou v. Prince et al... Paperback. April 11, 2011, by Greg Allen, Richard Prince, Hollis Gonerka Bart, Steven M. Hayes, Daniel J. Brooks, Hon. Deborah A. Batts, Patrick Cariou

fairly geriatric lot (Prince himself is no spring chicken). The art world's heavyweight institutions have rallied to the cause with *amicus curiae* briefs, because this concerns the entire art world ecosystem. Does an artist really need a lawyer to explain his work? If so, we're in big trouble, because what comes out of most artists' mouths is incomprehensible enough to begin with.

To recap: In 2013, a sometime editorial/"fine-art" photographer named Patrick Cariou sued Prince for appropriating some of his images of Jamaican rastas from his book, *Yes, Rasta*, published in 2000.⁴ In a typically Duchampian *détournement*, Prince had enlarged and inkjetted pieces of the photos, then placed guitars in their hands, girls in the frame, and dots on their bodies. Called the project *Canal Zone*. Don't ask me why. That's where Prince was born: He's a *Zonian*. Big show at Gagosian (2014), following on from the *Nurses* (2000–present), the *de Koonings* (2005–2010) and other bodies of works on canvas that balanced inkjetted figurative images pulled from books (nurse-themed mass market paperbacks, de Kooning paintings, beefcake), and abstract painterly gestures. Apparently, the law says it's fine to recycle an image if the resulting art is "transformative." You're supposed to know it when you see it, which is the same legal standard as obscenity. Seems pretty clear to me that Prince's paintings were transformative.⁵

Cariou's book wound up remaindered while Prince's paintings flew off the wall for six and seven figures. During Prince's deposition for *Cariou v. Prince*—certainly the longest interview he has ever given, and the only one under oath—he refused to play ball. Instead of his usual interview-as-standup comedy routine, he had to sit down. The tape was running. He bobbed and weaved. The judge threw the book at him.

As usual, though, Prince was sandbagging. Checked and then raised the bet and then raised the raise. He pushed all his chips—and, more or less, the entire contemporary art world—into the pot. While his lawyers were trying to do the right thing, Prince was on a sidewalk in front of Central Park peddling bootleg copies of *Catcher in the Rye*—now "a novel by Richard Prince"—out of a shopping bag. His take on J. D. Salinger's *magnum opus* was the ballsiest move in the history of appropriation. Cash only, no checks or credit cards. He had to get the books printed in Iceland since nobody else would do it. All he did was substitute his name for Salinger's, add a disclaimer on the colophon page, and hike up the cover price. The gloves were off.

Eventually Prince won the case: the *Cariou v. Prince* ruling was reversed on appeal.⁶ But he remains a soft target—follow the money, of which Prince has a lot—and does his level best, against advice of counsel, to make himself softer. His Instagram portraits demonstrate that he does not rest on his laurels. In the analog days, if you asked Prince to paint your portrait, you

⁴ Patrick Cariou, *Yes Rasta: Photographs by Patrick Cariou* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2000).

⁵ To determine if material is legally obscene it's put through the 3-prong Miller test, which includes as its third prong whether or not the material "lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." See: The United States Department of Justice, "Citizen's Guide to U.S. Federal Law

on Obscenity," accessed October 1, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ceos/citizens-guide-us-federal-law-obscenity>.

⁶ "Cariou v. Prince," 714 F.3d 694 (S.D.N.Y. 2013), <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca2/11-1197/11-1197-2013-04-25.html>.



Untitled (Cigarettes), 1978–79
Ektacolor photographs
20 x 24 inches each (50.8 x 61 cm)
Edition of 10 + 2 APs



Philip Morris advertisement, 1935:
"Marlboro: Mild As May, Ivory Tips
Protect the Lips." Marlboro before the
Marlboro Man



Untitled, 1981

had to give him two or three of your favorite photographs of yourself, and he would choose one and reshoot it. Now you see why Instagram had to be invented: Same shit, different day. What public domain could be more public?

Taking a photograph of a photograph is so . . . *eighties*. We've come a long way, baby. With *Catcher*, Prince reduced the essence of appropriation to a single gesture, deeply radical but almost undetectable. In doing so he summarized four decades of appropriation, just like that. End of the line. Game over. Next?

