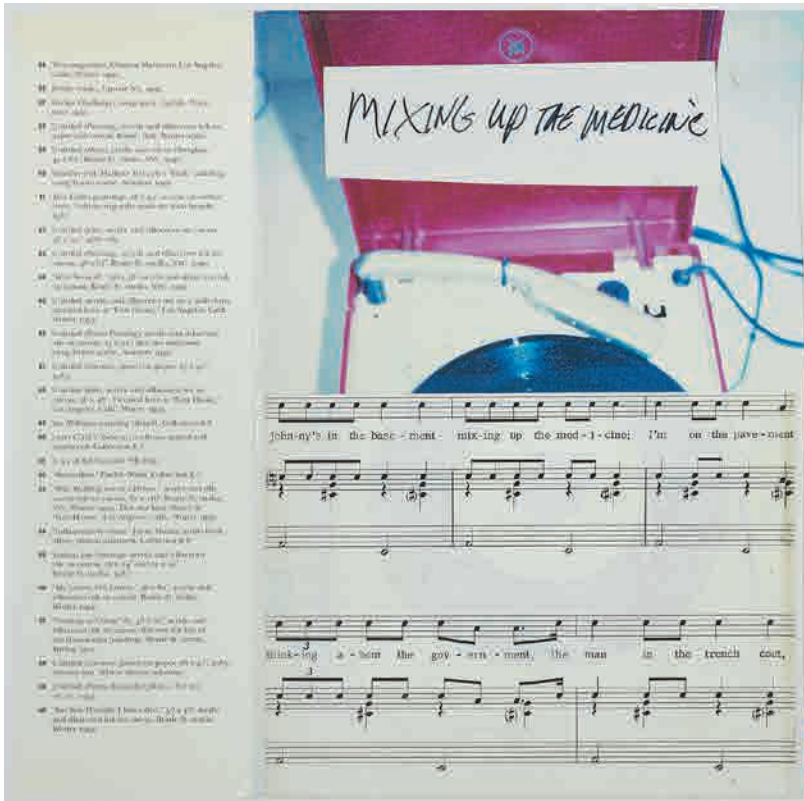


**What Are the Odds?
Richard Prince, Bookmaker**

Bob Rubin

Richard Prince is a book guy. The lines between his art and his library—his markmaking and collecting—are difficult to discern. He likes it that way. For Prince, books can be sculptural elements with textual overtones, like in the *American English* series. They can be canvasses. As a complement to his *de Kooning* series of paintings—reworked de Kooning paintings silkscreened from a book—he collaged and drew on a bunch of the cannibalized monographs to make a series of unique editions. Books are also donor cadavers, the pages and images from “beachcombed”¹ books finding new life first in silkscreened canvasses, and then as process material physically retrofitted to yet another book. As we shall see,



Richard Prince, *Mixing Up the Medicine*, 1995, unique artist's reworking of *Adult Comedy Action Drama*

Prince's own artist's books are not spared the scissors and glue treatment.

Why does an artist make a book of his art, or any kind of "art" book, in the first place? Presumably to disseminate his art—or his *shtick*—more widely than a single canvas or an editioned multiple can. Prince's books have delivered his work to a devoted subset of fans and collectors, at a friendlier price point. True to form, however, he cannot leave well enough alone. He makes the serial unique after making the unique serial. Why does Richard fuck with his own books? A better question is... why not? After all, his artist's books are collage diaries of his daily life—making art, collecting books, cutting up magazines, getting gas at the local filling station... They seem to go to press at random moments anyway, so why not open them up again when the mood strikes. Recycle the already recycled.

Adult/Comedy /Action/Drama

Adult/Comedy /Action/Drama (1995) is my personal favorite among all his artist's books. The cornerstone of any Prince bibliography, its greatness starts with its title (interesting because his art is all entitled... *Untitled*). *Adult/Comedy/Action/Drama*. Life's emotional sweep as four aisles in a video store.

Prince transformed this particular copy into a gift for a female acquaintance. He changed the title of the book to *Mixing Up the Medicine*, superimposing Bob Dylan's lyrics from "Subterranean Homesick Blues" above the rear dust jacket photo of a 45 RPM record player—the kind we all owned when, more than half a century ago, *Bringing it all Back Home* rocked our hitherto acoustic world ("Subterranean Homesick Blues" was the album's first



single). Handwriting the new title on a piece of taped-on scrap paper, Prince credited himself as the author of this rechristened book on the dust jacket spine. He also changed the title of a second music and lyric sheet from “Subterranean Homesick Blues” to *Adult Comedy Action Drama* on the front free endpaper—completing the identity “mixup” as well.

