

INTERVIEWS

Interview

May 2013

Richard Kern's Girls

by Rachel Small

Photographer and filmmaker Richard Kern shot a naked girl for the first time in the early '80s. By now, breasts have lost their novelty. "Let's get you out of those clothes. We're on the clock," is a phrase he might utter on photo shoots these days.

That's not to say he doesn't appreciate nudity. A beautiful girl, after all, makes for a better photograph—"It's almost like cheating," he says. Now 58, Kern is not interested in making pornography. He intends to create an artful product, whether it strikes viewers as provocative, sexy, grotesque, or beautiful.

Growing up in North Carolina, his newspaper manager father would take him on shoots. After graduating from UNC, he moved to New York in 1979. He started taking photos and then began experimenting with film. The unabashed shorts he made became part of the Cinema of Transgression, an underground group tied to punk culture that produced low-budget movies centered on violence, sex, and humor. He continued shooting people, too, and wound up taking photographs for *Barely Legal*, a soft-core porn magazine. "It was girls standing around in their bedroom, just looking like a girl you might see on the street, which is what I'd been shooting all along," says Kern of his foray into porn. Since quitting, he has focused on gallery exhibitions. He's had three previous Taschen monographs published: *New York Girls* in 1997, and *Model Release* in 2000, and *Action* in 2007.

Shot by Kern, his fourth book with Taschen, is a collection of photos taken while he starred in an online show of same name, which is produced by Vice and streams on VBS.com. Viewers of the show do not see the final photos, but that's not the case in the monograph: the first page shows Kern setting up a shot between a model's legs; turn the page and there's the girl's underwear from below. Accompanying the book is a DVD with short films that he made for Taschen or shot during the VBS series. Among these is *Cutter* (2003), which features a girl talking about her medication and showing Kern how she cuts herself.

In Kern's photos, ordinary girls look like they are in another dimension where it is as erotic to have toothpaste dribbling down one's chin as it is to be spread eagle on a bed. The former image is from "Tooth Brushing;" other series included are "Looking through Legs," "Makeup," "Personal Technology," "Medication," "Girls on Beds," "On the Toilet," and "Pot Smoking." Porn star and sometimes actress Sasha Grey makes frequent appearances. Others reach out to Kern over email. Many of the models are posing nude for the first time.

When we speak with Kern, it is on a Saturday afternoon in his apartment. He already has set up a stool for our recorder.

RACHEL SMALL: You're best known for your work in *Vice*—

RICHARD KERN: Really?

SMALL: What would you say you're best known for?

KERN: I don't know. But I would say now that's probably true.

SMALL: Do you remember the first naked woman you shot?

KERN: A girl I'd gone to college with came to New York to visit me on her way to Italy. She was going to start a new life, and I shot her. But, I imagined it was

something to do with like, "Oh, we were going to have sex." It didn't happen. I wasn't thinking that, but I thought maybe that's why she came to visit me. It didn't happen again for a while. Then, in the late '80s or early '90s, I started photographing naked girls again, girls I'd meet. Then one girl would tell another girl and she would tell another girl. People were just doing it for fun. It kind of blossomed from there.

SMALL: How did you get into films coming from photography, and how did Cinema of Transgression start?

KERN: In the '80s, I was taking photographs, and I just started messing around with film, to see if I could do it. Then I got really into it. Cinema of Transgression grew out of making these angry punk movies. I did *Right Side of My Brain* with Lydia Lunch. The reviews were so negative—they called it pornography and everything—and I was like, "You think that's pornography? We're gonna go all the way on the next one." I was going to make it look like the biggest nihilistic sex, misogynistic... That was the point of *Fingered*. But some stuff, like *Manhattan Love Suicides*, in "I Hate You Now," the storyline follows a guy who is with a girl who starts doing everything he does. He can't stand it so much, he kills himself, and then she can't stand it, so she kills herself. Except they do it in a cartoony way. With the films on the [Taschen] DVD, I'm trying to develop simple ideas, like *Clean*, and *Face to Party Ratio*. Those movies are kind of jokey. *Cutter* is a bit more deep. It's pretty dark, which is more like Cinema of Transgression. You can see that it's a very simple movie. It didn't cost anything. It was intense, but it resonates a bit more. She's just cutting herself. She's got scars all over her. She tells why she does everything. That's why it's interesting -her explaining the whole thing. And she does it very clearly.

SMALL: I know you took photos for adult magazines. When did it stop becoming associated with porn, and started, for you, to be an art?

KERN: I was taking photos of all kinds of stuff, guys and girls, long before the porn stuff happened. I gotta say, I don't think of those mags as porn. I mean, if it's in a porn magazine, I guess it's porn. But we're talking about porn magazines like *Barely Legal*, like where it's just naked girls; there's no sex, no nothing. At *Barely Legal*, they needed girls that looked different than the ones that were in every other sex magazine at that time, which was big hair, big fake tits. I did that for about five years, six years after that. Then I quit. I was doing the arty stuff before. When I got into the porn biz, the arty stuff got all confused and mixed up. And when I was doing fashion, the fashion stuff messes it up. Now I've just quit all the stuff. I just do all my shit.

SMALL: When did you feel you had a certain aesthetic that was different?

KERN: [Laughs] I never felt that. I pretty much work in series. They have a girl, usually she doesn't have clothes on, and then there's something else. I try to think of a reason why the girl could be without her clothes off.

SMALL: What are your impressions of the girls in the photos, that is, as people?

KERN: I'm not thinking of them in that way. I'm thinking of whether the photos are working or not. The model is just one element of the photograph. There's also the location, the light—all that junk. It helps if the girl is really good-looking, but a girl can be not super good-looking and it'd still be a really good photograph. I ask people to send some photos of where they live if that's where I'm shooting. I go for shabby places over too-nice places, because most of these girls are going to look better if they're not made to look rich.

SMALL: What do you think they like about having their photos taken?

KERN: I think a lot of times it's just a test, maybe, for themselves. Sometimes it's for money. I'm going to shoot a girl in a couple weeks in Italy who has been writing me for a couple years. She sends photos all the time and it's kind of like a game. A lot of times people write and then they just want to see if I'm interested. If I say I am, I never hear from them again.

SMALL: Do you have other muses?

KERN: That same girl I was showing you, I went back to Paris to shoot her again. She's here, doing an internship, next month, and I'm going to shoot her some more. But I don't know what it is. It's her vibe. She must remind me of somebody. It's usually some kind of really deep unexplainable connection - at least on my side. *[laughs]* I don't know what's on their side. But it's like a visual connection, a bunch of triggers. A lot of girls I'll just shoot once or twice, but with certain special ones I'll go a bit further.

SMALL: What's your favorite part about shooting these young women?

KERN: It's the only time I'm not really aware of time, except, if I don't have enough time.

SMALL: What would you say, besides the obvious erogenous zones, is your favorite part about a woman's body?

KERN: Lately it's been butts. *[laughs]* It's weird. It's something that changes over your life, and I think one of the most important things to have in your life is a butt to sleep next to. Hair is very interesting. I like feet, I like hands, I like everything. It's funny when I'm shooting girls leaning, they go, "Oh my stomach looks fat!" It's like, "No, we're leaving that," because that looks good and it's real. Usually, a lot of times, guys like stuff that girls just think they're gonna hate.

SMALL: How do you think guys view these photos, as opposed to typical men's magazine photos?