Appropriation itself is the end of the Aristotelian line. In fact, some of the jokes Prince has painted can be traced back to ancient Greece—and *Philogelos*, the earliest known compendium of jokes, which dates back the fourth or fifth century A.D.⁷ If you think anything is original, you're kidding yourself. The art is in the continuation, the accretion of meanings to familiar images with the passage of time and the onward march of technology. Just as "war is the continuation of politics by other means"—per Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz—continuation is the persistence of art by other means.⁸ Prince just nudges what's out there until you see what he sees. But it was hiding in plain sight.

If Prince is a thief, his is a victimless crime—at worst, petty larceny, like taking soap home from a motel. Not the bathrobe, mind you, just the toiletries. Who's the injured party here? Philip Morris? *Public domain* may be a legal term, but for Prince it's just what's *out there*.⁹ We all have a claim on this universe of saturated images. They're fabricated by paid professionals, targeting us, the hapless and hopelessly outmaneuvered consumer, to make us yearn ever more deeply for impossible satisfaction. The deck is stacked. The only way to level the playing field is to liberate the images. Get them circulating on their own two feet. That's Prince's art, in a nutshell.

With the Cowboy in Prince's crosshairs for the past four decades, this book is a comprehensive guidebook to appropriation and its discontents. To elucidate the postmodern response to the anxieties of influence, we will lay out the evidence and round up the usual suspects. You won't need Kit Carson to follow the trail. Prince's Cowboys not only draw on a broad range of cultural detritus from our Western imagination, they also animate (or at least make a cameo appearance in) virtually every body of work he has made. And Prince is a guy who likes to change it up regularly: *Fashions* (1982–84), *Gangs* (1984–90), *Girlfriends* (1987–95, 2008), *Publicities* (1991, 1999–2008), *Parties* (1993–95), *Upstates* (1995–99), *Nurses*, *American/Englishes* (2004–10), *Untitled (Originals)* (2005–present), *After Darks* (2007–10). The Cowboy is both a cultural trope to be curatorially lasso'd and a lens

⁷ Joke #263 in *Philogelos (The Laughter Lover)* goes like this: "Someone needed a jokester: 'I had your wife, without paying a dime.' He replied: 'It's my duty as a husband to couple with such a monstrosity. What made you do it?'" Fifteen hundred years later, here's Prince's version: "A man comes home and find his best friend in bed with his wife. The man throws up his hands in disbelief and says, 'Hey

Rick I have to, but you too?'" *Philogelos* translation, "45 Jokes from The Laughter Lover," John T. Quinn, transl, on Diotima.com, accessed October 2, 2017, http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/quinn_jokes.shtml.

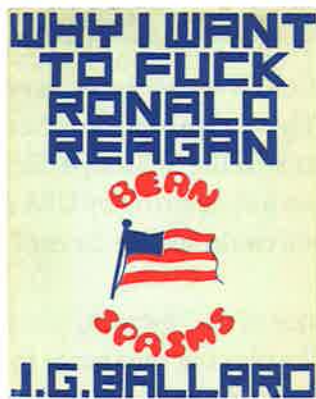
⁸ Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz, *On War (Vom Kriege)* (Berlin: Dümmlers Verlag, 1832). First published in English by N. Trübner, London, 1873.



Marlboro Patient Zero: Leonard McCombe, *Portrait of Texas Cowboy Clarence Hailey Long* on the cover of *LIFE*, August 22, 1949



Advertising executive Leo Burnett



J.G. Ballard's *Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan*, standalone pamphlet (Brighton: Unicorn Bookshop, 1968)

through which we can examine the evolution of the work of a single artist without having to embalm it with the *R*-word. This ain't no retrospective, it's a rodeo. Prince just keeps hitting the "refresh" button.

Let's put the boilerplate right up front: Prince is an equal opportunity appropriator. It's all fair game. In the case of the Cowboys, it started with art directed images of advertising, liberated from text and context. The person behind the lens was being paid a day rate for his work, and it belonged to Marlboro (Philip Morris) after that. Its qualities were measurable, its metric of success tangible. Did it sell the product? Did it make you buy what you didn't even know you needed?