Inserting himself into the persona of one of his heroes with a deadpan gesture is something Prince likes to do. “I want to see myself as a personality instead of as a person,” he once wrote.² Prince told me that Bob Dylan has been the single biggest influence on his artistic practice. He’s channeled him more than once.

Here, in a single gesture, Prince manages to stir up a lot of post-countercultural associations. To circle back to his own artmaking, he

rewrites the title on three Protest Paintings (themselves classic post-countercultural object/texts) leaning against the wall in a photograph foregrounded by his painter’s pots and brushes—showing us how *he* mixes up *his* medicine. Prince pulled the essential metaphor of Dylan’s breakthrough album—its layered evocations of underground alchemy—and borrowed it, a generation or two later, for himself. Didn’t steal it. Just borrowed it, long after it had lost its initial currency.³

Finally, he added a fragment of a proof Gang of four Girlfriends—one for each section of the video store, as he helpfully notes—on the front interior flap of the dust jacket. Girlfriends for a girlfriend. Love my art love me.

Subterranean Homesick Blues
WORDS AND MUSIC BY *Richard Prince*⁽¹⁹⁾

ADULT COMEDY ACTION
DRAMA

Moderate blues rock

Nov 1965

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Man

This unique copy of *Man* is described by Prince in its dedication as “my copy.” I have seen other books similarly notated or inscribed. It’s the author’s copy. In some cases, that would be the first book off the presses, which the publisher gives to the author. It can also be a copy the author keeps near at hand just for his own reference, or to mark up over time. (I’ve seen it called a “desk” copy as well.)

Man is a more elaborate intervention than *Adult / Comedy/Action/Drama*, perhaps because the person to whom it was ultimately conveyed—John McWhinnie—was a uniquely important figure in Prince’s life. John was a rare book and countercultural ephemera dealer who turbocharged Prince’s book collecting. Prince went from beachcombing to big time collecting. The

powerful medicine of his library, along with his own bookmaking, was the synergistic product of his growing success as an artist, and John’s erudition and reach.

Deconstructing the uniqueness of this copy of *Man* is challenging because there are so many rephotographed pastedowns in the book to begin with. I’m guessing Prince had some printer’s proofs of *Jokes and Cartoons* (2005) hanging around because this copy is festooned with fragments of them. They add layers of meaning to artworks otherwise frozen on the page. For example, he adds a joke about a whorehouse on a Richard Pryor *Publicity*, a reference to the fact that the comedian spent part of his childhood in a house of ill repute run by his grandmother. A smoking joke is juxtaposed with Cowboy photographs...you’re in Marlboro Country. Another one: he pastes in an Oedipal joke



A mother is having a very tense relationship with her fourteen year old son. Screaming and fighting are constantly going on in the house. She finally brings him to a psychoanalyst. After two sessions, the doctor calls the mother into the office.
 "Your son," he tells her, "has an Oedipus complex."
 "Oedipus, Schmedipus," the woman answers, "as long as he loves his mother."

Untitled (Marigolds) C111 as Found, 1988
 Photo on paper, 43 x 29 inches, 1 image (100%)
 mounted on white panel. This work was first exhibited in 1988
 and is now in the collection of the artist. This work is for sale
 and will be sold as a single or in a group.

The Great

Montgomery Clift as Freud

I met a girl recently who said she liked to listen to Abba. She said when she listened to it, it reminded her of a large room, with lots of people in it, all facing towards her, and watching her up close as she received the final inches of Secretariat's penis.

At the time I didn't think this thought particularly abnormal. I was thoroughly aware of the rise in demand for pictures exhibiting individuals having sex with animals. Sexually had become increasingly popular in 1981, and had displaced many of the more standardized groupings shown in pop show arcades.

What did surprise me was the pedigree of the horse, its specificity, a particular horse.... a famous horse, a successful horse.

I was also aware of the international reputation of Abba and the fact that they had sold more records than any other pop group in 1980.

The combination or I suppose the association between the two successes probably had an infinite number of exclamations, but I wouldn't help but think about was the apparent pleasure in which the episode was related to me, by my new friend. I have always associated unrestricted sex with people smiling.

*Back to the future
 from the future
 from the future*

100

on a small drawing of Montgomery Clift as Freud. Even the people from his rephotographed *Couples* series from the seventies are repurposed to appear to be telling each other jokes.