KERN: I have this argument with my friend who shares a lot of the same interests. He's a painter. What I think is art is not what he thinks is art. I think the medical stuff is strong because it has different layers, but my friend thinks, "No, it's this beautiful shot with a girl laying on a bed. That's art." Art is about beauty, to him. I keep using this medication series as an example—all the junk that's on the sink, and the way bathrooms look...it's stuff I think is going to look good in 20 years. That's what I'm aiming for, stuff you'll look back on and think, "Oh yeah, I remember when it was like this."

SMALL: You mentioned layers—what are those layers for you?

KERN: One of the elements of photography is, just by nature, journalistic. It's some kind of documentation. The most successful ones to me are with an interesting looking girl. They're not being provocative. They're just presenting their drugs to you, showing you what they take. There's a good-looking girl, but here's this thing about her that's not so cool. It makes you feel a little uneasy. What bothers people more than anything is that I'm an old guy taking photos of them *[laughs]*. But maybe if you look at the photos, 20, 30 years later, it's not going to matter who took the photos. I mean, they would just be there. People will hopefully get over that. Degas, I'm not comparing me to him, but I read about how Degas always making statues of girls, ballerinas and young girls. "He's a dirty old man," that was basically what they were saying. What? Like, who gives a shit? That never occurred to me on any level. Somehow, I have to think about that. Time separates all that stuff. When I went to the shrink, I was talking to my shrink about Picasso and how he was married to this young woman. He was a very successful artist and he drew naked women. She said, "Yeah, but he was an asshole!" *[both laugh]* And I'd go, "He was?"

SMALL: There's certainly a long tradition of the nude.

KERN: That's where my friend says, that "No, that's the art stuff, not the other stuff."

SMALL: Well I feel like the medication is art stuff because it creates a narrative. It's not purely about her beauty, although it is partially, but it's also reminding you she's got a past and a present.

KERN: There's something besides her beauty, basically. There's another thing about her that you might not know. In the *Cutter* movie, you'll see the parallels. After that, maybe, because it was 2003, you'll go, "I wonder if this girl is still alive." That girl wrote me an email from Tokyo saying she wanted to model, and I said,

"Okay, well if you're ever in New York, just let me know," and then she showed up like a day or two later. And I shot her, and then she left. When I saw her, she had a shit load of drugs with her, all these roofies and all this shit she takes all the time. All kinds of medication, and I shot all these stupid shots of her covered with pills, and all this stuff. But then I shot the little movie of her doing some of her cutting stuff and I felt so guilty about it, I couldn't look at it for...I finally edited it a couple years ago. Anyway, I wonder what happened to her. When you're watching the movie, you're like, "This person's damaged." I'm dying to know what happened to her. I can't find her; I've tried to find her. So yeah, definitely, that past and future thing.

SMALL: Tell me if I'm off, or being presumptuous, but when you do shoot girls in a more casual environment, or holding their pills, it does show that you care about your subjects. The fact that you would be worried about a girl with other things going on in her life, which might add to the final piece.

KERN: Yeah. There's one in particular from that drug series. We've had this ongoing discussion because I've been AA for 25 years or something. I just keep saying, "You know, you could always go to AA, and then you wouldn't have to take that shit anymore." But you can't make anybody do that. Or I'd say, "Why don't you leave this town and go live somewhere else?" You have those conversations with people. But a lot of the models, I meet them and I never see them again.

SMALL: To me it sounds like you have somewhat of a connection, to these girls, but they also stand unto themselves, as artworks.

KERN: I hope so. But a lot of times, over time, I'm disconnected from them too. Because I look at the photos, and I'm trying to see them without any connection. That's a hard thing to do, to get beyond your own connection with anything, to try and have some distance. I was looking at some older stuff yesterday, in a box. I was like, "This is great. This is really meaningful," but I was thinking, "Is this meaningful to anyone but me?" That's always a challenge. Oh, we're getting very deep here. *[both laugh]* We were just talking about naked girls.

SMALL: What do you try to create?

KERN: I don't like trying to create sexy. To me, sexy is when my wife wears dowdy old nightgowns that are very sheer cotton, but when she walks in front of the TV, it's completely see through. *[Small laughs]* But that to me is sexier than her coming out wearing some black panties with garters and stockings and high heels and low cut bra and a boa. The white cotton thing that goes down to her feet is way, way hotter.

Art Collectors

April 2014

Galerie Sébastien Bertrand

Genève

In 2008, Alan Vega and you were exhibited together at the Kunsthalle-Vienna, for *Punk. No one is innocent*, curated by Thomas Mießgang. In which way are you linked with the Punk movement and also with Alan Vega's work?

Richard Kern: I wouldn't say I was directly linked with the Punk Movement unless it was through fanzines I did as a result of being exposed to Punk. Punk was happening in '76, '77, and '78 while I was in college in North Carolina. My friends and I who were studying art were thrilled to read about bands like the Sex Pistols and the Ramones because it gave us some kind of music to listen to that separated us from the rest of the students.

The one thing we picked up was a Do-it-Yourself attitude (DIY) that meant we could make our own magazines, make our own bands, etc. This seems like a quaint notion now but at the time, the idea that if you couldn't find what you liked where you lived, you made your own version of what you were looking for was new to us. I started a small magazine featuring stuff by me and my friends as a result of this idea. When I moved to New York in 1978 I continued producing these magazines. My fanzines started as music review magazines but quickly changed to art-zines that featured drawings, photos and writing. I, of course, did the photography and a lot of the writing. A lot of my inspiration came from a magazine I found in the school library called ARTRITE. This was a New York based mag started by and run by artists. One of the issues (I still have a copy) was edited by and featured Alan Vega's work.

The museum at my school also had one of his pieces in a show of contemporary neon art that was organized by one of the teachers. His piece and one by Bruce Nauman were my favorites in this show. Around this time I also was very much into his band Suicide. The title alone was enough to make me buy the record.

What do you think about being an artist and also a musician as Alan Vega does? You've been close to the underground musical scene (like Lydia Lunch, Sonic Youth and others) and have made many contributions to it. Would you tell us more about this relationship?

Richard Kern: I think the music and the art world scene has been closely related for some time. For example, David Bowie was a painter. Kim Gordon studied art before she was in Sonic Youth. She is now again very much involved in the art world and is showing her paintings again.

Mike Kelley was in the band Destroy All Monsters. Raymond Pettibon started out designing covers for Black Flag.

I worked with people like Lydia and Sonic Youth because the New York scene at the time was a very small community. Back then, there weren't loads of liberal arts schools turning out armies of artists and journalists and photographers and filmmakers each year.

Oyster Magazine

March 2012

Interview: Richard Kern

People Think I Live this Crazy, Wild Lifestyle.

by Alice Cavanagh

Richard Kern doesn't look like the kind of guy who's spent the last 20 to 25 years taking pictures of young, naked girls. Now in his fifties, he's clean cut, almost collegial, and very approachable. Although his images aim to provoke, he makes you feel instantly at ease. No wonder young girls line up to take their clothes off for him.

Kern's images are unapologetically perverse, point-and-shoot portraits of girls either in their underwear or completely nude, posing provocatively. That sentence, however, does not do Kern's work justice. His photographs are seductively candid, and the girls mostly non-models from all backgrounds and of all shapes and sizes, are uniquely beautiful. We met up yesterday ahead of the opening of his latest exhibition in Paris.