After the first Cowboys, Prince went looking for female companionship. He found it in biker mags, where the biker chicks are adornments for reader-submitted pictures of gleaming motorcycles. The person behind the camera has no credentials whatsoever: he's taking pictures without a license from anyone except his cluelessly complicit girlfriend. Prince don't need to show you any stinking badges either. He bootlegged photo books that remixed pictures of his art and quotidian life, from the seminal *Adult Comedy Action Drama* (1995) to other basics such as *4x4* (1998), *Man*, and *Women* (both 2004). One day he comes out of the photocloset with his Upstates, large format landscapes of postindustrial New York State. Layer in Bettie Page, Franz Kline, the Sex Pistols, *On the Road*, SpongeBob, Jackson Pollock, rastas, Bob Crane, Picasso, de Kooning, the Velvet Underground, *Battlestar Galactica* . . . it's reductive merely to describe Prince's work as a taxonomy of marginal subcultures. It's a taxonomy of America.

The Body Snatcher: A Quasilinear History

There is linear method to his madness. It started with cigarettes. Not Marlboros—not yet. The objects are pens, watches, golden liquor logos, and boxes of Silk Cuts—more Kazimir Malevich than Marlboro. In the seventies, Prince was Big in Europe.

Then came noses, eyes, fragments mirrored in images in makeup cases. Objects and body parts surgically removed from any subliminally coherent editorial context.

After that came the hands: gloved hands, smoking hands . . . The smoking gun! Originally the Leo Burnett Agency was going to have the Marlboro logo "branded" (in reality, just inked) on the cowboy's hand, but they realized it was *de trop*. The lure of the cowboy life was so strong, no need to gild the lily. Burnett re-art-directed and re-photographed John Ford's West via *LIFE*, thereby teeing it up for the next iteration by Prince. It was hiding in plain sight the whole time. The weekly magazines were full of cigarette ads, but Leo

9 Public domain works are not protected by copyright law, but there's no actual term for it in the U.S. copyright statutes. A work could be in the public domain because: The copyright expired. / The work was produced by the U.S. government. / The work isn't fixed in a tangible form. / The work did not include a proper copyright notice before March 1, 1989. / The work doesn't have sufficient

originality. For a more detailed explanation on this, see: "What is the public domain," accessed Sept. 2, 2018, <https://www.copyrightlaws.com/what-is-the-public-domain/>.



Martin Smith's *Death in the West* (1976) starred 6 cowboys stricken with lung cancer or emphysema. After its first broadcast, Philip Morris sued to keep the film from ever being shown again. A DVD (cover shown) has been available since 2005.



Randolph Scott in *Albuquerque* (1948), directed by Ray Enright for Paramount

alone had the vision thing. By 1972, Marlboro was the top selling cigarette *in the world*. It still is.

Burnett's claim on our imagined West is as great as anyone's except John Ford's—and Richard Prince's. He is the missing link between the two.

Prince will not say exactly when he made his first Cowboy. The early ones are dated 1980–84, an obvious reference to Ronald Reagan. Prince had been onto the Reagan long con since the 1960s. “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” was one of several really offensive chapters in J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970). (Another chapter, “The Assassination of John F. Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race,”—with a nod to Alfred Jarry's “The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race” from 1903—got Ballard into a lot of trouble.¹⁰ When the publisher noticed the title, he pulped nearly the entire first edition. The odd copy that escaped the shredder goes for more than \$10,000 today.)

Prince was *au courant*. In 1967, he was interviewed by Ballard . . . even though Ballard wasn't there. Didn't matter. Prince just appropriated his thought processes. Wasn't plagiarizing, he was channeling:

Prince: “My father likes to know what Manson had for breakfast.”

Ballard: “It sounds like you've been in an atrocity exhibition.”

The first Cowboys were reg'lar li'l pictures: 10 x 14 inches. No wall power to speak of. As Prince got his hands on more walking around money, they got bigger, depending on how much cash was in his pocket when he showed up at the printers. They looked like Abe Zapruder filmed them off a television screen and then had some guy at the lab blow them up. They were claustrophobic renderings of the wide open spaces, the Big Sky West, directed like the moon landing Stanley Kubrick was rumored to have shot for NASA on a closed Hollywood set.¹¹ The West is real, and that moon shot actually happened. But it would have been cooler as a Kubrick movie, just like the West is better as a Marlboro ad. The moon as Cold War Cracker Jack prize; nicotine addiction as rugged individualism: The real things, only better.

This was Prince's Germanic phase. He was still Big in Europe. He was devouring those expressionist Westerns shot on a shoestring by UFA refugees like Anthony Mann and Budd Boetticher. If you could see the faces of Prince's Cowboys, they'd all look like Randolph Scott.