Man contains fragments from donor volumes of humorous cartoon anthologies that were cut up to go into *Jokes*. A famous pornographic riff on Disney characters that was making the rounds during the sixties is enriched with an anodyne television image plus a fragment of *Playboy* cartoon whose caption hearkens back to a simpler time when Disney cultural product was strictly big screen and you had sex instead of watching television because what else was there to do. The artist's trademark free associative lists become longer as new associations occur to him, and he writes them into "my (his) copy." Around this time, his upstate installation *First House*

was a particular preoccupation of the artist, so he enhances the original list and adds his signature "home" joke: "Do you know what it means to come home to a house and have your wife say "I love you with all my heart?" It means you are in the wrong house." (Not for nothing does he label this page "Bachelor Ranch.")

In *American Prayer*, I made a distinction between appropriation and continuation which is useful to invoke here. In this reworked artist's book, appropriation is a *fait accompli*. The reworking is continuation. The second course of the same meal. *Bonne continuation*, as the French say, when they serve you the main course after the appetizer. He's remixing his own medicine. If appropriation is theft, continuation is mere vandalism—more akin to graffiti than destruction. Besides, he's writing on himself.



*"Now do you remember what we used to do in
the evenings before we had television?"*

Untitled (Cartoon) 1970
Pencil on paper, 41 x 23 cm (16 1/8 x 9 1/8 in.)
© 2004 Richard Prince
In collaboration with the artist



Canal Zone

McWhinnie likewise turbocharged Prince's unique interventions, egging him on to new conceptual heights. Even a generic exhibition catalog, marred by an embarrassing printing error in the Acknowledgments section, became a lettered edition of 26 after the rest of the print run was pulped. I once attended a book auction with John and Richard. Richard was doodling on the pages of the catalog while waiting to bid on a holy grail first edition of Dashiell Hammett. John took the catalog home and archived it.

Canal Zone became a *cause célèbre* after Prince was sued by photographer Patrick Cariou for wrongful appropriation. During the various depositions, Prince declined to discuss the meaning of his art, or even affirm that whatever he did was

transformative. Meanwhile, here he is, further transforming the artworks he declined to deem transformative of the original Cariou photographs. For legal reasons, the catalog was never distributed, so the ones out there are fugitive copies. Within that small universe of collector copies given by Prince to his inner circle, there is an even smaller group into which he remixed more medicine: source material for the rastas (mostly soft porn images of Polynesian women—go-go Gauguin). Where *Man* feels pleasantly desultory—something he intermittently tinkered with when he felt like it—the small run of unique *Canal Zones* seems like a more deliberate project. As if he's providing a skeleton key to the *Canal Zone* imagery, by his intentionally inartful mixing of various masscult examples of what critical theorists generally refer to as “the Other.”



A *Dislocation*



B *Corolla Cemetery*



Unlike *Man*, where you have to run your hand over the pages to ascertain what are added pastedowns and what are reproductions of cut and paste jobs original to the book, *Canal Zone* is easier to parse due to its classical exhibition catalog format: one image per spread, with the other half of the spread white space and the title of the work in small type. Richard works that white space hard. There are also a few snarky addons to images in the catalog's two inserted sections which document other bodies of work. These sections could be refugees from unpublished artists books in the vein of *Man*, *Woman*, *4 × 4*, *It's a Free Concert from Now On*, *et al*—as if Prince was getting bored with the catalog format. It deprives him of one of his signature moves: juxtaposition. Without it he's a one armed paperhanger. When Prince is in the house, just when you think you have a discrete work of art, its aura well staked out by

white space, along comes a vagabond image to mess with it. The beast flesh always crawls back, like in *Island of Lost Souls*. Are we not men? Atavistic consumer culture pulls the rug out from under Art. The last emendation to this copy of *Canal Zone* is a sticker of the *Mona Lisa*—the ultimate auric artwork—smoking a joint. Iggy Pop and Richard Hell also make cameo appearances.

In lieu of the usual opaque art critical essay, *Canal Zone* opens with a post-apocalyptic riff by James Frey. Rich vacationers stranded on St. Bart. The natives are restless. This story line later morphs into a mass market paperback, *The Fall of Eden*, with Prince incognito in the process (he's mentioned in the book's acknowledgments, but for what it's not clear). Lost in the litigation shuffle. Soon to be a major motion picture. What are the odds?



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Bob Rubin

1 “Beachcombing” is the term Richard uses to describe browsing the used bookstores that used to line New York’s Fourth Avenue.

2 “Decorating My Walls”, 1980.
www.richardprince.com/writings/decorating-my-walls-1980/

3 Dylan took it back in 2015 when he titled a commemorative album of photos from 1965–66 *Mixing Up the Medicine* as volume 12 of the *Bootleg Series*.

THE FALL OF EDEN



The end of the world is just the beginning...

RICHARD MICHAELS

Richard MICHAELS. *The Fall of Eden*
(New York: Berkley Books, 2009)