Alice Cavanagh: Tell me about this series of work 'Medicated' [above and below]. How did this come about?

Richard Kern: She [points to one photo] was helping me on a shoot and she tells me she takes Adderall. I was thinking, 'OK what is that?' It's for ADD; instead of Ritalin, now they give Adderall. It's also the *most* abused drug in America. There's a huge black market and people take it recreationally, it's like speed. I know a bunch of people - grown ups - that grind it up and do it all the time. This girl [points to another] has been on this stuff since she was 14, since her parents split up. She's on a lot more than this, though. Usually, like, with her, you can't sleep so they give you something to sleep; then they give you something to stay awake; then they give you something because you're depressed. This one, she had anxiety and some kind of OCD treatment. I also have photos of regular drugs, like cold and flu medicine. This whole series is legal drugs.

How do you find these girls? Every time I do a casting I ask the girl if she takes any prescription drugs. There is a film I have done about this, just talking about when they started, why they started.

What draws you to a girl in the first place? It's impossible to say, really. Like this girl [points to an image], when I saw her I didn't think she was going to be any good, but she turned out to be really, really good. But she's really tiny, [has] like a really thin face, but when she took off her clothes – what a body! She was a really good model.

Are you shooting all of the time? Not all the time, but most of the time. A lot of the shooting is going to be done this week. I'm shooting five days straight starting tomorrow, and that will be a big body of photographs. I do tours with Vice - we went to six countries and we shot for 30 days. That's the way a lot of that happens. And then, somewhere like Toronto happens to be a really good place for models and I'll just book, like, five days of solid shooting.

Do you think your pictures represent who you are in 'real life'? It starts out as one thing and then it becomes your job, but it's a fun job. The one misconception, and you can ask my wife on that, too – is that people think I live this crazy, wild lifestyle. Like I'm going off to have sex with all these girls, but that's not happening.

It's really just a job? Do you ever want to try something else then? Yeah. I do shoot [other things]. Well, not a tremendous amount of other things, but I've gone back a lot to filmmaking. I've made quite a few new films in the last couple years. But, I don't have to break out. You have your job, and you don't really have time for

anything else.

I'm sure you have had to explain your work in the past, but how do you describe your approach? I used to try to defend stuff, but there's no point because the moment you've started defending something, you've lost. So, I don't generally bother anymore. To me, it's all portraits, you know? Who knows what'll be happening in 50 years? But you see this work in 50 years and you're going to know not just the drugs that these people take but also what their lives were like from these photos. You see some of the same products in different households; it's weird. People leave all their shit out. I would shoot someone just based on their room, because that's the kind of stuff you're going to be looking at. There's another series where every girl is in the same position, all different bedsheets – that's like 50 to 100 shots from that – with just the girl lying there. Someday I'll do some giant piece with it. Then, you see, it looks like no information but actually it's a lot of information.

Tell me about the cell phone series. This was a series about cell phones and I started shooting it a little late for America because everyone has an iPhone in America. So these are all Eastern girls; girls from former communist countries: Poland, Bulgaria and these two [gesturing] are Russians. Occasionally if a girl shows up with a different phone then I'll shoot her. But I am shooting this because, in ten years this is going to look really good. Who knows what phones we will be using [then]?

Your wife Martynka was one of your models. Are you often attracted to your subjects? I don't think it's any different than if you're in a room and a person's got their clothes on. It's the same thing. If you're at a job and it's business and you feel that it's someone that you have a weird connection with [then] that's going to happen. But, anybody that shoots like this, they're going to tell you that the excitement comes after you've shot the photos and you're at home looking at them. Then you think, "Oh, wow! This looks really good. This looks really thrilling." My wife asks me that all the time, "Don't you ever get excited?" Sometimes I'll lie to her and say, "I felt something. I felt a twinge." Occasionally that happens. I was thinking [that], this trip in August, it happened twice. I remember two times, like, wow, that feeling.

I saw a behind-the-scenes video of a shoot you did with two girls, and they were so different. One seemed quite conservative about sex and the other was obviously much more open. The end result was the same, though: they both loved being naked and seemed to be so comfortable in front of the camera. I think people might imagine that a girl without her clothes on is some kind of crazy girl. That's possible, but I would say any of these girls have some kind of exhibitionist streak, and it seems to me to be kind of common in a certain age group, I don't know, late teens to about 30. I get people that are late thirties and forties and I almost always know that they're at a certain point in their life when they're looking for some kind of excitement.

Do you like photographing older women? It's exactly the same. It doesn't come up as much. An older woman – they wouldn't fit into 'Medicated'. Actually, they would fit into this, but I don't know if they would do it. I've shot a few older women naked and it feels weird to ask them. It just feels like a different thing. It takes a certain person to want to be naked and to be around other people of a certain age. When you're young, you'd do anything. You don't really give a shit. If someone asked me to get naked now, I mean, I've done it [but] I'd feel really stupid. I don't look so good naked.

Berlin Art Journal

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Fabricating the Transgressive

by Susanne Pfeffer

Edited transcript of an open-panel Q&A session between curator Susanne Pfeffer and artist Richard Kern at the "You Killed Me First" exhibition at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art on Wednesday, 22 February. Editorial notes by Nicole Rodriguez

Susanne Pfeffer: Let's start from the beginning, the time you came to New York in 1978/1979. Before you started doing films, you did underground magazines. Maybe tell us a little about that. Why did you start with this and how did you start to do your first films?

Richard Kern: I started out with fanzines. This was in the late 70s. I saw an art magazine called Art Rite—it was a magazine that some New York artists decided to do. This was the beginning of the time where you would think, "Well, if I want to go start a magazine I'll just do it." It was the beginning of punk rock. People put out their own records, their own magazines, and I thought, "I'm just going to put out a magazine." I use the term "magazine" loosely—it was a fanzine. It was a shortcut to get your name around. Instead of waiting for someone to notice you, you put yourself in and put it all over the place. It was my photographs and my writing and some stuff by my friends—a lot of the people that later ended up being in the movies. Then I realized very quickly that it would be a lot faster—I would get noticed a lot faster—if I had some kind of movie stuff. People don't necessarily want to sit and read, but they will watch movies, watch something sensational. Immediately I switched to making kind of sensational movies. I didn't think they were sensational or confrontational, but the response from the audience was that they were.

SP: How did it feel for you seeing all the Cinema of Transgression films together again after 20 years?

RK: I really like the way the exhibition is laid out. For me, it puts it all together. It feels like the nightclubs I hung out in in New York back then. It has the same kind of feel and it's a nice way to see all the films, because I only watch them when I have to show them. The odd thing is it just seems like it was yesterday.

SP: Who was the first person you met out of the group Cinema of Transgression?

RK: I met everyone in the space of six months it seems like. I had seen Nick Zedd and Beth B. in clubs showing their movies. If it was an underground movie, you had to actually go out to a club where they were showing it—there was no video. You would have to go there, the person would have their film, you would put it on a projector and you would watch it. Coming from where I came in the South, arriving in the big city, New York City, I saw these people I'd heard about and it was like seeing my heroes. I quickly got next to these people. It helped a lot that Beth B. had just split up with her husband and she was "on-the-move" with every guy around. She helped me with some of the first movies. I bought my first camera for five dollars from this place, Film Video Arts, in New York—an artist collective that made cameras available for cheap. You could buy film and process each roll for three dollars. I made the first film Goodbye 42nd Street, with two rolls of film, so the whole production cost about ten dollars. And that's just kind of a travel log for me. I had heard that 42nd street was going to change. The mayor had decided he was going to clean up all the scum off 42nd street because it used to be really out of control with drugs and prostitution—it was all grindhouse movies and sex clubs. So I just made a quick movie of it, and it took maybe 30 years for them to get rid of it, but my movie happened in 1981.