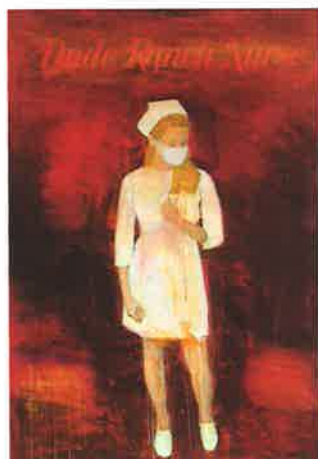
Following the principle laid down by Prince of the “8-track,” they were lo-fi samples of high-production-value ads, like playing the theme to *The Magnificent Seven*—which, by the way, the Marlboro television and radio ads appropriated from the movie—on a Sears, Roebuck guitar.¹² Someone else had done all the heavy lifting. (I once met someone who thought Prince had actually staged and art-directed the photographs himself. Let's just say he wasn't from around these here parts.)

¹⁰ J.G. Ballard, “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” and “The Assassination of John F. Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race,” in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).

¹¹ LaMarco McLendon, “Stanley Kubrick's Daughter Addresses Moon Landing Conspiracy,” *Variety*, July 6, 2016, <https://variety.com/2016/film/news/stanley-kubrick-moon-landing-conspiracy-theory-addressed-daughter-vivian-1201809270/>.



Untitled (Cowboy), 1980–1984
Dye coupler print
24 x 16 ½ inches (60.9 x 41.9 cm)



Nurse #2, 2002–03
Ink Jet and acrylic on canvas
70 x 50 inches (177.8 x 127 cm)

Back then, it seemed necessary to say, at least *sotto voce*, that there *were* interventions, even if the markmaking was provocatively paleodigital. The party line was: “I didn’t like my own art so I stole somebody else’s.” Prince even spouted some critical theory but it was always just a little off; plausible, but slightly out of synch. He crossed the thin line between esthetics and gibberish, but sent out no smoke signals that he was running amok.

Enlarged, the Cowboys sold better than the Girlfriends (tits on choppers were tougher to hang over the family room couch). With time, the Cowboys became less claustrophobic and more about the herd, the group. It was Prince’s *Red River* phase: Get the cattle to Abilene and we’ll sort out that Oedipal crap later, *mano a mano*. Back at the ranch, though, things were getting sticky. Cancer research was turning up inconvenient truths. As the permitted depictions of smoking in advertising became more strictly regulated, the look of the Marlboro ads became gauzier. The cowboys weren’t inhaling. They weren’t even smoking. Prince was ahead of the curve on that one, too. Lose the cigarettes, pard, he told his cowpunchers back at the studio.

Once the cigarettes disappeared, the portraits became landscapes. This was in the late nineties and early aughties—Prince’s John Ford phase. He excised the cowboy almost completely, and the work flew off the gallery walls. By now the relentless merchandising of the Marlboro brand created an indelible association with the American West. First, in the seventies, came the Marlboro Country Store. By the fall of the Berlin Wall, the smoking cowboy iconography was well and truly global. Marlboro Classics, which made dusters and sheepskin coats under license from Philip Morris, was an Italian conglomerate. You could dress like those guys in the ads (or Don Johnson in *Harley Davidson and the Marlboro Man*—talk about product placement!).

Prince showed us that you could lose the cigarette, even give the guy a boner, and he was still a cowboy. Same with the West: you could take out John Wayne and still have a John Ford movie. By blowing them up and putting them out there as Art (edition of 2, plus 1 artist proof) Prince was cutting through the red tape of art history. He didn’t need his 8-track anymore. He was digital now, baby.

Print the Facts

America is about its frontiers. The frontiers of consumption, that is: Bigger drinks, fatter tires, wider fairways, space colonies. For an impecunious artist in late twentieth-century New York City, the frontier was upstate New York—where Prince moved in 1996. He holstered his camera (the one he always said he had no license for), saddled up Bigfoot—his beloved 4 x 4—and lit out for the territories a la Huck Finn. He had to get out of Dodge before sundown. Things

12 In Prince’s 1977 manifesto *The Velvet Revolution*, he compared the pre-digital options of rephotography to an 8-track tape: 1. Original copy / 2. The re-photographed copy / 3. The angled copy / 4. The cropped copy / 5. The focused copy / 6. The out-of-focused copy / 7. The black-and-white copy / 8. The color copy / See Richard

Prince, “8-Track-1977-79,” in *Writings*, accessed October 10, 2018, <http://www.richardprince.com/writings/>.