SP: Before you shot a film, was everything already planned—the location, the

script?

RK: Not really. None of my films had a script. I would do a basic outline the same way I work today. If I'm doing something, I'll make a list of what has to happen. I tell the person right before what that is and they go in and do it. *Fingered* was probably the most planned-out movie. Lydia knew a guy in California that she used to go out with, and it was basically just a re-enactment of some of the things that happened in their lives with some of my fantasies thrown in. We shot that movie in one week. I would say 'tomorrow we are going to shoot this and this', Lydia and Marty would go off and make up a dialogue, and the next day we would just shoot it. *You Killed Me First* was another one with that kind of had a framework. I interviewed a bunch of my friends and asked, "What's the worst thing that ever happened in your family?" and then put it all in one movie.

SP: Nick wrote the manifesto for the term "Cinema of Transgression." Was it really something that was around and used, or was it just something Nick looked up in a dictionary and found suitable?

RK: I was making movies and Nick was making movies. Nick said to me that we needed to have some kind of label—a term, or some kind of name that people could pigeonhole us with. He was heavily into creating this whole thing and thought it should be called "Cinema of Transgression" and I said, "Sure, whatever you want." It was all a fabrication, and now we are all sitting here talking about it very seriously. It was a big joke but at the same time not a joke. But I think most starting moments are some kind of joke. Like, I think, maybe in Denmark they are sitting around laughing about *Dogma*.

SP: When Nick wrote that manifest, he expressed the need for more people. At the time, you and Nick Zedd were the main figures.

RK: Yes. At this point I was really trying to crank out movies because I had met Lydia. Lydia wanted to be an actress and would latch on to anyone who would make a film with her—she made a lot of films during that period. Also, Nick was interested in working with me because I had a camera and some lights. I sold pot for a living, so I had money. I was the only one that had money to spend on stuff. I was the only one who had the ability to say we were doing something and do it.

SP: And how did you bring the group together?

RK: Nick said we needed to have a lot of people if it was going to be a movement—we couldn't be a movement with just two people. So he found all these other people, because he was more familiar with who was in New York making films. He just pulled in all these names. Some people actually were part of it. I would say the core people in the group were Nick, me, Tessa Hughes-Freeland, Lung Leg, Cassandra [Stark] and Tommy Turner (who should be here, but they couldn't afford it). David Wojnarowicz wasn't in the Cinema of Transgression and would be spinning in his grave if he saw his name included in this movement, because at a certain point he wanted nothing to do with us. He said we were all too negative and obsessed with death. He said he was going to die and he didn't want to be hanging around with people who pretended to be in love with death, because he was actually dying (from AIDS).

SP: We already mentioned *Fingered*, which has collected quite a bit of respect because it was in that show at the Panorama at the Berlinale.

RK: Germany was an early supporter of our scene. Jurgen Brüning, who is still making films here now—a lot with Bruce LaBruce—would bring people over for *Eiszeit Kino* back in the 80s. He somehow got on the board of that festival and had me invited over to premier *Fingered*. Back then there was a really radical feminist movement in Germany, or at least that was my impression. Once there was a screening at *Eiszeit*, the feminist came in, they robbed everyone in the theatre and then they threw paint over the projectors where a film was screening and then left. But the funny thing was they didn't even know what film they were protesting because they destroyed somebody else's film. Mine wasn't even on yet.

This movie *Fingered* had so much bad word-of-mouth that while touring with it, each place we'd get to there was some kind of protest or the venue would move. This was still going on in the early 90s. There was one screening where they had to keep switching venues and somehow the protesters still found us. And these weren't even female feminists! They were somehow male feminists! They all came in hoods and threw things at the screen. One protest had a memorial visual because Lung Leg was on the screen going "I hate you! I hate you all" while the protesters were throwing paint at the screen. I thought I was going to get killed or something. At the Berlin Film Festival, the same thing happened. Before anyone had even seen the film, I walked out on stage to everyone booing. It was just all bad word-of-mouth. The Festival head, whoever it was, came up and apologized, explaining they had to pull the film. And now it's funny because now here they are, in an institution, canonized.

SP: I think it's really interesting that you were, and still are, attacked by feminist societies. It's quite strange, because if you see the movies, women appear as the main protagonists of the movement. Nick said yesterday that the women weren't so much the victims, as the acting.

RK: Yeah, I think everyone in the movies comes off silly and bad. It's not misogyny as much as it was more misanthropy. You hate everything—that was the idea.

SP: How much heroin in general was involved in the whole movement?

RK: There were a lot of drugs at one period. That was a big part of it, of the negative outlook. One movie that's not playing here is *The Evil Cameraman*. I shot one half in 1987 right before I quit drugs and the other half in 1991 or something. One half is dark, really dark, and then the other half is all happy and light. It's the same joke, I guess; the lighting is just different.

SP: And you stopped making films at some point. Why?

RK: After a certain point I just shifted to photography and I lost the desire or the energy to put a lot of effort into making films. It takes a lot of time and effort to make a movie, as anyone that's made a movie out there knows. I just stopped having a message. I didn't feel like preaching as much. I feel like a lot of these movies are kind of preaching at you.

SP: But then you did start to make movies again.

RK: Yes. A couple years ago I started again, and I'd like to make a real movie. Right after I made *Fingered*, the next step was to make a feature, but I just blew up in my head instead. Now I've gone back to making my arty-movies. I made [Clean] just recently and I thought, "I'm making a nice, pretty, sweet film." I made it for Channel 4 in the UK, and there is another one like this called *Face to Panty Ratio* (2011). They said, "We want you to make something like this, but one that hasn't been seen so many times." I asked if I could have nudity and they said yes. Then they got it, and of course they won't run it. Thirty seconds in there is a shot of two boobs, and right then they say, "We can't run this on TV!" I don't see the problem. It's a very nice clean movie.

Dossier Journal

October 2011

In Conversation of Richard Kern

by Natasha Arnold

Richard Kern is difficult to pin down. He has shot for some of the most well-known publications in contemporary culture, including *GQ*, *Hustler*, and *Playboy*, as well as independent magazines such as *Purple* and *V Magazine*, but it is his work for the subversive cult publication *Vice* with which his style is most affiliated. Kern has used *Vice* as a platform to showcase his unfaltering approach to shooting young women. Intimate, candid and almost always nude, his work squares up to the viewer. He provides pace and respite by oscillating between direct confrontation and a more voyeuristic gaze. Adolescence and eroticism play integral roles in his depiction of the 'regular girl', and his adopted style, usually reserved for soft-pornography, raises fundamental questions about the relationships between fashion, photography and art. The agent provocateur (and *Dossier* contributor) took some time to speak with us, and hand picked some of his favorite shots from his vast back catalogue for us to enjoy.

Natasha Arnold: Can you color in your childhood for us a little? Was art prevalent in your upbringing?

Richard Kern: I grew up in a small town in North Carolina so there was zero art in my environment or at least anything that was called art other than "art class" in high school. It was a popular class because the teacher never reported us if we skipped school, so I was rarely there. I did know an old man who was an abstract expressionist painter (in addition to being a sign painter). In the 50's and 60's I hung out with some adults that I would now think of as arty boho types. My father was a newspaper photographer, so I learned how to process film, etc, from him when I was in the 5th grade or so. I didn't think of art as a career choice until I started studying it in college.

Natasha: Who are your key influences?

Richard: Some of the people I was into in college were big influences – Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman, Carl Andre, Joseth Kosuth, and my ceramic sculpture instructor at UNC-CH, a guy named Mike Cendric. The art critic Donald Kuspit taught one semester there and I took him for the History of Modern Art – that was a giant thing to me because he really looked down at the artist types. He preached how we were nothing without the critics. That was the school of thought back then and probably still is now. I was also inspired by an art fanzine in my school library called *Artrite* by Walter Robinson (and I don't know who else did it).

Bear in mind this is all in the mid 70's. My biggest influence was a philosophy of art instructor visiting from Harvard's philosophy department. The entire semester we discussed the sentence "This is good art" and multiple variations of sentences like that, and went back and forth, breaking them down to basic logic and trying to determine if there is a formula for something to be called "art". Of course the answer is no.

Natasha: You've spoken before about the importance of the 'regular girl' and experimentation with models. How fundamental is the casting process to your portraits?

Richard: I only shoot girls I want to shoot. I'm shooting a girl this week because she has blond armpit hair and a blond bush. I think she will work for a bunch of series I'm working on.

Natasha: Freud argued that scopophilia is a natural human impulse (*scopophilia: an infantile habit, the pleasure involved in looking at other people's bodies as particularly, erotic, objects*). What do you make of the detractors who call the voyeuristic/erotic aspects of your work perverse?

Richard: I'd say they are right. For something to appear successful to me it has to have a bit of a sleazy aspect, something that bugs the viewer and makes them feel

like there is something about the image that they feel not comfortable with.

Natasha: How do drugs fit into your art practice? Do they inform your process or subject?

Richard: I did drugs at one time but don't now. I like to shoot people doing them cause they are a sort of hidden thing. I've got a great drug project going now called *Medicated* that's about medicated teenaged girls.

Natasha: Can you talk to us more about the *Medicated* series?

Richard: For the medicated series, I've shot maybe 20 girls that are on pills or have been on pills since they were young. There's an accompanying film in which I interviewed and shot some drug based footage of about 10 girls of all types, that were taking pills since puberty, or still are taking different pills perscribed by doctors to treat various mental disorders.

Natasha: What impact do you think the internet has had on your work?

Richard: Well, I used to sell a ton of DVDs, and that's dried up now. My show on Vice.com has been really good for me because that mag, although not noticed so much in New York, is really influential worldwide. In a lot of places that *Vice* is published – I think there's about 30 offices around the world – it's the only place for kids to find out about weird and cool things happening outside of their neighborhoods.

Natasha: Are you at a point where you are satisfied with your body of work or is there still subject matter you would like to explore?

Richard: I doubt anyone who is doing any kind of exploration using some art form is ever satisfied with their body of work. What else is there to live for?

Natasha: You've shot various decades of girls, do you have a favorite?

Richard: My favorite decade is tomorrow.

Interview

June 2009

Kernel of Truth

by Emma Reeves

A new exhibition of the work of Richard Kern is on view. Photo director Emma Reeves scopes it out.

EMMA REEVES: This is really a kind of mini-retrospective show isn't it?

RICHARD KERN: Yeah. A little bit. It is photos from '82 to '99.

ER: Your last show, at Feature Inc, was a more specific body of work.

RK: Yes, my shows, at least over the last five years have been really specific, a show for each space. Like I have a couple in the fall in Europe and they will be very specific shows for those places. I am leaving this Sunday and going all over Europe to shoot. I will be shooting different series - a Pot-smoking series, an ID series—girls and their IDs - there are eight or nine different series. Some of these will turn up in the fall shows. One gallery will just show voyeur stuff. There is none of that in this show.

ER: What made you look back at old work for this show?

RK: I just had a very specific show of new work last October so I wanted to do something different. Plus there has been a lot of interest in the old color stuff lately, different magazines have been asking me to shoot in this style again so I thought I would just show all this old stuff!

ER: Is this show an aim to introduce a younger audience to your work?

RK: I think the VBS show I did with VICE (Shot BY Kern) introduced my stuff to that age group - that online show has opened it all up for models for me from all over the place. In fact that trip to Europe is all VICE: All seven cities we are going to will feature girls that have been cast through VICE. These are all girls who have seen the show and want to model.

ER: Your relationship with VICE has been ongoing for many years.

RK: Yes, maybe five or six.

ER: There are so few magazines now, even the so-called independent ones, that will take any risks. What relationships do you have with other magazines?

RK: There aren't many magazines like VICE that I can propose anything to, but even VICE has a little bit of a censorship issue now because of their advertisers. Some magazines like iD, every time I shoot for them, they have all kinds of issues with what I shot. Either they reduce everything to tiny images or they say that the shoot isn't exactly right for them. I have this problem with a lot of magazines. They say they want me to do whatever I want and when I do it then they reject it. VICE still call me for random stuff, this week I shot Elmore Leonard and Harry Benson. I am still interested in meeting those kind of people. The middle ground for me is what I do for GQ. It is a girl who is barely dressed. I don't have to think about it at all.

ER: You have published so many books but you didn't start until the late 90's. Why was that?

RK: The first time I got offered a book was around 1988 and I started going through the photographs and thought that I really only had 10 or 15 that were any good. I changed my whole approach and I go heavily into photography after that. A lot of this work is from that period. I mostly took film stills for my own movies before 1990.

ER: Do you still consider yourself as a filmmaker?

RK: I just did a rock video and I have been offered a few others things. Someone else just offered me a commission. So that stuff still comes up. The rock video I just did was so much fun. It was for the band Lizzie Trullie. I was shooting her for a label called Herve Leger and they wanted a rock and roll girl for their campaign and they also wanted a video for their website. You know

one of those behind the scenes type things but this will be an actual video which didn't have much to do with fashion.

ER: You did a video for Marilyn Manson didn't you? I see that you have included his portrait in the show.

RK: Yes, that was ages ago. The portrait is from 94. I never noticed until now that he shaved his armpits!

ER: Why did you include him? He is the only man in here.

RK: Well, because a whole lot of people say how much they love this photo and I looked back at it and thought it was actually a good photo. I also have a problem with showing celebrity photos. This is kind of not a celebrity photo! It is just a weird photo.

ER: What's wrong with celebrity photos?

RK: It is a whole other thing you have to think about. Is this photo interesting because of the person or is it just a good photo? I try to shoot people nobody knows.

ER: Are there certain countries where you have a really strong following?

RK: Italy is just fantastic. France has always been good. The UK is weird. They are more censoring that even the US! The magazines there are really pushing it, they are ahead of the curve, so you would think that they would be more open minded.

ER: Have you ever had to take a show down?

RK: No. But it does make me look at the work and question it some times. Like that bondage picture in the show. I am asking myself if it is just too weird? I don't even have a frame of reference. I know the 'head in the toilet' picture is weird.

ER: Was it your idea?