Left: Marlboro advertisement (detail);
right: *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 1999
Ektacolor photograph
61 x 32 1/2 inches (154.9 x 82.6 cm)



Publicity still from *Urban Cowboy*,
directed by James Bridges for
Paramount Pictures, 1980:
John Travolta as Bud, the hero



Publicity still from *Urban Cowboy*: Scott
Glenn as Wes, the heavy—in a cowboy
fashion-forward mesh t-shirt

were heading south fast. He didn't even have a gallery. He was radioactive.

His Upstate landscapes make interesting companion pieces to his twenty-first-century Western landscapes. "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend," said the reporter in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, (1962) and it's worth pointing out that Ford added that line; it wasn't in the original 1953 story by Dorothy Johnson.¹³ But Prince, ever the contrarian, prints the facts—what remains after everybody's gone in search of some new legend. Which will just be an advertisement anyway.

(Almost) Original

With the Publicities, Prince limited himself to forging celebrity inscriptions on publicity photos he bought at conventions or found online. He forged them crudely, in what was obviously his own handwriting. If they happened to be signed or have a mechanically reproduced signature already, that was fine too. Then he started mixing celebrity photos with his own work: re-photography like the *Girlfriends* and the *Parties*, hippie drawings, childhood souvenirs, whatever fell readily to hand.

Next, he started marking up and doctoring original illustration boards for the covers of nursing, detective and Western pulp fiction paperbacks, adding paint and lists. He placed little cloth surgical masks on the Nurses and bandanas on the Cowboys. Ever the minimalist, he decided one day his interventions were overkill. He drew another line in the sand and crossed it. Now it was *just the facts, ma'am*: an illustration board, a paperback cover, mated with an actual copy of the book, set side-by-side in a nice metal frame. Sometimes he left the books in the same Saran wrap they were shipped in by low-budget eBay paperback resellers. He called these works *Untitled (Originals)*, and then retroactively titled the earlier ones he had fiddled with as *Untitled (Almost) Originals*. It's easy to follow his line of thinking here—anyone can do it.

Unfortunately—or maybe this is the artist's intent—the basic rule of Prince discourse is this: the simpler Prince's gesture, that is, the fainter the markmaking, the more strident the critical carping. The self-proclaimed *auteurs* of the Cowboys, the commercial photographers who gladly toiled in anonymity for the real *auteurs*—Leo Burnett's posse of art directors—came out of the woodwork for the 2007–2008 Guggenheim retrospective, *Spiritual America*. Sam Abell called Richard "a cheeky fellow" and accused him of violating the golden rule. *Ouch*. Jim Krantz (self-outed in *The New York Times*) promptly emerged from the shadows to sell lightbox images through a New York photography gallery and the cutting-edge fashion emporium, Colette's, in Paris.¹⁴ Krantz got a fat gig shooting Western-themed heritage clothes for an up-and-coming young

¹³ Dorothy M. Johnson, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Helena, Montana: Riverbend Editions, 1953). James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* screenplay, Paramount Pictures: 1962.

¹⁴ Kennedy, "If the Copy Is an Artwork."



Giorgio de Chirico
Il Ritornante, 1918
 Oil on canvas
 37 x 30.7 inches (94 x 77.9 cm)



Untitled (Portrait), 2013
 Inkjet on canvas
 Primary support: 65 3/4 x 48 3/4 inches
 (167 x 123.8 cm)



Prince's Motorcycle: Western saddle seat, no engine

fashion designer, and wound up on expensive shirts by skater and streetwear brand Supreme. If not a full fifteen minutes of fame, it was a brief second wind, thanks to Prince. Funny thing is, these guys were nowhere to be seen at Prince's first American retrospective 1993 at the Whitney, because—

Dough-Re-Mi

What we *really* talk about when we talk about Prince is Money. Suddenly art is all about how much it is worth, and that worth is often measured by how much effort the artist put into it: how much markmaking, how transformative. But you can't be just a *little* bit transformative. Besides, art and the art market are two different things. These days they're not even vaguely correlated. As the stakes get higher, the ambiance gets nastier. The Krantz article in the *Times* included this quote from Prince: "I never associated advertisements with having an author." How's this from the blogosphere in response:

Mr Prince you can go fuck yourself And I hate to tell you, but whether you associate something or not has no bearing on reality. For instance I never associated you with having a soul.

At least the blogger had the guts to sign his name.

But Prince took the entrepreneurial view. He said: "It would be strange for me to think I'm being ripped off, because that's what I do! In those days it was called 'pirating.' Now they call it 'sampling.' There's a guy on the street who paints copies of my Nurse paintings, along with Elizabeth Peytons and Eric Fischls. I think it's funny. I actually bought one; I thought it was pretty close." (I guess you can't rob a thief.)¹⁵

There was also considerable action on eBay. An enterprising outfit in Hong Kong made Nurse paintings "to order" and stockpiled each variant in "editions" of five—as if not sure if they were going for uniqueness or controlled, "editioned" scarcity. Another seller offered recropped images of the famous Prince *Cowboy* that broke the million-dollar barrier for a photograph at auction in 2005—the same Cowboy on the cover of the Whitney retrospective catalog.¹⁶ That seller explained that he found Prince's cropping too constricting, so he fixed it. Charged \$49.99 plus postage and handling: the real thing, only better.

Prince has often said that if anyone has the guts to sign his own name to a Richard Prince, be his guest. Then there's the famous precedent of Giorgio de Chirico's *Il Ritornante* (1918). Pissed off about something, de Chirico denounced his own painting as a fake while it was hanging in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris.¹⁷ Come to think of it, Prince took a page out of the de Chirico playbook when he disavowed an Instagram portrait of Ivanka Trump. But I digress: Between the repudiation by de Chirico of his own painting, and the

15 Karen Rosenberg, "Artist: Richard Prince," *New York*, May 2, 2005, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/11815/>.

16 Lisa Phillips and Richard Prince, *Richard Prince* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1992).

17 "Vente Bergé YSL: Pompidou a-t-il acheté un faux?" *Par Lunette Rouges* (blog), February 26, 2009, accessed October 17, 2018, <http://lunettesrouges.blog.lemonde.fr/>.



Untitled Twitter image



Marlboro Adventure Team T-shirt, 1990s

expropriation by Judge Batts of *Canal Zone* before the decision was reversed, you pretty much have the conceptual extremes of authorship right there. One artist denounces as a forgery something the whole world knows he really painted, while in a court of law, another is denied the authorship of a work of art that's clearly his. We're talking generations of doctoral dissertations here.

Mainstream Cult

Truth be told, Richard loves his subjects. His problem is that authenticity doesn't do it for him. He's been reeducated, like in Cambodia, except it's America. Reality makes him nervous. As he explained:

The Girlfriends began when I rephotographed biker girls that had their pictures in biker magazines. Then when I moved upstate I actually met some real biker girls, at biker parties. I started to take their pictures but it wasn't the same. I liked it better when I'd buy the magazine and look at their pictures that were already there.¹⁸

Eventually Prince would stage his own biker chick worlds: a bouillabaisse of sci-fi sirens—like the Girls of *Battlestar Galactica* (2008), studio assistants and upstate locals and, for good measure, in his *Spiritual America* show: a grown Brooke Shields *avec moto*, photographed as work-for-hire by Sante d'Orazio but signed by Prince. When Prince takes his own pictures at home, you'll notice *his* motorcycle has no motor.

Recently the Canadian self-described “fetish rapper” Tommy Genesis (Genesis Yasmine Mohanraj) extolled the Girlfriends in an interview for *Billboard* about her new video, “Lucky,” which contains a bike scene she calls an “an ode to Richard Prince’s Girlfriends’ series.” “I used to have them all printed out on my wall, I just love girls on bikes,” she said.¹⁹ In the eighties, Prince was glomming on to failed idealizations in ultra-marginal cult media, and making art out of them. Genesis takes that art and mainstreams it. Forty years ago, you had to send away for the magazine. You had to know about it. Your local newsstand wasn't putting it out there. Now you just click on one of your social media feeds and boom she there. Prince should be flattered, because it shows how far ahead of his time he was. He describes this phenomenon with one of his typical oxymorons: *Mainstream Cult*.

Vanishing Point

Prince is remarkably consistent in his approach to the world and its monuments. In 1969, he made the obligatory cultural pilgrimage to France. The Prince World Grand Tour consisted of hitting the tourist spots, buying postcards at the gift shops, and then trying to replicate them with his own camera. Four decades later, he started doing the same thing in Monument

¹⁸ Rosetta Brooks, Jeff Rian and Luc Sante, *Richard Prince* (London, Phaidon Press, 2003), 23.