RK: Yes! I can't believe I found someone who could do it. I asked Lucy and she said, "Sure, I can do that, I was a gymnast." And she just did it!

ER: The fact that you have many on-going series that are working on - is that a way of reigning yourself in?

RK: Something has to be happening in the photos. They can't be just standing there so I create different series. That becomes the methodology. But in between all the different series there will also be other random stuff. Like a certain location can be perfect for the Voyeur series. I mean, how many times can you shoot someone naked? it just gets boring.

ER: Well, you seem to have been doing it for quite a while!

RK: Actually I just realised that I haven't shot anyone naked since January. It goes in spurts. But in Europe I am going to shoot 15 girls.

ER: I am interested in the way you cast girls. You have seen them online. But when you meet them in person does it ever just fall apart? The magic is not there?

RK: Yes. That has happened many, many times! Usually now I always try to meet them before. Nowadays because of Facebook, MySpace and all that stuff everyone is an amateur photo-editor, they will send you all these photos where the girls are striking poses and you have no real clue what they look like. I have a standardized form that I send out to try to get to see what they really look like but even if I get a head on shot you still really can't tell. I just realized that actually all the girls in this show are pre- Internet, pre-email.

ER: Is that over-awareness of presentation and appearance in women unattractive to you?

RK: Yes, I had an email yesterday which said, "You are the master, I am the poet. Men seem to be hypnotized by my eroticism. We should meet and you should photograph me." I thought that just sounded revolting!

ER: Do you actually approach people?

RK: No. It is all via email. When I get back from this trip there is a girl who wrote me from a tiny city in Utah. She is getting out of high school at the

beginning of June and she wants to model. It is going to be weird out there. It has nothing to do with urban coolness. She is a hippy girl working in Yellowstone State Park. This summer and I hope I can shoot there.

ER: Perhaps that will be the beginning of the great American State Park series!

RK: That would be nice!

Vice Magazine

2007

Photo Book

Finally Legal

Richard Kern Takes It Off

By Jesse Pearson

Vice: When did you start taking pictures?

Richard Kern: When I was maybe ten years old. I'd make model cars and arrange them in little scenarios and then take photos of them with my Instamatic. It meant a lot to me, just taking pictures. Now my son is near that age and he takes pictures. He just walks around and snaps photos of things.

Then I did fanzines when I was in college. A lot of the reason for doing them was to publish these surrealist-type photos I was shooting. Then I realized that that you get known a lot faster from movies and stuff than from photos—at least this was what I thought. So I started making films and using my photos as promos for the films.

But were the photos still your priority?

No, it was kind of like a dual thing. I was into films, but the films seemed to be a really fast way to get your name out. Like performance art. I did some of that stuff too.

Like what?

Well, what I realized was even faster than film was if you were super controversial and just living in the East Village. In the early 1980s, it was a lot easier to be controversial than it is now. I went out with a dancer and I'd go to see her do these performance art things that were horrible. Unless they at least had music to go with them, they were usually really boring. So I would have these performances, maybe show a film or something, at the same venues these dancer people were using. The first one was in a super-crowded little club and I planted a heckler in the audience. He was standing there and yelling at us while I had a guy doing a regular performance dance thing. Then I had the dancer start shouting at the heckler and it escalated. Then I ran through the crowd and started stabbing the heckler and we had fake blood all over him, just blood shooting up everywhere in a crowded place. It really worked.

People bought it?

Yeah, yeah, people would totally buy it. But then they'd realize it was fake and then it'd be over.

I always wondered how you walk away from a performance like that when it's over. Like you're just standing there as people recover and start to get it...

You just leave.

You just walk out the door?

Sure. So soon after that I started working with Lydia Lunch a lot. She heard about these things, and we started doing stuff together at the Pyramid Club on Avenue A. For example, I'd have a projector on which I'd show a wrestling film, except I had the projector on the stage and I'd turn it around towards the back of the room so everybody had to be turned around in their chairs to see the movie. As soon as everyone turned around, me and another guy came

out and we just tried to kill each other. We were fighting, and we agreed we were just going to try to kill each other for real. We rolled out right into the crowd, knocking shit over and chasing everybody off. I went on tour with Lydia and we did this shit in Japan and all through the United States. It was a real quick way to get attention.

You and this guy would fight and that would sort of be her opening act?

It would be listed on the bill but nobody would know who I was. So it would just be this thing that happened, and they wouldn't realize what the hell was going on.

It's good that you didn't try to rationalize it with some bullshit art talk about being transgressive or crossing borders or something.

Everything else seemed so pretentious, so we were always trying to do stuff that was totally unjustifiable.

So after these performances came your first movies?

Yeah. I started making films that I would do these performances with, and then finally I had enough films that I actually could just show them and not have to perform. I didn't have to do the other shit anymore. I could show movies like *Fingered* and I didn't have to stand up there and do anything because the film did it all for me. It's hard to imagine a film like that shocking people now, but I was sitting in the front row at some place, like in Boston or something, and looking at people's faces while the movie was rolling and they would just be appalled.

Didn't they sort of know what to expect when they bought a ticket or booked your movies?

Not always. They would hear about me and then they would book one of my movies or go and see one, but they'd have no idea what it was beforehand. People do this a lot. They have no idea what stuff is, but they hear that it's cool. They're like, "This is cool. I've heard of this thing and it must be cool." So they'd book it and it'd always be a big surprise.

Why did you quit making movies?

Around 1992, I just ran out of steam. The last one I made was called *My Nightmare* and it's me fantasizing about this girl I know. I was doing a lot of photographs around this time, and I'm fantasizing about this girl I'm going to shoot and jerking off and having all these flash-forwards to when she's gonna be there and then she shows up and I just come, and she walks in and I try to do all this stuff and she doesn't want me to do anything. The whole point of the movie was I really wanted to do all this stuff to this girl and since I filmed it, I got to actually do it.

So with the movie camera you got to do stuff you couldn't do in real life.

Yes, and it's the same thing with taking photographs.

So you left film in '92, and photos became the focus. What kind of photos?

At that time I seemed to know a lot of strippers and S&M people from a couple of girls I'd met. I started just shooting whomever I could. There seemed to be a

lot of tattoos, and I was shooting all these tattooed girls—all these rich girls who would become strippers and get tattoos and it was like a great performance angle for them or something.

This was right before that era that sucked, when some strippers were getting into riot grrrl politics. Right?

They kind of ran parallel, because a lot of the girls I shot bought that stuff but then at the same time, they thought, “Well I should be able to be a stripper if I want to.” Then there were also girls who thought, “By stripping I am helping mankind.” That’s the way they were justifying it.

Helping mankind by getting guys off?

Yeah, because these are lonely guys who wouldn’t otherwise be able to have any thrills.

But I was just into shooting anyone I could. One girl would lead to another and then to another, and at one point I started getting some very good models. That became the book *New York Girls*. Most of the girls in there were just starting to get nipple rings and tattoos all over.

That stuff is really taken for granted now.

Yeah, now it’s the exact opposite. When I see somebody like that they seem totally jaded to me. I was telling my girlfriend how I’ve seen the entire progression of the belly button ring. It started as a thing where one girl would have it, like one out of five girls. Then there was one point where every single girl had a belly button ring. Then it started going away, where I’d see girls that were like 24 who used to have one but took it out so you could still see the hole. And now I’m starting to see girls who have never had it, which is kind of cool.