¹⁹ Michael Saponara, “Tommy Genesis Takes Her Talents to the Wild West for New ‘Lucky’ Video: Premiere,” *Billboard*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8254034/tommy-genesis-lucky-vid-eo-premiere>.



Untitled (*Check Painting*) #8, 2004
Acrylic on screenprinting frame
57 ¼ x 62 ½ inches (145.4 x 157.8 cm)



Untitled (*Jackson Hole After Dark*), 2009
Ink jet and acrylic on canvas
72 x 90 ½ inches (182.9 x 229.9 cm)

Valley—except this time he brought forty years of accreted meaning to his art (not to mention better equipment). He was already in the space of the proverbial slip between cup and lip: the ways in which real life falls short of a postcard.

But with all this baggage, the Monument Valley images (2013) are something of an inversion of that dialectic. In the twenty-first century, anyone with enough money to buy a fancy digital camera could have taken these, but what makes them important is that they were taken *by Richard Prince*. They carry the weight of four decades of the artist's Western imagemaking, despite the fact that these are totally literal—if not to say deadpan—photographs. What does it mean that a guy who has spent his artistic practice undermining “fine art” photography took these actual, unreworked, unrephotographed photographs himself (or at least was standing nearby when someone on his payroll did)?

I think he's pulling the rug out from under the *idea* of the West, while at the same time acknowledging its powerful spiritual and literal topography. Back to the connection between Prince and Ford: Larry McMurtry, our trusted guide to the Western imagination, said of Ford that he “knew quite well that, far from being representative of the West, Monument Valley . . . was unique, not only in the West but in the world.”²⁰ The same could be said of Prince. Monument Valley is a found Hollywood sign (as opposed to the created one that looms above the City of Angels and in Ed Ruscha paintings). McMurtry calls it “the West-in-the-mind's eye,” which always trumps the historic West or the geographic West, thanks to the camera.²¹

While everyone else is printing the legend, Prince is shooting the facts. Or is he? Is Monument Valley, as a Western symbol, any less made up than the Spahn Ranch, the former Western movie set where the Manson cohort holed up (and worked for its half-blind, elderly owner while plotting the Tate-LaBianca murders)? Or than those fake spaghetti Western villages in Spain?

Homeless on the Range

To steal a phrase from Roger “King of the Road” Miller, Prince's art “swings like a pendulum do.”²² His paintings of Cowboys, made just before he went to Monument Valley, went to some lengths to abstract the landscape, if not to eliminate it completely. They privilege the human archetypes: gunfighters, cowpunchers, the odd Native American. This after foregrounding the landscape, downsizing and all but eliminating the human figures from his rephotographed Marlboro landscapes. The Cowboys in these paintings, silkscreened off the covers of pulp fiction Westerns, are disembodied figures of our imagination, floating against ab-ex or lightly figurative backgrounds. Some of these boys look downright indigent: Homeless on the range. After so much

²⁰ Larry McMurtry, “The West Without Chili,” in *Sacagawea's Nickname: Essays on the American West* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 9–10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Roger Miller, “England Swings (Like a Pendulum Do),” on *Golden Hits*, Smash Records, 1965.

**IS
SUPREME
X RICHARD
PRINCE
COMING?**



Supreme illustration for “Is a Supreme x Richard Prince Collaboration on the Way?” by Kam Dhillon, *Highsnobiety* blog, February 2, 2017

decontextualizing, Prince just got homesick for where John Ford put the West.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Time-Life was compiling its list of the one hundred most important photographs of the twentieth century. They decided on the million-dollar cowboy (of course: money talks), rang up Prince, and came around to do a mini-doc.²³ The suits showed up with some pristine vault copies of *Time* from back in the day, when Prince labored in their archives. They handed them to him and asked him to make a Cowboy for the camera. He demurred: No reenactments, just my talking head. But on their way out, he told them, Take the film. Leave the magazines. As in, leave the gun. Take the cannoli.

Getting those magazines was like time travel: *Richard Prince’s Excellent Adventure*, a trifecta of obsolescence. Cigarette ads are over, magazines are over, and analog photography—or at least the idea of any kind of decisive moment, as Henri Cartier-Bresson called it in 1952—is beyond over. Prince’s Cowboys are blue chip. Certified negotiable securities with rock solid art historical bona fides. So what’s next? Art mutating into real estate, that’s what.