And now all these girls who have tattoos want to get photographed. They’re regular girls who come in from the street with a ton of tattoos. It just doesn’t do it for me.

You mean like Suicide Girls kind of things?

Yeah, that whole genre.

My problem with that stuff is that those girls are saying they’re empowering themselves by going out and doing porn, and I’m sure some of these girls are actually homeless punks...

I’ve shot some of them, some of the homeless punks. They were junkies.

... but I think they’re outweighed by the liberal-arts college girls, and I think that they’re sort of pissing on women who actually are more compelled to be strippers. Because it’s easy to decide to be a stripper when you’re one of the prettiest girls in a shitty town and you’re too lazy or dumb to go to college or get another job. I’m thinking of these girls who I was friends with in high school who were strippers, and then they were strippers who used to fuck around a little bit, then they were hookers, and now they’re hookers who are schizophrenic from all the speed they shoot and they probably have twenty different kinds of AIDS

and are going to die at 30. Compared to all this, the *Suicide Girls* stuff is such a day-tripper vibe.

To me that stuff is all fashion. It's a whole part of fashion that hopefully will go away.

Yeah, and I'm not totally complaining. On the basic physical-uses level, a photo of a naked girl is a photo of a naked girl is a photo of a naked girl. It's on the bigger implications level that I'm grossed out by college girl porn.

I have a question about *New York Girls* in relation to what you do now. In *New York Girls* you'd see a lot of colored lights. Things felt more theatrical. Now everything in your pictures is very natural. How come? Did you just get tired of it?

I wanted to make everything more real. In *New York Girls* I was trying to make it look mysterious and cool, and now I'm into making things seem kind of pure-but-not-pure.

But really it's just art, and it kind of suited that time period. If you look at music videos from then, there was a whole period of cross process. It became a look, almost like shooting in black and white to make it like, "This is art because it's black and white." That's stupid but kind of cool in a way too.

Do you think you were influenced by the rise of amateur internet porn?

Oh sure, I got a lot of good ideas from it. There was a site that I looked at everyday, with just people sending in their own stuff, and I thought it was really great. But now, on the internet, I am getting way more into everyone taking pictures of everything— especially celebrities. I love spy photography and voyeuristic stuff.

I think a lot of people who look at your work want to know, historically, how many of the girls you've shot have you ended up doing it with.

That's a good question. Um...

Because it's so intimate when you shoot these girls.

Sometimes just taking the photos is as hot for me as actually having sex, because it's super intimate. It becomes more.

But how many girls? I don't really know. A lot more in the old days than I do now.

In the *New York Girls* era it was more than now? Definitely. I always had a girlfriend though, so it was like...

Do they get jealous?

That has happened, yes. Or they say they don't care, but after we break up they say they had a real problem with it.

So they bring it up afterwards?

Yeah. But the girl I'm with now is totally into it. She's practically a lesbian. She helps me get models.

Do you think you'll ever make a movie again?

I'm making one this summer. Well, I'm not making it—I'm just editing together a bunch of sexy video footage that I've shot over the last few years. It's going

to be on a DVD inside my next book.

What's the next book called?

It's called *Action*. They wouldn't let me call it *Hard*. It was going to be all outtakes from porno, but now it's turned into a mix.

There's some hard stuff in there for sure, but the publisher is backing off, kind of mellowing out a little. Everybody does.

Do you have a favorite girl you've shot?

No, because there's always somebody new. I can tell you some favorites though. There was one named Alisa. She was this Russian girl who was like 22 and went to Julliard. She was a classical musician. She like entered into that world, just being in photographs, had shots in tons and tons of magazines, and was super popular. I got tons of good photos, she did all this crazy shit for me. But then she just wandered back out again and disappeared.

You've photographed the Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie a lot too.

Yeah. She was really into Cosey Fanni Tutti from Throbbing Gristle. That was very interesting for me, because when I was like 20 or 21, I'd seen these porno mags with Cosey in them. I was like, "This is the girl from Throbbing Gristle and she's in a porno mag!"

Lucy discovered her and she was really into it, so she did the same thing.

So were you guys doing it as like a cover of what Cosey had done?

Well, just as like an intellectual exercise, the same way Cosey did it. It all accumulated in England with a show I had, and we had a panel with Lucy, Cosey, and me.

Is Lucy still cool with all the photos you guys took now that she is getting famous as an artist?

Yeah, she doesn't give a shit.

Maybe since she's an artist it's a totally different story. There are probably plenty of normal girls whose lives could be ruined by being in porno photos.

Oh yeah, for sure. But those girls' lives are probably going to get ruined anyway, whether they do this stuff or not.

The porno business is dark.

And it's gotten darker. I get these model one-sheets everyday, from all the porn agents, and it's like, "She does double penetration, swallows, facial, cream pie, snowball, interracial, double anal, double vag." But it'll say something like, "No tickling." Some weird personal thing. And then it'll say, "Age: 18."

And they used to just say if they did anal or not.

Yeah, and that would be something you'd get to once you'd been shooting forever and exhausted every possible means. Then you could always go back and do that. Now it's just like they start that way. I shot one girl who was 18 and she said, "I did my first interracial anal gangbang yesterday."

Jesus, how old was her asshole?

That's what I wanted to say: "Can I see how pink your butt is?" She was like, "That's something I've always wanted to do. I knew since I was twelve that I wanted to be in porno." And it's like, how do people even know that? But I

guess, I don't know, you look at some kids' MySpace pages now and it's pretty obvious.

Can you run off the names of some porno mags you've shot for?
Barely Legal, Tight, Live Young Girls, Finally Legal, Candy Girls...

That'll do.
Juggs, we should say Juggs.

OK: Juggs.

User

2002

Interview

Darren Flook on the phone to Richard Kern

I'm surrounded by porn. *iD*, *Dazed*, *Vogue*, *The Face*, *Sleaze Nation*, *Richardson* and a hundred other style and fashion magazines filled, with images that use the language of porn to speak to an audience media savvy to the gap between this pseudo porn and the real thing. This doesn't take into account *Loaded*, *Maxim*, *FHM* and a host of other magazines that trade off a lad image and tabloid 'great tits', 'up for it' propagation of soft porn photos styling. Add to this the internet, OS9S, satellite TV, everything Uncovered, ChannelS and Strippers in the windows of Selfridges and you start to see that what was once underground, hidden territory is now a mainstream obsession. The magazine editors bored of druggy looking kids need a new thing and ad men and TV execs have always known the power of flesh. Whether it's Emmanue/le Fashion or Cheap Bright Plastic, the pornification of society is everywhere. Sex sells and in the new millennium for sex, read porn.