When Prince dove into those pristine back issues, he saw how the magazine ads had aged under the kind of optimal archival conditions one normally doesn’t come across. How the colors had mutated in ways you couldn’t invent or manipulate, even with a fancy computer. So yeah: bigger and better. But how to mark them with the spoor of the old century?

Tear It Up! Rip It Up! Voila! The 2016 torn cowboy works. In the same way *Catcher in the Rye* is an end-of-the-line appropriationist gesture—something that both sums up and puts *paid* to a postmodern line of thinking—the torn Untitled (Cowboy) works are *fin de race* for the Marlboro Men.

To use a cinematic analogy, the fourth wall has been pierced. Torn open. Torn out of the magazines themselves. Why not make it obvious? After forty years, we’re used to this. Everyone knows what a Richard Prince Cowboy is. His secret sauce has long been reverse-engineered by succeeding generations of artists, but he still owns the brand. He’s cobranded the American West: *Richard Prince x Marlboro*. The lazy RP, a subsidiary of Inside World, corporate headquarters in upstate New York, franchise locations all over Spiritual America.

Anyone Can Do It

A recent search for “Richard Prince” and “Cowboy” on eBay unearthed a photo of a cowboy by Krantz, the same Krantz who shot those Marlboro images appropriated by Prince.²⁴ Only it’s not a Prince. It’s a Krantz, plastered on a Supreme shirt. But the man on the street probably thinks this a Richard Prince shirt.

The metrics of markmaking are surely beside the point. But Prince has done more than anyone to keep the Marlboro man in the picture. The eBay reseller, unconstrained by any niceties of copyright, conceptual justice or

²³ The documentary was “Behind the Photographs: Untitled (Cowboy) Photograph by Richard Prince,” directed by Kira Pollack and Paul Moakley, for *100 Photographs: The Most Influential Images of All Time*, Time Inc., 2016.

²⁴ <https://www.ebay.com/itm/Supreme-Cowboy-Work-Shirt-Jim-Krantz-Size-XL-Richard-Prince-Marlboro-Denim/152584617362>.

Supreme Cowboy Work Shirt Jim Krantz Size XL Richard Prince Marlboro Denim

Item condition: New with tags

Price: **US \$488.88**
From \$44 for 12 months

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Supreme x “Prince” merchandise for sale on eBay

decency, uses the keywords “Richard Prince” to hawk those wares. Where I come from, we call that a bait and switch. The seller just wants to sell the shirt. It’s truthful hyperbole, so it’s fine. Our President said so.

Speaking of bait and switch, here’s one even closer to home. This Supreme outfit appropriated their logo typeface from Barbara Kruger, but thinks nothing of suing other street clothiers for IP infringement. It was they who planted a story about that particular line of shirts on *High Snobiety*, a fashion blog, hinting it was a Prince x Supreme collab, which it wasn’t.²⁵ The accompanying illustration is easily identifiable as Krantz’s, not Prince’s. Even though Krantz images are often appropriated by Prince, this one lacks that final turn of the screw that makes Princes *Princes*.

Whoever put the teaser out there knew exactly what they were doing. Prince had done a skateboard collab with Supreme back in the day, before he became an art world su(e)perstar, so it had the whiff of real news. The flack in question was complicit with the manufacturer in using Prince’s name to hype something they *both* knew was just a knockoff. The real thing, only better. The postmodern tide came in, and when it went out, all that process and source material had its own fifteen minutes of fame, thanks to Prince’s “brand.” Sold American.

Prince has a v. in front of his family name, but it’s not the German aristocratic particle, as in Richard von Prince. It’s a legal docket reference: *Cariou v. Prince*. *Graham v. Prince*.²⁶ *McNatt v. Prince*.²⁷ And so forth. Really, Prince should open a Japanese restaurant: *Sosome*.

²⁵ Kam Dhillon, “Is a Supreme x Richard Prince Collaboration On the Way?” *High Snobiety* (blog), February 2, 2017, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/02/02/supreme-ss17-richard-prince/>.

²⁶ “Graham v. Prince et al.,” No. 1:2015cv10160 - Document 54 (S.D.N.Y. 2017) <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/new-york/nysdce/1:2015cv10160/451754/54/>.

²⁷ “Complaint McNatt v. Prince et al.,” No. 1:16-cv-08896 (S.D.N.Y. 2016) Also see: Josh Russel, “Appropriation Artist’ Richard Prince Sued,” *Entertainment Law Digest*, November 22, 2016, <http://www.entlawdigest.com/2016/11/22/4381.htm>.