A photograph of a young - very young - looking girl, naked with a shaved crotch, bound wrists and sucking on the end of a double ended dildo that isn't inserted in the crotch mentioned. This is porn. I know this. I've seen porn before. Not a huge, weir~, specialist amount but enough to know that this is it. The picture is in *Model Release* (2000), a book of photographs by Richard Kern and I'm staring at it trying to work out why all the female art type friends that I canvassed on this matter reckon that Kern is brilliant, fascinating, etc. Another reason I'm staring at the image is that there is something strangely non arousing about this image when it portrays an individual and a situation that I would normally find extremely interesting. It's porn that doesn't work as porn - the use to the User, as Kern would say, is being perverted. This is dysfunctional pornography, art pornography. Richard Kern came out of the Cinema of Transgression of the New York underground in the 70's. With their scratchy, fake dialogue and a gangs sense of pushing each other, testing their boundaries, the films aren't an easy watch. Kern joked that he stopped doing them when they realized that the one thing they hadn't done was children in the films - it was time to pull out. In film, or later in the photographs, Kern is capable of doing truly fascinating things with his deliberately hard and narrow genre. Like any good genre artist Kern has the ability to subvert his material, to make it funny, to apparently play by all the rules and yet twist and gently contort his subject into something that can not be what it is telling you it is. This doesn't mean that it isn't porn but it's being used for something different. *Model Release*, published by Taschen, opens with the model release form to be signed by Kern and the model for any photo shoot before they begin.

I hereby release, discharge, and agree to defend, indemnify and save harmless the Photographer and Users, their legal representatives, agents, licenses, successors and assigns, and all parties acting under their permission, or with authority from them, or those for whom they are acting, from and against any and all losses, damages, costs, charges, attorneys' fees, recoveries, actions, judgments, penalties, expenses and any other loss whatsoever which may be obtained against, imposed upon or suffered by all or any of them which may arise from the use of such Photographs, even should the same subject me to ridicule, scandal, reproach, scorn, or indignity, and from any liability as a result of any distortion, blurring or alteration, optical illusions or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be reproduced in the taking, processing or reproduction of the finished product, or its publication or

distribution, or which may arise from any breach of any warranty, representation, covenant or agreement made by me. I waive any claim that I may have for alleged violation of privacy, defamation or libel by the use of such Photographs.

Richard Kern was born in 1954 in Roanoke Rapids in North Carolina and has lived in New York since 1979. He emerged as a filmmaker in New York in the 1980's working with artists such as Lydia Lunch and Sonic Youth. Kern has published his photographs in magazines including *Barely Legal*, *Juggs*, *Tight*, and *Finally Legal* and number of books including *New York Girls* (1997) and *Model Release* (2000) I spoke with Richard down a bad telephone line earlier this year when he was selecting work for his upcoming show at the ICA, London.

Darren Flook: When you're selecting work for a show like this is it being themed or...how are you selecting the work?

Richard Kern: Honestly. I'm going through the shots I have and seeing which ones I wanna pay to have printed - that's a big part of it. Which ones are the best? A lot of it is going back overtime - which of these do I wanna bring into existence. It takes forever sometimes you know.

DF: Is it a very different process from selecting work for a book?

RK: It's similar, but with a book there is a lot more leeway. There are so many pages, and the time period is fixed. There are works in all the books that if I went back I'd take out and other images I can't believe I put in, but that happens with exhibitions too. The last time I did a show in New York - by the time I got a couple of them framed and the show opened, I was looking at them and thinking 'I fucking hate these fucking shots' you know?

DF: Do you take a different audience into account? The difference between who is going to see the work in a book, a magazine and in a public gallery, do you see these as different?

RK: Well they're all the same. But books have more pages, and with shows some things just don't work. People look at the books and say they have a favorite picture and I'm like 'I fucking hate that'. Then other people say they like it and I don't even get it.

Then I try to like it because people seem to respond to it. Then it ends up getting in the show anyway and has a great response, but I'm not necessarily into it. I'm always going over images I shot like a year, two years ago, and editing and re-editing. That's where I am now for this show. It's this constant situation.

DF: And when you're selecting work for an exhibition like this, how do you decide, that was a porn image and now I'll use it in a show. What makes an image change like that?

RK: Well by the time of the show, the porn shoot has faded away you know. And about 90 percent of the time, stuff that is porn can't really be used anywhere else. But a lot of the stuff in *Model Release* is stuff that was taken during a porn shoot but just didn't relate to it. It was too ridiculous for porn.

DF: Is that the editors decision?

RK: No. Because before I send anything off I pull all the stuff I like for me.

DF: So the same images wouldn't appear in the porn mags that appear in the books or exhibitions?

RK: No. Similar, but not the same. There's this shot of this girl that's in the show that was taken in a bathroom in Dundee. She's pulling down her panties, but it's all wrong for porn. She not looking at the camera or anything. The magazine got a very similar image but it really conforms to porn. She's smiling and looking at you and everything.

DF: So there are rules that have to followed?

RK: Yeah. Like you have to be showing something in every single shot. In theory.

DF: So how long have you been taking this kind of work?

RK: I started taking porn shots in the early 90's, overlapping with the films a bit. Mostly black and white stuff. Then around '93, '94, I started being able to sell stuff to magazines. But you know, a shot of this girl, a shot of that girl, the odd group shot. Then around the same time I started doing rock videos, and it was during the 3rd or 4th video that I starting selling stuff to *Barely Legal*. It was this new kind of magazine, a new concept. Girls that had just become legal. It was all fresh. It was counter to the whole 80's, early 90's thing of girls having giant hair and fake boobs. It was just like a return to innocence. Kinda. But basically it was there to appeal to all the pedophiles. Those people who want to look at really young girls, and it's not legal to do that, so along came all these magazines which were just the youngest of the young girls. You know. It was to appeal to them. I was interested in this point, about pedophiles, about Kern's stance on this. After all he is a father himself.

DF: There is one bit (in this conversation) where you say that you are basically aware that magazines such as *Barely Legal* are used by people with pedophile tendencies, because the girls in *Barely Legal* look so young. Is this ever problematic for you, or not? You don't have to answer this, but I'm sort of interested.

RK: The pedophiles thing, I'm not too sure about. What I meant was that the mags were aiming at the youngest legal age that they could get away with so that the mags would appeal to people that were fed up with hard, used up looking bleached blond fake tit girls that were the norm at the time. I tend to think of pedophiles going after kids younger than 18, a lot younger in fact. It would seem that 13 and under would suit that group. *Barely legal* is based around girls that aren't experienced. They also hint at stepfather / daughter incest type things. Anything that is "Barely legal."

DF: There is the thing you do at the back of Model Release where you have shot the girls holding their Drivers Licenses and 10's.

RK: Yeah. I always do that with them.

DF: And now for the new show you have the girls before the shoot. Straight on, no make up.

RK: I've been doing those for about a year now. Against the wall. Not posing. They're not ready. Deadpan. Before they become...and you can see how average most of them are.

DF: It must be strange for girls who come to you who don't know who you are and don't know what you do. Why is he taking this?

RK: The girls who do porn regular. The girls from agencies - they couldn't give a shit. All they care about is if they get their paycheck. But there are girls who won't be photographed without the ridiculous make-up and hair. It's a hang-up they have. And there are some images that I just want. The girl with the meat on her face? I wanted that girl with the meat. I did this whole stupid fashion shoot just so I could get that girl with meat.

DF: Do you suggest most of the things like that or do the girls suggest things as well?

RK: It's me. I say 'We got this. Stick it on your eye'. But one time I was doing that and the girl said 'but Helmut Newton did this', and I'm 'Oh fuck, that's right!' Like that one of the girl with bloody nose. I was doing a porn shoot with her that day, in fact I did two that day. Anyway, at the end of the day I was at my publisher's house, Taschen, in Germany, and the publisher's daughter comes in with a bloody nose having bumped into something. And I thought 'Hey that's a great shot. I can do that!' Because I have this whole series of girls doing something. And thinking of things for girls to do in states of undress is really hard.

